Bloodbound Four: The Order of Apostolous
by LLReid

Summary

Killing the first was only the beginning...

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“Tonight there will come a moment that will change the course of history, a moment where one life must be sacrificed in order to prevent Rheya from rising again. If you perish and
the ritual is complete...,” he trailed off and rested a small hand on her forearm. That sentence didn’t have to be finished. “A moment will come where your life and another’s intersect... a choice will be made... someone must die.”

“Will I make the choice?”

“No,” Kano whispered. “The choice that will be made will be the defining moment of someone else’s story. You may be part of it, but this time around it is another who must do what you have already done and choose to save the world rather than running from the call of destiny.”

“Who?”

“You know I cannot tell you and if you really wanted to know, you’d be inside my head already,” he said. “If you know who must die in order to preserve the world’s equilibrium, you will try to prevent things from happening as they must. A heart and mind divided against themselves cannot stand... and you must stand, Anastasia. You must.”

Notes

Chapter inspired by; Carry You by Ruelle & Fleurie
“Winter is coming, Anastasia,” the voice in the Bloodkeeper’s head said, clear and chilling even over the howling of the wind that whizzed through the damp dungeons she’d been held in for weeks, "An unforgiving season. Before it comes, you'll have learned what we can and can't do. Before winter is here, you'll have joined us. You'll be ours.”

The young vampire growled and rattled the silver chains cutting into her wrists that she had managed to tear from the stone walls, more like an animal than a woman at all. She didn’t know who she was. She didn’t know where she was. She was a girl with a name and no memories but pain. All she knew was rage and the insatiable desire to feed on those whose torment was all she remembered.

For as long as she could remember, her story told only of dripping stone walls in a Scottish castle and of ivy-clad ruins by moonlight, of locked inner rooms and secret dungeons, dank charnel houses and overgrown graveyards, of footsteps creaking upon staircases and fingers tapping at casements, of howlings and shriekings, groanings and scuttlings and the clanking of chains, of hooded figures and headless horseman, swirling mists and sudden winds, insubstantial specters and sheeted creatures, vampires and bloodhounds, bats and rats and spiders, of men found at dawn and women turned white-haired and raving lunatic, and of vanished corpses and curses upon heirs. Her painful world made little sense. She didn’t understand it.

The castle presented a somewhat forbidding aspect to the world, for there was little about it to suggest gaiety or warmth or any of those qualities that might assure a wanderer that they’d be welcome. Rather, this vast edifice of stone exuded an austerity, cold and repellent, a hint of ancient mysteries long buried, an effluvium of medieval dankness and decay. At night, and most particularly on nights when the moon was full or cloud-enshrouded, it was nothing more than a heavy blot upon the Scottish landscape, a shadow only, without feature save for its many-turreted outline; and should the moon be temporarily released from her cloudy confinement, her rays leant no comfort, for they but serve to throw the castle into sudden, startling chiaroscuro, its windows fleetingly assuming the appearance of sightless though all-seeing orbs, its gates becoming an instant a gaping mouth, its entire form striking the physical and the mental eye as would the sight of a giant skull.

This was her home. This was her prison. This was all she knew.

The legend of the monster of Glamis had been told for centuries, but all of those rumours had been false until Anastasia was brought there. Some rumors said she was a demon from another world. Other rumors said she was death incarnate, someone to remind humanity of their misdeeds. But no one said how beautiful she was. No one had mentioned her eyes. The ones that showed colour only for a second. A hint of beauty in absolute emptiness.

The voice in her head spoke again, “See with your soul and not your eyes, because to dance with the beasts you must penetrate their disguise...”

She wrapped her chains around the neck of the barely conscious mortal who’d taunted her with bags of blood through the bars of her cell. He didn’t even try to fight before falling limp, and she tightened the chains again to make sure he stayed that way, then stepped over him casually, her
bare feet leaving bloody footprints on the damp stone.

Revenge was the emptiest of emotions. Apparently it motivated people to do the stupidest things as well.

As she fell to her knees to feast on her captors, a man screamed. With one hand she drew the screaming vampire close to her and rose over him, feeling her fangs brushing against her lips, feeling her crimson eyes fill with the colours of his face, her ears fill with his struggling cries, her limbs fill with that strong, fighting flesh until she drew him up to her, helpless, and tore that flesh and had the blood that gave it life.

It wasn't as precise a blow as she would have liked when she shoved the wooden stake he carried in his own pocket into his chest, not with the frantic way he was squirming in her hold. She struggled to get the stake in deep enough to his heart, unsure if she could do it from this angle. Then, his struggles stopped. His eyes stared at her, stunned, and his lips parted, almost into a smile, albeit a grisly and pained one.

“Die,” she whispered, her grip on him loosening. His head flopped against her, “die,” and she felt him struggle to look up at her as his last breath left his body and he crumbled to ash.

“We can awaken things inside you that have been sleeping all your life. You're strong enough to live in the dark, to glory in it. You can become a queen of the shadows. Why not take that power, Anastasia?,” the voice in her head chanted. “Let us help you take it. Take it. Take it...”

She had been more than happy to drink their blood, break their bones and lick the marrow, and squeeze their limbs to dripping pulp the moment she realised they'd been underestimating how dangerous she was. What a way to feast, so deliciously violently. Whilst she felt no great cravings for mortal blood now, the way most vampires did; she still wanted it. But the desire for vampire blood overpowered her in all its ravening purity, quite apart from the thirst for mortal blood. She could have easily feasted upon three or four vampires a night.

But if anyone had looked, then, into the Bloodkeeper’s eyes, if they had been a ghost or a puff of smoke and had floated up to the ceiling to look deeply into those shiny crimson eyes where the brilliant silver slithers of moonlight were reflected, they would have seen a despair bigger than those eyes could hold, bigger than the world itself.

“It stinks down here,” someone said. “It smells like someone died.”

“It's a dungeon, Lily. They're Supposed to smell,” said a man.

Mission accomplished, Anastasia thought, paying not attention to the voices. The stench might have actually killed her new appetite if she could remember the last time she fed. If hell could fart, it would probably smell the way the dungeons did.

“She’s in here!,” a voice called. “Oh for craps sake, you dumbfuck. We’ve been looking for you everywhere. You're not dying again, are you? It's seriously inconvenient when you do that—Anastasia? It’s... it’s Lily— Oh fuck... Holy fuck... Fucking shitballs—“

“Annie, my love— Oh shit—,” a woman’s voice said from behind her, drawing her attention away from her feast of both mortals and vampires. The emaciated Bloodkeeper whirled around, fangs extended and growling like a beast to ward away anyone who would even consider touching the first meal she could ever recall receiving. Power radiated from her body, the whites of her eyes glowing red and blood dripping down her chin as she growled at the gaggle of well dressed vampires who were frozen in her cell door.
“I don’t know you,” she hissed, guarding the pile of corpses behind her as best she could manage. She felt lonely all the time, she wanted to be accepted, by anyone, on any terms, but she felt so apart. As if nobody who really got to know her would trust her. Even now with these strangers standing before her, she didn’t know how to react. “Find your own food.”

The woman who’d spoken looked crestfallen. Her silky brown hair was a mess, her suit bloody and not concealing the twin daggers holstered inside her jacket very well in the slightest. “Baby— It’s me. It’s Kamilah. Your Kami. You know me—“

Anastasia growled, but made no move to attack the woman. She didn’t know her... but something about her felt familiar. The rings on her left hand matched the rings on her own, but no matter how hard she tried she couldn’t remember what they symbolised. Right now everything looked so strange to her, as if she didn’t belong here in this cell. Like it was her that was out of place. And the worst thing was that she felt there was somewhere she did belong, but she just couldn’t find it or remember it.

Kamilah was trying to smile at her, but the expression kept breaking apart. She was looking at her as if she hadn’t seen her for a long time of searching, and had just now walked into a room and come upon her unexpectedly. As if she wanted to look at every part of her, now that she could do it honestly.

“I don’t know you.”

“Everyone had better keep out of here. After you spend so much time locked up, you get to like your space. You get kind of territorial. I wouldn't want anybody to get hurt,” a man who was standing closest to Kamilah said. They seemed close enough to want to shield one another from danger... from her.

He gave Anastasia a long, measuring look. Then the Bloodkeeper flashed a brilliant, unsettling smile. She knew she was playing with fire, with something she didn’t understand. “You can come in any time you like.”

“She killed Vlad,” the man whispered. “His necklace... the pile of ash...”

“Yes he met with a slight accident involving a stake,” Anastasia said, drawing everyone’s attention. “Funny how that happens sometimes.”

“Oh for the love of god, just hit her over the head and let’s get out of here!,” a woman wearing a teal coloured blazer said. Her face was bruised, her lip bloody, and on her left cheek there seemed to be the imprint of Kamilah’s rings. There was an ugliness about her — not in her features, but in her lackluster gaze.

With a wave of her hand, Anastasia sent the woman flying across the dungeons and slammed her into one of the stone walls, her powers knocking everyone off of their feet. She didn’t know why, she just didn’t like her.

“Sister, what do we do?,” the man who had spoken before asked.

Anastasia growled at him before scurrying away into the corner of her cell. Their thoughts were too loud. She could hear them. She could feel them. But she couldn’t understand them. “I! Don’t! Know! You!,” she screamed so hysterically that the ground began to shake and dust fell from the ceilings. “Go away! Leave me alone!”

“Baby, look at me,” Kamilah said softly as she began slowly crawling towards her. “Please look at
me. You’re safe now—"

“I don’t know you,” the terrified woman whimpered as she cowered in the corner. She was strong enough to kill her. She knew she was. But she couldn’t bring herself to hurt this stranger. She didn’t know why... she just couldn’t. In the eyes of this woman, she saw loss and despair, as she saw in all creatures who visited her. But this loss was different than any she’d ever encountered before. It wasn’t the loss of a beloved, it was the loss of being. She followed the curious intensity behind those dark brown eyes and the moment her eyes changed. Suddenly, her world felt terribly small, like she’d experienced merely a handful of what it had to offer.

“You do—"

She turned her haggard, haunted face on her and said, "I want you to stop it. I don’t know anything."

“Your name is Anastasia Sayeed,” Kamilah soothed, her face paling as she came to a stop on the other side of the corpses piled up in the middle of the barren cell. Her voice was everything she’d never known. Warm, eager—everything that everyone she’d killed wasn’t. She turned to see brown eyes flecked with dancing amber and an astonishing smile. A smile that drew her in, changing the world. Maybe everything was going to be all right, after all. “I’m your wife and this is your family... and you’re safe now.”

“What... is wife?"

Kamilah’s face contorted at the question and she seemed like she was fighting off the notion to curl inwards and start bawling, but her eye contact never wavered. “A wife is someone that loves you above all others. Someone who spent two thousand years living aimlessly before finding you, and when I met you, it was like I already knew you.” She paused, her eyes overly bright. “You always say that you know we were meant to be together, and nothing could ever keep us apart — and you’re right. You’re my soulmate, who had hit me like lightning, the one person in the world I was always meant to be with. The one person who has always been my destiny.”

Soulmates. She recognised the word. Deep down she could sense what it meant. Two people connected, bound to each other forever, soul to soul, in a way that even death couldn't break. Two souls that were destined for each other.

“The love I feel for you now is a burning tenderness, a knowledge that you are the one who taught me it was possible to love, who had melted the ice of my heart. Its strong and gentle and steady, full of admiration and the intimacy of shared likes and dislikes. Its golden and warm like a summer afternoon,” Kamilah said.

“Love,” she whispered, the unfamiliar word feeling strange in her mouth. Something truly bizarre happened as she watched her. It was like she could feel her touch through their eyes. She couldn’t look away from her.

“You see how it is with us? You can’t fight it any more than I can,” Kamilah pleaded with her.

“You're trying; you're doing everything you can to kill it. But you can't kill my love for you. You know me, Anastasia. You know me. Come back. Please come back to me.”

For a moment all Anastasia could do was stare at this woman. She was the only person she could remember ever treating her with kindness. Whenever other people visited, it hurt. As she stared at her, she remembered something, just a flash: looking up at Kamilah’s face in a cabin in the woods and feeling such — such excitement, such affinity with her. As if she understood the flame that burned inside her as nobody else ever could. As if together they could do anything they liked,
conquer the world or destroy it; as if they were better than anyone else who had ever lived.

“Cabin. Trees. Fire. Real or not real?,” she asked hesitantly.

Kamilah’s eyes lit up. “Real. It’s real. You remember it?”

She was out of her mind, irrational, probably needed more pills jammed down her throat, she told herself, but that little flash of memory wouldn’t go away. And then she remembered something else: how Kamilah had acted later that night, how she’d kept her warm, and had even been gentle with her.

Anastasia blinked and clutched her head, the thoughts inside so torturous that she couldn’t bear them. “I don’t know...”

Kamilah was looking at her, and her expression had changed from fear to bitter anger and heartache. Part of her wanted to reassure this stranger completely, to throw her arms around her and tell her that she was hers and always would be and that nothing else mattered. Not the chains around her limbs, not the fact that she didn’t know what was real and what wasn’t, not anything. But she didn’t do it.

“Annie, you know me!,” Kamilah pleaded. “I said the world was evil and horrible — remember? But then you proved to me that it wasn’t, you—“

“I’m a monster,” said the shadow that Anastasia had become. “Everyone says so.”

“So are we all, darling,” said Kamilah. “The thing to decide is what kind of monster to be.”

“Leave me alone!,” she screamed, her powers shaking the building. “Leave!”

“I cannot tolerate a world emptied of you. I have tried. I have looked for your face in the patterns of the ice. In the dark, I have pored over the loss of you like pale gold,” Kamilah practically sobbed. In the space of one heartbeat to another the ancient vampire loved the Bloodkeeper and Anastasia was lost to her. “Anastasia... look at me. I know you’re still in there—“

“Kamilah,” the woman with purple hair said.

“Mon amie, we cannot help her like this,” another woman said.

“I agree,” said a young boy. “They’ve completely altered her memories and her sense of self. The Anastasia we knew is gone—“

“I don’t accept that!,” Kamilah snapped. For a moment, as Kamilah glanced toward Anastasia, their gazes locked and something electric passed between them. It made Anastasia tingle all over, that one look did.

“Choosing not to accept it does not make it any less true,” the child said. “She has been tortured into... into the version of herself we see before us. I can’t be sure our Anastasia is even still in there. When a caterpillar changes into a butterfly it loses its caterpillar life.”

“I am not giving up on her, Kano,” Kamilah said. “She’s in there. She obviously recognises me on some level.” Her voice was still quiet, but it was filled with the authority of absolute conviction, a kind of bedrock certainty that held Anastasia mesmerised.

“There is no denying that you are familiar to her, Kamilah,” Kano said, “but it is not the same thing as recognition. Your personal feelings are clouding your judgement.”
“Can’t you read her mind and—“

“No,” interjected Kano, “she is much too strong. Even now, I can only enter her mind if she permits it... and she would kill me if I tried.”

Kamilah looked at her.

That connection again. It seemed to be drawing them together — an almost physical feeling of attraction. It was exciting, but scary. Terrifying.

The strange woman got up very slowly and moved a little closer to her. She sat by her and neither of them looked away. It was one of those fleeting moments that became an eternity. From a past encounter everything had disappeared in the dungeon of forgetfulness. A few furtive flashes or innocent twinkles had survived, though. Some immaterial details had remained marked in Anastasia’s memory, forever. A significant look, a salient colour and an unforeseen gesture abided, indelibly engraved in the back of her mind.

Kamilah reached her hand out towards hers, her movements languid. Anastasia jerked away at first but stilled as Kamilah made soothing sounds and gestured towards the chains that were painfully cutting into her wrists. “Let me help you, darling. Please let me help you.”

“Don’t hurt me. Please.”

“I won’t. I promise, my love.” The Bloodkeeper watched with wide eyes as Kamilah began unwinding the rusty chains, freeing her from her bindings. The strange woman gently touched her hand. Their fingers intertwined, as if entirely of their own accord. Kamilah was looking at her and Anastasia was transfixed on their hands. It was a good touch. They were so close that their breath mingled, and the Bloodkeeper shivered with the electricity.

Everything seemed wrapped in a golden haze.

“She knows me,” Kamilah said, defiantly. When Anastasia finally forced herself to look up at her, Kamilah swore she saw understanding in her haunted, shocked gaze. “You should remember that darkness does not always equate to evil, just as light does not always bring good. She’s still in there.”

“Kamilah,” Kano said. “You’re getting ahead of yourself.”

“I am not. She is my queen, and anyone who says different can fuck off.”

“Kamilah,” the man in the suit said. “You know that when you love someone you don’t always see them realistically—“

“She’s lost,” the woman in the red blouse said.

Anastasia scoffed. She was not lost, because she hadn’t any idea where to go that she might get lost on the way to. She’d have liked to get lost, though, because then she’d have known where she was going, instead of just existing in this state of purgatory.

She studied the strangers who spoke about her as if she weren’t right there, and she didn’t know what to make of them. She couldn’t remember how sometimes people kept parts of themselves hidden and secret, sometimes wicked and unkind parts, but often brave or wild or colourful parts, cunning or powerful or even marvelous, beautiful parts, just locked up away at the bottom of their hearts. They did this because they were afraid of the world and of being stared at, or relied upon to do feats of bravery or boldness. And all of those brave and wild and cunning and marvellous and
beautiful parts they hid away and left in the dark to grow strange mushrooms — and yes, sometimes those wicked and unkind parts, too — ended up in their shadows.

If they thought her aimless, if they thought her a bit mad, let them, she decided. It meant they left her alone. Anastasia was not aimless, anyway. She was thinking. She was always thinking.

“She’s still my Anastasia. The woman who has never hurt a thing for malice. Who is like a kitten making airy pounces at no prey at all. She’s—“

The scent of blood tickled Anastasia’s nose, and the compulsion to drink was so strong that she let go of Kamilah’s hand and hesitantly crawled towards the feast she’d acquired, trusting the woman close to her not to touch her food as the hunger became far too much to bear. When she lunged at her food the talking strangers fell silent and simply watched her tearing through the pile of bodies. As she drank, a little strength came back to her, like a candle flaring in the wind.

“This is exactly why you shouldn’t get attached,” the woman in the teal blazer said. “Let yourself care, all you’ll feel is pain.”

Kamilah glared at her. “This is all your fault and you damn well know it.”

“Don’t blame me for your domestic drama.”

“Don’t make me punch you again!,” Kamilah yelled. “After what you’ve caused, every breath you take is mercy from me, Aiko. I wouldn’t speak again if you value your life.”

“Like you would—“

“You’re more than welcome to test that theory.”

“You are evil. Cruel, capricious, and dangerous as a cobra. A queen of darkness,” Aiko spat at Kamilah.

“Completely evil, and completely in love with her,” Kamilah fired back.

“I've been in love. It's painful, pointless and overrated.” Aiko turned away from Kamilah. “Love is for weak people, it's a delusion and it can be deadly. The worst day of loving someone is the day that you lose them, isn’t it, Kamilah?”

“Fuck you, Aiko. After everything she’s done for all of us you’d think you’d have a bit more compassion,” the purple haired woman said. “Im not letting my best freind die. Been there done that. I got that freakin T-shirt.”

“All I’m saying is that forcing her to live like this, a shadow of her former self... little more than an animal... is cruel,” Aiko said. “A heart's a hard thing to live without. I should know. I've tried it.”

“You,” Anastasia said to Aiko, somewhat indistinctly through the blood in her mouth, “I don’t like you.”

“Enough,” the child said. “Kamilah, you know how Serafine and I can try to help her... but we have to get her out of here first.”

Anastasia looked up from the mortal she was drinking, the steel in her glowing red eyes had been forged in the deepest circle of hell as she stood up and stalked past Kamilah towards the group, who all backed away from her. “I’m not going anywhere with you.”
“Anastasia,” Kano said. “Relax, child. You’re amongst friends—“

“I am the only one who can decide what will happen to me,” she went on very quietly. Tears began streaming down her face. That’s what happened when she made the mistake of thinking about life being fair, because she couldn’t explain why it wasn’t… but she didn’t think it was something anybody knew. “No one else. Me. And I’ve already made my decision. I’m not going anywhere. I don’t know you.”

“Anastasia,” the purple haired woman said. “It’s me, it’s Lily. You know me. This isn’t you—“

“I am what I want to be,” she said, exactly as her keepers had told her. Her heart was so cold that she could have held ice in her mouth and it would never melt. “If you forgot that— then that was your mistake. I am done hiding, hating, or apologising for the parts of me I haven’t chosen and can’t change. If some people have a problem with my differences, that is just too fucking bad for them.”

“Sweetheart,” Kamilah cooed. “Look at me.” Anastasia froze and obediently stared at her, and Kamilah tried to make her voice sound confident. “You need to calm down. Please. Do it for me —“

The Bloodkeeper growled as the woman in the teal blazer caught her eyes, distracting her from Kamilah. Each step was deliciously slow, calculated, her grin widening into a feral smirk that showed off her fangs as she stalked towards them. There was nothing more powerful than fear — not witches magic, not vampire strength, not Bloodkeeper abilities. Nothing. And in an insane world, sanity made very little sense.

Before she could even register what was happening a strong pair of arms wrapped around her from behind and something sharp entered her neck. The world started to spin and her strength began to fade, and she turned to see Kamilah holding a syringe.

“You lied—“ Something was shining on Kamilah’s face. Anastasia reached toward it with a weak hand, touched it, and lifted her fingers away in wonder. “But don’t be sad,” she told her, feeling the cool wetness on her fingertips. But a pang of worry disturbed her. Why, she didn’t know. But she couldn’t help but wonder about this woman as the world began to fade. Who was there to understand Kamilah? Who was there to push her, to try to see what was really inside her?

She was still looking at Kamilah and she felt tears spill from her eyes and fall toward the woman’s outstretched arms. Anastasia didn’t know why she was crying, but part of it was sorrow for her ever having doubted her. Because Kamilah wasn’t just on her side. Unless she was wrong, she was willing to die for her, she was risking her life by being this close to a monster — she was courting death for her.

Amazing how this stranger could make her feel. Safe in a vacant space, warm in the middle of the night. Just being this close to her, being able to touch her thoughts alone and feel her presence, was comforting—and dizzying. She had never been so close to anybody with there being some sort of pain involved. Even though she was drifting in and out it was as if they were one being, together, not predator and prey, but partners in a dance.

The initial shock of being injected was washed away by something much stronger and deeper. Something fierce and joyous—and pure. They were clinging together, Kamilah was holding her as hard as Anastasia was holding her. Electricity seemed to arc between them. Everywhere they touched she could feel the sparks. Kamilah’s hand tangled in her hair, and she was frighteningly moved by the tiny tugs, the little pain it caused as her fingers worked. Her lips brushed against her forehead again and again.
“I’m sorry, baby,” Kamilah whimpered, her tears falling onto her face as she lowered her to the ground. Her voice was rough. It was like staring into the face of a familiar stranger. You know, that person you see in a crowd and swear you know, but you really don’t? Now that’s all she was to the love of her life — the familiar stranger. “I would never hurt you this way save for one reason: to keep you safe. I can live with your anger, your retribution... bloody hell, despise me if you must, but don’t expect me to behave as though you aren’t the most important thing in my life. You are, and I will let no one, yourself included, bring you to any more harm.”

~~~~ Six Weeks Earlier: Tokyo, Japan ~~~~

“You’ll think I’m crazy if I tell you what has been bothering me,” Anastasia said to Kano as the two of them fed after a hard day of training. She’d become so strong that her teacher could no longer peer into her mind unless she knowingly lowered all of her defences, so when Kano had asked why she seemed so distracted she knew he wasn’t testing her. He really didn’t know.

“Try me,” he said.

She took a long sip out of the porcelain bowl filled with blood. After spending hours with Kano, she was exhausted. Dark circles under her eyes sunk deeper and deeper into her skull, in contrast to her pale skin there was an undeniable resemblance to a fresh corpse. He pushed her hard. He knew what she was capable of and accepted nothing less than her best. So much so, she wasn’t sure she even had the energy to explain things. “I... I’m hearing voices.”

“You are the strongest psychic in the world, dear bloodkeeper. Hearing voices is hardly cause for concern—”

“Even if I know they’re not other people’s thoughts that I’m accidentally picking up on? Kano, the things that they say to me... the whispers... they never stop.”

He raised his hand to her temple. “May I?”

She nodded and closed her eyes, allowing him to breach her mind. The bond between them was like fire — it burned and consumed, almost painful in its intensity.

“A double-edged sword. One side destroys. One releases. I am your Gordian knot. Will you release or destroy me?,” Kano said aloud, echoing the voices inside her head. “Follow truth and you shall: find me on water, purify me through fire. Trapped by earth nevermore. Air will whisper to you what the spirit already knows: that even shattered, anything is possible. If you believe then we shall both be free.”

Kano’s brow furrowed as he let the connection between their minds drop, seemingly exhausted by just those few moments that he’d spent inside her head. He looked exactly like she felt all the damn time. Like she was inside a fishbowl in the middle of a typhoon, and everyone else was on the outside cluelessly enjoying lovely weather.

“It’s... it’s not normal, is it?”

“No such thing as normal, child,” he said. “It... it is certainly unusual as the voice is very clearly from an outside influence. Yet there is no one strong enough to penetrate your mind. Even Serafine and I together could not overpower you.”
“And that’s why I’m so concerned. My walls never come down unless I’m specifically showing someone something. I don’t understand what’s happening to me.”

“What else have you heard?”

A shaky sigh escaped from the back of her throat and she took another sip of the blood she’d been drinking. “Something about how winter is coming, whatever that means. And it... it keeps giving the impression that I’m still eventually going to go the way Rheya did. You know, dark.”

“You are the furthest thing from dark—“

“So was she, once. So was she.”

Kano patted her hand affectionately. “The question of what we are can only be answered by ourselves, Anastasia. We each decide what we are by the life choices we alone make. How we were made, who are parents are, where we are from, the colour of our skin, who we choose to love, all those things do not define us. Our actions alone define us, and will keep defining us until even after deaths. Only you have the power to decide who and what you will become.”

“You know it isn’t always that simple.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Not always.”

“You are still very young,” he said. “As time passes you by, you will see that it is always that simple. We can be forced into certain circumstances, but at the end of the day only we can dictate how we act. You must bask in your uniqueness, revel in your strengths. We stand separate from the world because of our gifts. You must never forget that, because you may be sure the world never will.”

Anastasia nodded and bit down on her bottom lip. “Kamilah senses darkness again. She’s never wrong.”

“And you think the darkness is you?”

“How could I not? After how I almost went after Rheya’s powers latched onto me—“

“Almost being the key word in that statement,” Kano interjected. “There's power in the truth, just like there's power in making the right choice. You made the right choice, yet you give yourself no credit. You judge yourself off of an outcome that never materialised... and I cannot understand why.”

“Because you weren’t in my head that night. You don’t know how the darkness called to me... how appealing it seemed at the time.” She looked down at the blood she’d been drinking, suddenly not hungry anymore. “If someone were to write a story with me in the lead role, it would certainly be... a tragedy. All I seem to do is stop myself from doing the wrong thing.”

“That's how life works, child. That is how it has always worked. Darkness tempts us all, offers us power beyond our wildest dreams... but you resisted it.” He sighed. “Fear is like a fire. If you can control it, it can cook for you. It can heat your house. If you can't control it, it will burn everything around you and destroy you. Fear is your friend and your worst enemy. Sometimes good people make bad choices. It doesn't mean they are bad people.”

“Kano—“
“All I’m saying is that sooner or later, you’ll have to come to terms with yourself. You can’t wish away the vampire or the Bloodkeeper in you, and you shouldn’t keep atoning for it. You should figure out who you are and what you need, and then don’t apologise for it. Not to anyone. We are all worth more than the sum of our sins.”

“I feel like I’m losing touch with reality. This power is— I just struggle to relate to anyone because of it.”

“Power does that. It wastes you away. Once it grips you by the ear, the real world gets quieter and quieter, until you can hardly hear it at all.”

“But something is obviously wrong with me. There’s so much I still don’t understand!,” she snapped. “Like, who the hell leaves the tapestry fragments? Why do they do it? How do they know where I’ll be? Why do I feel so... so damn weird?!”

“What’s wrong isn't you. What's wrong is the world. Being afraid and not knowing all of the answers does not make you a bad person.”

She frowned at him. “What am I then?”

“In your own words, normal.”

Along the way home Anastasia stopped into a coffee shop. Since the gang’s second week in Tokyo she’d been stopping for coffee on the way back to the penthouse they were all living in, mainly to absorb everything that happened during her long hours of training with Kano. Sometimes Serafine trained with her, but most days she didn’t.

All around her was completely normal, everyday city-dwellers were going about their normal, everyday affairs. Lovers were whispering to each other, businessmen were poring over spread sheets, college kids were planning their next night out and discussing the newest Ariana Grande album. She could have been in any coffee shop in any city in the world. Transplant this coffee shop scene home to New York or London and nothing would seem out of place. In spite of which — or, rather, all the more because — there she was, exhausted with her nerves fried, sitting in this coffee random shop, drinking her coffee, feeling a desperate loneliness despite being surrounded by people, despite having a house full of people waiting for her at home.

She was different. Different from other vampires. Different from mortals. She alone was the outsider. She had no place.

When one was traveling, everything looked brighter and lovelier. That did not mean it was brighter and lovelier; it just meant that sweet, kindly home suffered in comparison to tarted-up foreign places with all their jewels on.

Night could swallow you up here, yet none of it actually touched you the way it did in New York. Around any corner, there was a promise of something daring and ideal that you’d never find in the West. There was something obscenely joyful behind every door, either that or somebody crying with their head in their hands — there was no in between. A lazy rhythm loomed in the dreamy air and the atmosphere pulsed with bygone wars, past-life romances, comrades requesting comrades to aid them in some way. You couldn’t see it all at a single glance, but you knew it was there. Somebody was always sinking. Everyone seemed to be from some very old Japanese families. Either that or a foreigner. Or a vampire. Or, more frequently in these parts, werewolves and witches.

There was a thousand different angles at any moment. At any time you could run into a bizarre
ritual honouring some vaguely known queen. Bluebloods, titled persons like crazy drunks, leaning weakly against the walls and dragging themselves through the gutters. Even they seemed to have insights someone like Anastasia might want to tune into their minds and listen to. No action seemed inappropriate here, the way they were other places. The city was one very long poem. Gardens full of pansies, pink petunias, opiates that her wife loved showing her. Flower-bedecked shrines, white myrtles, bougainvillea and purple oleander stimulated the senses, that made you feel cool and clear inside.

“Ayyyyy!,” Lily cheered as she shuffled through the front door of their penthouse.

“You’re drunk already,” she laughed.

“First of all, how dare you. Second of all, I’m tipsy not drunk. Third, Serafine got so wasted she fell in the pool and almost drowned.”

She snorted. “What??”

“Don’t you watch my TikToks?! I got the whole damn thing on video! Adrian had to dive in the deep end in a three piece suit to rescue her because the dumb bitch just lay there at the bottom of the pool!”

“The things that happen when you leave me alone with these imbeciles,” Kamilah mused as she waltzed out of their bedroom with the biggest smile on her face. She’d deny it, but she always eagerly waited for her to get home just so she could give her a hug and a kiss. She’d always been very sweet that way, and it’d only intensified after their wedding.

Kamilah fiddled with the silk tie on the robe that skimmed her upper thighs. She looked particularly beautiful in a just-roused, early-evening kind of way. Her hair was very wavy, as if she had run her fingers through it one too many times as she worked, her eyes were hooded and lazy and there was a faint smile of satisfaction on her lips.

“Is that why you’re hiding in the bedroom?”

“There is only so much domestic drama one can handle whilst sober, darling.” Kamilah pulled her into her arms and gave her a kiss on the lips and when they broke apart she moved so that her face was mere inches from hers. Looking into her eyes. What she could feel in her was something she’d never felt before with anyone else. Something oddly childlike, a marvelling sort of joy. Trust and vulnerability. And such love.

“I’m all sweaty and bloody,” she protested.

“Heavens, not sweat and blood,” Kamilah replied mockingly.

Anastasia managed to smile. “Smartass vampire.”

“How was your day? You seem especially exhausted. Is he pushing you too hard?”

“No, he isn’t. Training is just hard, that’s all. Bastard hits harder than a fucking freight train.”

Kamilah nodded. Even though she didn’t know what it was like having any sort of psychic abilities, she always did her best to be supportive and understanding. “Do you want wine or something stronger? Dinner, perhaps? A bubble bath?”

Her lips curved upwards into a smile. “Why are you so good to me?”
Kamilah huffed. “Because I’m in love with you. I think everything you say and do is marvellous.”

“You sap.” She didn’t even try to hide her smile. She was with her favourite person. The one who was the other half of the mysteries of life for her. The one who would always be there for her, helping her, watching her back, picking her up when she fell down, listening to her dumb stories — no matter how many times she told them. Loving her even when she was stupid. Understanding her without words. Being inside the innermost circle in her mind. Her soulmate.

Kamilah lowered her mouth to the base of her throat, her kisses soft and lingering. That the soul was capable of experiencing such richness of feeling, such variety, all in the space of a few moments, was both exhilarating and frightening. Anastasia’s breathing became more uneven as she reached the most sensitive part of her neck, just beneath her ear, and whispered, “I'm with you, my angel, and I happen to know you like it when I’m soft.”

“Mhm,” she hummed blissfully as Kamilah gently rocked her from side to side.

“Y’all are such an interesting couple,” Lily snorted. “Definitely my OTP.”

“Your interest has been duly noted,” Kamilah said without taking her eyes off of Anastasia. She was so stubborn that her heart had an argument with her head every time it wanted to beat, and that stubbornness absolutely dripped from her every word. “Though I do recall sitting you on that couch and telling you not to move until you’d eaten something and drank some damn water. If I have to force feed you any more Cheetos to sober you up, I will resort to killing you with my bare hands instead.”


“Oh shit, indeed.”

Anastasia snorted. “You’ve had quite the day, haven’t you?”

“Do not even get me started.” She sighed. “These people are impossible. If Serafine isn’t drowning, Lily is getting so drunk she thinks she can turn into a bat, or Adrian is being a drama queen and is trying to convince us that vampires can get man-flu. I have been surrounded by idiots since the moment you left.”

“That’s family for you, babe. If one member isn’t being a pain in the ass, another one will be guaranteed to fill the slot.”

“Would I get myself into trouble if I sedated them all for some peace and quiet?”

Anastasia shrieked with laughter as Kamilah’s lips brushed against the side of her neck. For her whole life, she had wanted a love that consumed her. Growing up she’d poured over the Twilight Sagas and watched Titanic more times than she could even count, her teenage heart had longed for a love like that; a love with passion and adventure, and even a little danger... but she never imagined she’d get everything she was looking for and so much more than that.

“Wanna take a bath and have a glass of wine whilst we bitch about life?”

Kamilah simply smirked at her and began leading her towards their bedroom.

“What?,” she prodded.

“I may or may not have already run the bath and chosen a bottle of wine.”
No one had ever understood her the way Kamilah did. She knew her better than she knew herself most of the time. It wasn’t even like being caught in a web, the way relationships often could be; it was much closer than that, much deeper. She’d torn down all the barriers and put her soul into her hands.

Even in the midst of craziness and exhaustion and the chaos of life, Anastasia was filled with peace and the sweet knowledge that she was walking the path she wanted to be on. Not that that path was smooth and pothole free. But still, it was her path, and like her, it was bound to be unique... and boozy.

Their bathroom smelled of citrus bubbles and floral scented candles. Bubbles and scented candles. On a scale of one to ten, a bubble bath and a scented candle had to rank zero as far as things anyone would expect an older-than-dirt-badass vampire to indulge in. But the fact that Kamilah Sayeed enjoyed bubble baths and scented candles was a secret that no one but Anastasia knew.

“Did you tell Kano about the voices?,” Kamilah asked between kisses she was littering across the skin of Anastasia’s shoulder as she sat behind her in the warm water.

“I let him hear them,” she whispered. “He doesn’t know what they are... only that it’s someone else who is powerful enough to get inside my head. Not powerful enough to take any memories or control me... but enough to speak to me.”

Kamilah’s arms tightened around her. “No one will harm you.”

Anastasia leaned back against her and tilted her head to press a kiss against her cheek. She wished that someone could say that to her and she’d believe it, but she was smart enough to know that there were some things that no one could protect her from. She didn’t doubt that Kamilah would do everything in her power to keep her safe... she was still so traumatised from watching her mortal life end and then watching her kill Rheya... there was nothing the ancient vampire wouldn’t do to see her safe. It was the sort of bone deep emotion that made her want to hold her tighter with one hand, and draw a sword against the world with the other.

“What are you thinking about?,” Kamilah whispered in her ear.

“Aren’t you scared of me at all?,” she asked, hesitantly.

“No.”

“No?”

“I’ve watched you barely escape death several times, and each instance killed me a little inside. The threats we’ve faced in the past may be dormant now, but we still have enemies both cunning and cruel. Knowing you possess the power to defeat all of them doesn’t threaten me, darling.”

Kamilah’s lips brushed against the shell of her ear. “Truth be told, it relieves me to my very core.”

“Sometimes I think if I blink, you’ll disappear,” Anastasia laughed weakly.

Kamilah smirked. “And what makes you think that?”

“I just can't even imagine life without you anymore, but I’m so afraid you'll go away,” Anastasia whispered.

Without saying a word Kamilah looped her pinky finger around hers. She’d rolled her eyes when she’d taught her about the sanctity of the pinky promise, but any time she promised her anything she was the one who twined their fingers together. “I’ll never leave you.”
“Oh yeah?”

“Mhm. I'm yours. I don't care if it's in this world or the next. Just show me how to get where you are, and I'll be there for you. I'll always find you, you don't have to worry. I'll find you again. Even if it takes a thousand years. No matter what happens, you will never lose me, I am forever yours.”

“Swear it?”

Kamilah caressed her face. When she smiled, so sensual and beautiful, it was another form of bliss just looking at her. “That's what vampires do, my love. We always come for what's ours, no matter the circumstances. I will never stop loving you. No one can change that. No matter what happens later, I’ll still love you.”

Anastasia remembered the things she'd given her, the star-flooded nights, and the cool healing ocean waves, and the music she'd written and would play on the piano. She’d given her everything that was best in her, everything she was.

She wanted to give her the same thing back.

“I don't know how you can love me.” The words came out softly, as if she were thinking them to herself. “You've seen what I am. What I can be.”

“That's why I do love you,” Kamilah told her. “Just as you still love me, when you have seen what I once was.”
“Absolutely not,” Kamilah snarled as she held her unconscious wife against her chest. Adrian was standing at the foot of the hospital bed that had been set up in the basement of Raines Corp with restraints that would shock her if she tried to move and dampen her abilities enough to make her safe to be around. “I am not above stabbing you.”

“Kamilah, be nice,” Serafine scolded.

“I am being perfectly fucking civil. We are already pumping sedatives into her veins and she has already been through more than enough pain. No. Under no circumstances.”

“Kamilah, we cannot keep drugging her with Propofol every time she starts to wake up. Once we are sure she can’t hurt us, we can start assessing her mental state,” Adrian said softly. “Kano and Serafine need her alert if they are to try and restore her memories, and right now she is a liability. We can’t trust her—“

“She is not a dog!,” Kamilah snapped. “Putting those on her would be inhumane—“

“Kamilah,” Lily interjected, “we all know that if she was in her right mind, she would want us to protect ourselves. The restraints will keep her abilities under control, and they’ll keep her still. She’d never forgive herself if she had to hurt us.”

All Kamilah could do was nod as a means of giving Adrian her permission to put the restraints in her limbs. She knew that Lily was right, but that didn’t mean she was happy about it. That didn’t mean she wasn’t further sickened by guilt.

“I’m so sorry. Forgive me,” she mumbled into the crown of Anastasia’s head, slipping her fingers into the unruly strands of ginger hair that she’d tediously washed and conditioned in the way that she knew her wife always did. Instead of watching Adrian as he worked, she chose to focus on Anastasia’s face. She’d always been very thin, but her face was positively gaunt looking due to weeks without feeding. But despite how ill she looked, the sheer splendor of the sight made Kamilah’s chest tighten and tears sting at her eyes. All the darkness that had enshrouded every moment since Anastasia had been taken had made it easy to forget the world contained more than people trying to hurt other people. It had beauty, too, if you knew where to look — and remembered to open your eyes.

“We can turn the drugs off now,” Adrian said as he moved to clamp the IV that had been inserted into Anastasia’s arm. “If she gets too agitated we can give her something to keep her calm...”

“I think I should be the only one in the room when she wakes up,” Kamilah said. “Even if she didn’t fully recognise me, she seemed to trust me more than she did anyone else—“
“You did inject her, though, Kamilah,” Serafine winced.

“I did what I had to do to stop her killing you all.” She caressed her wife’s face and blinked back her tears. “I know my Annie is still in there. If she’s angry with me, so be it, but I know how to placate her. Perhaps talking to me will jog her memory... she remembered the cabin.”

Serafine gently touched her shoulder. “I can’t promise you Kano and I will be able to do anything. Even sedated her mind is too strong for us to penetrate, you have to get her to let us in... you have to get her to trust us... to trust you.”

Kamilah’s entire body trembled. “Even if I have to get her to fall in love with me all over again, I will. I just need time.”

“You are clear what will happen if they can’t help her?,” Adrian said whilst furiously wiping at his eyes. “Whatever The Order have done to her, she is craving vampire blood. The Five, the clans... they won’t let her live if she’s become their soldier. Members of the Order of Apostolous are far deadlier than their predecessors, you know that. They’ll already know we have her... we don’t have much time. The Order of the Dawn was child’s play compared to this... and Anastasia is stronger than us all combined. If she is on their side, or if she doesn’t have the mental capacity to fight, we really don’t stand a chance—“

“Brother, I know. We kill members of the order on sight. If we can’t undo their brainwashing I know what will have to happen... and I know it’s what she would want.” She sighed and held Anastasia tighter. “But I have walked this earth for more than two thousand years. Where she goes, I go.”


“I cannot face a life without her,” she whispered, her fear and vulnerability evident in her voice. There was no point in hiding it, as she’d been a hysterical wreck for weeks on end and they’d witnessed her distress first hand. “My soul searched for her’s for thousands of years. Aiko was wrong, she is not just my weakness.” She drew her closer to her on the narrow hospital bed, one hand sliding along her jaw while the other caressed her cheek. “She is my destruction, because if I were to lose her again, it would finish me. She is the only one I wish to share my life with, the only one for me. If we shall die, we shall do it as we have lived; together, as one. It’s her and I until the stars burn out... and that’s all there is to it.”

She knew how much was at stake here. She knew that with Anastasia as their enemy, they may as well have begun digging their own graves already. The Order of Apostolous was incredibly strong, stronger than anyone had initially believed them to be. Kamilah had already made her choice, if these coming weeks and days would be her last on earth, she’d spend them fighting to save her wife with everything she had. If their roles were reversed, she knew Anastasia would do the same for her.

“None of that,” Serafine scolded as Anastasia began to stir. She began to usher Adrian and Lily out of the room they’d set up. “Survival first, then heartbreak.”

As Anastasia stirred more, Kamilah moved to a chair at the side of her bed, not knowing how she would react to having her in her personal space when she woke up. If things were normal she would have lay down on her chest and kissed her awake, but things were so far from normal that she wasn’t certain exactly how she should act. She didn’t know exactly what had been done to her. She didn’t know how much of the Anastasia she adored was really still in there, despite how intensely she professed to knowing everything would be fine.
She was out of her depth and she hated it.

For thirty minutes she did nothing but sit there in silence, watching Anastasia slowly coming around. The hospital room had been modelled in the image of Kano’s home, in the hopes that the lack of stimulation would soothe her psychic abilities. Everything was as tidy as could be. Even the IV needle that had been pulled from Anastasia’s arm rested innocently on the bedside table as if waiting for the next vein. No footprints, no fingerprints, no blood, no bodily fluid, not even a sheet out of place on the bed that Kamilah had made cosy with her favourite pillows and blankets and even her favourite teddy bear that was left over from her childhood.

“This evidently isn’t the first time I’ve woken up as a captive,” Anastasia croaked, her voice paper thin and her face a ghastly shade of white. “Something tells me its not even the second. I so need to reevaluate my life choices.”

Kamilah snorted. “You’re right... it’s actually the third. Do you remember—“

“No,“ Anastasia said quickly as she tested her restraints. She winced in pain as they shocked her, but rather than laying still she only tugged on them harder. “I can’t— My mind is broken— What have you done to me?! What do you want?!“

“Annie,“ she breathed as she placed her hands on her shins in a bid to stop her from trying to kick herself free. More of that hair-raising energy rolled out of the Bloodkeeper as she touched her skin, until the sensation made the tiny hairs on Kamilah’s arms stand on end. Vampires could measure each other’s strength by feeling each other’s auras, and Anastasia had always been strong... but she somehow felt even stronger now she was awake. “They’re for your own good. You’re safe. I know you don’t feel it, but you are. You’re safe.”

Anastasia stopped moving, her chest heaving as she stared at her. “Don’t. Please. I’ll be good. Please don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Bad touch,“ the Bloodkeeper whimpered.

Kamilah’s heart dropped and her eyes drifted downwards towards her hands rested just above her wife’s ankles. She immediately removed them and sat back down on her chair at the side of the bed, her mind going to all sorts of dark places. Anastasia was an extremely touchy-feely person. She expressed her love and affection through physical touch. She couldn’t sleep unless she was snuggled up in Kamilah’s arms. She’d never once shied away from her touch.

Anastasia stared at her, her mouth agape. “You... you listened to me. Thank you.”

“You are the only one who gets to decide when and how anyone touches your body,” Kamilah said, holding her eye contact. “It’s not something you need to thank me for. It’s just what you deserve.”

Anastasia’s brow furrowed as she studied her. “You’ve said that to me before. Real or not real?”

“Real,” she whispered.

“Why are you so familiar to me and nothing else is?”

A shaky sigh escaped from the back of Kamilah’s throat. Anastasia had been so many things to her. Seductive as silver and deadly as a cobra, but never, not even when she was mortal, had she been vulnerable like a hurt child underneath it all. She took a moment to compose herself, just looking at
her, and when she spoke her voice was so fragile she barely sounded like herself at all, “You showed me what it was like to love. What the world could be like. You and I... we’re so close that sometimes it feels like we are one being.”

Anastasia bit down on her bottom lip, like she always did when she was thinking deeply. “If we are so close then why were we apart for so long?”

“It took a long time to find you. I searched— I— You have no idea how hard I searched for you, my love. I didn’t eat. I didn’t sleep. I just... I couldn’t find you. You were gone.”

Her eyes drifted down towards her feet, unable to meet her eyes. How could she explain to Anastasia that she’d stormed away from her after an argument and just hadn’t come back afterwards? How could she explain to her what they’d fought about when she had no memory and no sense of self? She wanted to tell her everything, she wanted to throw herself into her arms and beg her forgiveness for so many things, but how could she? Maybe some hidden, fragmented part of her feared that if she admitted to Anastasia how much she truly meant to her whilst she was in this state, then she’d be acknowledging to herself that she had the power to destroy her more thoroughly than anyone, even The Five or the vampire council, could. All the rest of the world could only kill or devastate her mind and body. Anastasia alone held the power to demolish her soul with a single word, even in her current state.

“You’re sad,” Anastasia whispered.

She looked up at her to be greeted with that same empathetic look she’d seen whenever she was even a little bit sad. She smiled. “I’ll be alright.”

“Smiling doesn't always mean happy. Sometimes it simply means that you're a strong person.”

“Did you smile a lot in the dungeon we found you in?,” she asked, not sure she really wanted to know the answer.

Anastasia nodded slowly. “He didn’t like it when I smiled.”

“Who?”

The younger vampire opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out of her mouth. She simply stared at Kamilah, as if trying to predict how she’d react if she said whatever it was she was going to say.

“You can say it, my love,” she whispered. “Its okay. You don’t have to be afraid.”

Anastasia shook her head. “I can’t. Please don’t punish me.”

“Annie, you’re safe here,” Kamilah said, her heart shattering inside her chest. She would not force her to speak because she loved her so much, and when you loved someone the way she loved her, you didn’t make them tell war stories. A war story was a black space. On the one side was before and on the other side was after, and what was inside belonged only to the survivor themselves. “You don’t have to tell me anything that you don’t want to. Nobody is going to punish you—“

“As long as I do as you say, right?” Anastasia looked away from her, her bitterness evident in her entire demeanour. “There will be no pain, only when I obey. If I don’t, you’ll burn me with the sun. Or you’ll chain me to the wall. Or you’ll force so much vampire blood down my throat that I throw up, you won’t care that it makes me crave it whilst also malnourishing me, you won’t care that I become so addicted to it that even thought of mortal blood makes me feel sick. You’ll just do it and do it and do it until I’m too weak to fight you. Real or not real?”
Tears began streaming down Kamilah’s face, the hurt so intense that her stomach began to cramp and her head began to ache. “Not real. You are safe here. Nobody is going to hurt you in any way —“

Anastasia scoffed. “Then why am I strapped to a bed with cuffs that shock me whenever I try to move and take away my abilities? It seems to me that you only want to use me for something, just like everyone else did. You want me to trust you, but you don’t trust me.”

“No. All I want is to help you, baby. To bring you back—“

“You don’t want me. You want the version of me you’ve made up. The knight, even though I’m the dragon and I always will be,” the Bloodkeeper muttered.

“Anastasia, look at me,” Kamilah breathed. “Please, look at me.”

“I am,” Anastasia said flatly.

“No, you’re not. You stare straight through me as if I’m not even there. You look at me… and you don’t see me. You see just another vampire and you want to drink my blood. You’re craving vampire blood—“

“I don’t want to drink your blood.” For a moment Anastasia ignored her pleas, as if testing to see whether she’d forcefully turn her head or not, and when she made no move to either touch her or force her to do anything, she did as she asked and found her gaze. “But that doesn’t mean I’d be able to stop myself if you took these restraints off of me. I never want to drink anyone’s blood or hurt anyone. It just happens. Or if the pain gets too bad, if I obey and hurt someone then they stop hurting me.”

“We can help you get everything under control.”

Anastasia shook her head. “You can’t help me. No one can help me.”

“Drinking too much vampire blood corrupts anyone, especially because of your bloodline. Rheya was—“

“You’re wrong about something, Kamilah. It’s not vampire blood that corrupts — it’s whether the person who drinks it is corrupted to begin with.” Anastasia sighed. “You should find someone else to toy with. We both know I lack experience, so I don't know how to play the game without everyone around me getting hurt. Besides, I hate games. I prefer knowing straight up what's real and what's not.”

“Right now, I know you better than you know yourself. All I want is to help you in any way that I can. You know I’m not making this up—“

“I told you before, I don’t know anything. I don’t know you, Kamilah. I don’t know who or what you were to me. All I know is that dungeon, pain, and now this room. Before that there is nothing but flashes of things I can’t understand.”

“In your thirty years on this earth, you’ve already seen and done more than many people would do in a lifetime, but you tell me all the time that you wouldn't have made it this far if not for love.” Tears pricked behind Kamilah’s eyes. “You tell me that love has been the solid ground beneath your feet when everything else around you has crumpled, and despite the danger and uncertainty of what lies ahead, you knew it would be again.”

Anastasia sighed. “I don't remember.”
Kamilah pulled her cellphone out of her pocket and went onto her camera roll. All she had on there were photos and videos of them together. She placed the phone in her hand and stood up, she had to get out of there before she started bawling in front of her. It hurt too much to be this close to her, but continually pushed away. When it was light versus dark, that didn’t matter. One shadow in a brightly lit room went unnoticed, but shine a ray of light into even the darkest corner... and everything changed. The light of her life had been tortured to the point that she didn’t know her or the life they’d created together, and she wasn’t sure if she could bear it.

How she hated the dark part of herself that continually foretold of failure or futility.

“Swipe the screen with your thumb and you’ll see some of your life for yourself,” she smiled sadly.

“Where are you going?,” Anastasia yelped as she began to walk away. “Please don’t— Don’t—“

Kamilah turned to see her wife looking heartbreakingly tiny in the hospital bed, gazing at her with terrified eyes. “I’m just going to get you something to eat and some water. You’re not going to be punished. You don’t have to be afraid—“

“How long will you be gone?”

“Not long,” Kamilah said as soothingly as she could. “Just look at the pictures and videos and I’ll be back before you know it.”

Anastasia blinked. “Do you promise nobody else is going to hurt me? Those people who were with you before... I don’t know them. People I don’t know frighten me. You feel familiar, so you don’t frighten me as much. But I don’t know them. Are they going to come in when you leave?”

“No. Nobody else is coming in here until the moment you say that it’s okay for them to do so. Nobody is going to hurt you.” Moving slowly, she made her way back towards her bed and gently looped her pinky finger around hers. “I promise, baby.”

“We’ve done this before, I think. Real or not real?,“ Anastasia whispered. She bit down on her bottom lip again and just stared at their joined fingers with wide eyes.

“Real.”

“I might not know you, but it feels like you are in my soul, and nothing you did before we met or will do in the future can change that,” she said after a few moments of silence. “I don’t trust easily, so when I tell you I’m trusting you not to hurt me, please don't make me regret it. Please.”

“The worst part of being in a bad place is knowing no one cares enough to save you. That’s what you remember forever. Not the physical pain or the never-ending fear, but the despair of being utterly alone and knowing you’ll die that way. I was lost that way when I met you,” Kamilah confessed, her vulnerability penetrating through her gaze. “You pulled me out of the dark and I’m going to do the same for you. You can trust me. I swear to you, I will not let you down. I love you far too much to give up on you.”

“We love each other.”

“That’s right. We love each other.” She closed her eyes. “I’d do anything for you.”

“Just love me then,” Anastasia whispered. “Just love me.”

And with that, Kamilah slipped out of the hospital room. Emotions blasted into her the second the door closed with such force, she backed up until the wall stopped her. Then there was nowhere to
go as a geyser of tormented anguish flooded through her, drowning her anger and fear under its depths. It turned into glaciers of ruthless resolve that chilled her sense of betrayal until it crystalized and shattered. Finally, an inferno of love swept over the remains, burning away all her hurt with its searing, excruciatingly beautiful flames.

~~~~~ Six Weeks Earlier - Tokyo, Japan ~~~~~

“I still think you would have been a marvellous addition to The Five,” Henry said as he lead the grand tour of The Five’s new headquarters, which had been tipped to become something of the United Nations of the vampire world. “Between you and your wife, our power would be unmatched.”

“I am happily retired from public life,” Kamilah replied dismissively, “and Anastasia cares little for power.”

Aiko scoffed. “She has all that power and refuses to use it. How typical—“

“I think her hesitation to wield it makes her the best person to have it,” she interjected, glaring at her with an intensity that would have made someone smarter shrink away from her. “Especially in days like these where rumours of a new Order echo in every hallway.”

“She could end any Order with a wave of her hand and yet she does nothing.”

Kamilah’s eyes flared red. It infuriated her whenever anyone thought they had any right to dictate how Anastasia lived her life, when they thought they had some god-given right to her powers. Like everyone else, Anastasia had to play the hand she was dealt. Fighting the battles she could win and that she believed in... she was not a puppet on a string to be commanded. “Is it really so hard to believe that she doesn’t want to jump into another fight before she understands exactly what it is that we are facing? She is thirty years old, give her a break.”

Aiko’s eyes turned red, mirroring Kamilah’s anger. “I think it’s cowardly.”

“Says the woman who sat on her ass and did nothing whilst she singlehandedly defeated Rheya Apostolous, mere months after she gave her mortal life driving a stake through Gaius Augustine’s heart, and only a year after she united the clans in New York. You ought to have some respect for the woman you owe your life to.”

It was taking every ounce of self control she had in her to not tear her ex’s head from her shoulders. Aiko knew nothing of their latest enemy, yet spoke with so much self assurance that she was just begging to be punched in the face.

For some, vampires were still firmly in the 'evil, scary' column. However, since Rheya’s death, vampires also ran the gamut from evil to morally ambiguous all the way to fangless and vegetarian. To most people, part of their kind’s appeal lay in their versatility. Just like mortals, vampires could be the villain, the hero, and everything in between... but that didn’t stop some people from hating them.

Whatever this new Order was, whatever they stood for... Kamilah knew Aiko would run with her tail between her legs the moment they turned up at her door. The sheer audacity of her speaking about her wife was just too ridiculous.
“The girl owes it to us to stand and fight. She betrays her kind if she doesn’t,” snapped Aiko. “As do you.”

Kamilah growled and shoved Aiko against a wall. “Say that again.”

“Traitors the both of you. This new order has killed many of our kind already and yet you do nothing. Your wife is being a coward—“

“Enough! Don’t say a word about my Annie!,” Kamilah snapped. “You won’t be satisfied until you’ve brought me to my knees, is that it?”

“Why not?” It shot out of Aiko with all the recklessness of her still-broken heart. “You brought me to mine.”

Kamilah’s smile widened into a full-fledged, wicked grin that made her almost devilishly attractive. Aiko looked away, not wanting her obvious thoughts to inflate her ego. To distract herself, she concentrated on the hand holding her wrist the wall. Kamilah’s grip was light, as if tempting her to pull away at any moment, but they both knew better.

“How often must I tell you that she means more to me than vengeance? I can live without defeating our enemies until the moment I am certain we are strong enough to defeat them, but I cannot live without her!,” Kamilah snarled, baring her fangs. “You of all people should know that killing your rival doesn’t guarantee happiness. Sometimes it ruins any chance you have of it instead. Memories of dead men hold far more power than the annoyances of living ones.”

“I’m no coward.” Aiko glared at her as she shoved out of her grasp. People could perfect whatever facade they wanted to, but it seemed that everyone held their sins close to their skin. Age had done very little to mellow out Aiko’s childlike pettiness, if anything it’d seemed to only make her even more of a raging bitch.

“No?,” Kamilah huffed with a ghost of a smile. “You look like the same stubborn, reckless, devoted sod who sent an army after me because she couldn’t handle our breakup. The same coward I’ve almost killed a hundred times over since arriving here.”

Aiko scoffed. “What’s stopping you? The Kamilah Sayeed I knew was the furthest thing from merciful.”

“Unlike you, I’ve actually evolved since the thirteenth century.”

“There’s less violence in my world compared to yours,” Aiko insisted.

“No. There are only different reasons for it,” Kamilah sighed defeatedly. She knew arguing with stupid was a fool’s errand, especially when stupid was still in love with her. Love had evidently cut deeper than the sharpest blade, crippled more than shattered bones, and left scars that would never fade away. She pinched the bridge of her nose, “I'm much too old for this shit.”

Henry cleared his throat, drawing attention to the fact that he was still there. “Should we... continue our tour?”

“Indeed. Apologies, Henry,” Kamilah replied as she waltzed ahead of Aiko without another word in that carefully measured strut of hers.

Henry didn’t respond with any useless, comforting cliches, for which she was grateful. She'd had enough of those well-meaning phrases. Why couldn't more people acknowledge that occasionally, people were just terrible? Didn't they realise that sometime silence was more comforting than the
more sincere expression of sympathy or attempt at showing the deeper meaning behind it all?

Despite the fact that there was exactly four people alive that Kamilah liked, she was merely indifferent towards most other people... but the level of hatred she felt towards Aiko was unparalleled. Even the way she’d hated Gaius hadn’t held a candle towards this.

She didn’t understand what she’d ever seen in her. She suspected being a lonely victim of emotional abuse and a mind numbing depression might’ve clouded her judgement and lead to the whole century long fling she’d had with her, but it was still odd not to be able to pick out one damn thing she might’ve found appealing. With all her other exes, she knew why she’d loved them and she could say with certainty what they’d brought to her life, but with Aiko there was nothing but anger and a soul-deep hatred.

Anastasia, for example, was the that kind of woman that might actually be too interesting for her own good, and even as a mortal that spark had been the thing that had initially tempted her to get involved. Her wife was a woman who challenged her to be the best version of herself she was capable of being, who could be her equal in all things. Her mind was a place of blue pools and blazing meteors... and she stood slim and proud as some medival queen against every dawn. She knew why she loved her. She could list a million different things that she found appealing about her and then still think of more. But she couldn’t do any of that with Aiko because she hated her that much.

Beauty faded but Evil Bitch was forever, apparently.

~~~~ Seven Years Earlier - Almaty, Kazakhstan ~~~~

“Know what’s weird?,“ Anastasia smiled.

“Enlighten me,” smirked Kamilah.

“After NYU I seriously considered moving back home. Like, you have no idea how serious I was about either coming back here or going to Nur-Sultan. The day I interviewed with Adrian, I had been looking for flights home. I’d never have met you if I hadn’t got that job.”

“I’d have found you,” she replied. “Whether it was wandering The Louvre, or shopping in Harrods, or walking amongst the flowers in Central Park. I’d still have found you, somehow, somewhere.”

Anastasia’s cheeks flushed a rosy shade of pink that melted Kamilah’s heart. She’d never been to Kazakhstan before, and she’d certainly never met any of her previous lover’s family. So this was all new to her, and it was somewhat strange. She never would have guessed Anastasia would be as out of place in England and Kazakhstan, the countries where she’d been raised, as Kamilah would be in Egypt, the native ground of her ancestors. The arrow of natural history wouldn’t be reversed: by now Anastasia was as much an American as she was... despite the adorable accent.

“So you’ve really never been taken home by any of your past lovers?,“ Anastasia beamed as she lead her by the hand through the park she used to flee to instead of going to primary school.

The late afternoon setting sun gave her copper-hued hair flame coloured highlights and she made sure that the soft skin of her cleavage and legs were on full display as her pace kept her long hair billowing behind her. Grudgingly, Kamilah had to admit that several heads turned, and more than a few cars slowed down as both male and female drivers gave her a second, third and fourth look.
Anastasia responded by flashing them a dazzling smile, making her appear almost angelic to anyone who didn't know that she was a little hellion.

Kamilah snorted. She was danger wrapped in secrets tied with a bow of bad intentions, and she was certain she was exactly what most parents warned their children to stay far away from. “Is that really so surprising? All I'm saying is that I'm a moody, arrogant, impatient, borderline homicidal bitch who carries knives and hemlock wherever she goes. I'm not exactly meet the parents material.”

“Kami,” Anastasia laughed hysterically. Blood whooshed through Kamilah’s body. An Anastasia buzz. She was using her bedroom eyes... all heavy lidded and seductive. But Kamilah didn’t even think she was trying. “My family loves you very much, you massive dork.”

“And I want you to promise me that you're okay with that, because it's who I am, and you're what I need,” Kamilah smiled as she drew her girlfriend in her embrace. Her embrace was her drug of choice, and as any addict knew, one sampling was way too many and a thousand never enough. “You know, I’m winging all of this, but even though I’ve been through dozens of prior relationships... I don't know if any of them would've prepared me for being with you.”

“They wouldn't,” Anastasia said with complete assuredness. “I told you before; I know you're the dragon instead of the knight. And I don't care. At your best or at your worst, I will always love you, Kamilah. We are who we become, not who we start out as. You’re wonderful and need to stop being so hard on yourself.” She pushed herself up on her top toes and kissed her. A long, deep kiss filled with promise and passion. She loved the way she kissed her. Like she was drinking in the taste of her and still coming back thirsty. The Bloodkeeper’s lips left hers and moved to her neck and she mumbled, “You’re mine.”

“Forever. Say it.”

“You’re mine. I’m yours,” she swore, the words ragged from passion. “Always and forever.”

“You know, Annie... the night I came to visit your grave, when I found you alive, it was the only time in my life I've ever thanked God for anything.” Kamilah rested her brow against hers and whispered, “You’re all I’m ever going to need. Do you understand that? You’re my forever... and I want to be yours.”

“Forever, huh?”

“Months ago, I asked you about your thoughts on marriage... if you would ever consider marrying me. This time, I'm not asking. I'm telling you to say yes, so say it, and be mine for eternity. I can't give you a normal life, but I promise to adore you every day for as long as we both draw breath.” She reached into her pocket and produced the diamond ring that Anastasia had picked out on the last night of her mortal life. She held her bare hand in her own, her fingers curved around hers. Her hand was warm and calloused from millennia of combat, but Anastasia’s touch made her shiver. And those eyes were so steady and blue; they were everything that Anastasia was: true and tender, sharp and witty, loving and so very kind. “Marry me, baby. Marry me and stay with me and never leave me, because I cannot bear another day of my life to go by that does not have you in it.”

Anastasia froze, then she grabbed her face and kissed her for saying exactly what she had wanted to hear since the moment they first met. They kissed once, twice, three times before she pulled back.

“Does it always take this long for someone to answer? It’s making me bloody nervous,” Kamilah smirked.
Anastasia giggled and rolled her eyes. “Yes, Kami. Of course I’ll marry you.”

“I love you,” she whispered as she slipped the ring onto her finger.

“I’ve loved you longer,” she smirked.

“Impossible.”

“When I first saw you, you were like a flood of sunshine. Lily thought I was crazy because there was like a 97% chance you’d end up killing me,” Anastasia smirked.

“That’s an oddly specific percentage.”

“It’s Lily. She’s oddly specific.”

Kamilah snorted. “She’s just odd in general, I think.”

"But I knew you wouldn’t, and I watched you. You somehow got even more beautiful every time I saw you. You were so different from anything in my world. Everyone else just watched you, but I wanted you. Not to use up the way — the way humans sometimes do. I needed you." She rested her brow against hers. “I couldn't see anyone else, couldn't hear anyone else. All I could think about was you. I wouldn't let anyone hurt you, ever. I knew I had to have you, no matter what happened. Lily said I was crazy in love with you that night on the train... but even before that I knew you were the only one I wanted.”

It wasn’t often Kamilah smiled until her cheeks started to hurt. It wasn’t often she openly displayed her emotions, but in that moment she was so happy she couldn’t resist sweeping her fiancé off of her feet and spinning her in playful circle. She was more herself with her during the year-and-a-half that they’d been together than she’d ever been with anyone in her whole life. She was certain it would be easier if she could be fake with her from time to time, but Anastasia brought out everything in her. Everything she’d thought had been long forgotten and buried beneath two thousand years of heartache. All of it.

When she got control of herself a few moments later, she realised that in her arms she felt almost what she had in her childhood dreams, that inexpressible sense of peace and security. Of belonging somewhere, utterly. As long as Anastasia, her soulmate, was alive and they were together, she would always be all right.
“Winter is coming,” the voices in Anastasia’s head crooned. “The power is yours. Take it. Take it. Take it...”

“Shut up! Shut up!,” Anastasia cried as she slammed her head into her pillow over and over again in a desperate bid to silence the voices. She screamed at the top of her lungs for the longest time. And she knew she should stop, but she couldn’t. It just kept coming out. But she didn’t cry. She wouldn’t let herself cry. “I don’t care if winter is coming! I don’t care!”

“Bare your teeth, send winter to its death...”

“Stop it!,” cried the Bloodkeeper. She lay sweating, shaking, doing her best to quell the overwhelming need that was driving her to the brink of insanity — to consume vampire blood, and to extinguish the dark flame inside her. A flame that burned brighter, hotter, stronger each passing moment. A fire so insatiable it wanted to consume everything in its path.

“And one will come to end us all. One will come to bring her fall...”

“Will I bring my own fall? Or another’s?” She looked frantically around her room. “Who is falling?!"

“Anastasia,” soothed Kamilah. “No one else is here, baby. Just breathe. You’re fine. It’s fine—“

“Before there is peace, blood will spill blood, and the lake will run red...”

“What lake?!,” Anastasia screamed as she thrashed in her bed.

“Annie, please be still,” Kamilah pleaded. She looked as out of her depth as she felt. “Please, baby. Stop. You’re hurting yourself.”

Anastasia growled. The food she’d been given and the images of herself she’d been shown had done little to calm her down. The fact that she was still restrained to a bed, unable to use her abilities the way she wanted to, and still had no memory or sense of self was a potion for the perfect storm of anxiety. If anything, the fact she’d been moved from the only place she remembered unsettled her even more.

“That one tickled,” the Bloodkeeper hissed as her restraints sent electric shocks through her limbs. She tugged on them violently and ignored the urge to convulse with the pain. If she were in her right mind, she always said that age had taught her patience. But since her memories had been taken, life had taught her to get frustrated at lack of progress. “If electrocution is your way of flirting, I commend you on your originality.”
“Annie—“

“You really don’t play nice when it comes to something you want, do you?”

Pain flashed through Kamilah’s dark eyes as she watched helplessly as Anastasia kicked and thrashed in her bed. “You have no idea.”

“Your friends want to inject me again,” she stated as she continued to tug on her cuffs. “So forgive me if I don’t want to stay here when I can hear every word that they are saying—“

“This room is soundproofed. I can’t even hear them, how could you possibly—“

“I’m not like you, that’s how... and they’re not exactly subtle. I might not be able to make things move with my mind right now, but these restraints aren’t strong enough to take my abilities away entirely. You’re going to have to try much harder if you want to do that.”

“Stop it!,” Kamilah ordered, the pain in her voice thicker with her vehemence. “I promise, I’m not going to let anyone hurt you but right now you’re the only one hurting yourself! Stop pulling on your restraints, baby. Please stop it.”

Anastasia had a warrior’s spirit inside her sleek, feminine frame, for true valor was best revealed when defeat was inevitable. She gave one last almighty tug on her bindings for spite before falling limp against the mattress. “If you cared as much as you say you do, you wouldn’t be doing this to me.”

“You’ve said yourself that you don’t think you’ll be able to control yourself if the restraints are removed,” Kamilah said calmly. “Do not think for a moment that I want to keep you like this. Do you really think I’ve ceased to care? Annie, I care about you so much it kills me. It breaks my heart to see you this way and not know how to help you or comfort you.”

She opened her mouth — and had nothing to refute that with. Damn people who argued using logic. Talk about unfair.

She bit down on her bottom lip and stared at the woman in front of her. In the pictures she’d seen, it was obvious that she adored her, and Anastasia could see that she’d also adored her back. But trusting anyone entirely after going through what she had, and whilst in this vulnerable position was just... hard. She knew there was more to everyone than what met the eye. Yet most times, people still only saw what they expected to see.

“You should just put me out of my misery,” she grumbled. Perhaps the moths knew what she didn’t, that the joy of the flame was worth the price of destruction. “The voices in my head tell me to do things I don’t want to do and they say things I don’t understand. Potentially evil. Potentially good, too, I suppose. Just this huge powerful potentiality waiting to be shaped. But it’s so scary. The only way I’ll be free is if you kill me.”

Kamilah’s jaw dropped. “Don’t. Don’t go there—“

“I can hear the woman I slammed into the wall saying that everyone would be safer if I was dead. They’re all watching and listening from the room behind that mirror facing the bed.” She sighed. “You’re smart enough to know that as soon as I get these cuffs off, I’m too strong for any of you to overpower me. Here I am, vulnerable and weak. Now might be your only chance to kill me before I can hurt anyone else.”

“Aiko talks shit,” Kamilah spat. “She wouldn’t know common sense if it bit her in the ass. You shouldn’t listen to her. You should listen to your family instead.”
“Family?”

“Our family, not by blood but by affection. Adrian, Lily, Serafine, You, and I. We’d all be lesser people without each other.”

Anastasia looked at her blankly. Those names meant nothing to her. She guessed a person never knew what they had till they’ve lost it. “I... I don’t know them.”

“They know you.” Kamilah gently brushed the tips of her fingers over her knuckles. “I can see you getting stressed about not remembering. What has been destroyed can never be resurrected the exact way that it was because we’ll all be determined to help you recover from this, but it can be rebuilt, so that is what we are all trying to do, Annie. Rebuild.”

“You want me to let the two psychics into my mind, don’t you?”

Kamilah stilled. “How did you know that?”

Anastasia shrugged, she wasn’t going to tell Kamilah she was picking up on some of her thoughts... she’d made that mistake back in the dungeons when Vlad had asked her if she could hear his, so she didn’t trust that she wouldn’t be hurt if she was honest. “Intuition.”

“How would you feel about letting Kano and Serafine in?”

“I made the mistake of letting my guards down once.” She looked away from Kamilah and stared at her reflection in the one-way mirror opposite her bed, knowing that Kano and Serafine were watching from the other side. The voices in her head goaded her. Summoning as much strength as she could, she focused on the pane of glass and began sending shockwaves across it. She couldn’t pick things up without touching them and she couldn’t control anyone’s mind, but even in her restraints she was strong enough to do something as simple as shattering the glass. There was a loud cracking sound and the mirrored surface crashed to the floor, revealing the ashen faces of the people who’d followed Kamilah into her cell. “It will never happen again. If either of you so much as tries to penetrate my mind I’ll kill you, do I make myself clear?”

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Adrian muttered. “The restraints—“

“You, like my previous jailers, assumed you knew the extent of what I am capable of. But you don’t. You never will. Speed, vision, hearing, smell, physical strength — all are superior to a regular vampire’s,” Anastasia fired back, drawing everyone’s attention. She was terrified of these people, but she’d cower to no one. Not ever again. “I might not be able to break free of these chains yet, but I will, and when I do you better hope that you’re far away because it’s you I’m coming for first for creating these things.”

Even though she’d released only a sliver of her power, it still felt as if her mind had just gotten subconsciously scalded and her head ached with the strain of it. If Kamilah were anyone else, she’d have been terrified at pissing off the legendary Bloodkeeper, but instead of running she grabbed her hand and instantly began trying to soothe her.

“She’s gone mad,” Aiko grimaced. “She’s cunning to the point of being a sociopath.”

“Don’t you ever speak to her that way again.” There was pure warning in the whip of Kamilah’s words as she spoke to Aiko. “You can call me any name you like and more, but I will not stand by while you slander her out of your own ignorance. You treat people with understanding when you can, and fake it when you can’t, until you do understand.”

“One to be a murderer. One to be a Martyr. One to go Mad....,” the voices in her head murmured.
She slammed her head against her pillow again and shook her restraints. “Stop it. Shut up. Please stop....”

“Annie,” Kamilah whispered. “Please, baby. Please stop. This isn’t you.”

Anastasia turned to look at Kamilah, the voices in her head screaming so loud that her eyes burned and her brain began to throb. “You’re married to a borderline psychotic who conquered the brutal circumstances she was held in by being even more brutal. Add turning into a vampire who craves the blood of other vampires and centuries worth of memories of undead power struggles, and you have the crazy cruel bastard you fell in love with.”

“This isn’t you. This is not who you are. You are kind and gentle—“

“Kill me.”

“No—“

“What if it can't be worked out? What if I'm — what if I'm broken for good? I don’t want to live like this! I don’t want to hurt anyone but I— Please kill me.”

“Annie—“

“Kill me!,” she screamed as she began tugging violently on her restraints again. “Just kill me! Please! Make it stop! Kamilah, I want it to stop! It hurts! Please just kill me!”

Tears began streaming down Kamilah’s face and she turned to the horrified onlookers. Horror didn’t begin to describe the look on her face. Adrian stared at her like he knew her world was being crushed, ground up and then forced down her throat until she died choking on its remains. When she spoke, her voice was little more than a whimper, “Adrian...”

“Sedate her,” Adrian nodded.

“You’re swimming with sharks,” that pitiless voice in her head snapped. “Either grow some teeth or get eaten.”

In a flash Kamilah was at the opposite side of her bed, unclamping the IV tube that fed a continuous stream of Propofol directly into her veins. Anastasia thrashed and screamed, but she wasn’t sure if she was screaming in an attempt to scare off the strangers she’d once known or the voices inside her head. As the drugs flowed, she begged them to kill her, she told them she was sorry, that she didn’t actually want to hurt anyone, and she begged them to help her.

“I know it hurts,” Kamilah sobbed whilst she stroking her hair as the Bloodkeeper’s cries became even more incoherent and her movements grew languid. She looked at her, the light in her eyes fractured into millions of bits — a kaleidoscope of darkness and pain that may never be fixed. “I’m going to make it stop, baby. I promise. I’ll find some way to make it stop. Forgive me. This is one of the reasons I love you. You bend for no one. Unfortunately, that same trait might also tear us apart right now. I’m sorry. It’s all going to be okay. I promise. You'll always be safe with me.”

“You're the light I can never have,” Anastasia slurred, “and I'm the darkness you'll never succumb to. You feel like mine. Whoever you were, whoever you are... you’re mine.”

“You and I are meant to be. It's the only thing I'm absolutely sure of. And while I have no idea what to expect, I promise I'll do whatever it takes to help you find your way back.”

As the world began to fade, all she felt was how tightly Kamilah held her, how her own strength
sparked against her skin, and how she kissed her face with delicate savageness, as if she sensed her inner turmoil and sought to turn it into peace instead.

~~~~~ Five Weeks Earlier - Tokyo, Japan ~~~~~

“The Order of Apostolous,” Akeyo said as he nervously drummed the conference table with the pads of his fingers. He looked exhausted after weeks away trying to investigate the rumours of a new enemy. “It was begun by the few Rheya loyalists who managed to slip the net following her demise, but has managed to grow from a cell of a few rouge vampires to thousands of mortal groupies — most with ties to The Order of the Dawn — and the more unsavoury vampire stock.”

“They seek to resurrect Rheya. Their goddess,” The Evolved added.

“But that’s impossible, isn’t it?,” Lily asked. “We destroyed the Tree Of Life and the Tree Of Death.”


Every set of eyes in the conference room fell on her. Despite being psychic, Anastasia hadn’t a clue what anyone expected from her. There was a voice screeching inside her head and now yet another enemy hellbent on attacking her from the outside. She knew all the way down to her bones that she’d have to fight again. There was no vision that told her so, no prophetic epiphany... she just knew she was either going to have to win or die trying.

“Well then, what do we do about it?,” she asked.

Everyone’s eyebrows shot up and Adrian said, “You are clear they’re very likely going to be after you?”

“I thought that much was obvious?,” she prodded. “Listen, I might be young but I’ve been through this before. If you’re waiting on some petulant emotional reaction then do it on your own time. Right now we have a powerful enemy that we know very little about and a fragile peace between our society and the mortals’. We need information and a plan of action. I trust everyone in this room will actually fight this time around, or are you lot expecting us to bleed for you again?”

The Five all squirmed in their seats and Kamilah didn’t even bother to conceal her amusement. Anastasia knew that there was only one way to fight, and that was dirty. Clean fighting would get them nowhere but dead, and fast. She intended to take every cheap shot, every low blow, she’d absolutely kick people when they were down, and then maybe they’d be the ones who walked away at the end of everything.

“You can count on our aid this time around, dear Bloodkeeper,” Kano replied on behalf of everyone in the room who’d sat on their ass last time. “It is how it must be.”

It wasn’t that she wanted to be the one to lead them, but she was the most powerful person in the room. She was the most powerful person in any room. Therefore it was her responsibility to use her powers wisely. It always seemed to happen that way. Everyone would help her get to where she needed to be, but in the end everything always seemed to fall to her because of the blood running through her veins.
“They’re after you,” Aiko said. “Am I the only one who sees a quick and simple solution to this problem that would avoid us having to go to war—“

“If you are suggesting my wife end her life I advise you quit whilst you’re ahead,” Kamilah interjected. “Just because Anastasia was born different doesn’t mean she was born wrong. Actions, not existence, define character. She’s already sacrificed more than enough for our wellbeing, we owe it to her to protect her.”

“As long as she lives and breathes, her bloodline exists,” Aiko said. Evidently hundreds years of losing out on the girl of her dreams wasn’t sitting very well with her these days. “The blessed chalice was the Bloodkeeper and vampire bloodline merging. Her blood may as well be a grenade.”

She had recently discovered what she had suspected all along — cynicism like Aiko displayed was always overrated and overvalued. It was the shield people hid behind in the mistaken belief that it made them appear cool, strong and impenetrable. But true bravery wasn’t about following the crowd or pretending not to care — it was about daring to trust in yourself and staying true to your heart in the face of dissent. True courage was going out on a limb for the people you love because it was the right thing to do.

Anastasia fell silent and simply looked between her wife and Aiko as a violent war of words broke out. As much as she didn’t want to admit it, Aiko did have a point. Power was supposed to be used for the protection of those you cared about, not for selfishness. Was it selfish of her to ignore the fact that this new order obviously believed she was they key to resurrecting Rheya? What else could her blood be used for? Did the voices in her head actually make more sense than she thought they did?

She’d been only twenty-two when she’d defeated Rheya, and she’d been naive enough to believe that the rest of eternity would be nothing but sunshine and roses after that. But life was still life. It was still tough, complicated, and more than a little messy, with lessons to be learned, mistakes to be made, triumphs and disappointments to be had, and not every day was meant to be a party. She might’ve been a beautiful vampire who was loved, worshiped and admired by mortals and most supernatural creatures... but she had no idea what she was doing.

“Enough!,” she commanded, silencing the yelling room with a wave of her hand that lifted everyone’s chairs up a few inches and slammed them back down on the ground with enough force to shock them into stillness. Everyone gasped and glared at her, they might’ve been silent but their thoughts were loud. “What is this accomplishing? You’re all at least centuries old — save for you, Lil — and you’re acting like children!”

There were multiple mumbled apologies and then Serafine spoke. “We’re merely stressed—“

“You’re stressed? I’m the one that’s faced with a choice between going to war with this Order so that I can be with the love of my life, or saving all the lives that are never meant to end by giving my own. If I can act like an adult, then you all sure as hell can pull your shit together for five minutes.”

Kamilah squeezed her hand. She loved her so much that she’d never allow her to give her life again, even if it was to protect everyone else. The heart knew no logic, and rarely corresponded with the brain... even when the brain was as sharp as Kamilah’s was. “You’re not sacrificing yourself. I think everyone here with two brain cells to rub together will come to that conclusion.”

“One life to save thousands. Is it even a choice? As long as I’m alive, Rheya and Demetrius’ bloodlines are immortal... and we don’t know what else my blood can be used for. We just... we don’t know what sort of blood magic is out there, and I’m not only talking about what vampires
could potentially use it for. Every supernatural sect has their own magic and rituals we know nothing about.”

“The vampire community is safer with you alive to protect us,” Akeyo said. “Sacrificing you is not, and will not, ever be an option that those of us not harping on petty grievances would ever consider.”

“You can't go back, Ever. You can't change the past. It just is.” Anastasia squinted, having no idea what Lily was talking about. But just as she opened her mouth to start to ask, she shook her head and said, “This is our destiny. All of us this time. Not just yours.”

All Anastasia could do was nod and fall silent as a more civil conversation began. She was exhausted. Her mind was being too loud, the world was too busy, and everything just felt as if it was suffocating her. Like she was drowning on dry land.

What the others didn’t seem to understand as they discussed creative ways to kill a monster, was that the only monster was Anastasia. They all looked at her like some sort of hero, the girl who’d killed Gaius Augustine and Rheya Apostolous, without realising that the only reason Rheya and Gaius lost, the only reason they failed to get what they wanted, was because the monster was her, there was no difference between them. They were all powerful people whose power and abilities had changed the course of history. Power that made all the moves, called all the shots, whilst Anastasia felt she was just along for the ride, with no idea how to pull the brakes or get off or fight the darkness that followed her like a shadow.

“Winter is coming,” the voices in her head whispered. “We’re coming. We’re coming...”

“Everything alright?,” Kamilah whispered in her ear. Concern was written across her face, like it always was whenever Anastasia randomly zoned out. She knew about her visions of the past, and knew that she couldn’t control them, but she knew her so well that she could tell the difference between a vision and the voices. She was the only one who could.

“Can I talk to you outside?”

Kamilah nodded and gently took her arm to lead her out of the conference room without saying a word to anyone. Nobody said a damn word about them just getting up and leaving. Only a person with a death wish would’ve questioned Kamilah Sayeed at that precise moment in time.

The moment they got to the nearest bathroom and the door was locked, Anastasia’s tears started flowing and Kamilah had her held tightly against her chest. While appearing weak was okay, giving into that weakness was definitely not.

“Kami”, she whispered, her tears starting to flow faster.

“Shhhhh, my love. You’re alright. You’re going to be alright,” Kamilah soothed.

“I’m sorry. Sometimes— sometimes it just hits me, you know? And, it's not getting any easier,” Anastasia choked, her eyes flooding all over again. “I'm not sure that it will get any easier being what I am. I think I just need to get used to the feeling, the hollowness, the fear of bad things happening, and somehow learn to live around it... but I don’t know how.”

“Don’t be sorry. My feelings for you are not conditional. I don't judge you. I don't loose patience with you. I don't punish you. I just love you. That's all. Pure and simple. I’m here.”

Kamilah moved with her incredible speed, gripping her tightly in those powerful arms to sit her up on the marble counter by the sinks. She tilted her head back and covered her mouth in a bruising
kiss that made joy rip through her with all the intensity of the pain she’d felt before. When she finally broke away several minutes later, both of them could hardly breathe, but Anastasia still managed to speak.

"I love you," she choked out. "I love you, I love you, I love you—"

Kamilah’s kiss cut her off again, and this time, she wasn’t only crying when she kissed her back. She was smiling, too.

“And I love you.” She smiled as best she could, her lips still seeking hers. "Always have. Always will."

“I don’t want to say in front of the others because they won’t understand... but I think the Order have something to do with the voices I’m hearing. They have to,” she confessed. “They... they never stop. I can block them out sometimes but not others.”

Kamilah caressed her wet face. “What do you think they want?”

“Memories. Which ones, I don’t know, but it feels like they’re searching my brain for something... but they’re not strong enough to find it.”

“You said ‘they’, as in, you think this is more than one psychic...”

She nodded. “It’s at least six or seven. I can sense that much, my mind is just too strong for them to leaf through. They speak to me but they can’t... they can’t get in, you know? Like they’re speaking to me through a closed door and seeing everything through frosted glass.”

“Have you told Kano?”

“No and I don’t plan on it. He’s a good teacher but I can’t stand his cryptic bullshit.” She rested her head on her shoulder. “He thinks talking in riddles will help me, but he fails to realise that there's no longer any difference between me and a monster. I am a monster. Its my dark side, my shadow self, and my mind is tormenting me to the extent it feels like we’ve now joined as one.”

“You are no monster. I’ve known my share of those and you are not one of them.” Kamilah’s arms tightened around her. “God. I feel so helpless right now. I wish I could take this and suffer it in your place.”

Kamilah was the only one she trusted with a secret of this magnitude. Despite having no psychic abilities of her own, she was the one who had taught her that her abilities were nothing to be ashamed of, nothing she should try so hard to deny. She convinced her that what she had was a gift — not a curse — and that she shouldn't let other people's narrow minds and fears determine how she loved, what she did, or how she perceived herself in the world. She actually made her believe that in no way, shape, or form did their uninformed opinions make her a freak.

For that moment, she didn’t feel like anything special at all. She felt small. Just Anastasia — a girl straddling two bloodlines. One she had been given — one she felt like she must earn. Unlike most people, her deepest fear was not that she was inadequate. Her deepest fear was that she was powerful beyond measure. It was her light, not necessarily her darkness that most frightened her.

“I wouldn’t wish this on anyone, Kami, least of all you.”

Kamilah sighed. “Is there anything I can do to make this more bearable?”

“Just love me,” Anastasia whispered. “Just love me.”
“Girl, how in the ever loving fuck do you get these grades?,” Lily lamented loudly as they trudged through the snow towards their crappy apartment. The subways had been closed because of the snow storm, so they may as well have been climbing Everest. “You fuck your way through the entire population of New York instead of sleeping, you live on a diet of Red Bull and vodka, and I’ve literally never seen you pick up a book that wasn’t written by Tolkien!”

Anastasia laughed nervously. She knew that if she had to tell anyone she’d always heard voices that told her what answers to write down on her schoolwork, all she’d get was a psych hold at the nearest hospital. “I’m just winging it, I guess.”

For as long as she could remember, she’d heard these voices and had blurry visions of the past. She’d thought they were nothing more than childish day dreams until the moment she realised the only reason she’d passed her world history final was one of these visions. Nobody would understand.

Lily stopped in her tracks, face expressing major disappointment. “Wait — seriously? That’s it?”

“What the fuck were you expecting?”

“More than that! I was hoping we’d get to do a stealthy tiptoe into the school at night to search for cheat sheets or you’d introduce me to more sexy gay hackers. You killed my dreams. No sneaking through a cracked window, or arguing over who gets to crawl through the doggie door to let the other one in?”

“NYU doesn’t have doggie doors, Lil.”

“What are the things Zack and Cody were always creeping around the Tipton in? You know, Mr Mosby would be pissed as shit at them for it—“

“Wasn’t he always pissed at them?”

“Damn right he was. He needed a Xanax. But wasn’t he especially pissed at them for creeping through these things?”

“Air vents?”

“That’s what I meant! Air vents!”

“Do people actually do that in real life?”

“They fucking should. If people literally did the whole planking trend, there has to be someone dumb enough to crawl through air vents on a regular basis.”

She shook her head and rolled her eyes in amusement. If anything could make walking home with half of New York in a blizzard a fun experience, it was Lily’s humour.

As they turned onto Fifth Avenue, the streets became much more crowded. With the snow blurring her vision and people shuffling in all directions, it was pretty much impossible not to bump into people. Just as she started to move past a short man in an old fashioned suit that looked like it
belonged on an old school gangster, her shoulder accidentally rubbed against his and the whole world faded away for a few seconds.

Instead of being on a snowy New York street, Anastasia suddenly found herself standing beside a poker table. Seated around the table was a group of individuals in 1920s clothing, their faces obscured the way the surface was when you were swimming deep under water.

“Don’t be ridiculous Cecil,” a woman snapped, “You and Priya both know the Order of the Dawn do not operate on this side of the Atlantic. They wouldn’t dare.”

“I’m telling you that one of my houseboys saw something in his dreams!,” another woman whined like a petulant child. “A girl.”

“Shocking,” the woman deadpanned. “A girl. How terrifying, but do go on, keep wasting my time if you must... but you’re both buying me another drink.”

“I don’t make it a habit of keeping women around my house, grandma! They visit but they don’t stay, I don’t like my boys eyes wandering—”

“Get to the point, hussy,” a man snapped.

“A girl with red hair. A vampire who kills vampires, apparently. He’s had prophetic dreams before —”

“What exactly did he say?,” another man in a suit asked.

“The other side of midnight’s hour strikes a herald thrice rung. Seer, Shadow, Sun, together they come in Winter. The light shall be eclipsed. Leaving darkness to ascend beneath a sky bleeding fire.”

The other woman scoffed dismissively. “Then the council shall end her for betraying her kind when she makes herself known to us. Now can I enjoy my scotch in peace? I have had more than enough socialising tonight, thank you very much.”

A hand on Anastasia’s arm drew her out of her trance and brought her back to the present moment. As she stared at Lily’s face and the falling snow, the memory of where she had just been faded away almost entirely until they felt like a half forgotten dream. How strange and unsettled she felt. Like a snow globe paper weight that had been shaken. There was a blizzard in her bubble, that mirrored that around her. Everything in her world that was steady and sure and sturdy had been shaken out of place, and it was now drifting and swirling back down in a confetti of snow.

“What’s wrong?,” Lily prodded.

“I, uh, nothing. I just thought I’d lost my phone,” she lied as she patted her jacket pockets. “This jacket is so puffy that I couldn’t feel it.”

“Wanna get a cookie or something?”

Anastasia snorted. “A cookie? That’s a bit of a weird question.”

“You cannot trash the person who makes you coffee in the morning. It's a rule somewhere,” Lily laughed. “You seem stressed as fuck with all the sex you’re having and those perfect grades of yours. So... a cookie... or ten, I don’t judge. That would make everything better. Dunked in a shot of tequila, maybe? Or better yet, just the bottle with a twirly straw so you feel fancy?”
“Yeah, that ought to do it.”

“When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies but the pack survives!”

“Did you just quote Game Of Thrones?”

“This is why we’re best friends. I say shit like this to anyone else, and they don’t get it.”

Lily smiled and looped her arm through hers, and started talking about Game Of Thrones. Anastasia did her best to listen, but her mind was preoccupied on what she’d seen. Sometimes there was just more worth in silence than in noise. Sometimes everything she felt like she needed to know most was contained in that small quiet space. Sometimes she got so caught up in the distraction and noise and seeking other people’s approval she could easily forget the quiet seed of truth that lived in her heart. But just because she often failed to tune in to it, didn’t mean it wasn’t always there.

Memories were the only things anyone really owned, the only things that stayed constant. Everything else became dust eventually. And that made her episodes all the more confusing... and all the more precious.
She’s fine when we’re alone,” Kamilah sighed as she tucked her sedated wife beneath her favourite blanket. She didn’t want to believe that the woman she’d fell madly in love with — the woman made entirely of goodness and light — had been eternally snuffed out by the bloodthirsty creature that lay before her. “What we just saw was fear. She heard you all talking and she started to panic because she thinks everybody is going to hurt her.”

“She’s never gonna forgive herself when she gets her memories back and realises she’s both tried and threatened to kill us multiple times,” Lily laughed weakly as she wiped the tears from her eyes. “Sis is so gentle she won’t even kill a damn spider... so we all know this isn’t her, right?”

Everyone nodded.

“If she’s strong enough to shatter a mirror in these restraints... I don’t know how safe she is to be around,” Adrian sighed. “We need to keep her in them at least until she stops craving vampire blood.”

“It should be impossible,” Kano added as he and Serafine tried once again to penetrate the unconscious Bloodkeeper’s mind, to no avail. “The restraints you’ve created should act as a block for her psychic energy.”

“Whatever they’ve done to her, they’ve destroyed the mental barrier that exists in a psychic mind that stops it from tearing itself apart,” Serafine explained as Adrian wiped the sweat from her brow. “Her psychic abilities were already incomparable, but now there is nothing stopping them from running rampant.”

“What does that mean?,” Kamilah prodded.

Kano and Serafine shared a pained glance and Serafine said, “It means that she has no control over them whatsoever, especially when she gets upset. It means that the sane part of her — her sense of self — that brought her back that night in the opera house and stops her from spiralling whenever she gets upset, is fading... and the longer she fights us, the...”

“The less chance we’ll have of bringing her back,” Kano finished. “Whilst all minds are a maze, her mind is a labyrinth. Keeping her as calm as possible may ward off another meltdown.”

“Like I said, she was calm and able to communicate reasonably when it was just the two of us. If you can all go home and sleep, I can be completely alone—“

“It’s not safe, Kamilah,” Adrian interjected.
“If we weren’t here and she manages to slip her cuffs, she’ll kill you,” Lily said.

“Even if you were here and she slipped her cuffs, all of us together still couldn’t stop her from doing whatever the hell she wants,” Kamilah sighed. “It’s safer if you all leave. I’m the only one she doesn’t want to hurt, and she’s not only said as much, but she’s displayed it through her actions. Back in the dungeons, I was the only one she bypassed. Here, she hasn’t threatened to kill me. She might not trust me entirely but she doesn’t want to hurt me... and she’s much calmer when it’s just the two of us. She’s scared of people right now. Really, really scared.”

“If she’s strong enough to shatter the mirror and hear through the soundproofing we installed here, even in the cuffs, chances are she’s strong enough to read your thoughts,” Kano said. “The Anastasia we all care for would never enter someone’s mind uninvited, but there is every reason to believe that the moment she wakes up she will try to manipulate you into letting her go. Her understanding of right and wrong has likely been skewed, you understand this?”

“I know. It might be foolish of me but I trust her, even now. She won’t harm me. If you can’t trust her, trust me. I know my wife is still in there.”

“Sister—,” Adrian started, but Kamilah cut him off.

“When I was at my darkest and killed people, I didn’t have the concept of pity or remorse for centuries. Telling me then to stop hurting others would have been like telling a shark he was a bad fish and to stop eating people. But Annie? She knows she was doing wrong when she was acting out but she didn’t have control, so she did it anyway.”

“Kamilah,” Serafine said. “She warned us herself, we simply don’t know what she is capable of right now. In her right mind, we all know how she adores you, how she wouldn’t dream of laying a hand on you... but the woman before us is not our Anastasia. The darkness that she believes to be inside of her, this is it come to the surface. You mustn’t let your love for her cloud your judgement here. She is far more dangerous than you want to admit to yourself.”

“I’m fully aware of how dangerous her abilities can potentially be, I always have been, but does that mean I treat her like some sort of monster? No, and I’m not going to start now. Treat a broken person like a monster, that’s exactly what they become,” Kamilah snapped. “She has been tortured within an inch of her life and we now have her strapped to a bed, the last thing she needs is someone treating her anything but kindly.”

“She’d literally never forgive herself if she had to hurt you,” Lily said. “She’ll hate herself for the things she’s said to us, but you’re a whole different kettle of fish. You gotta be careful here. You are her entire heart and soul.”

“She kept me alive for years through two major threats, a crazy situation that almost ended up with a clan war, and comforted me when my abusive ex-boyfriend came back from the grave. Its about time I return the favour and be there for her as best I can as I try to fix her! And if I can't fix her, then I can sit by this bed and hold her hand for as long as she’ll let me and then hold her as she dies at the execution that will inevitably be ordered... because I've had plenty of practice doing that, too!”

The darkness inside Kamilah had allowed for her to see her wife’s predicament on a more human level than some of their friends. Giving her the very thing most people lacked: an insider’s knowledge of the two faces of a woman — the constant struggle between darkness and light. She knew what she wanted, what she knew Anastasia needed, and she was more stubborn than their entire family combined.
Nowadays, her heart always knew what was most important. It always knew how to guide her, especially where Anastasia was concerned. It was pure, and trustworthy — though it would never shout to be heard. It never seemed to speak above a whisper. But she had learned how to heed it, how to hear it, and it had taught her how to be a good and loyal wife.

Nobody could argue with her when it came to Anastasia’s wellbeing, so they all eventually had no other option but to leave for a few hours sleep. Leaving them entirely alone.

“They’re gone,” Kamilah said when she heard the elevator start to rise and knew everyone was now out of earshot. “I know you’re awake.”

Anastasia cracked an eye open and took her in. “How long have you known?”

“A while.”

“You didn’t say anything to your friends.”

“Indeed.”

“You didn’t give me enough medicine to knock me out for more than a few minutes. You let a little through the IV and then clamped it again,” Anastasia stated as she watched her like a terrified wolf backed into a corner. “You don’t strike me as the sort who’d make such a careless mistake, which means you defied your friends intentionally. Why?”

“Look into my mind and see for yourself. You’ve been rifling through my thoughts since the moment you woke up.”

Anastasia’s eyes widened. “How did you—“

“I feel you. Everywhere.” She sat down on the edge of the mattress and took her hand in hers. “I’ve let you see my thoughts so many times that it’s become impossible for you to slip into my head undetected. I know how your powers feel.”

“You have such interesting thoughts. You drive yourself crazy with all the soul searching you do, though.” She paused and took a deep breath. “It... it doesn’t hurt, does it? When I... when I look into your mind?”

She shook her head. “All I feel is you.”

Anastasia bit down on her bottom lip and studied her in silence for a few moments. “I’m sorry about earlier. Aiko’s thoughts were very loud and they sounded like Vlad’s... he thought many of the same things before he had people hurt me. So I got scared... and when I get scared my own thoughts become something I can’t control... and then things just happen.”

“Yes... but I don’t feel bad about that. They treated me like an animal,” Anastasia whispered. “I feel bad about the way I acted today, though. You’ve been nothing but kind to me. I want to be the same way but I— Bad things just happen sometimes and then I have to be punished.”

“Oh, Annie. You don’t have to be punished,” Kamilah breathed as she reached out to caress her face without even thinking about it. Anastasia froze as her palm made contact with her cheek, her eyes widening. Just as Kamilah was about to pull her hand away, scared she might’ve overstepped her boundaries, her wife leaned into her touch and her eyes drifted closed. A small smile twitched at the corners of Kamilah’s mouth and she gently traced the pad of her thumb across her
“Good touch.” Anastasia nodded. “We’ve... we’ve done this before. Real or not real?”

“Real.” She kept gently stroking her cheek, quietly reveling in the physical contact. Moving her hand slowly, she tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, always studying her reaction to make sure she was comfortable. Deluding herself into thinking that if she could just touch her enough, love her enough, she could vanquish her fears. “You like physical affection a lot,” Kamilah continued. “You’re always snuggling me and touching me in some way.”

“Do you like it when I touch you?”

“I love it. It makes me feel safe.”

“It hurts when other people touch me. When it’s a bad touch it burns... like the sun,” confessed Anastasia. “But you feel... familiar. In a good way.”

Kamilah smiled softly. “And what about my blood? You can smell it, can’t you?”

Anastasia nodded and whispered, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

A compassion swirled from nowhere in the high Kamilah was lost in. She needed her. She needed her to accept her for what she was at that moment in time, even if neither of them fully understood the extent of it. And when she realized that she had it within herself to give her at least this small part of her, the last of her fears melted away. When she spoke, she spoke with nothing but confidence, “I know you don’t. I know you won’t.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because I know you saw my memory of Adrian putting those restraints on you, so you already know how to slip them... yet you haven’t. If you wanted to hurt me, if you were going to hurt me — or anyone, for that matter — you would’ve done it already.”

Anastasia actually laughed at that, her laugh as sweet and musical as it always was. “You miss absolutely nothing, do you?”

“Mhm.”

“I could just be lulling you into a false sense of security, like I did with my guards at Glamis. How do you know I’m not?”

Kamilah shrugged. “I don’t... but I’m trusting that that’s not the case. I’m trusting you.”

“You’re trusting a mentally unstable vampire who craves the blood of other vampires? Kamilah Sayeed, you must have a death wish,” Anastasia huffed.

“No one lives forever.”

Anastasia’s brow furrowed and her gaze intensified. “You’ve said that to me before in... in the cabin. There was... a fireplace... trees outside the window... and... Ferals — but we didn’t know then I was immune and could cure their bite, so you were worried about me. Real or not real?”

“Real— wait, you’re immune and can cure their bite?”

“Don’t tell anyone, please,” Anastasia whimpered, her eyes holding a shared pain as she saw her confusion. “I— just please don’t.”
Kamilah wrapped her pinky around hers. Knowledge was Power. Ignorance was Bliss. But curiosity — even if it had killed the cat — was king. “I promise,” she murmured. “All of your secrets are safe with me. Trust me.”

Anastasia nodded and took a deep breath. “My blood cures a vampire infected by a Feral’s bite. It was one of the experiments they did on me, one of my first memories. They had Ferals bite me and nothing happened, then they had another infected vampire drink my blood and they were cured. The same thing happened with the sun, though it burns me, it doesn’t to the same extent it does everyone else and my blood can cure a fatal sunburn.”

“My God,” she whispered. What exactly had they done to her? She thought, humbled and horrified. Some of the mystery had been broken, but not entirely. With just that little bit of knowledge, Anastasia’s soul was bare to her, the scars of her tragic past and her triumphs over pain and her aching need to find her place. She just wanted to hold her to her chest and tell her it would be okay, that she had survived and was beautiful... but she knew she couldn’t do that. So she settled on holding her hand instead.

“That’s why I got so upset earlier when I heard Aiko. Her thoughts and the words she was saying sounded so much like Vlad’s right did before the Order began those experiments. I... I thought you were all going to put me through it again... and I couldn’t stop myself. I didn’t know what to expect the first time and it didn’t make sense... it still doesn’t. It just... happens.”

“When something horrible happens, your brain doesn’t process the memories right,” she explained. How the hell was she going to explain to her that she already had PTSD after everything she’d been through? Was it even her place to do that to someone already in such a vulnerable state? All she knew was that she had to offer some sort of comfort. “It stores everything — sounds, pain, smells, feelings — all mixed up. It doesn't matter if it made sense; it gets stored and sometimes those memories rise to the surface when you don’t mean for them to.”

“It does?”

“It does, but I’ve got your back. Nothing alive will hurt you again if I have breath in me. And nothing dead will hurt you if I don’t,” Kamilah promised, stroking the inside of her wrist the way she always did when she was anxious or sad.

Anastasia’s eyes met hers at the soft touch, and a chime seemed to shake inside her head, realigning the universe... if only just a little bit more. She was hers.

“Remembering something?,” she asked.

Anastasia nodded.

“You can tell me, my love.”

“You... you like the way my accent makes your name sound different than when anyone else says it. I say the ‘i’ like an ‘ee’ and you think it’s sweet because I struggle with that letter most... especially when I’m drunk or tired... and sometimes I miss out the articles in my sentences and you like that too,” Anastasia said slowly, her brow furrowing. “And I... I called you Kami to annoy you when you started calling me Annie, but the names stuck and now it’s weird if we don’t say them. Real or not real?”

“Real. That’s all very real,” Kamilah nodded and closed her eyes. She tried to breathe, failing. She clutched her hand tightly in hers, a few tears slipping from under her closed eyelids. “Especially the things you said about your accent. I love the way you talk.”
“And you... you started calling me Annie before you told me you loved me. And... Adrian... said the moment he heard you say it, he knew how much I mean to you because you, um, you usually hate nicknames but get offended when anyone else calls me Annie... because, um, because I’m your Annie and no one else’s. Real or not real?”

“Real,” she sniffled. “We were quite pair before we found the courage to express our emotions. One too afraid to feel anything lest she lose control of her ironclad hold on her emotions, and the other so hungry to feel everything that she’d risk everything by falling in love with a vampire. We expressed our love without actually stating it in so many ways... and I think that brought us closer together.”

“I’m glad you’re here with me,” Anastasia whispered to her. “There’s still so much I don’t know but I... I think this is why I need you here, especially in times like this. You're unpredictable, and that can be the difference between success and failure. Most people make decisions in anger, fear, love, or obligation... that’s what your — our? — friends want to do. But you make decisions to irritate people... it’s impressive.”

“You usually find my inability to follow other people’s instructions irritating,” she chuckled. “You call it ‘my ancient attitude problem’.”

“I... knew that, I think,” Anastasia smiled softly.

Kamilah smirked. “My bad attitude doesn’t feel too ancient for you?”

“No, you don’t feel too ancient. Or too different. You feel like mine,” Anastasia murmured, studying her intensely. “The beast inside me may be alive and well, but right now, right this moment, my heart and soul are leading.”

“I'll always be here,” she said softly. "You can never fill my need, never drive me away, no matter how much you give me. The good or the bad. I'll always be hungry for emotion, always and forever, and I can feel you hurting. I can turn it to joy. If you'll let me... if you’ll trust me.”

“I think I do. Trust you, I mean. I... I think I do.”

It was as if her soul was liquid fire and she could feel Anastasia’s, swirling about her own. The little things she remembered might’ve seemed like insignificant things to her, but to Kamilah they were some of the most precious memories she had. Her remembering these things was like she was penetrating her very soul. But she wanted to give it to her, to catch her in a small part of herself and protect her. Her needs made her so fragile... but she was still the same person deep inside — because for all the changes, some things were immutable truths: a love like theirs transcended all barriers, understanding trumped fear, and great power could always be surmounted by sheer determination.

~~~~ Five Weeks Earlier - Tokyo, Japan ~~~~

“You need to watch your footwork,” Kamilah commented as she pinned Anastasia to the mat and pressed her dagger lightly against her throat, “otherwise an attacker can get you like this—“

Before she could finish she somehow found herself laying flat on the mat with her own blade pressed into her jugular. Anastasia was straddling her with the smuggest smile painted across her face. “And you need to focus on training instead of focusing on the fact playing with knives makes
you horny, otherwise you’ll find yourself having to top from the bottom.”

Kamilah snorted. “Did you just kink shame me? You, who is actually far kinkier than I am. You, who happens to be the kinkiest individual I have met in over two thousand years of life? Really?”

“I’d never,” beamed Anastasia as she lightly trailed the edge of the blade down her neck, not enough to draw blood but enough to make Kamilah bite down on her bottom lip.

“Mhm,” she hummed. With Anastasia’s face so close, and her eyes so deep, she literally couldn’t help but lift her fingers to her smooth, sculptured cheek. Then without even thinking, she closed her eyes, leaned in, and kissed her.

Anastasia’s hands caressed her shoulders firmly and she yanked her flush against her body and managed to steal another kiss, a wild, wonderful, passionate kiss. Anastasia lips were heavy on hers, an erotic mix of demand and softness. Her hands against her shoulders were set to push keep her down on her back, but she couldn’t, as Kamilah was so shocked at the sudden surge of desire that burst from her core that she flipped them over, desire flaring through her like flash paper.

“What are the chances someone is gonna walk in on us?,” Anastasia breathed as Kamilah nuzzled her neck.

“Almost certainly,” she smirked. “How do you feel about that?”

“I think you know damn well how I feel about that,” Anastasia whispered, giving her permission, wrapping her legs around her waist as a soft invitation to blissful madness.

She scraped her teeth lightly against her neck and felt the warmth of her body pressing into hers, breathing in their scents that were mingling and changing with the warmth. Anastasia’s hands rose to find her hair, and Kamilah relaxed into her as the silky strands brushed through her fingers. She wanted more, and leaned into her as their lips moved against each other.

“Say it,” Kamilah mumbled against her lips.

“My name is Anastasia Sayeed, and I’m an exhibitionist,” Anastasia deadpanned.

Laughter bubbled up in Kamilah’s throat and she didn’t even bother to hide it. “This isn’t AA!”

“First step to getting help is admitting you have a problem, right? I’m a horny exhibitionist who desperately needs you to fuck her in public!”

“Annie,” Kamilah giggled. “How do you expect me to top you satisfactorily when you insist on making me laugh like this?”

“You’re talented woman— you’re a talented woman,” she laughed, putting emphasis on the ‘a’ she’d missed out. “See, I’m so horny my already terrible english sentence structure is suffering very much. It’s a problem.”

“Eez eet?,” she teased as she slipped her hand beneath the waistband of Anastasia’s shorts.

“Your accent is terrible... but I think the fact you’re terrible at mimicking accents is endearing.”

“I’ll admit my accent needs work if,” she started teasing her over the fabric of her underwear, “you don’t call your english sentence structure terrible again. You’re fluent in four languages and not all of them use articles or structure their sentences the same way. English is difficult for everyone who isn’t born in a country that speaks it. I’ve been speaking it for centuries and still find myself
thinking it makes no sense. You’re doing wonderfully.”

Anastasia’s breath caught in her throat as Kamilah pushed her underwear aside and she nodded her head. “Thank you, Kami.”

Kamilah smiled and murmured. “Hands above your head. Keep them there.”

Anastasia did as she was told but smirked at her. “Make me keep them here.”

Using her free hand, she pinned her wrists down. “Do the thing you did last night.”

Anastasia smirked at her. “You’re bossy.”

“Yes, I am,” she agreed, amiably. “Isn’t it a shame you happen to like that?”

Anastasia giggled softly as she tapped into her abilities and allowed Kamilah to feel all the sensations she was as she fingered her. Her blood rose, mixing with her lingering excitement at the fact they could use Anastasia’s abilities like this, to drive her to a fever pitch. Her lips touched Anastasia’s lower neck and vertigo spun the room, burning tracings of desire to settle deep and low them both. She exhaled into the promise of more to come, calling it to her. She breathed it in like smoke, the rising passion starting a feeling of abandonment inside. She didn’t care that someone could walk in at any moment, it only made it more exciting.

“I give you permission to be as vocal as you wish,” Kamilah said, her voice low and husky at Anastasia’s ear, “because I am going to blow your mind in a few minutes and I want to hear how much you enjoy the ride. I want everyone to hear exactly how I make you feel.”

Anastasia kissed her jaw and Kamilah moaned then, tilting her head back to give her better access. Her hand holding hers to the mat clamped like a vice, then let her go and moved — going to cup her breasts, as one of Anastasia’s slid between them and the other tangled up in her hair.

Kamilah’s tongue scraped the roof of Anastasia’s mouth as she dragged a finger down the center of her beneath her underwear, and the bloodkeeper gasped, her back arching. “Kami,” she said against her lips, her name like a prayer more devout than any she had ever heard.

“Say you’re mine,” Kamilah ordered.

“I— oh— I’m yours, Kami.”

“That means you’re mine in every way. Mine to care for.” She ran her thumb over her full lower lip. “Mine to fuck.” She leaned forward, her mouth an inch from hers. “And mine to protect. Don’t forget that.”

“Kami, I need to—“

“No,” Kamilah murmured, “you do not command. You may beg, if you feel the need.”

“Please, Kami. Please, I’m... close. Can I?”

“Not yet,” she smiled against her lips, slowing her hand. “Not just yet.”

“Kamilah,” Anastasia whined.

“I said no. Be a good girl.”

Energy flowed between them. As her surrender and response heightened Kamilah’s own pleasure
and increased her ability to read her, she could play her better, which increased her response, and
on and on, spiraling upward into the instinctive dance linking a dominant and submissive.

Anastasia’s tongue swept Kamilah’s mouth, in time to the finger that she slipped inside of her that
mirrored what Kamilah was doing to her. Their hips undulated, demanding more, craving each
other, and Anastasia’s sharp gasp reverberated in her chest as Kamilah added another finger.

“There,” Kamilah moaned, resting her brow against Anastasia’s. “Right... right there, baby.”

“I’ve got you,” Anastasia smiled.

As Kamilah moved in her, lightning lashed through her veins, and their focus narrowed to their
fingers, their mouths, their bodied pressed together. Anastasia’s palm pushed against the bundle of
nerves at the apex of her thighs, and Kamilah rolled hers with her thumb, and they groaned each
other’s name as they shattered.

It was like they were fused, two immortal hearts beating as one. Kamilah promised herself that it
always would be that way as they touched each other. Again and again.

They broke and broke against each other as they moved, as they murmured each other’s name and
whispered words of love in each other’s ears. And when that lightning once more filled their veins,
their heads, when they gasped out each other’s names, release found them. They held each other
through each shared shuddering wave, savoring the closeness and pleasure that Anastasia’s
abilities could bring.

The intimacy between them was about knowing each other on a deeper level than Kamilah had
ever known anyone. Being comfortable in their own skin around each other, in moments like this.
It was more important and lasts longer than pure-passion. Sex could give a person a quick physical
release. Which could be nice. But the intimacy that came with making love like this went further. It
involved touching, holding, cuddling, and being vulnerable with one another, even in the heat of
the moment.

For a while, only the rasp of their breathing and moans the training room of The Five’s
headquarters. Throaty moans, high screams, whining, whimpering, and groaning. Until they fell
onto the mats. Kamilah stretched out on her side, head propped on a fist, and traced idle circles on
the sliver of Anastasia’s stomach exposed between her shorts and sports bra, and along the curve of
her breasts.

“That was incredible,” Kamilah concluded. She hadn’t realised just how much she liked to be
touched before meeting Anastasia, especially after sex. She kept her arms around her or a hand on
her like now. The way she played with her breasts, or just touched her arms, or ran her hands over
her body, made her feel so... so beautiful, so desired.

“Not nearly as incredible as hearing you scream when you came that last time. Someone definitely
thinks you were being murdered... and, uh, yeah, I’m not entirely innocent in that regard either.”

She smirked and pressed a long kiss against her lips. “Oh but what a way to go, darling. Death by
mind-blowing orgasms.”

“Slap that on my tombstone if I go before you. ‘Here lies Anastasia, fucked to death by Kamilah
Sayeed.’”

“Well if that’s how you plan on going, at least you’ll die happy,” she breathed, nothing but
affection in her voice. They both started laughing, laughing to the point that they couldn’t stop and
there was tears streaming down their faces, laughing to the point that they felt slap-happy drunk. Kamilah had never been able to be this silly with anyone since her brother had died, no lover had ever broken down every single one of her walls like this and gotten to the mushy center. Nobody else even knew this side of her existed.

Kamilah shifted onto her back and Anastasia snuggled into her. She rubbed her cheek on her chest like a sleepy cat. When she spoke, her voice was breathy and her accent a little thicker after being tired out, “I like when you hold me.”

She kissed the top of her head. “I like when I hold you too, baby. Are you feeling good about everything that happened? I wasn’t too forceful, was I?”

“You were perfect. Everything was perfect.”

Her arms tightened around her. “I love you so much.”

“I love you, too, Kami... but you’re literally going to have to carry me home because that was so good I can’t feel my legs.”

“Do you intend on announcing to the entire family, once again, that I made your legs go numb?”

“Of course. I need Lily to know the sex I’m having is much better than that new vibrator she got.”

She snorted. “The fact that you two discuss this stuff over your Pop Tarts in the morning whilst wearing matching Spider Man pyjamas is quite something.”

“Don’t act like you don’t love the matching jammies Lily makes us all wear. I know the truth,” Anastasia giggled. “Is it cool with you if I brag a little? Maybe hearing me brag will finally make Serafine admit you were a better lay than Adrian.”

“However will I survive with everyone knowing that I fuck my wife so good she has trouble walking after?,” she replied, sarcastically. “What a travesty that would be.”

----- Eight Years Earlier - New York, NY -----

Peeved, Kamilah crossed her legs and shook her head. She wanted to go home. She hated the maze of bureaucracy that came with council meetings with a passion, but she’d found the best way to deal with it was to smile and stare down the other clan leaders until they bent to her every whim. “We have much to discuss, Adrian. I’m not asking the rest of the council to leave so you can tell me of whatever piss-poor problem you’ve landed yourself in this time that I’ll inevitably have to bail you out of.”

Adrian sighed and looked away from her. “I asked Anastasia to dinner.”

“What?,” she prodded.

“She’s gorgeous and I panicked,” he lamented. “Now she knows I desire her.”

“I think she knows everyone desires her, honestly,” Adam muttered.

All thoughts had fled Kamilah’s mind the moment she’d locked eyes with Adrian’s newest assistant, Anastasia. The moment she’d really noticed the mortal it was like something inside her
shifted, and after centuries of complete numbness she’d felt... something. What that something was, she didn’t know, but something within her had stirred and it wouldn’t be ignored.

She’d been thinking about the mortal and her ridiculously endearing accent for the better part of three weeks. Non-stop. And it didn’t help that her newest protégé spoke of her so often that she knew the girl’s entire life story by this point, despite having only spoken to her a handful of times about personal matters. She’d kissed her twice, and they’d taken a lovely walk around Marcel’s night blooming garden together, and she’d taken her to swim in her pool, which had ended up being sort of like a date.

She was not this person. She was more than two thousand years old. She damn well knew she was capable of ignoring the warmth in her chest and the tingling between her legs long enough to focus on a council meeting, but at that moment in time she just couldn’t. Not when Anastasia looked as beautiful as she did... focusing on anything but her was impossible. Her sparkle could not be ignored.

“Adrian, not only is that unprofessional and predatory of you as her boss to put her in such a position, it is also irresponsible of you to continue to hire mortal girls when so many of your previous assistants have met unfortunate ends,” Kamilah huffed, her eyes never leaving the pretty redhead that she could see flitting around outside the conference room. “If any more of your assistants turn up murdered or mysteriously vanish from the face of the earth, the mortals will start investigating you. I’m certain there are many who already think you’re a serial killer.”

“It—"

“It was a statement, not a question. Don’t attempt to justify your actions,” she interjected before Adrian could defend himself. “You must be more careful, brother. Your inability to think through your actions has gotten you into more than enough trouble.”

“I plan on watching over her much more closely until the culprit is found,” Adrian said. “She’s a very sweet girl and she brightens my day—“

“Barf,” Priya snorted with laughter. “She’s been working for you for a grand total of three weeks and you’ve already asked her out on a date? How the hell have you not been hit with any sexual harassment lawsuits yet? You literally cannot keep it in your pants.”

“Typical,” Adrian said, his eyes dramatically sad. "Try to do something nice with a person who works with me, get to know her a little, maybe make a new friend, and what do I get? Abused and teased by you people. Everyone loved her a Marcel’s party, so I’m not the only one enchanted by her."

“Shes hot,” Lester said. “I’d screw her.”

“I’d invite her to my annual Dark Solstice orgy,” Priya nodded. “I did a Google search on her after seeing her in one of my dresses because I recognised her face from somewhere... did you know she modelled as a child and a teenager?”

“She modelled?,” Adam asked. “I can’t say I’m surprised. She is something special.”

“She’s from Kazakhstan, which is right next to Russia. Child super models are a legitimate thing out there,” Priya explained. “I don’t know if it’s a cultural thing or what, but parents aren’t as creeped out by the idea of selling their child’s image as they are here.”

“I was unsettled by seeing that information on her resume,” Adrian nodded, “but also impressed
that she’d accomplished so much. Her work ethic is admirable and she told me she’d learned a lot about how to conduct herself in a professional environment by doing it.”

Priya nodded. “As a child she walked the runway and shot campaigns for all of the designers most models can only dream of being cast by. If she’d grown taller she could’ve continued her career as runway model... she has the everything for it.”

“The everything?,” Kamilah queried, her jaw clenching and the plastic pen in her hand splintering slightly under the strain of her grip. “How perceptive of you, Priya.”

“Those eyes,” nodded Vega. “Redheads with blue eyes are wild.”

“That seems like a rather presumptuous generalisation,” she grumbled, fighting the urge to whip out her daggers.

“She’s more attractive than the trollops you had working for you before, I’ll give her that much,” Cecil concluded.

“I might ask her to be my muse for my next collection, regardless of the fact she’s smaller than most models. Her style is incredible. She carries herself with grace. The hair. The makeup. The fact she told Lester and The Baron to go fuck themselves ten minutes after meeting them— This mortal is iconic,” Priya smirked. “Like, I’d want her to seriously be my muse instead of being my dinner... but if she asked me to — and we all know she would — I’d bite.”

“She’d rather spend time with me,” Lester pouted like a petulant child.

“In your dreams,” snarled Priya. “You look like a hairier and uglier version of Danny Devito.”

“You have male strippers wait on you hand and foot—“

“Jealous?,” Priya smirked. “I bet Anastasia would be into that. There’s no way she’s vanilla.”

“That’s quite enough, children. Have some respect. Adrian’s assistant is beautiful but that does not mean you can speak of her like she is some sort of inanimate object,” Kamilah hissed. Everyone glared at her. “Oh, I'm sorry. Did I interrupt some sort of dominance foreplay?”

“Tell me I’m wrong,” pouted Priya. “She’d sleep with me before any of you.”

“Priya, you leave the poor girl alone,” Kamilah warned, her eyes flaring red. “And, Adrian, did she accept your dinner offer?”

Adrian looked at her through slitted eyes. His attitude, though always slightly melancholy, had changed since Anastasia had started working for him. It seemed the girl was a ray of sunshine in everyone’s life. Kamilah could tell Adrian thought she was falling for her — as ridiculous as that sounded — it was written all over his face. He cleared his throat, “No... she didn’t.”

“Finally, you’ve hired someone with a shred of self respect. You do owe her an apology, though, and it better not happen again. You meant well but it is inappropriate and you have to think before you speak,” she said dryly. “Perhaps you should give her Nicole’s job as a means of saying sorry. If whoever keeps offing your assistants was smart, they’d just go straight for her... killing Nicole would practically be a public service.”

“Did you not just scold me for hiring her?,” Adrian gaped at her. “Now you’re suggesting I promote her? Kamilah—“
“I scolded you for endangering her life, not for hiring her,” she deadpanned. “You have to be extremely careful with her, as she is obviously particularly appealing to those of our kind... and she’s already almost been attacked because she works for you. It could have been her that night instead of Lily.”

“When did you start caring about her safety? I thought she was just another mewling mortal to you?”

Kamilah shrugged and absentmindedly drummed her pen against the table instead of answering. She knew Adrian found Anastasia attractive, and he knew what he was doing. And when he didn't succeed, he could improvise on the fly, coming up with options that left a lot of collateral damage but usually only hurt herself, not the people around him. It was one of the things Kamilah would never admit that she admired about him. But the fact that they had eyes for the same woman sickened her... reminded her far too much of the situation with Gaius.

However, Anastasia really did seem like the perfect partner for her. She was her opposite in almost every way, yet they complimented each other. Kamilah had a knack for irritating people, and Anastasia seemed to naturally smooth things out in just about any situation. Anastasia had a good energy about her, and Kamilah only thought she did. Kamilah was an introvert who found most people exhausting and Anastasia was an extrovert who loved talking to everyone, and already it seemed like she was bringing Kamilah out of her shell a little whilst Kamilah was mellowing out Anastasia’s excess energy.

As the conversation shifted towards clan politics, Kamilah’s eyes drifted back towards Anastasia working at her desk. She was like the sun. Seeing her sparkling there, concentrating on her work to the point she was completely oblivious of her power and a fire burning in her eyes... it was really something special. One couldn’t catch the sun, though. You could only feel its touch on your face. And if you got too much of it, it burned you.

The girl was a mortal, and Kamilah was old enough to know that entanglements with mortals rarely ended well for those cursed to live forever. Time would pass, she would age, and the sun would continue to set. One moment they’d both be there to see it, and Kamilah’s heart would break knowing how few sunsets Anastasia would witness. Then when she was gone, her heart would break because she’d inevitably miss her for as long as she drew breath.
“I leave you alone for five minutes to go get some blood bags and you’ve already slipped your restraints and torn the door to your room from its hinges,” Kamilah sighed as she sauntered towards her without a hint of fear, “and broken a vending machine, apparently. I can’t say I’m surprised.”

Anastasia looked up at the elder vampire from the spot she was kneeling in on the floor as she tore through a packet of peanut butter pretzels. Gingerly, she held the packet up to offer her one as some sort of peace-offering. Kamilah accepted and cleared a spot for herself to sit in by kicking aside some of the candy bars and bags of chips that had spilled out of the machine when the bloodkeeper had smashed the glass with her fist.

“Here. Drink up,” Kamilah said, handing her a bag of B-Positive. “I know you’re not craving the blood of mortals at the moment but you still need it to survive. B-Positive is your favourite... not least of all because of all of the puns you can make when you drink it.”

“It makes me nauseous because of all the vampire blood they forced into me,” Anastasia replied as she continued her feast.

“I know, baby, but the vampire blood has malnourished you. Mortal food does little for us besides stimulating the palette. You need mortal blood to be healthy.”

Anastasia sighed and found Kamilah’s gaze. “Vampire blood is saltier than a mortal’s. That’s why I’m eating these things to try and stop myself from acting on my impulses... the only blood I’m craving right now is yours.”

“Smart move,” Kamilah nodded approvingly as she grabbed another pretzel from the bag, “these things are all salt... I used to worry terribly for your health when you ate them as a mortal.”

Anastasia’s brow furrowed. This woman was infuriating. She didn’t know if she had ever wished for Kamilah in her life, but now that she had her, she was more confused, more heartbroken than she’d ever been before. Kamilah was willing to sacrifice everything for her, but she didn’t know if she could let her. “I did just admit that part of me wants to drain you dry, you do realise that?”

“If you wanted me dead, I would be. I told you I am not afraid of you.” She gestured towards the blood bag on her lap. “Now drink up before it warms to room temperature. It’s fresh and just out of the bank, so it’s the best you’re going to get until you’re recovered enough to drink from the vein again.”

Anastasia opened her mouth to protest, but anything she was going to say died on her lips as Kamilah began drinking her own bag of A-Negative and opened up a Twix that had fallen out of
the broken vending machine. She wasn’t going to force her to eat or drink, nor was she going to take away her food and force her to watch her eat whilst she starved. Instead she was eating with her, like she was a person and not a wild animal.

“Life ended, a soul to save,” the voices in her head whispered. “Decisions age-old are made. Is it choice? Is it fate? Forgiveness or hate?”

Slowly she raised the bag of blood to her lips and took a small sip of it, ignoring the voices as her eyes turned crimson and her fangs extended the moment that it touched her tongue. She didn’t exactly want to drink it but she didn’t want to hurt Kamilah either, so she forced herself to swallow tiny mouthfuls at a time between bites of her pretzels.

Kamilah had once said that feeding together was a way to show deep affection, loyalty, and friendship. And before Anastasia’s memories had been taken she had felt that way about it too, but what Kamilah secretly wanted from her at that moment was so far from what she understood. Kamilah wanted to share with her something so complex and intangible that the shallow emotional vocabulary of the shadow that Anastasia had become simply didn’t have the words or cultural background to define it. She was waiting hopefully for her to figure it out... but she never did.

“You were just worried about me, that why you're asking me to feed. Real or not real?,” Anastasia asked.

Kamilah exhaled, relieved that she had understood she didn’t purposely want to nauseate her. "Real.”

Anastasia turned. "Because you think I'm worth it.”

“I absolutely think you're worth it... but you don't think you are.”

Her mouth opened, then shut again. Kamilah knew her very well, so she couldn’t lie. So she simply shrugged her shoulders.

"We’ve talked about this a lot, Annie. How you won't let us worry about you because you don't think you're worth it. But I do. I absolutely do. You deserve to be cared about.’’

Anastasia nodded, but said nothing.

Despite trying her best to hide it, Kamilah just seemed so empty, and Anastasia feared she’d never be able to fill her up the same way again. She was worried about being able to fill that emotional void she had. Kamilah ached with it, and she could see it. She needed to be accepted for who she was so badly. And Anastasia knew she had once been able to do that, and she knew it had felt good. To be able to show her that, yes, she was someone worth sacrificing for. That she loved her for her faults and that she respected her for her ability to rise above them.

“Can I ask you something?,” Kamilah asked. Her gaze was even and calm, wise and even a bit sad as she took her in.

“I guess... but I can’t promise I have whatever answer you’re looking for.”

Kamilah nodded. “Why aren't you afraid of me? Is it just because I feel familiar to you, or is there something else—“

“I've seen my death, and you're not it,” Anastasia said simply. She had no intentions of elaborating on what she’d witnessed in one of her dreams, for she knew that if she did then she’d start to fear even more than she already did. Fear always left her sweaty and shaky and insecure enough to
question everything she knew to be true, and that seemed like the very last thing she needed. “I can’t say as much about anyone else, though.”

“You— What?”

“It’s a blessing and a curse to know so much and so little about oneself. Remembering. Forgetting. I’m not always sure which is worse.”

“Ain’t—"

Slowly, Anastasia reached out to caress Kamilah’s cheek, mirroring what she’d done to her earlier. It was odd to touch her in ways she had no memory of touching before, this person who, beyond all logic, was the other half of her. Who belonged to her. Who was her soulmate. “I know I’ve spent years trying to protect you from the staggering pain of grief that comes from losing the things and the people and the places you allowed yourself to care about — but guess what, Kamilah — that’s no way to live. As much as it hurts to lose something or someone you love, there’s much greater joy in getting to experience it for as long as it lasts. Sometimes not knowing exactly when something will end is a kindness.”

“I’ve lost you before... I can’t lose you again any time soon——"

“I never said it would happen soon... but it is a simple fact of life, everybody who lives must also die. Nothing but our final breath is promised to us in this life. Some people may live longer than others, but nobody lives forever.”

Kamilah stared at her for a few seconds in silence, her ancient eyes overly bright. When she spoke, her voice was barely above a whisper, “I am so sorry.”

“What for?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but whatever she was going to say died on her lips. At that moment Anastasia could have penetrated her mind again, but she didn’t. This woman had been nothing but kind to her, so she felt no threat lingering in the silence that hung between them.

“You don’t have to say it if you don’t want to,” the bloodkeeper shrugged. “But you seem like someone who is carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. Whilst I’m sure you feel that whatever particular mistake you’ve made is extraordinarily big, insurmountable even, contrary to what you might think, these types of things can always be undone, and oftentimes aren’t nearly as lethal as we think — or, should I say, as we allow them to be. I know that much to be true. Chances are, that whatever you think you have to apologise for isn’t as bad as you think it is.”

Kamilah laughed weakly and rubbed at the corners of her eyes. There were some wounds that never showed on the body that were deeper and more hurtful than anything that bled, and this was obviously one of them. “I wish that were true in this case.”

Anastasia took another long sip out of the nauseating mortal blood she was drinking. “There is nothing frightening in the dark if you just face it.”

She shook her head and took a deep, steadying breath. “Before you were taken, we argued. We never argue but this night we— things got so heated between us that you stormed out of the penthouse we were living in... and you never came back. It was so bad that the only reason I knew you hadn’t just up and left me was because we found your phone and some of your blood on the pavement.”

Her brow furrowed, she had no memory whatsoever of the incident. A tear slipped from under her
eyelid at Kamilah’s loneliness, her need for emotional reassurance, and her frustrations that though she could understand what she wanted, she was afraid to find out if she still had the capacity to meet her halfway, to trust her. And her breath caught when she reached out and wiped the moisture away with a careful finger, unaware that it was for her. She took a deep breath and murmured, “What exactly did we argue about?”

“Annie... what I did was so stupid I probably deserve to be staked for it—“

“Stupidity isn't punishable by death. If it was, there would be a hell of a population drop.”

Kamilah huffed. “You don’t know what I’ve done.”

“I’d rather judge a person on why they make the choices they do rather than the cold facts of what they choose. I know you’re afraid to tell me whatever it is, and before I met you I thought brave was not being afraid. You’ve taught me that bravery is being terrified and doing it anyway.”

“Aiko,” Kamilah whispered.

“Aiko?”

“She’s been obsessed with me since the thirteenth century, to the point she once sent an army to kill me and evidently wasn’t above taking me off guard and kissing me before I even realised what was happening. She knew we were within your line of vision and she did it anyway... and you... god—,” her voice cracked and she looked away from her in a pitiful attempt at composing herself. “I have been stabbed, shot, burned, bitten, beaten unconscious too many times to count, and even staked. None of those held a candle to the pain I felt at seeing your face after you saw my mouth on hers. When you love someone, truly love them as I love you, you should never cause them pain. Never fill their eyes with something that close to grief...”

“Didn’t I let you explain what had happened?,” she asked hesitantly. As her hand found hers, bitter salt tears spilled from her eyes, in sorrow and pain and regret that she had so utterly failed her. “Why would I not allow you to explain?”

“A few of your past lovers have betrayed you by sharing their body with another and seeing her with me was like opening up an old wound,” Kamilah explained tearfully. “You weren’t capable of reacting rationally and I was so angry at Aiko and at myself for allowing it to happen that I wasn’t either. Some wounds cut us so deep that they stop us. Stop us from letting go, from seeing the truth. You left before I could stop you and by the time I had calmed down enough to try and find you... you were just gone.”

“Well that explains why I immediately hated her,” Anastasia laughed weakly as she scooted a little closer to Kamilah and gently took her hand. “I— thank you for telling me.”

She saw the white flash of Kamilah’s eyes as she whirled on her. For one stunned instant she stared at her, and then it was like lightning crackled. From an empty sky. “You’re not— You still trust me?”

Anastasia raised an eyebrow. “Shouldn’t I?”

“I—“

“Kamilah, I might not remember much but I know enough to know that the only person anyone can control is themselves. If Aiko kissed you against your will, then the fault lies with her... and if I was unable to see that at the time then I owe you an apology. We are all affected by our pasts, but it is within our power not to let what we have done or what has been done to us dictate what we
will do.” With a slow and trembling hand, she reached out at gently brushed away a few of the elder vampire’s tears. “I’m sorry.”

Kamilah sniffled and Anastasia took a breath, seeing from where she was sitting the tears on her thick eyelashes. A sudden need to brush them free filled her. She could almost feel the dampness of her tears on her fingers, how soft they would feel. When Kamilah spoke, her voice was fragile and filled with exhaustion, “I’m sorry, too. I am so, so sorry. I would never knowingly betray you like that.”

The ancient vampire leaned closer to her and Anastasia let her get almost all the way there, just staring, before she tumbled towards her. They ended in a rush and then fell to the ground together, with Anastasia flat on her back and Kamilah sort of on top of her with her face pressed against her neck, arms locked around each other, each holding on as tightly as possible. Neither of them saying a word.

This was as close as Anastasia could ever recall being with another person, yet she didn’t feel afraid. Having Kamilah this close to her was a very, very good touch. It felt familiar. It felt safe. The warm dampness of her breath made her shiver at the mix of the familiar and the unknown, with a soft exhalation she shifted her head and her lips found her collarbone, teasingly shy of an old scar Anastasia had no memory of receiving.

“Good touch?,” Kamilah mumbled through a watery laugh, her lips close enough that she could feel the heat of them against her own.

The bloodkeeper inclined her head slightly, looking as alluring as mysterious as ever, more so than before because neither she or Kamilah really had any idea what she was going to do, what she was capable of. She closed her eyes and eliminated the distance between them, brushing Kamilah’s lips softly with her own.

The moment their lips touched, that lightening exploded once again. Memories whizzed across the backs of Anastasia’s eyelids, years and years worth of joy and pain and love and heartache all hitting her at the one time. With a sharp gasp, she broke away from Kamilah, her head hitting lightly against the marble floors.

The memory of Kamilah tracing the features of her face filled her. She remembered the touch of her sensitive fingers, following her jawline, running down her neck to follow the curves of her body. She remembered her warmth, the gold of her laughter, and her eyes sparkling whenever she twisted a phrase to mean something entirely new and naughty. She remembered the way she always made her feel needed, appreciated for who and what she was, never having to apologise for it, and the contentment they’d always found in sharing themselves. They’d been so happy together. It had been great.

She remembered everything.

“Kami?,” she practically sobbed as she cupped Kamilah’s face in her hands and wrapped her legs tightly around her waist.

“What just— You called me Kami... you...”

“I remember. I remember everything.” That moment had been the first time she’d felt alive since leaving Glamis Castle, the adrenaline and endorphins making her frail body, still recovering from her torture, feel… normal. It was then that she realised she’d risk anything to feel that way all the time — and she knew she would have to.
“How is this possible, all I did was kiss you—“

“How is this possible, all I did was kiss you—“

“Kami, don’t worry about that right now, we can figure that out later... but you have to listen to me first. We’re not safe. You’re not safe. The night I was taken, they wanted you too. The Order— It — You and I are right at the top of their hit list.”

She knew she wasn’t being very optimistic, but sometimes it was not an optimist anyone needed, but another pessimist to walk beside you and know, absolutely know, that the sound in the dark was a monster, and it really was as bad as the one who’d seen it warned.

“She knew she wasn’t being very optimistic, but sometimes it was not an optimist anyone needed, but another pessimist to walk beside you and know, absolutely know, that the sound in the dark was a monster, and it really was as bad as the one who’d seen it warned.

“How is this possible, all I did was kiss you—“

“Me? Why do they want me?”

“Because one of their highest ranking members is your cousin. Cleopatra is alive.”

~~~~ Five Weeks Earlier - Tokyo, Japan ~~~~

Ice cold rain battered against Anastasia’s skin as she stormed away from the penthouse, ignoring Lily and Serafine’s frantic pleas to get her to stay. To hell with everyone, she thought, unshed tears stinging at her tired eyes. To hell with family. To hell with friends. To hell with marriage. She needed no one.

Just another day in her life. This was one of those days when she thought that maybe a new life, a different life, a mortal life with an end in sight, wouldn't be so bad. But where the hell had she put the receipt, and could you return something like this? Where did you go to get a new life when the one you were living had you so fucked up you didn’t know how to fix it? She wished she knew.

She’d known since she was a child that happy endings were never handed out. You had to fight for them, earn them with bruised hearts and sacrifices. But she’d been young enough and foolish enough to believe that a piece of paper and matching diamond wedding sets adorning her and Kamilah’s hands would be enough to stop this from happening... again.

This was all she’d ever known of relationships. Her father had cheated on her mother because she was batshit crazy and too reclusive to sustain a real relationship. Her mother had then cheated on her father with his best friend and his brother as some petty form of revenge. Her father had then retaliated by sleeping with three of her mother’s sisters. Her first boyfriend had cheated on her, as had her first girlfriend, and she’d turned a blind eye because she thought that it was normal. Kamilah... Kamilah was the one person she’d thought would never, ever hurt her — but she’d saw her and Aiko kissing with her own two eyes and then Kamilah had had the audacity to act like she was overreacting when she’d used her abilities to upend an entire bottle of vodka over them both before storming away.

Dawn was fast approaching but at that moment in time Anastasia didn’t care. She didn’t care about potentially being hurt by the sun. She didn’t care about the phone that was vibrating constantly in her pocket. Messages from Kamilah. Calls from Kamilah. Calls from their family. She just didn’t care. She couldn’t care about anything because the pain in her chest was even worse than the stab wound that had ended her mortal life, it was worse than anything she’d ever felt... so much so that she wondered how a heart could hurt like this a keep on beating.

Love sucked. Sometimes it felt so damn good. Sometimes it was just another way to bleed.
“Well, well, well... look who it is,” an irritatingly familiar voice crooned from a dark alleyway.

“What are you doing here, Vlad?,” the bloodkeeper hissed, stopping in her tracks. Letting this fool walk away after the final battle with Rheya was the biggest mistake of her life. After what he allowed to happen to Jax, he should’ve been dust.

“Is it really so hard to believe that I was merely taking in the sights of the city now that The Five are allowing our kind to visit Japan?,” he smirked, leaning against the damp wall as he twirled a golden necklace around his fingers. The green jewel at the centre of it seemed to be emitting some sort of magic, as it glowed so brightly that Anastasia had to squint in order to see him.

“Obviously.”

Some instinct older than civilisation itself was telling her to run, to flee.

She didn't move.

Sometimes a person fought what they were, and sometimes they gave in to it. And some nights they just didn’t want to fight themselves anymore, so they picked someone else to fight.

“Why don’t we go for a drink, beautiful?”

“I don’t associate with sexual predators.”

He moved as if to grab her by the wrist and in a smooth, unhurried motion, Anastasia reached out and slapped him across the face. He let out a pained grunt and spat, “That’s rich coming from the woman who drugged and robbed me!”

“You are an irritating son of a bitch.”

“Ah, how can I resist you when you whisper such sweet endearments to me?”

Vlad yelled and lunged towards her, and she hit him again, adrenaline pulling a scream of outrage from her. He went quiet and fell to the ground, and she held her breath to make sure she could hear him breathing. She supposed she could have used her abilities on him, but this was a lot more satisfying.

“I’d rather cut my own arm off than have a drink with you,” she sighed. The level of hatred she had for him was probably unhealthy. Most hatred was based on fear, one way or another, but this one wasn’t... she didn’t fear him at all. Anastasia wrapped herself in anger, with a dash of hate, and at the bottom of it all was an icy center of pure terror she inflicted on Vlad.

He pushed himself up, blood streaming from his nose. She jumped at him with a howl, and he grabbed her by the neck. She clawed furiously at him, and he casually thunked her head into the wall before she managed to kick herself free of him. He growled like an irritated toddler when she shoved him into the wall, vampires and five-year-olds played by the same rules... and both threw tantrums when they lost.

Vampires were always either trying to kill her, or own her, or manipulate her into some sort of evil scheme. God, how she hated being popular.

“An intriguing thought. But I can do it so much more enjoyably.”

A sharp pain shot across the front of her shoulder, slicing open her upper arm. She didn’t know why Vlad had thrown a knife into her arm and she didn’t care. She pulled the knife free, flinging it
towards his face in revulsion. The old bat made a ragged noise and his face twisted as the blade just barely grazed his cheek, as though he were somehow in more pain with the silver scrape on his skin than she was with a gaping wound in her arm.

She tried to run at him to attack and access her abilities, knowing that he was up to something more sinister than a petty mugging, but she couldn’t. Her limbs were paralysed and her mind was locked. Hovering near panic, she continued trying to focus but found it hard to even open her eyes. Her heart was pounding. She couldn’t get enough air, and she couldn’t find the desire to push him away as he dragged her into the alleyway by the hair and threw her onto the ground.

As she landed in a freezing cold puddle, her phone flew out of her jacket pocket and skidded across the alleyway and the hemline of her silky slip cocktail dress exposed the uppermost part of her thighs — and despite the position she found herself in as her limbs were bound, all she could think was: that she hadn’t expected to be kidnapped today or she’d have worn something more conservative for the occasion.

She tried to thrash, to instinctively scream out for Kamilah, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t do anything. She knew the rule, that if an attacker had a weapon and wanted to take you someplace else, it was only so they could torture you and kill you slower.

“Here she is. The mighty Bloodkeeper,” Vlad beamed to a gaggle of hooded figured hovering in the shadows, applauding slowly. He gave her a sharp kick in the ribs, “Consider this payback, bitch.”

She couldn’t wince or roll away as the breath was knocked out of her, again and again as Vlad’s heavy boots shattered rib after rib. Blood poured out of her mouth and she wheezed, trying to breathe through the pain. She could not believe this. She was probably going to be hacked to shreds by an idiot with chipped nail varnish to the accompaniment of applause. Ridiculous.

“Good. That is good. The Order will be so pleased,” one of them said as she glided through the bloody puddles towards her and knelt down at her side to run a single finger across her jawline. “You’re exactly my cousin’s type. Small. Delicate. Very pretty. We told you we were coming, darling, I had so hoped my cousin would be with you... but no matter. Kamilah’s grief when you die again will be a terrible thing. It will hurt her, a lot, and women like her never suffer grief alone. She will snap and spread her grief all over the world, and she will join us, not because we failed in our task or she believes in our goals, but because it'll give her something to focus on so she doesn’t have to feel the pain.”

Anastasia’s eyes widened as she tried to peer beneath the velvet hood, to no avail. But she kept her heartbeat slow, she would not show fear... regardless of how afraid she was. If a person feared nothing, then they were not brave. They were merely too foolish to be afraid... and being that foolish in a situation as serious as this one was the height of stupidity. Especially when the one thing she’d learned about vampires in general — was that they would always keep pulling new rabbits out of their cloaks. Big, fanged, carnivorous bunnies that'd eat your eyeballs if you were not paying attention or they thought you were weak.

Sticks and stones may have broken bones, but failure to appear strong would get you killed.

“We won’t be forgetting who actually captured her, now will we?,” Vlad said like a petulant child. “I expect to be compensated for my expertise in capturing the local psychopath.”

“You forget, darling,” drawled the woman. “I am the local psychopath.”

“I want my reward—“
“You arrogant, over publicised, showy old bat, what did you do besides wear the necklace? Aren’t you the king of all bogeymen? The legend children fear will devour them if they misbehave?” The hooded figure yelled, “Come on Vlad, live up to your reputation and put her down if you are so mighty! If you can’t kidnap one arrogant Egyptian vampire before capturing the Bloodkeeper, like the Order asked of you, how did you ever drive the Turks from Romania?”

Vlad growled, ignoring the woman’s statement. “They’re going to come looking for her, you know.”

“We know, you weak-willed, jealous sack of vampire spit,” the woman mused. “People are motivated by three things. Love. Revenge. And power. Our dear Bloodkeeper has people around her who desire all three, but when they find her... it won’t be her that they find.”

“You forgot one,” Vlad said, “Family... this family do not give up on each other and are far more dangerous than you know. Kamilah will show you no mercy.”

“No matter. Rheya will return to us one way or another, and they will die.”

“And you’ll tell her who downed the Bloodkeeper,” Vlad tried. He looked down at her laying there on the ground, his eyes fixing on hers with such ferocity Anastasia swore she could almost see the undead vampire in them despite the fact they weren’t red. “Cleopatra, you know what our agreement was. I must get the credit.”

“There is no must about it.” The woman scoffed and lowered her hood... her voice was terrifyingly similar to Kamilah’s. The former world leader snarled at Vlad and then looked down at her. Her eyes were the same as Kamilah’s, only they held no warmth or kindness. Anastasia’s face went cold as she caressed her cheek, and she wondered if she’d fare better in a fight with a hungry pack of werewolves. “She is heir to madness. Vessel of perversion. And she will be your worst nightmare should you cross me, Vlad. Do not forget who you are dealing with here. Sheep are treated like sheep, users are used, and those who deserve more will receive everything.”

The angry sound of Cleopatra’s words became the shushing of blood inside Anastasia’s head, and she listened as best she could as something sharp was jabbed into her neck, hovering on the edge of consciousness, bathed in the oblivion of whatever drug they had given her. As everything started to fade her last thought was of Kamilah... and how much she loved her.

~~~~ Three Years Earlier - Southampton, New York ~~~~

“Mrs. Vampire Queen, you're all wet,” Anastasia teased as she surfaced in the swimming pool after being dragged into the water by her ankles in retaliation for shoving Kamilah into the water. Anyone else who dared have the audacity to shove the Kamilah Sayeed into the deep end of the swimming pool fully clothed wouldn’t live long enough to tell the tale, which was exactly why Anastasia had taken the plunge. Birthdays could suck when you were older than the country you lived in, so there was no lengths she wouldn’t go to in order to get her wife to smile on her special day — especially when the only thing Kamilah had wanted to do was get away from the city for the weekend, just the two of them.

Money may have driven the world, but when everything fell apart to leave the underpinnings of a person’s life bare to the scrutiny of critics and thieves, the only thing remaining, the only thing that couldn’t be taken away, was the love they held for the people they surrounded themselves with. So
she understood why her wife had asked for no gifts and only wanted some one-on-one time. To Kamilah, good memories were everything.

Kamilah huffed and splashed a whole tsunami’s worth of water onto her face. “Was this really necessary?”

“You’ve told me the story of how you shoved Lysimachus into The Nile on your eleventh birthday and he was almost eaten by a hippo. I figured I’d enact some karma on my brother-in-law’s behalf... even if I did find out the hard way that it’s illegal to try and order hippos off the internet.”

Kamilah’s jaw dropped and her eyes widened. “Do I even want to know what you and Lily did this time?”

“I never said anything about Lily—“

“Whenever one of you does something reckless and stupid, the other is right there cheering and filming the whole thing... which is exactly why Adrian and I have suggested Adderall on multiple occasions,” Kamilah interjected. She was doing her best not to laugh, and her poker face was so enviable that anyone else would’ve missed the amused twinkle in her eyes and the way her upper lip was twitching ever so slight, but Anastasia saw it all. “I just want to know exactly how much I’m going to have to bribe law enforcement with this time—“

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, I just erased a few FBI agent’s memories and managed to get Lily the passwords to a few government computers in the process. It’s all good.”

“I’m sorry, you what?!?”

“She wanted to know if aliens were real because, you know, vampires are real... so you better believe there are aliens out there somewhere and the government knows about it. What kind of best friend would I be if I didn’t aid her in her cause?”

“If my hair could turn grey, I’d be white headed by this point,” Kamilah laughed as she wrapped her arms around her waist beneath the water. For all her sourness, she was ruled by her heart where her family was concerned... and Anastasia knew she was always thoroughly entertained by the things she and Lily managed to get themselves into.

“If your hair could turn grey you’d actually be pretty dead at this point, babe. Really dead, actually. Like, corpse dead... buried in a pyramid somewhere with all your organs put into little jars kinda dead— not the I-don’t-look-a-day-over-thirty kinda dead—”

Kamilah snorted. “Did you just call me old?”

“I— Uh— You’re the one who taught me that mortal laws were more like vague guidelines we only have to pretend to follow!,” she giggled, ignoring the question.

“I didn’t expect you and Lily would try to order hippos on the internet or hack the US government every other week when I covered that section of your vampire training.”

“Not everything is legal, but nothing is immoral if your heart is in the right place, and that is my guide these days.”

“You are a danger to society.”

“Life's a bitch, huh?,” Anastasia said.
“And then you die,” Kamilah finished for her.

For a while there was no sound but the sound of their laughter and the ocean beyond the sprawling landscaped gardens of their Southampton vacation home. The shushing of the waves was the heartbeat of the world, ever present, seldom noticed, and linking every moment together from before there was life to now.

For as long as Anastasia could remember she had wanted to make decisions on who she loved by who completed her, made her feel good about herself... even whilst she was teasing her. Who she could love freely and help make her a better person by just being there. And for her, that person was Kamilah. It would always be Kamilah.

Nobody would’ve guessed that Kamilah turned into a child whenever there was a body of water she could torment her in. She was absolutely not above splashing her, or throwing her in headfirst, and she loved a good water fight so much that they owned a collection of Super-Soakers. Kamilah was the most private person Anastasia had ever known, not even telling herself what her own feelings were until she found a logical reason to justify them, so the fact she now felt so comfortable around her to show her this side of herself had been the most wonderful surprise.

As they played in the water, Kamilah pulled her against her. Then she bent down, breath warming the bloodkeeper’s lips. Both of their pulses were racing so fast they both could barely breathe. Her lips pressed against hers, then parted. And she kissed her. Really kissed her — arms tightening around her, mouth moving against her’s, firmly.

“The things I want to do to you,” Kamilah smirked. “Since it’s my birthday... does that mean I get to do whatever I want?”

“Jesus, are all vampires over two hundred perverts?,” Anastasia giggled.

"I am over two hundred."

“I rest my case, babe... but yes that’s exactly what it means. Use me however your perverted little heart desires.”

Anastasia slid her arms around her neck. Kamilah’s tightened around her and she scooped her up, lifting her off her feet, kissing her like she was never going to stop, and she kissed her back the same way, like she didn’t want her to ever stop.

It was a perfect moment, one where nothing else mattered. All she could feel was Kamilah. All she could taste was her kiss. All she could hear was the pounding of their hearts. All she could think about was her, and how much she wanted this, and how incredibly lucky she was to get it, and how tight she was always going to hold onto it.

This was what she wanted. This woman. This life. This version of herself. She was never getting her old boring life back, and she didn't care. She was happy. She was safe. She was right where she wanted to be.
Kamilah blinked, she could hardly focus on a word Anastasia was saying because the recognition in her eyes was like noticing the sun. She couldn't help but see it, to turn to face the heat of it, to bask in the glory of it. But often when the sun was high in the sky, the moon was up there, too. A dim memory of what she would be in the night, but there, nonetheless, dim and misty, hard and white. At night, there was only the moon, the sun was nowhere to be seen. There were no distractions when the moon ruled the sky, and Anastasia was both the sun and the moon of her life.

“Kami,” Anastasia breathed. “I need you to focus, love. Your cousin is alive and she’s fucking crazy.”

“But that... how?,” she stammered. “She killed herself. The brat was an incompetent ruler and ruined Egypt and then she poisoned herself to avoid being ruled by Octavian. She was a stupid woman who did something she was ashamed of, so she declared that it was her duty to die. Even Caesarion was executed after her display of cowardice—“

“No,” Anastasia shook her head, caressing her cheeks. “She drank vampire blood, Gaius’ blood, and then killed herself... but she didn’t stay dead.”

“But Gaius—,” she started, only to fall silent and pensive. “He wouldn’t have told me. The bastard would not have told me a damn thing because he needed me angry at the world and isolated from everyone but him, didn’t he?”

Anastasia nodded her head slowly. “I know you miss your family... and that after two thousand years of thinking she was dead now hearing that she is alive and well must come as a bit of a shock... but I’m telling you she is crazy.”

Kamilah closed her eyes and rested her head on her wife’s shoulder as she thought of her cousin. Her seductive power that had been blazoned into history had not lay in her looks, as many mortals claimed. In reality, Cleopatra had always been physically unexceptional and had no real power compared to earlier pharaohs of Egypt, yet many brave and clever men had saw none of this. What they’d saw was a woman who constantly transformed herself before their eyes, a one-woman spectacle... and as a young woman Kamilah had admired that greatly about her.

Her dresses and makeup had changed from day to day, but had always given her a heightened, goddesslike appearance. Her words could be banal and empty enough, but they’d been spoken so sweetly that listeners had always found themselves remembering not what she said but how she had said it.

She’d been a horrible queen as far as Kamilah was concerned, and she’d committed high treason on
multiple occasions right in front of her face and gotten away with it because Cleopatra had always been too dimwitted and distractible to catch her. But despite that, she’d been family. She’d made her a nomarch, confided secrets in her that she’d never forgotten.

“Did she hurt you?,” she asked quietly, looking up at Anastasia... and already knowing the answer.

“Kami—“

“Please, my love.” Her voice was so soft it was barely above a whisper as she pulled her protectively against her chest. “If she hurt you, I need to know.”

A shaky sigh escaped from the back of her wife’s throat as she nodded her head so subtly she would’ve missed the gesture if she hadn’t been so close to her. “She tried torturing me into giving her information about you before my memories were taken. When I wouldn’t talk, when no one could torture me enough to talk, she came back and tortured me some more for entertainment. She — let’s just say that no one else was quite as cruel as she was, I could tell that she enjoyed what she was doing to me. It wasn’t just a job to her. She actually enjoyed it... and got very creative with the ancient methods she used.”

“You held up under torture,” Kamilah whispered, more to herself than anyone else. She knew only too well the methods of torture her cousin had sanctioned whilst she was on the throne, the documented ones and the ones so brutal she would allow no record of. She’d heard the screams too many times to ever forget them. She’d seen many seasoned warriors break after mere moments and deliver false confessions to make the pain stop, and that was without the more sensitive nerves that riddled vampire bodies. Even just thinking that Anastasia had been subjected to that made bile rise up in the back of her throat. “Annie—“

“Anything I could have said to make it stop would have lead her straight to you. I couldn’t use my abilities and I couldn’t think of any lies I could tell that would be believable enough to make her stop or distract her long enough to escape... so I just refused to talk.” Anastasia’s entire body trembled violently at the memory. “She wasn’t as good looking as the historians say, she had the social skills of a wet cat and the patience of a caffeinated hummingbird.”

Kamilah sighed, then put a hand on her cheek. “I don’t tell you this enough, but I am incredibly proud of the vampire you’ve become. I want you to know that. I need you to know that and never doubt it.”

“I know it.”

Instinctively her arms tightened around Anastasia’s frail body as she pressed a series of kisses onto her hair. “I will never let her lay a finger on you ever again,” she promised. “I’ll kill her with my bare hands the moment I lay eyes on her. I should have done it when I was younger.”

“Sweetheart,” Anastasia whispered, “whilst I appreciate the sentiment I’d never expect you to kill your family for me—“

“You are my family.” As gently as she could manage, she slipped a hand beneath her chin and tilted her head upwards so she was looking her in the eye. “Nobody touches you and gets away with it. I don’t care who they are or who they once were to me... you touch my wife, you die.”

“Taking me out the equation for a minute... I know how much you miss your blood family. I want you to think things through, okay? I know she’s our enemy and I know she’s cruel... but I don’t want you to do something you’ll regret because you’re defending my honour.”
“Lily said you were too sentimental for your own good sometimes.”

“Maybe, but you have taught me that sentiment is not always a bad thing.”

“In this case it is. She was complicit in kidnapping you and she tortured you, and likely wanted to do the same thing to me. I care very little about myself but anyone who dares hurt you gets stabbed. Hurting you does not get forgiven... she does not get to live after doing that.”

Anastasia said nothing else, and Kamilah stared down at that impossibly beautiful face, and felt love swell up inside her like a physical force. It filled her whole body, swelling upward until it made her chest ache, her throat tighten, and her eyes burn. It sounded so stupid. But she loved her. Loved all of her, even now, but loved her more because loving her had made her better. That she would say that she had taught her about being sentimental made her want to cry, because she always assumed it was the other way around. Gaius had reminded her at every turn that she was bloodthirsty and cold. If that were true, then she couldn't have taught Anastasia a thing about sentimentality. You can't learn, if you don't have it to teach.

Kamilah kissed her. She kissed her softly, with one hand lost in the mass of ginger hair to the side of her face. Then she drew back and whispered, "I never thought I’d get to see that look upon your face again, not for me, not after everything that happened.”

"I love you," Anastasia said, and touched Kamilah’s hand where it lay against her face. “Last time I saw you before I was taken, I said that it hurt too much to love you. But I was wrong about that. The truth is it hurts too much not to love you.” She sighed. “None of what happened was your fault. Not the situation with Aiko. Not me getting kidnapped. None of it. If anything it was me—“

“Annie, you had every right to be upset. After the shitshow your parents marriage was and how your exes treated you, why wouldn’t you be?”

“Because I trust you so much that I shouldn’t have jumped straight to the worst conclusion, but I did. Some issues stay fresh every time you open them up, I guess. It's like evil magical Tupperware — it just stays fresh forever.” She held her gaze. “You know I trust you, right? I trust you so much with everything that even with my memories all scrambled I still wanted you close... I still needed you close to feel safe.”

“I know you trust me.” Kamilah rested her brow against hers, holding her as close as she was physically able to. She looked into her eyes and completely forgot the rest of the world. In that moment, all she knew was that she was holding Anastasia in her arms, and she was never going to lose her again. “I’ve always known how much you trust me. I don’t think you even realise just how much you had to trust me in order to be with me when you were a mortal. Never once were you afraid of me... you even fed me quite a few times and trusted that I’d be able to stop drinking before killing you, that’s not an easy thing.”

“Now it’s me having to restrain myself from drinking your blood,” Anastasia laughed weakly.

Kamilah held her tighter. After a minute she said, "It's like— I don't know how to describe it, but it's like I belong with you. You really see me. You always have. Not the outside stuff. You see me inside, and you like me and you still trust me despite the million-and-one reasons you could probably find not to. Nobody else has ever done that.”

“You know you’re trusting me now the same way I trusted you when I was mortal. Most people are afraid of me now, even Cleopatra was afraid once she realised I was much more powerful than she originally planned on me being... that’s why she bolted and left Vlad to torment me.”
Kamilah sighed and rolled her eyes. “Once a coward, always a fucking coward.”

“I’m sorry you’re in this position,” Anastasia whispered.

“Don’t you worry about me.” She pressed a kiss to her brow. “I can deal with my cousin and I will not hesitate to do what is right when she inevitably tries to face us. I can’t live without you, though... so right now I’m just happy to have you back— to really have you back.”

“Lily’s gonna lose her shit when she realises the true love’s kiss trope is real.”

Kamilah snorted. “That’s what true love is. It cannot be broken, it cannot be chipped away, it’s eternal, everlasting, and it can weather any storm— god, I’ve turned into such an idealist. This is your doing.”

“It’s cute.”

“It’s disgusting.”

“You’re still a big scary vampire, don’t worry.”

“A big scary vampire whose hair is being stroked rather furiously right now,” Kamilah smiled, leaning into the contact.

“Want me to stop?”

She leaned in so that her lips were mere inches away from hers and then stole a quick kiss. “Don’t you dare. We only have forty-five minutes or so before the others return...”

“And you want all the affection you can get,” Anastasia stated.

“Yes.”

The bloodkeeper glanced towards her bedroom and let out a soft laugh. “I would suggest cuddling in bed... but I might’ve smashed the bed up in a Hulk Rage after breaking out of Adrian’s restraints — which, by the way, if you’d to tie me up in at any other time I wouldn’t be opposed to.”

Kamilah practically doubled over laughing and held her tighter. “Does your kinky-ness know no limits?”

She grinned at her, those ridiculously blue eyes tripping her ancient heart. “I swear to God, you teasing me about being kinkier than you never ends!”

“Not when you’re immortal,” Kamilah agreed. “That’s actually the point, baby — that and it’s difficult to imagine that anyone kinkier than me actually exists.”

“Don’t act like you don’t love it,” Anastasia smirked. “I bet I’m the first person who has actually taught you a thing or two.”

“Mhm... you know how I love it,” Kamilah beamed as she rubbed the tips of their noses together and let out a dramatic humming sound. “Bondage and electrocution all wrapped up into one— I can’t say I’m exactly surprised it turned you on. Let the dust settle on this terrible experience for a bit and then we will talk.”

Anastasia giggled loudly and threw her arms around her neck. Then she smiled, kind of a quirky half smile that tipped up only the right corner of her mouth. Because of that smile, that goddamn beautiful smile, Kamilah had to swallow down a burst of affection that nearly brought tears to her
eyes. “So is this a date?”

Her laughter intensified and a few tears spilled down over her cheeks as she took in the broken vending machines, the woman in the hospital gown nestled in her arms with the biggest smile on her face despite what she was recovering from. It might’ve been the shittiest date in the history of accidental dates... but Kamilah was happy. Oh, how she’d missed this. How she’d missed her. “I want it to be.”

“Just you, me, junk food, the voices in my head, and looming mortal danger. If I wasn’t wearing a dress that showed off my whole ass-crack, this would be perfect.”

Kamilah’s lips turned upwards into a smirk. Anastasia was always the most beautiful woman in the room, irrespective of what she was wearing. And most especially and preferably when she was wearing nothing at all. “Speak for yourself. I’m rather enjoying the view.”

Anastasia laughed and nuzzled closer to her. “I really missed you, Kami. You and that dirty mind of yours.”

“I missed you too, my love. In my very, very long life, I need you more than I have ever needed anything or anyone.”

Kamilah smiled as Anastasia’s mouth moved on her, and she took her breath away once again. She kissed her like a woman possessed, like a woman with nothing more on her mind but the taste and feel of her.

Like a woman returned to life.

~~~~~ Five Weeks Earlier - Tokyo, Japan ~~~~

Kamilah fell to her knees in a puddle of her wife’s blood as rain soaked her to the bone and thunder boomed overhead. All around her, their family was frantically searching the dank alleyway for some sort of clue as to where Anastasia was, to what sort of trouble she’d gotten herself into, but Kamilah couldn’t do anything. She was frozen. Her entire body trembling violently and her chest aching. Soundlessly, she whispered into the void, her lips moving quickly, silently, without ceasing. Calling her wife’s name, calling her to her.

Even though there was no use.

Even though it was futile.

Even though it was already way past too late.

“Kamilah,” Adrian said as he knelt down at her side, Anastasia’s shattered phone in his hands, “not all of the blood is hers. Vlad was here and she must’ve fought him.”

The ancient vampire blinked and nodded. She was so dazed that even absorbing the information was difficult. At that moment in time, all she wanted was nothing more than to climb between the silk sheets and wrap her nude body around Anastasia’s. She wanted to hold and be held, to heal the horrors that the last few hours had brought. Sex was a wondrous thing, but at that moment she wished to be comforted more than pleasured. She felt like a child in the dark who knew the monsters were hiding under the bed. She wanted to be told it would be alright, but she was far too
old to believe such comforting lies. Not only was her wife missing, but she genuinely believed that
she had willingly betrayed her... and no matter how hard she tried, Kamilah could not erase the
memory of the pain that had shone in Anastasia’s eyes as she’d left her.

There were a thousand ways to hurt someone you love that had nothing to do with physical
violence. This was unforgivable in Kamilah’s eyes, and for all she knew, Anastasia had left and
was never going to come back. That was the true terror of love, that you could love with your
whole heart, your whole soul, and lose both in the few seconds it took for a door to slam.

You never knew the last time you were seeing someone. You didn’t know when the last argument
happened, or the last time you had sex, or the last time you looked into their eyes and thanked God
they were in your life.

After they were gone?

That was all you thought about.

Day and night.

“Kamilah?,” Adrian prodded, turning to the others when she didn’t respond. “Is she— What’s—“

“She’s in shock,” Serafine whispered whilst pulling Adrian out of his jacket and wrapping it around
Kamilah’s trembling shoulders. Usually Kamilah would’ve pulled away from anyone besides
Anastasia who attempted to comfort her, but she felt so helpless that she leaned into Serafine’s
touch and allowed herself a moment of weakness.

“What are we gonna do?,” Lily sobbed. “It’s obviously the Order of Apostolous that have her
right? Vlad betrayed our kind once before, so he’s obviously a member... right?"

“I believe that’s the most logical conclusion at the moment,” Serafine nodded as she helped
Kamilah to her feet and began leading her towards the car. “Perhaps Kano and I can try to locate
them... try to psychically connect to Anastasia... if we find out where Vlad is hiding then we will
likely find her.”

“How long is that gonna take?!,” demanded Lily. “She’s obviously banged up pretty bad, bad
enough that she couldn’t fight him off... and to get the most powerful psychic vampire in the world
into a state where she can’t fight back— god— she must be in real bad shape right now. We don’t
know what the perv is gonna do to her and—“

“Lily,” Adrian coughed, nodding towards Kamilah, who’s face was palling with each and every
word that left Lily’s mouth. “Making assumptions is not helpful in the slightest. We have to focus
all of our energy on finding her, we can’t allow ourselves to worry about what might be happening
to her... otherwise we’ll make reckless mistakes and everything will take longer.”

“Forgive me for freaking the fuck out that my best friend is in the hands of a rapey bastard with a
personal vendetta against her!,” Lily snapped. Asking her not to be a pain in the ass was like asking
rain not to be wet. Why even try?

At that, a choked sob escaped from the back of Kamilah’s throat and she practically collapsed in
Serafine’s embrace. People were supposed to fear the unknown, but ignorance was a twisted sort of
bliss when knowledge was so damn frightening. Kamilah didn’t want to think about all the things
that a man as perverted as Vlad could potentially do to Anastasia. She was incredibly desirable and
rarely went anywhere without her looks garnering some sort of attention... and it was already
common knowledge that Vlad had wanted to bed her the moment he’d set eyes on her, and that he
hated her after the events that had followed Anastasia slipping him some hemlock. There was no

doubt in Kamilah’s mind that he’d defile her if he was given half the chance to do so.

“Lily!,” hissed Serafine as Adrian began to drive towards their penthouse.

“Kamilah?,” Lily sobbed. She seemed just as traumatised at the sight of her mentor crying so

hysterically she was on the verge of hyperventilating as she was to have her best friend missing.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t—“

“This is all my fault,” Kamilah cried. “If I hadn’t— Not only have I broken her heart and probably

ruined our marriage, it’s my fault she left. If I hadn’t— She wouldn’t have—“

“Shhhh,” Serafine soothed whilst rubbing her back slowly over the fabric of Adrian’s blazer. She

was doing her best to comfort her, but nobody besides Anastasia really knew how Kamilah needed

to be comforted when she cried... nobody besides Anastasia had ever really seen her this upset.

“Anastasia loves you dearly and if there is one thing that she knows, it is that she is your moon and

stars. If that girl was secure enough in your love for her to deal with Gaius and then make friends

with me after finding out about our fling, she is secure enough to see sense once she calms down.”

“This is the worst way I could’ve ever betrayed her,” Kamilah sniffled. “People have hurt her this

way so many times before... she’ll never look at me the same way after this.”

“You pulled away from Aiko,” Lily said. “Aiko was the one that cornered you and practically

jumped your bones. We all saw it happening. It wasn’t like you purposely set out to kiss someone

else. It was so quick—“

“Indeed but then I allowed my temper to get the best of me and before I could stop myself, I turned

the situation on her and accused her of overreacting.” She sighed and rested her aching head

against the cool glass of the window. “That was why she left. If I’d acted my age and tried to

comfort her instead of getting angrier— I demanded too much,” she said, her sadness at herself, not

Anastasia. “I found someone who makes me strong who does not hold too tight... and now I know

that the pain of losing her to fate is more than the pain I would’ve felt if I’d just admitted I was the

one in the wrong.”

She knew that being a successful couple was learning what you were willing to compromise on,

and what you weren’t; learning when to stand your ground, and when to give it up; what was truly

important enough to fight over, and what was just you being pissy. You learned each other's hot

buttons, the places that hurt, or angered, when you pressed them. Love made you learn where all

the pitfalls were, and how to avoid them, or how to set them off. She knew better than anyone

exactly what she’d done. They could try and assuage her guilt until they were blue in the face, but

they didn’t know Anastasia inside and out the way she did.

“This is not all your fault,” Serafine offered. “Getting angry at her for reaction wasn’t right and you

certainly owe her an apology for that, but once Anastasia calms down she’ll realise that Aiko was

the one who instigated this whole situation. All she saw in the moment was Aiko and you kissing,

she wasn’t capable of seeing it for what it really was because her emotions clouded her judgement.

We’re going to find her and you’ll have the chance to talk everything through.”

Kamilah sighed and shook her head, knowing how raw a wound infidelity of any kind opened in

her wife. Trust issues were a major hurdle one had to jump in order to get close to Anastasia, and

despite being hard won her trust was very easily lost... and she very rarely gave second chances.

Tears trickled down her cheeks and she brushed them away with a heavy hand. “The way she

looked at me... she was the only person who had never looked at me like that...”
“Like what?,” Adrian prodded.

“Like a monster.”

The car fell silent, the only sound the rain battering against the windows and soft sobs that nobody attempted to conceal. People spent their lives getting caught up in all the wrong things — led astray by their minds, their egos, seeing themselves as separate from each other, rather than listening to the truth that lay within their own hearts, the truth that everyone was all connected, that they were all in this — whatever this happened to be — together.

Kamilah didn’t ask why they weren’t going to The Five’s headquarters, because she already knew that everyone was aware that she was likely going to behead Aiko the next time she saw her. Going home and then inviting over Kano and whichever one of the other lazy bastards who actually wanted to lift a finger to help was the smartest move they could make — even if going home and knowing Anastasia wouldn’t be there felt like another physical blow to everyone’s already fried nerves.

The moment they arrived home Kamilah stalked straight to the kitchen, avoiding the bar. She knew if she started with the alcohol she’d never stop, so camomile tea seemed like the next best thing to lower her blood pressure.

“Who in hell bought a mug with blue butterflies on it?,” she shouted, slamming it on the counter beside the stove. She wasn’t really angry at the butterflies, she was just angry in general and when she got like this she enjoyed her anger — it was the only hobby and coping mechanism she had. “We are serious people doing serious things! I don’t have time for butterflies!”

“It’s Anastasia’s,” Adrian said quietly. “I saw it in a market last night and it reminded me of the blue butterfly emoji she used when she entered her contact into my phone... she drank her coffee from it before her training with Kano this morning.”

Kamilah stilled and braced herself against the counter. She had been downright paranoid all night, aware of everyone near her. By the time her tea was ready she should’ve been just climbing into bed beside her wife but instead, her neck and shoulders were knotted into one painful ache and she had to be patient whilst Kano and Serafine attempted to locate either Anastasia or Vlad and Lily attempted to hack into various security cameras around the area where she’d been taken.

“You said her mind is too strong for you to penetrate unless she gives you permission,” Kamilah pointed out as Kano and his mortal servant strode through the front door. There was no time for formalities or pleasantries of any sort as far as she was concerned, and she was far too frazzled to even notice that the child vampire seemed as concerned about Anastasia’s wellbeing as everyone else did. “What do you plan to do?”

“Serafine and I are going to try and penetrate Vlad’s mind. Try to take a look through his eyes to see what he does... which is going to be incredibly difficult from a distance without any real idea of his location. Or we could try to look into his memories for clues about what his plan is. Which would you prefer?,” Kano said evenly.

“Why is everything always my decision?,” Kamilah asked.

“Because you will not tolerate anything else,” Serafine answered.

She sighed. “Can’t you at least try looking into Annie’s mind— just... try it?”

“Trying to peer into Anastasia’s mind would be impossible, even if she were standing before me
right now I would be powerless unless she permitted my entry,” said Kano. “She is very protective of her thoughts, Kamilah. You may be the one person alive who is given free reign of them.”

“Uh, guys,” Lily said without looking up from her laptop screen, “Vlad wasn’t alone.”

“What?,” Serafine asked.

“Bruh definitely joined a cult or some shit.” Without saying another word Lily turned her computer around so they could see the footage that had been captured on a restaurant’s security camera. A gaggle of people cloaked under thick black hoods could be seen parading out of the alleyway in front of Vlad, who was carrying an unconscious Anastasia. She was limp, there were boot prints on the side of her dress, her arms and legs had been tightly bound together with rope, her knees were grazed, her head was bleeding and there was blood coming out of her mouth, and there was a piece of fabric tied around her mouth as a makeshift gag.

Suddenly the tea no longer seemed appetising at all.

“Find her!,” Kamilah barked, slamming the mug down on the table so hard that the china shattered. This was the problem with loving people: it made you weak. It made you need them. It made the thought of not having them the worst thing in the world. It was a delightful problem to have, to care for someone so deeply, but it was also the single most terrifying thing Kamilah had ever known. The pain of that first time she’d lost her was still raw. She could deal with it, endure it, but she could never escape it. “Just— I don’t care what you do, just do something! Hurry up and find her!”

She hadn’t meant to break her wife’s mug, she really hadn’t. But she really didn’t want to cry again, and if you were too damn stubborn to let yourself cry, then your body always found other ways to let it out.

Everybody stared at her but Kamilah was so close to tears that she didn’t notice the concern on their faces before she stormed away to the bedroom she and Anastasia had shared, slamming the door behind her with such force that the wood of the doorframe splintered. The moment the door was closed and there was a physical barrier between herself and the rest of the world, she broke. She broke with such force that she couldn’t even make it to the bed and instead crumpled up on the floor in the foetal position, her entire body convulsing with each and every sob that broke free.

She hated herself for letting Anastasia walk out on her. She knew she’d have gone anyway, as she always liked to take a walk when she was upset, but she had just sat on the couch seething with misdirected anger and watched her go. She hadn’t stood in her way. She’d figured it was her choice, and she knew you cant hold someone if they didn’t want to be held. If someone really wanted to be free of you, you had to let them go. Well, fuck that, fuck that all to hell, she thought to herself.

It was so easy to see in hindsight that she should have grabbed her hand and begged her not to go. To have begged her, please, not to go. She should have told her she was sorry and how she loved the way her hair shone in the light. She should’ve told her that she loved that way she smiled when she was not trying to hide or impress anyone, how she loved her laughter. She should’ve told her she loved the way her voice could hold sorrow like the taste of rain, how she could listen to her talk forever just to hear that lilting accent, how adorable she found it when she missed out or muddled her english words. She should’ve told her she loved watching her when she moved through a room, when she didn’t think anyone was watching. She should’ve told her how she loved her eyes, it didn’t matter if they were blue or crimson, as fire and ice could burn just the same. She should’ve just told her how much she loved her, plain and simple.
“Kamilah, I have a problem.”

“Go away.”

“Kamilah, it is serious!”

She did not even lift her head. “No, it is not.”

“Kamilah!”

“Leave me alone. I do not desire your company at this hour, cousin.”

“Kamilah!”

Kamilah groaned and rolled over in her bed. The sun was shining into her bedroom through her balcony and her cousin was standing in the middle of the room, hungover and wearing some random Roman general’s toga. If she were not the queen of Egypt whatever drunken story she was about to tell might’ve been amusing. “I am glad you have finally realised I am your answer instead of your foolish advisors, Cleopatra,” she yawned. “Do make this quick, though. Lysimachus and I are going hunting this morning and I do not have time for whatever this is.”

“You are pleasant this morning,” Cleopatra said.

Kamilah pasted on a pleasant smile. “It has been a long week. I am just trying to relax.” And she was also trying to avoid more drama, but she did not say so.

She was quiet for two or three minutes, during which the two of them simply glared at each other. Then Cleopatra groaned and fired herself onto her bed without an invitation. “I woke up with six men in my bed this morning and four of them were Roman.”

“Six,” she nodded approvingly. Despite having more of an eye for the female form, she could certainly appreciate a handful of men and she found her cousin’s zeal for beds highly amusing. “Well... that is a record even for you. Congratulations.”

The queen groaned petulantly once again and whacked her arm with her sandal. “Kamilah!”

“Are you really going to make me listen whilst you explain what happened in excruciating detail?,” Kamilah laughed as she grabbed the sandal and hit her back harder, then shoved her off the bed for good measure.

Cleopatra wheezed with laughter. “That is treason!”

“Execute me if you must but then who would listen to the tales of your wild nights? We both know Lysi would be horrified if he knew even half of the things you get up to.”

“Lysi would be horrified if he knew you have slept with three of my handmaids... and two of my security officers!”

“I only slept with your bodyguards because you said they were good!,” Kamilah laughed. “All they
did was remind me why I seldom sleep with men. They were terrible, as men always tend to be.”

“I was young and inexperienced then, cousin,” Cleopatra chuckled as she climbed back up onto the bed and began recounting her sexcapade in the most excruciating detail. All Kamilah could do was roll her eyes and occasionally laugh at the awkward situations her bumbling cousin managed to get herself into so frequently.

“Well,” she began, “you roped me into your shenanigans and it was horrible.”

“I was young!”

“You were foolish.”

Unlike Cleopatra, Kamilah did not give herself so freely. She would not say she was forward, but she made a move when she was interested in someone. She experimented and she had fun, but her fun was few and far between as a sense of duty often prevented her from enjoying life the way Cleopatra did. Despite always choosing partners she knew there would be no future with, Kamilah wanted what most people wanted — love, companionship, butterflies in her stomach. She wanted someone to touch. She wanted someone to touch her back. She wanted someone to laugh with, someone who would laugh with her, laugh at her. She wanted someone who looked and saw her. Not her proximity to power, not her position. But she did not think she would ever get any of that, not in this life.

“You have to ensure they will be silent about what occurred last night,” Kamilah interjected after fifteen minutes of non-stop talking. “Be stubborn if you wish to, if you need to, but we know how this will end if you do not offer some sort of bribe... you are a woman who wears a crown and your life is dangerous enough—“

“I already had them executed,” Cleopatra said as casually as if she was discussing the weather.

Kamilah’s eyes widened and her heart rate doubled. “Under what charges?! ”

“Trespassing into the queen’s bedchamber.”

“But... but you invited them—“

Cleopatra shrugged and cut Kamilah off with a laugh. “Ruling requires that your hands be drenched in blood. You must not worry so much, cousin. I thought you might like to own their weapons? A woman can never have too many swords.”

Kamilah knew there was some comfort in killing that which has hurt you, and the Romans had done nothing but hurt Egypt, but it was cold comfort that came from killing... and Cleopatra did not seem to realise that. She enjoyed killing... or rather, hunting people for sport. To a normal person, killing would destroy things inside of you that the original pain would not have harmed. Sometimes it was not a question of whether a piece of your soul is going to go missing, only which piece it was going to be.

She sometimes wished Cleopatra’s world would stop turning for a few hours, just so she was given an opportunity to catch up.

“I,” Kamilah gulped and averted her eyes, “t-thank you, cousin.”

“Always remember,” she whispered to her, "that you are an uncommon soldier, whatever they say. And you are quite a thing to behold. I am lucky to have you as my friend.”
She was sure everyone had days when they felt small. Really small. Completely inadequate but saddled with too much responsibility... she had to fight battles against people who should not have been her enemies — especially when there were already plenty of enemies to go around. There were days when she would love to pull the cover over her head and say to hell with it.

But she did not do that. She could not do that.

She smiled, despite how much she wanted to scream. The world that Cleopatra had decided to create was not perfect, and some days it worse Kamilah down... but she was best at placating her cousin’s desire for blood and dramatics. She knew she could either accept that, and face it, and be a help to others instead of a hindrance. Or she could decide the rules were too tough and they should not apply to her, and she could ignore them and make things harder for everybody else because she was a woman of royal blood... just like her cousin did everyday. Sometimes life was about being sad and doing things anyway. Sometimes it was about being hurt and doing things anyway. The point was not perfection.

The point was not running and doing it anyway.
“Kamilah?!,” Adrian yelled as he and the others stormed into the trashed hospital room with their weapons drawn, clearly spooked by the mess in the hallway. Adrian, Akeyo, Kano, Lily, and Serafine all stopped short in the doorway at the sight of Kamilah lovingly brushing through the length of Anastasia’s hair, and Anastasia dressed in real clothing that didn’t show off her ass-crack with her wrists willingly restrained in front of her in the hopes it’d make everyone more comfortable— and the hope they’d be enough to stop her from draining anyone dry.

Anastasia tensed up as she hesitantly looked towards their family and friends — thankfully Aiko was not amongst them. Despite having her memory back, the idea of being around so many people was not as exciting as she thought it’d be. Not only could she not predict what they would do or say, she was craving their blood to the point of her eyes began turning red the moment they walked through the door. Resisting a small army’s worth of people was going to be a challenge.

“She’s back,” Kamilah beamed, holding her tighter on her lap. “I cured her.”

“Kamilah,” Serafine said urgently, “you must come here. Her memories can’t spontaneously return to her... she is inside your head—“

“They didn’t spontaneously come back and I’m not inside anyone’s head but my own,” she said hesitantly, making eye contact with Serafine for a split second before feeling ridiculously uncomfortable and having to look away. “We kissed and that sparked something... then everything just came back. I— I’m really sorry for almost murdering you guys.”

They all exchanged confused glances, the tension thickening to the point that it could’ve been cut with a knife by the time Kano took a few steps forward. He tapped on his own temple with his left hand and said, “will you show me?”

Her entire body shuddered at the thought of anyone roaming around inside her head but she knew that the only way they’d believe she wasn’t scheming against them was if she gave them physical proof. Her legs shook violently and she broke out in a cold sweat as she made the short walk towards her teacher with Kamilah holding tightly to her restraints, a syringe in her pocket that she would use if it looked like she was going to lash out unexpectedly.

Despite being restrained, she knew everyone was afraid of her... and rightfully so. But throughout everything Anastasia had come to a point when she had decided to either embrace who and what she was, or condemn herself to be miserable all her days. Other people would try to make her miserable; and she was not going to help them by doing the job herself.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she whispered to Kano as she fell to her knees before him, her red eyes
overly bright with bloodlust and a brand new discomfort around other people. But despite how uncomfortable she was, she wasn't afraid of him, because she could smell his fear. You never had to be afraid of anything that was afraid of you. “I am only just beginning to remember what it means to need things. Laughter. Companionship. Love. Don’t take it away again.”

Kano nodded only once and reached out to touch her temple at the same time Kamilah placed a supportive hand on her shoulder. Just knowing she was there made dropping her mental barriers seem a lot less intimidating than it would otherwise be.

“Continue to move at a glacial pace,” Kamilah snapped after only a few seconds of Kano’s presence inside her head, “you know how that thrills me.”

Kano ignored her and took a step back with a smile on his face. “Welcome back, Anastasia. I can’t say what happened with much certainty... but it seems you’re all there.”

“It’s good to be back, I—“

She was cut off as Lily shoved past Kano and practically dove at her, hugging her so tightly that her ribs would’ve likely snapped in half if she were mortal. She glanced at Kamilah as if for support, but the ancient vampire was stifling a laugh, badly, despite how she was holding onto the restraints with a white knuckled grip.

“You gotta stop almost dying on me you dumb bitch!,“ Lily sobbed. “Do you know what it’s like being stuck with these morons without you??”

She’d always enjoyed hugging Lily, but with her hands bound it was pretty awkward being clung you so tightly. She’d missed her and wanted to give her a hug. Both of Lily’s arms were around her. Both hands, on her back. At the same time. But Anastasia didn't know what to do, especially since she felt so awkward and unsettled around anyone who wasn’t Kamilah. She didn’t want to hurt her feelings. Should she have asked her to let go? Should she have tried back away?

Lily’s chest shook. Again. "Anastasia?" Her voice was quivering and strained. She realised she was laughing. "You frozen in horror? Trying to figure out what to do now?"

“Lil,” Anastasia winced, turning her face away from her neck so quickly that her fangs cut the inside of her own lip. Her entire body convulsed with the need to drink, the sound of Lily’s heart beating suddenly all she could hear. It hit her all at once like a tonne of bricks. Being this close hadn’t been so tempting at first but when that urge surfaced, it was hard to ignore. “I love you but you have to let go... I’m... I’m still—“

“Get back!,” Kamilah ordered as she pried Lily off of her and then yanked the restraints even closer to her.

“Oh shit,” Lily gasped as she scurried back a few feet.

Anastasia’s chest heaved and each and every breath she took burned at her throat and lungs, a white hot pain that would only be soothed if she gave in to what she really wanted. Controlling herself around one person had been far easier than this... than hearing so many hearts beating and litres of blood being pumped around multiple bodies.

Kamilah knelt down at her side and began rubbing her upper back. “You’re okay. Just breathe, baby. Breathe through it. Nice deep breaths, that’s it... that’s it...”

She looked up at Lily for a few seconds before needing to look away again, tears prickling at her crimson eyes. “I’m sorry. I don’t... I don’t want to hurt you— any of you.”
“You’re still craving vampire blood,” Adrian breathed, falling to his knees beside Lily. Anastasia nodded and hung her head, unable to meet his eyes. “Yes.”

“How do we fix this?,” Akeyo asked Adrian.

“I... I don’t know,” Adrian stammered, turning to Kano. “Do you have any ideas?”

“There is no going back,” he replied, his voice as even and sedate as ever. “There is no revival of the past. There is no erasure of the horrors Anastasia has faced. No healing except of time and she is a vengeful mistress, leaving scars that are forever. But there also is no proof of foreknowledge, only of twenty-twenty hindsight. We can guess. We cannot know. Knowing is only for God.”

Kamilah scoffed. “Speak plainly. I don’t have the crayons I’d need to explain why I have neither the time or the patience for riddles.”

“He doesn’t know, mon amie,” Serafíne soothed, sparing Kano an apologetic glance on Kamilah’s behalf.

“It’s gonna be alright,” Lily said confidently. “You’re gonna be all right. You don’t have to worry about anything again. We won’t let any vampire hurt you and we’ll help you get over this...blood addiction. We can do this, right? Fight the Order and run a blood addiction support group at the same time? I mean, I suck at multitasking and probably have ADHD, but Imma give this my best effort—“

“I’m sorry, did you just suggest putting me through rehab?,” she laughed. If she didn’t laugh, she’d cry. Yet she knew understanding one’s own nature was often a first step to personal growth. All this psychological crap was making her irritable and emotional... and she hated it.

“Fuck yeah I did. If crackheads can get clean in a few weeks, why the fuck can’t we make our own twelve step program?,” Lily beamed. “I’ve never actually been to rehab, but don’t you have to stand up and be like; My name is Anastasia Sayeed, and I am a vampire blood addict? Then we all greet you and talk about how bomb vampires taste— Oh, speaking of food, I almost forgot, I have some pizza left. I don’t suppose you’re interested.”

“I already ate.”

“Anyone we know?,” Lily’s dark brown eyes twinkled and Anastasia started laughing. “Ouch!” Lily yelped as Kamilah lightly swatted her across the temple and glared over the rims of her glasses at her. “Dude. Take a Xanax or something.”

“The goal is to try and help her, not make her want to kill herself,” Kamilah scowled.

“She’s immortal,” Lily deadpanned, adjusting her glasses so dramatically that everyone started to laugh.

Kamilah glared at her. “I’m aware.”

“Kami, breathe,” Anastasia whispered. “We have bigger problems than me to discuss right now.”

“Bigger problems than this, ma petite?,” Serafíne prodded as she came to sit down in front of her. Her voice was warm and sweet like sun warmed honey, her eyes shining with the same affection they always did when she looked at her.

Rather than explaining in great detail what had happened, Anastasia projected a few memories into
everyone’s minds — she’d recovered enough strength after feeding that the restraints couldn’t stop her abilities as much as they had before. Cleopatra downing a vile of vampire blood before her suicide. Her galavanting across the world, hunting people for sport. Then, eventually, a dank jail cell in the bowels of Glamis Castle, where she and Cleopatra were stood together, her chest was heaving with the discomfort of the hand wrapped around her neck, a spray of vampires and mortals littering the floor in front of them. Anastasia hadn’t been entirely undamaged by the former queen’s experiment, aside from her lifeless eyes and robotic responses to everything she said — she’d taken a serious bruising to her right thigh, a burst lip, bruised knuckles, and a few bloody slices across her belly and back where she’d been whipped for attempting to refuse to take part in the little Hunger Games tournament Cleopatra had decided to throw.

Even in that state she hadn’t wanted to harm anyone.

Bile rose up in Anastasia’s throat as the raw memory was shared. It was one of her first after her mind had been broken and she’d lost her sense of self... starving and being beaten like an animal... being forced to fight to the death with the Order’s other prisoners for entertainment with the promise of feeding at the end — a promise that was never kept.

But she was still alive. She was free, even if she still heard the voices. But for that moment the only place their voices were left was in her head. It was better than being alone but it was still so, so lonely... even surrounded by people.

She glanced over at a despondent looking Kamilah. She was just about to speak, but before she could get out words, her hand was at the back of her head, her mouth pressing against hers. The intensely possessive kiss left her gasping for breath, but even as she pulled back, her fingers stayed knotted in the back of her hair. “I will never let her touch you again.”

Anastasia nodded and leaned into her embrace. She sensed her leaning forward. It was still so weird to feel someone's attention on you that way, like you were the only thing in the world they were listening to. Most of the time people were so distracted, or just thinking about what they were going to say next... but Kamilah had never been that way with her. She breathed in her scent, revelled quietly in her warmth. “She wanted you too. I would give,” she said, her voice rough, “everything I am to keep you from being hurt that way.”

“You’re trembling, baby,” Kamilah whispered. It was one of the silky whispers that only she could give, low and effortlessly erotic, like vocal sex. She tightened her arms around her and rocked her gently from side to side. Her thumb stroked her cheek lightly and Anastasia’s eyes half-closed. When Kamilah spoke next, it was very softly, her voice an almost-physical caress against her whole body. “What can I do to make it better?”

“Just love me.”

“You're safe, okay? Nothing's going to happen.” Kamilah’s mouth pulled tight against itself. And now Anastasia felt like she was having some sort of heart attack. Because when she looked at her like that and twined their pinkies together, her chest started to feel like it was turned inside out. "I Promise."

And that — the promise, the way she said it with utter certainty — was enough to make me tear up a little again. She hated that she had to settle for two of the most inadequate words in the English language, words too pale to express what she needed to say. "Thank you."

Kamilah pressed a kiss to her brow. “You are mine, Annie. You are mine today, tomorrow and five hundred years from now. You will always be mine. I do not give up my treasures, my love. Remember that.”
“Why is it every other year we seem to be faced with a situation like something Disney might have envisioned if he’d taken a dose of LSD, backed up with a serving of psilocybin mushrooms, and a quart of tequila?,” Lily asked dryly, interrupting the moment.

“Thank you for that scientific analogy,” Kamilah sighed.

Lily groaned. “What the fuck are we gonna do about the psycho?”

“You better not be referring to me,” Kamilah grumbled.

“I’m talking about your cousin, you dumbass. Anybody ever tell you that you tend to overreact?”

"Indeed. A few people have tried. Most of them are dead,” Kamilah said, letting her grin out. “You’d do well to remember that pissed off is not the same as well armed.”

“I should warn you, I’m an expert on vampires. I’ve seen every episode made of Buffy, Angel, and Forever Knight, so don’t think a little fang-flashing is going to scare me,” Lily pouted.

“Is that why you’re wearing a cape, Vampire Expert?,” Serafine snorted.

Anastasia smiled. "You're looking hot, dude."

Lily sprang to her feet and strutted around the room. "I'm too sexy for my cape, too sexy for my fangs. Too sexy." She whirled in a circle, then struck a disco pose with a hand pointing at the ceiling with a flourish of her cape. "Too sexy!"

Kano grinned. "I think she enjoys being a vampire."

Akeyo reached out and gently patted her shoulder as Kamilah and Lily bickered back and forth like siblings. She felt his hand on her skin, cool and smooth and utterly inhuman. He affectionately pushed back her just-brushed hair, and his voice was curiously gentle when he said, "I’m glad you’re alright. I would have been most... discommoded had you died."

"Yeah. That's why I stay alive," she laughed, her native snark coming back online, as if she had just rebooted that file, "to keep you from being 'discommoded.'"

She’d have to look that one up. Vampires.

~~~~~ Four Weeks Earlier - Glamis Castle, Scotland ~~~~~

When Anastasia was dragged back into the first chamber of the dungeon, the stench made her recoil. It smelled like someone had mixed together kerosene, rotten fruit, stale blood, urine, and dog shit, then blown it up. How had she not noticed this before they’d moved her to be force fed vampire blood? She wasn't even breathing, but the rancid odor found its way into her nose anyway and made her already aching stomach throb.

Without looking down at her body, she figured she was likely swimming in vampire blood... and not all of it was hers. Ick. Through the tiny barred window in the dungeons she looked at the full moon and judged that the torturing had took over two hours before Cleopatra had called a halt by saying words she didn’t understand, in Egyptian, or Latin, or it could have been Mandarin for all she knew.
The bloodkeeper pulled in a soft breath. Her lungs were starving, crying out for air. She tried to stay still, not wanting to do anything to make them hurt her more, and a cough tickled at the back of her throat. It always happened when you wanted people not to notice you; a cough, a sneeze, something. It was stupid. The body decided to screw around with you, even though it knew being still and quiet was probably the only way it's going to go on living.

“I don’t understand why you moved her,” Vlad yelled at Cleopatra as he tossed the Bloodkeeper back into her cell. “There is blood all over the rugs upstairs!”

“I prefer to torture in the parlour, darling, like a civilised woman. Don’t you?”

“No, I do my torturing in the dungeon like any other respectable castle owner!”

Noticing them distracted and her crippling anxiety getting the better of her, Anastasia lunged at one of their ghouls before he could shut her cell door. She needed to escape. She needed Kamilah. She knew she couldn’t access her psychic abilities so long as Vlad’s necklace and whatever charm had been inserted into the gold pendant was near, but she could certainly tear out a throat or two.

Blinded by rage and physical pain, she tore the nameless man’s arm from its socket and ignored Vlad screaming like a child and Cleopatra’s laughter. The only thought in her mind was Kamilah, and getting back to her as soon as possible. Under normal circumstances the idea of killing someone this brutally would turn her stomach, but in the two days she’d been held prisoner all she’d known was pain... so she had no qualms about suddenly holding an arm that wasn’t attached to a body anymore. She just grabbed the ghoul by his other arm and began thumping him over the head with the loose limb before snapping his neck and tossing his corpse at Vlad with such force he stumbled backwards and hit his head on the iron bars of the cell opposite hers.

She’d heard Kamilah threaten to beat someone with their own limb before, but she’d always assumed that was a figure of speech. Apparently not.

On a regular day when she felt like killing someone, she cracked her neck from side to side and then move on. She’d breathe in a martyred sigh, then remind her temper to behave itself. If she’d learned one thing, it was that killing people who annoyed her generally created more problems than it solved... and she realised the moment she’d finished that she shouldn’t have acted out. Anxiety was a bitch.

Before she could reach Cleopatra, the door to her cell was slammed shut, separating them. Locking her in.

“People frequently bore me, sometimes amuse me, most often irritate me, but rarely intrigue me. I see why my cousin likes you so much,” she concluded. “All that rage. All that bloodlust. You are not just a pretty face, are you, my dear?”

Anastasia said nothing. Now seemed like the best time to follow Kamilah’s mantra; when in doubt, ignore and be horribly unimpressed.

“I had so hoped we’d be friends, darling,” Cleopatra sighed. “We’re practically kin now you’ve married into the family.”

Again, she said nothing. Sometimes ignoring people’s anger made them calm down.

Cleopatra glared at her through the bars of her cell. “I see. You’re stubborn enough not to utter a word during your interrogations and smart enough not to make casual conversation. Is that it?”

She looked away from her and sat down against the far wall of her cell. Everything ached and
burned with pain so severe that every limb felt like it had its own pulse, but she wasn’t going to show Cleopatra how unwell she felt. She would not show weakness.

“I know her — how capable she is and how stubborn — and those are qualities that The Order will come to appreciate,” Vlad said to Cleopatra, rubbing his bleeding head.

“Given time,” she muttered. “Lots and lots and lots of time.”

“Eons,” Vlad agreed.

“Immortal,” she reminded him, using a finger to point between them. “We have the time. Besides, I wouldn’t want to make it too easy on her friends.”

Vlad laughed sadistically, and his eyebrows drew together. He was perilously close to a unibrow; she guessed nobody had ever held him down and administered a good plucking to the caterpillar climbing across his forehead. “We'll see if she can rise to the occasion, do what needs to be done.”

“We’ll see if she can manage not to kill the two of you, especially if you continue talking about her like she's not in the room,” Anastasia blurted out before she could stop herself. She regretted it the moment the words had passed her lips. Wished she could take them back... especially when they both smirked at her through the bars. Fucking anxiety.

“That sounded like a threat to me,” Vlad beamed.

“Indeed,” Cleopatra hummed in a way that was far too close for comfort. Why did so many of her mannerisms have to be so similar to Kamilah’s? “Perhaps another force feeding will teach the dog some manners.”

“I think it just might.”

“Believe it or not, there are plenty of ways to satisfy your need for blood without harming anyone,” Anastasia sighed, realising she had no other option but to resign herself to whatever Cleopatra decided to do to her — what you cannot escape, you must fight; what you cannot fight, you must endure.

Cleopatra raised an eyebrow and gave a wicked smirk so similar to Kamilah’s that she had to look away. “Indeed, darling, but where's the fun in that?”

“You’re insane,” she whispered.

“You think I'm deranged! How refreshing. Everyone here takes me so seriously, it's a wonderful change to be thought mentally deficient.”

Anastasia curled in on herself. Having a tube shoved down her throat and vampire blood forced through it was horrible enough on its own without then being kicked in the stomach until she threw it back up. Then the process was repeated. Over and over. Back home, they didn’t do that. They might’ve shot, stabbed, cut, sliced and diced, eviscerated, disemboweled, and decapitated. Sometimes shot and also blew up their enemies. They’d been known to bury their dead in the Hudson from time to time. But they didn’t force feed. That was wussy.

She had always thought vampire screams were bad when she had heard them on other occasions. Hearing the high, glassy cries of other Order prisoners in the middle of the dungeons at night was infinitely worse, because the screams sounded like it could be words if she just listened hard enough. The horrible thing was that it pulled on that deep hidden part in every person — the blind animal part.
The part that knew you were the prey.

But the worst thing about it?

Was when it sounded right behind you, and something hit you from behind, tumbling you into another disassociated daze where the world became liquid and time became syrupy. Hearing vampires scream like that was... well, traumatising all on its own. The sound was glassy, hovering at the upper ranges of hearing, and it was full of centuries worth of pain running with the icy wind hitting the back of your throat like shards of ice. Underneath the glassy edge was the song of flesh being ripped apart, healing, then being ripped apart again, the sweetness of hot blood, and the savagery of crunching bones.

The worst part was how it climbed into your brain whilst you were also being tortured and trying your best not to scream and failing eventually, pressing itself like a hard sharpness into the soft folds, and dragged open the doors socialisation slammed shut to keep the howling ravening thing deep inside down and tame. It made her wonder what her own screams sounded like to the poor souls who were being hurt the same way, if they thought thought the same things she did when the wailing reverberated off of the walls and echoed throughout the dungeons.

Anastasia knew those screams would haunt her until the day she died — the sound of immortal souls bleeding tears of anguish.

She really did think she’d die there, and as she was being hurt she couldn’t help but think of Kamilah. If she did die, she would wait for her wherever people went after this life drew to a close. No matter how long. She would watch from beyond to make sure she lived every year she had to its fullest, and then they’d have so much to talk about when she saw her again.

And yet when she finally drifted off in that barely conscious state where logic was absent and dreams encroached she could almost hear Kamilah’s voice. She was whispering that same promise she'd made to her weeks before, and she wondered if it was a sign. And she wondered if she’d really meant it, “I will always find you.”

~~~~ Seven Years Earlier - Paris, France ~~~~

“Jax, oh my god!,” Anastasia squealed with laughter as Jax hoisted her up onto his shoulders in celebration after their battle in the crypts. Happiness bloomed in her chest, there was something about succeeding at something you tried, especially when people specifically needed your talent. That talent might’ve been illegal breaking and entering, and finding creative ways to kill undead vampire zombies, but hey, Anastasia knew there wasn't much she was good at, so success felt good nonetheless.

She held onto his head tightly. She didn't care if it hurt her bruised arm and her ribs and her neck and pretty much every other part of herself — mortal bodies were not made to battle Ferals and walk away unscathed. When you were physically wrecked, that was the only thing to do. Hold onto whatever you can. Hold on tight.

She’d hit her head a little in the fight, so the world felt like it was sort of spinning. When she laughed, it was amazing. She swore she could see her laughter floating around her like the puffy things you blew off a dandelion, only instead of being white it was birthday-cake-frosting-blue. Who knew hitting your head and almost passing out would be so much fun? She wondered if this
was what it was like to be high.

“Be careful with her!,” Serafine laughed. “We haven’t checked her for any internal injuries. Perhaps we should seek a mortal physician’s advice on the head wound. Bumps to the head can be deadly for mortals—“

“Don’t worry, Serafine!,” Anastasia giggled, glancing back towards her new friend. “I’m good... nothing a strong drink won’t cure!”

“Are you certain?,” Serafine prodded. “I dislike the thought of damage to you.”

“I dislike the thought of damage to me too,” she smirked.

“We all dislike the thought of damage to you, little bird,” Jax beamed up at her, the nickname he’d labelled her with flying effortlessly off his tongue. “We should take more steps to avoid it. If you're going to carry a dagger, you need to learn to use it properly."

Anastasia frowned down at him. "I know how to use it. I stick the pointy end in things I don't like.”

Jax laughed and affectionately patted her shins. “Damn right you do.”

She actually knew more about daggers than anyone knew — being in a relationship with a woman who owned more knives than shoes tended to do that to a person. She knew that the true way to a man's heart was six inches of metal between his ribs. Sometimes four inches would do the job if you were dedicated enough, but to be really sure, Kamilah had told her she should aim to have six, or even more if she wished. Funny how phallic objects were always more useful the bigger they were. Anyone who had ever said that size didn’t matter had obviously been seeing too many small knives.

“Jax, Kamilah will stab you if you drop her,” Adrian chuckled as he wiped cryptoferal blood from his hands. His suit coat and tie were off and his sleeves were rolled up, he was the picture of exhaustion. “Please be careful. She is already going to be angry when she finds out about the crypts... and don’t even get me started how she will berate me if the bump on her head bruises.”

Jax laughed and ignored the elder vampire’s pleas, running onto the grass. It wasn't a wild grass, of course, it was in the middle of the city, but it was happy grass. Some variety of centipede, the mat stretching across the open spaces, the fallen leaves and roots and runners heavily steeped in time and good water and care and nitrates. Even in the dark, it was beautiful and vibrantly green.

It was probably bizarre to be feeling safe after battling Ferals in the Parisian Crypts, but she was. Not the kind of safe where you knew there was still bad things howling outside the door waiting to get in. No, it was the kind of safe where you sank down in your bed at the end of the day and knew you could go to sleep and everything was going to be the same tomorrow... and she’d never had that feeling until tumbling head first into the world of vampires. Until finding her family.

Her life had strayed so far from normal now, she knew she would never find her way back. And the truth was, she no longer wanted to.

“Jax, do you even know where you’re going?,” Anastasia giggled.

“McDonalds is that way,” he laughed.

“We’re going to McDonalds?,” Serafine cringed. “Please don’t be so American. You cannot come all the way to Paris and then eat at McDonalds— it’s ghastly.”
“Hey, controlling a zombie vampire horde is hard work!,” Jax protested. “I'd punch a nun for a cheeseburger right about now, and I’m pretty sure the MVP on my shoulders would do the same for some chicken nuggets.”

“I’d die for a Happy Meal, honestly,” she laughed.

“You heard the lady,” beamed Jax. “We’re getting Happy Meals.”

“Don’t tell Kamilah, though. She gets stressed out when I eat McDonalds because she thinks all the salt will give me a heart attack and I’ll die at the age of twenty-two because I ate one too many Happy Meals.”

“She what?,” Jax spluttered.

“It’s not a weird controlling thing, she just wants me around for a long time,” Anastasia shrugged. “She worries when I don’t eat healthily and don’t even get me started if I have a headache or a cold. She’s lost a lot of people, so it’s understandable she’d be protective. Us mortals are a lot more fragile than you lot.”

Serafine snorted and cast Adrian a knowing glance that Anastasia couldn’t even begin to decode. “She cares for you a great deal, it seems.”

“I’ve never seen her smile more,” Adrian nodded. “The past eight months she has been a completely different woman than the one we’ve known for centuries.”

Serafine’s eyebrows shot up. “Good for her. I think we can both agree she deserves that happiness.”

Just at that moment, Anastasia’s phone buzzed with a message from Kamilah. She knew she shouldn’t want her to miss her as much as she found herself missing her at the most random moments, but she was glad to know she was. A huge smile spread across her face as she opened it to see what her vampire had thought of the outfit she’d worn that evening. Kamilah may not have used emojis to articulate herself, but she always got her point across perfectly. The message said: ‘Sweetheart, if it’s not too much of an imposition, I would be forever beholden to you if you could kindly assume a reclining position so I can fuck your brains out.’

‘I miss you too,’ she replied with a red heart after a few minutes of rereading the message over and over.

Kamilah began typing immediately and within seconds another message appeared. Clearly she’d used her vampire speed to get it all out so quickly. ‘I miss you more than I initially thought I would. You are different, Annie. I don’t need you in order to survive. But surviving is not the same as living. Or the same as feeling human again. I am alive when I’m with you. You feed my soul.’

And Anastasia responded, ‘I’ll see you really soon. Are you sure you’re safe?’

Kamilah replied, ‘I’m always safe. I am more than two thousand years old, you know... but I appreciate your concern. Nobody has been so concerned for my safety before.’

‘Your exes are assholes,’ she replied with a few knife emojis.

Kamilah replied instantly, ‘Why are you always so willing to protect me?’

She froze, her thumbs hovering over they keyboard. Because no matter how much she fussed and snarled, it was music to her ears. When she breathed in her scent, she was in heaven. And when she
gazed into her warm amber eyes, an eternity wasn’t nearly long enough. But she couldn’t tell her all that yet, so she replied, ‘You matter to me.’

Kamilah’s reply appeared instantly again. That damn vampire speed. ‘When you have lived as long as I have, you realise how relative time is. I’ve endured centuries that passed in the blink of an eye as if I were barely breathing.’ There was a short pause, then another message appeared directly below it. ‘Or I can experience an entire lifetime in the span of a few months. All the hope and passion that makes life worth living, it is suddenly surrounding me like a gift from God.’ Then another message, ‘At first, I thought it was only your body I wanted. But something about you has made me greedy as hell. I want everything. Your love. Your mind. Your secrets. Your soul.’

Anastasia’s heart was beating so fast that she was getting dizzy and had to assure everyone that she was fine as she typed furiously onto her phone. A series of hearts followed by, ‘You have it all already. I’m yours.’

When she looked up from her phone she had to do a double take, as a woman with red eyes who looked somewhat similar to Kamilah was walking the opposite direction down the other side of the street... but no one else seemed to notice her through the barrier the traffic provided. The woman smirked at her and winked, flashing her fangs. It was only from her higher vantage point that she could see her but when she blinked, she was gone.

“Are you sure everything is okay up there?,” Adrian prodded. “You don’t seem like you’re okay.”

“We definitely should get that bump to the head checked out,” Serafine concluded, pulling up directions to the nearest emergency room on her phone. “Her heart does not sound like it is beating the way it should be.”

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Jax added.

“I thought I just saw... never mind,” she shook her head, realising she must’ve been hallucinating and resigning herself to a night spent in a Parisian emergency room with a bunch of overly concerned vampires who were currently trembling at the thought of telling Kamilah. “I really must have hit my head harder than I thought.”
Kamilah watched Anastasia eat a thick, salted caramel-laced brownie, feeling her pleasure radiate across the small space that separated them on the couch in her office, the restraints that had been around her wrists sitting on Kamilah’s lap. She’d offered her a bite, and although she could not consume sweet food in anything more than a mouthful, she accepted a small taste of the sticky chocolate confection Lily had stress-baked instead of sleeping if only to share in Anastasia’s unabashed enjoyment. She swallowed the heavy, pretty much revolting bit of pasty sweetness with a tight smile and noticed every other vampire in the room seemed to be enjoying it.

“Good, huh?,” Anastasia licked her chocolate-coated fingers, slipping one after the other into her mouth and sucking them clean. She still wanted to drink their blood so much her eyes were red and her fangs elongated, but only she could still manage to look adorable in that state.

“Delicious,” Kamilah said, watching her with her own brand of hunger.

“You can have some more if you want it.”

“No.” She drew back, shaking her head. “No, it’s all yours, baby. Please. Enjoy it. You deserve it.”

Anastasia nodded and continued eating, ignoring everyone else as they chatted about the information she’d shared with them about the order. Despite knowing who they were to her, she was so uncomfortable around everyone that entire body was tense and she refused to turn her back on them... and than in itself broke Kamilah’s heart. Anastasia was not introverted or shy or distrustful in the slightest. Yet now she flinched at loud noises or unexpected movements, and was so skittish that she’d made her own palms bleed by clenching her fists so tightly. But after everything she supposed it would take time to learn to trust people again.

“You don’t think I’m... some kind of monster? That I’m not much better than him to have killed Vlad like I did, in cold blood?,” Anastasia whispered to her. “I... I’m starting to feel a little guilty, Kami. I know I shouldn’t... but I do. I killed him in the end, but revenge only makes things all better in the movies. In real life, once the villain is dead the trauma lives on inside the victims.” She sighed. “How long can you brush up against evil and not come away stained with it yourself?”

“You’re not evil.” Kamilah lifted her chin on the edge of her hand. She didn’t care that her voice and hands shook as she brought her closer. She was thoroughly unashamed of the depth of her feelings for this woman. “I think you’re courageous, Annie. Courageous and good. An avenging angel, that’s what I think.”

“I’m a freak.”

“No, baby, no.” She kissed her tenderly. “You’re amazing.”
Anastasia’s crimson eyes glowed bright with tender emotion. She held her face in her hands, searching her gaze with an intensity that made Kamilah’s blood heat beneath her skin. “You think so... even now?”

“Indeed I do. You’re not a blade or an animal, my love. Whatever awful things you were forced to do in your past don’t define who you are today.” She inched closer, braved the smallest caress of her jaw. “Annie, you are not what they tried to make you.”

“I wish that were true,” Anastasia whispered.

“You’re a good woman, Anastasia Sayeed.”

“No. I’m not. But I want to be. For you.”

“You’re the only woman I want. The only one I love. I may be an arrogant asshole with more blessings than I’ll ever deserve, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have enough self-awareness to recognise something extraordinary. Especially when I’m looking right at it,” Kamilah smiled, kissing her brow. “You’re a very good person who a lot of bad things have happened to. You’re not a monster. Your hands are clean. Not stained with blood. You need not carry the blood of those men.”

“I have to do something purposeful with this life — for myself as much as I want to show people that I’m not the awful person they believed me to be when you found me in the dungeons. I need to prove that I still have honour, that I’m still worth something and I’m not just this... collection of broken parts.”

“You don’t have to prove a damn thing to anyone, Annie. You are all of those things already.”

Anastasia simply nodded and smiled at her sadly. It didn’t matter what Kamilah believed, not if she couldn’t believe it herself. But some people were worth all the effort it took to love them, or to show them that they were worth loving when they couldn’t love themselves.

In spite of everything they’d been through, there was still this. There would always be this. Kamilah knew it as surely as she saw the same truth reflected in her stormy crimson eyes. They would be drawn together like this always, even if it hurt, because even when nothing else in the world was alright... they always were. They always would be.

“So Cleopatra is M.I.A,” Akeyo said, drawing everyone’s attention across the office where he had written down the basics of what they knew on a glass board with a dry erase marker. “That seems like our biggest issue at the moment. Vlad is dead. His necklace is in the labs downstairs. Cleopatra and other high ranking Order members are missing and we know they’re after Anastasia and Kamilah.”

“When did she leave Glamis?,” Aiko asked Anastasia directly, without making eye contact. She was sulking in the corner of the room that was furthest from where they were sitting, her arms crossed over her chest like a petulant teenager throwing a tantrum.

Anastasia glared at her for a few seconds and looked ready to pounce on her, but Kamilah grabbed her hand and began tracing soothing little patterns across her knuckles in the hopes it’d be enough to centre her without snapping the cuffs back on her. The bloodkeeper cleared her throat and looked back towards Akeyo, shrinking under the weight of everyone’s attention. “She... um... a week before you found me. Give or take a few days.”

“That’s not very specific,” Aiko muttered.
“Aiko,” warned The Evolved. “That is quite enough.”

“We need this information to be accurate,” Aiko snapped.

“It’s hard to focus on anything besides the pain and keeping your mouth shut when you’re being tortured for information. Sorry to inconvenience you,” Anastasia deadpanned.

“Spare me the self-righteous indignation. I highly doubt your motives are selfless. How do we know for sure you didn’t talk?,” Aiko goaded.

Anastasia glared at her and then assaulted her with a psychic wave. She hissed, “You are a cockroach.”

In Aiko’s inebriated state, she had no resistance at all to the Bloodkeeper’s mind control. She fell to the floor and scurried around the office on all fours. “I am a cockroach,” she muttered in a squeaky voice. “I am a cockroach. I am a cockroach.”

“Hmm, about time you figured that one out,” Anastasia smirked as she offered Kamilah her wrists, signalling that she needed the restraints as everyone laughed. Without a word Kamilah fastened them back around her tiny wrists, tightening them enough that she wouldn’t be able to slip out of them but not enough to hurt her.


Anastasia nodded and did as she was asked.

“Can’t you just use your abilities to find her?,” Aiko snapped again from the floor. She stared up at Anastasia, and there was something in her eyes, something that said they finally had an understanding. She was afraid of her, and sometimes that was the best you could do with people like her. Anastasia had tried kindness. She’d tried friendship. She’d tried respect. But when all else failed, fear would do the job.

“She is exhausted,” Kano said, glaring at Aiko. “After a few days of rest Anastasia may well have recovered enough strength to perform such a stunt, but as of right now she is incapable of it. You ought to have some respect and let go of this petty grievance.”

Aiko scoffed and Anastasia fell silent, shrinking even further into her shell.

“Bitch, hold my earrings,” Lily said to Serafine, who then grabbed hold of her to prevent her from punching Aiko in the face.

“Aiko, if you’re not going to be helpful I suggest you return to Japan and sit on your ass like you did last time. We don’t need you... and if you so much as look at my wife the wrong way I will kill you,” Kamilah growled. The words came out in a voice she hardly recognised as her own, it was so full of venom and deadly warning. She swiveled her head around and met her ex’s eyes, her vision burning and sharp, her fangs having stretched long in an instant. The protective urge boiling through her was fierce, utterly lethal, and Aiko evidently understood at once as she got up and stormed towards the door.

“Don’t push me, Kamilah.”

She shook her head. “I think a push is exactly what you need.”

“A push from the top of the Empire State Building,” Lily muttered.
"Moving on from the domestic drama," Adrian said. "From this moment forward, we play by our own rules. Whatever it takes, whatever the cost. Our new mission begins now... we must bring down The Order of Apostolous... stop them from resurrecting Rheya at any cost—"

"Cleopatra already has my blood," Anastasia said quietly. "I... I don’t know exactly why she needed it, other than it was important for some ritual that they were going to do. I blacked out before I could hear anything else about it... I... I’m sorry."

"Don’t be sorry, ma petite," Serafine soothed. "That’s very helpful. Do you... do you remember her drawing your blood or—"

"She drew a lot of my blood into little vials," Anastasia nodded, leaning closer to Kamilah. "When she was... um...," her voice cracked and her eyes glazed over, "t-torturing me... she did a lot but she only drew my blood right at the end. Something to do with... adrenaline being released throughout the session, I think... but I’m not sure. She’d always tell me that too much power is never a good thing. It corrupts even the strongest... but I don’t know why she said that either."

"Tortures sole purpose is to arouse the senses, to disturb and elicit that sort of flight or fight response. Even if it’s ugly. Even if it fucking scares the living shit out of you... that’s the whole point."

"My father used to say that to us when we were girls," Kamilah murmured, "the thing about power corrupting. But why would she... why would she say it to you?"

Anastasia shrugged and slanted her a wary look. "I don’t know, I’m sorry."

Kamilah caressed her face. "It’s okay, baby. You don’t have to be sorry about anything, okay? You’re doing so well just keep telling us anything that you remember, no matter how small."

"She... um," Anastasia started, averting her eyes from everyone but Kamilah. "She said to Vlad at one point that they were desperate and without other options. I don’t know what she meant by that or why she said it... I just heard it when they were testing to see how long I could be in the sun and then I passed out."

"Did she say that — those exact words?," Akeyo asked. "Just like that?"

Anastasia nodded and seemed too exhausted to answer. This all felt far too close for comfort. First the clan wars. Then Gaius. Then Rheya. Now this... and what was happening right now around the world, Kamilah’s guess was history would soon — once again — be explained simply in terms of Before and After another one of The Bloodkeeper’s battles.

"Monsters are most dangerous when they’re desperate," Kamilah breathed whilst gently stroking little circles over her wife’s knee.

Cleopatra had been volatile as a mortal, more volatile and sadistic than historians ever considered, but Kamilah had known her like the back of her hand. She’d been able to control her cousins mood swings better than anyone else could and in turn, Cleopatra had considered her a dear friend. But two thousand years was an awfully long time to not see someone. So long it was impossible for her to imagine what her cousin had become in that time, or try and predict what she would do. She knew it was more than enough time to rack up a few dirty skeletons for the old metaphorical closet.

She knew she couldn’t go back in time and kill her cousin, to stop any of this from ever happening. She couldn’t change the past. It just was... and now this was their destiny. This fight that they did not yet fully comprehend... and Kamilah was woman enough to admit that she was frightened.
Incredibly frightened.

~~~~~ Three Weeks Earlier - Bran Castle, Romania ~~~~~

“Where are you, bloodsuckers? Here, fangy, fangy, fangy,” Lily called as they wandered the empty dungeons. “Vlad? Drac? Yeah, he ain’t here.”

“She’s not here! You said she’d be here!,” Kamilah roared at Kano and Serafine in a rage fuelled by her crippling anxiety, her refusal to feed on blood or mortal food or sleep, and an anger so blinding she couldn’t keep it below the surface.

“Kamilah,” Serafine said as calmly as she could manage. “We said we saw a dungeon... and Vlad’s primary residence seemed like the most logical option to search. We never promised that we’d find her here—“

“Where is she?!,” Kamilah snarled as she smashed up another suit of medieval armour that was on display. Breaking things that belonged to Vlad did little to relieve her frustrations but she did it anyway... if she didn’t she’d likely have turned on Aiko, who was wisely giving her a wide berth.

“Be reasonable,” Aiko quipped bravely from her position at least twenty-feet away from her. “If your wife wanted to escape she would have by now, if she’s even as powerful as you all make her out to be—“

Kamilah’s eyes flared a deeper red than they’d ever been, her fangs elongating as she snarled at her ex. By the blasé flatness of Aiko’s expression as she started to approach her, she might as well have just come back from taking a piss instead of being literally seconds away from murdering her.

“Be reasonable? Fuck you. How’s that for calm and reasonable? I’ve chosen… there is only Anastasia. Build a bridge and get the fuck over it.”

“Why the fuck are you even here if you’re just gonna continue to make shit worse?,” Lily snapped at Aiko, who didn't reply. “We’ve shown you the CCTV footage where Anastasia was literally beaten half to death and being carried from an alley. We ain’t making shit up here.”

“Sister,” Adrian cooed, pulling her into his arms before she could lunge at Aiko. “It’s okay—“

“None of this is okay!,” she snapped, hiding her face in his shoulder as the tears she’d been holding back finally burst free. Before this she and Adrian hadn’t been particularly physically affectionate, but it turned out that functioning without the endless physical affection she’d become accustomed to receiving was doing nothing to help maintain the little sanity Kamilah felt like she had left. She couldn’t figure out how she’d ever survived without her wife’s cuddles.

Adrian ran his hand slowly up and down her back as she cried quietly. “I know,” he breathed. “It’s not okay right now but it will be. We’ll find her.”

“I have to go to her, Adrian. For my own sanity, if nothing else. Even if she wants nothing to do with me, I can live knowing she is alive and well but this not knowing—,” she cut off momentarily, too overcome to finish without taking a few deep breaths first. “If I stay here, I’m not sure what good I’d be, to tell you the truth. She’s the only thing that’s held me together in a very long time. I’m a wreck for this woman. She owns me now, in heart, mind, body, and soul. She’s an innocent angel. She deserves so much better than me.”
“Right, because you’re a disgusting, slobbering beast who’ll rip her throat out and toss her dead body out to sea,” Lily said dryly as she hugged her from behind.

“Do I look like I need a fucking group hug?,” she winced as Serafine joined.

“Oui,” Serafine deadpanned. “Everyone makes mistakes, Kamilah. Everyone has regrets and guilt for things they should have done differently in their lives. Shit happens, and we do the best we can at the time. You can’t blame yourself for this forever.”

“Exactly. Fucking stop being so hard on yourself or you’ll go crazy and then the wifey will be pissed as shit at you for not taking care of yourself.” Lily gave her a hard pat on the back. “You know she knows you’re coming for her. Don’t think for a second she doesn’t know you’re moving hell on earth to find her. Okay? I promise you, wherever she is, she knows.”

“Do you really think so?,” she whispered. When she spoke, there was an odd vulnerability to her husky voice. As if she were letting them peek inside one of the dark chambers of the heart she seemed so sure she didn’t actually possess... that she usually tried so hard to conceal from everyone but her wife.

“She’s had our back more than once,” Serafine said. “She must know we’ve got hers now. She has to.”

Kamilah laughed weakly. “I love her so much. With every ounce of life in me, I love her... and I just... I need her to be okay.”

“There are other castles we must check,” Kano interjected as he came out of his psychic trance. “Vlad owns a fair few residences across Europe, mainly here in Romania, that he has likely handed over to the Order to become outposts.”

Kamilah nodded and withdrew from the hug she’d been smothered in. “Then we burn each one to the ground that we come across and offer no quarter to those inside. We lessen their numbers, weaken their territory, obtain their weapons and any knowledge we can find... and we find my wife in the process.”

“You want to burn buildings of such historical significance?,” Henry yelped. “Kamilah—“

“This is war, Henry,” she interjected. “Like it or not, this is war, and in war you sometimes must play dirty. We know so little about The Order of Apostolous that we must strike them however we can.”

“Lock and load, everyone,” The Evolved sighed, casting a grave look at the rest of them. “It’s going to be a long, bloody night.”

“Kamilah is almost never wrong about things like this. Whatever she tells us tonight, it’s fated to be,” Kano said, bowing his head.

“Fated,” Lily said, sounding amused by that. “Well, shit. Then I guess we’re doomed, Master Yoda.”

Kano waved her off, but seemed amused at the Star Wars reference. “What is meant to be will be, but I must warn that wishing can be dangerous business... and dreaming only makes reality harder to accept.”

“You sound like Dumbledore now. Holy fuck,” Lily breathed, earning a laugh from Kano.
A few unintelligible murmurs rumbled throughout the group, but it only took a few moments for everyone to nod resolutely. All was fair in love and war. To hell with anyone who thought differently.

“Jesus,” Lily interjected when the heavy quiet in the room seemed endless. “All this touchy feely is making me itchy to kill something. How about we quit jerking each other off and go blow the roof off this mutha? I’ll film this so we can show Anastasia actual footage of our rescue mission. She’ll love it.”

“There’s gasoline in the utility cupboard off the kitchen,” Akeyo said. “Everyone grab a canister —”

“No,” Kamilah interjected. She was seething, drunk on her own magnificence. “I wish to do it myself. Wait for me outside.”

Nobody argued. They all seemed to know that arguing with Kamilah in the state she was in wouldn’t end well for them. These days, talking to her at all felt like sneaking up on a wounded animal, unsure if reaching out to her was going to win a bit of uneasy trust or a vicious taste of fang and claw. Even she, herself, couldn’t predict how she would react whenever anyone said anything to her... emotions of this intensity could do that to a person, it seemed.

She thought of Anastasia as she doused all of Vlad’s grand furnished rooms in gasoline, dropping a handful of lit matches in every room as she moved sedately throughout his castle. The smoke from the fire didn’t bother her too much. Neither did the smell, putrid as it was... she figured it was nothing compared to what her wife was suffering... she figured that she deserved the mild discomfort and much more.

The fire made her think of her. How when she was with her, she was dancing right up next to the flames of everything she was afraid of and she was learning that she could actually enjoy the burn. Whenever she was with her, she was still learning that she craved it.

She slashed at priceless paintings of Vlad as she went and took great pride in throwing camp pieces from his wardrobe into the flames. She tore up books and smashed china. She destroyed suits of armour and shattered jewellery. She even emptied out bottles of cologne and black nail polish, just for spite... setting absolutely everything the monster held dear ablaze in her anger.

Flames flickered in the adjacent bedroom. She followed the ambient warmth back to the threshold and paused there, marveling at what she saw when she really looked. Vlad’s austere bedroom had been transformed into something out of a dream. Four tall black pillar candles set into intricate silver sconces burned in each corner amongst the flames consuming the room. Red silk draped the bed, the ends of it being eaten by flames. On the floor before the fireplace was a cushioned nest of fluffy pillows and even more crimson silk. It would have looked so romantic, so inviting... were it not currently burning.

A room intended for lovemaking, obviously.

She sighed and thought of Anastasia, tears pickling at her eyes as she threw down another lit match for good measure before moving on. Pain? She could handle that, no problem; it was the idea that the woman she loved was suffering that made her want to either punch something or vomit in the corner.

Her stilettos echoed across the marble floors as she moved through the building, grabbing any bottle of alcohol she could find and downing it in only a few gulps and then smashing the bottles against the walls. Drinking might not have been the smartest idea but she didn’t care, she needed to
feel something other than numbness and rage and self hatred.

Rolling orange fire silhouetted her from behind, backlighting the ancient warrior’s strong shoulders and casual, long-legged stride as she glided out of the castle, daggers in hand. As she strolled away from the inferno, the ends of her black leather jacket winged out behind her like a cape befitting the Queen of darkness herself.


“Let us go before the mortals arrive to battle the blaze,” she deadpanned. “Where now?”

“Corvin Castle,” Kano said. “Let us move quickly, dawn approaches.”

~~~~ Seven Years Earlier - New York, NY ~~~~

“You’re still trembling,” Kamilah whispered. “Tell me what it is you need, sweetheart.”

“This. You,” Anastasia said, sighing with exhaustion. “I just needed to feel safe tonight. I needed to feel connected to something solid and warm and unbreakable. Just for a little while. I am where I need to be,” she insisted, her sweet voice thick and hoarse with tiredness. “Right here, with you.”

“Then just hold on to me,” she mumbled, holding her mortal tighter. “I never knew what it was to crave a woman’s touch. Or to hunger for a woman’s kiss.”

“And now you do?,” Anastasia asked sleepily as she nuzzled closer to Kamilah in the bed they’d hijacked in the deserted furniture store.

“Since I met you, Anastasia Swann, I’ve been thinking of little else.” She searched her tired eyes, and there it was. A sense of time becoming syrupy. A world melting away with only two souls remaining. An eternity of longing. Bittersweet and beautiful. “I can’t help but desire you. This feeling I have for you is more than intense,” she said roughly. “It is a possessive thing greedy. I look at you, Annie, and all I can think is that you are mine.”

“How exactly do you feel?”

Kamilah’s breath hitched in her throat. “You taste of the cool water that hides deep in a stream. You taste of the night air, soft and scented and mysterious. The taste of you drives me wild. I want to be with you, be inside you, shout to the world that you are mine at the same time I want to keep you hidden where you will exist only for me. You make me feel invincible, little firefly.”

Anastasia gave her a sleepy smile. “Ever felt this way before?”

Kamilah huffed and pressed a kiss to her brow. “I have been stone cold warrior whose frozen heart refused to thaw… until you came along.”

“You are pure flame. I touch you and it’s like… I ignite. I kiss you and I burn to have more. You consume me… like no other woman before you, and, I am certain, like no other ever could again.” Anastasia nuzzled further into her warmth. “I wasn’t prepared for you, Kami. Holy hell… not even close.”

She smiled. “I wasn’t expecting you either. I wasn’t looking to feel something like this, I didn’t
know it was possible. But then you look at me like you are right now... you take my hand, or you pull me down beneath you, and I think maybe I’ve been waiting for you — looking for you, for this, for us — all my life.”

Anastasia pressed a kiss against her neck. “You do?”

“Everything makes sense when I’m with you, you know. My life makes sense, after so many years of running from myself in the dark. You are the light, the reason I live. I’m bonded to you deep, Annie. For me, there will never be another.” She leaned in closer and whispered, “Thank you.”

“What for?”

“You stayed,” she murmured, knowing how close her lover was to falling asleep. Her softly whispered words sifted into her long red hair where her lips rested against the top of her head. “You saw who and what I am and you didn’t let go.”

Anastasia yawned and when she spoke, her accent was thick with tiredness and, perhaps, love. “I never will... not until you ask me to.”

“I won’t do that.” She took her hand and lifted it to her lips. Her mouth was warm and soft on her always-cold-fingertips, weaving an air of safety around the mortal as only she could do. She brought her hand closer, pressing her palm to her bare chest, to the heavy throb that beat against her ribs like a drum. “I can’t ever let you go, Annie. Because whether you want it from me or not, you have my heart.”

“You have mine, too... and I don’t ever want it back.”

Kamilah smiled and pressed another kiss to her hair as her chest bloomed with happiness, her heart thundering uncontrollably in a way that it never had before. She loved her dearly, and planned to actually say those three words the moment Gaius was gone and she was finally set free. Joy, pure and bright, poured through her to hear those words coming from Anastasia. “Sleep, darling,” she whispered. “I will watch over you.”

“You’re just going to lie there and not sleep? Sounds kind of boring,” Anastasia mumbled groggily.

“Not at all.” She stroked her hair, the softest smile playing at the corners of her lips at the sight of her mortal lover hopelessly fighting off sleep. Her skin dewy from their lovemaking. Her hair disheveled. Bites and other marks of passion littering her body. She was perfect. “I get to hold you. Listen to you breathe. Think.”

Anastasia yawned. “About what?” She closed her eyes.

“Keeping you warm.” She tucked the comforter around her and drew her closer. “Keeping you safe.” Her breaths deepened slightly, and her body relaxed against her. Kamilah kissed the top of her head, knowing she was too far gone to have any memory of what she was saying. “Keeping you mine.”

“Mm,” Anastasia hummed after a few seconds. She was basically already asleep.

Kamilah rested her brow against hers and whispered, “Because I love you, you know.” She’d never told her that before and she didn’t know why she’d decided to say it when Anastasia was too groggy to realise what she’d said, but the moment the words had left her lips it felt like the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders. “And even though tomorrow we face Gaius, all I feel right now is peace.” She gently stroked her fingers across the velvety skin of her cheek. “Thank you for everything you have given me, my angel. To have you has been the greatest
honour of my life. I love you so, so much. Sleep well, darling girl. Be at peace... and know that you
are loved.”

The gentlest smile settled on Kamilah’s face as she watched her and gently traced her fingers
across her creamy white skin; her back, her arms, her face... everywhere. It was so bizarre to her
that this mortal girl, just a few months shy of her twenty-third birthday, had taught her so much
about life. About what it means to live.

In all of her days, she had never met another who adored simply being alive like Anastasia did. It
was like there was no pleasure too small to bring a smile to her face; the way the trees blew in the
wind, the way the water in the Hudson rippled and waved, how each sunrise and sunset became a
one-off masterpiece in her eyes. Having spent so much time with her, Kamilah had actually found
herself seeing the beauty in things that she’d long since stopped noticing. It just went to show that
time was not the great teacher of life. Experience was. A man may live a whole life, but if he never
left his home to experience that life, he died knowing nothing. A mere twenty-two year old who
had suffered and lived could actually be the wiser of the two.

Kamilah heaved a soft sigh and pressed another kiss against her brow. Time seemed to pass by so
fast when she was with Anastasia, probably because she made her so happy. She didn’t even have
to do anything or say anything, just being in her presence was enough to ignite the warm feelings
of home that had fled her ancient heart the day Lysimachus had died. Life would have been a blink
with Anastasia whether it lasted for millennia or a mere few decades... or another few hours.

She hadn’t even realised that for the past several minutes, she’d been laying next to Anastasia and
watching, admittedly, much too intrigued, as the soft glow of the candlelight soaked into her ginger
hair, infusing the silky strands with a dozen different shades of copper, bronze, and gold. What the
hell was wrong with her?

She was laying there staring at her hair, for christ’s sake. Not just staring, but staring with total rapt
fascination. To Kamilah, that seemed to indicate one of two equally disturbing facts: Either she
should seriously consider looking into night courses to occupy her often entirely sleepless nights,
or she was a complete goner when it came to this woman.

Goner as in gone for good, ruined for any other.

The feelings she had for her went far beyond lust. It was something profound and elemental,
something primal and undeniable. Something possessive and permanent.


This was everything she’d ever wanted, and all it had took was a chance meeting with a stranger,
some unexpected conversation after approximately 2,063 years of life. A few moments of kindness
from someone who had then had no inkling of what she’d been through, of what she was. Someone
who had wandered into Adrian’s workplace on a whim and ended up making the worst days of her
life seem less awful simply by being in them. She really had not been prepared for how deeply this
woman was impacting her life. She had first thought that she simply didn’t have room for the
trouble she brought into her solitary world. And she sure as hell hadn’t been prepared to deal with
all of the feelings she’d been stoking inside her from the moment their eyes first met — but
everyday she was thankful Anastasia hadn’t allowed her to push her away... that she’d held on so
tightly.

In the short time they’d come to know each other, she trusted her as a friend, a confidant. As a
lover. She trusted her as the partner she never dreamed she’d find.
Part of her knew she probably should have let her go. She never should have brought her into any of this danger in the first place. Anastasia deserved so much better than this.

But it was too late for that.

Too late for either one of them. There was no undoing the connection that had been smoldering between them since their eyes locked for the first time. Now, those flames had long since exploded into something neither of them could control... and despite how hellish everything else had become, it seemed like they were both better off for it.

In a few hours they’d face Gaius Augustine... and she knew the likelihood of them all surviving was extremely thin. Her ex was nothing more than a brute in her eyes. Cold. Abusive. Evil. And despite being terrified of him, still, she was no longer beholden to him. She was no longer his bloodthirsty puppet, and the best revenge she could possibly get was to show him that she was capable of living well without him.

“My angel,” Kamilah whispered as she gently brushed a strand of Anastasia’s hair behind her ear. She settled more comfortably on the bed and wrapped her tighter in her protective embrace, giving her a hundred solemn promises that she was very eager to keep, and loving her with all the reverence and worship of a woman who had stared hell in the face and now understood that she was holding heaven in her arms. “When I look into your eyes, only one word leaps to my mind every time: Forever. Please... don’t ever let me go. Don’t leave. Stay... with me. Stay forever. You are a miracle I never expected. The angel I’ll do anything to deserve. I don’t know how to be what you need, Annie, what you deserve. You make me want to be something I’ve never been before... you make me want to be better. You show me that I can be better... that I can be who I might’ve been if you had found me before he did. I’ll do anything... I’ll be anything you need. I promise.”
I Don’t Feel Alone ~ Anastasia

Chapter Notes

Inspired by; To Build A Home by The Cinematic Orchestra.

~~~~ New York, NY ~~~~

“Are you sure you’re comfortable with me being here?,” Anastasia asked quietly as Kamilah lead her back into their penthouse by the hand. “I... I really don’t wanna hurt you, Kami.”

“You won’t,” Kamilah assured her again, tossing the restraints down on the couch. It’d been a battle to even get her to agree to bringing them home. “Kano says you must rest and you can’t do that properly at Raines Corp. So you’re going to let me care for you and make you feel better, okay? Just us. No distractions.”

Of course Kamilah had known the risk in coming home for a few hours, but she wasn't fearful at all. Anastasia told her, "Sometimes I don't think you have the sense to be afraid when you should.”

“I’m stubborn to a fault, baby... and you could never be cruel. It’s simply not in your nature.”

Anastasia smiled. “You sound very certain for a vampire who thinks with her vagina most of the time.”

Kamilah arched a dark brow and chuckled. “It's because I’m an always horny vampire that I know. I can read your soul, Annie, and it is as pure and beautiful as any I have ever seen.”

Anastasia sighed and looked around the room. Nothing had changed since they’d left for Japan a few weeks earlier, everything was as it should’ve been, but Anastasia seemed like she was a whole different person than the one who’d left a few weeks ago. She felt like she’d lived here in another life, another life where she’d been young and idealistic without a care in the world.

“When you got captured, I didn't know...,” Kamilah trailed off, she had to chug a glass of whiskey from the bar before she could continue. "If it'd be like..."

"What?"

"Like it was when Gaius took you, when I thought he would... r—,” she cleared her throat and averted her eyes, “when I managed to convince myself he would...”

“Rape me?,” Anastasia whispered.

Kamilah nodded.

"Oh, Kami, no,” she soothed, taking her wife’s clammy face in her hands and pressing a kiss to her cheek. “I am okay. They threatened to hurt me like that, but they never actually did. Cleopatra... I think rape was where she drew the line."
“They threatened it?,” Kamilah said, her voice cracking.

Anastasia nodded. “The men mostly did. Vlad. The guards. They all said I was pretty. Sex is a weapon... I guess."

Kamilah screwed her eyes shut. When she opened them again, moisture glimmered in them. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologise. In this house you know tears are not viewed as a weakness but as a natural expression of one’s emotions and an ordinary response to pain or stress,” she soothed. “The important thing is that I’m fine.”

"Didn't know if I'd get there too late," Kamilah said with a shudder as she gently drew her into her arms, being careful not to hold too tightly. "Annie, if you ever get taken from me again, you better know that I'll be coming for you." She caressed her face. "So you stay the hell alive! You don't do anything rash, you don't take a desperate way out. You and me can get through anything, just give me a chance." Her voice broke lower, "just give me a chance to get to you." She buried her face in her hair, inhaling deeply. "There is nothing that can happen to you that we can't get past."

Anastasia nodded. “I’m just worried, Kami.”

“Worried?,” Kamilah echoed.

“Cleopatra, she had... she had this vampire she’d been keeping prisoner for, I don’t know, centuries at least.” She sighed. “He was wearing an iron mask over his face the whole time he was in the cell next to me and his memories had been taken from him a long time ago. I’m really worried about him because she took him when she left. He was... he was so kind to me.” She wiped furiously at her eyes. “We’d talk to each other a lot... became acquainted with the sound of each other’s screams... but we helped each other, I think.”

“What was his name?”

“He didn’t know his real name but he went by Mach,” she explained.

Kamilah’s brow furrowed. “Mach? That’s an unusual name.”

She shrugged. “He was an unusual guy... but I think I’d be able to help him get his memories back. I want to try.”

Kamilah kissed her brow. “We’ll do what we can for your friend if we can find him, okay? I promise, my love.”

Anastasia tightened her arms around her. “I love you so much, Kami.”

“I will fight any battle for you, crush any adversity.” Kamilah’s lips brushed the edge of her jaw and the side of her neck. “Because you are mine, beautiful girl. I love you so madly that the past before you actually feels sane. Promise me. You don’t leave me again when we argue, okay? Space is fine but leaving like that... just... please don’t.”

"I promise." Staring at her lips and already knowing the answer, she said, "Would you always come for me?"

Kamilah buried her face in her neck. Her arms tightened around her almost to the point of pain. Frowning, she hugged her back. “Kami?”
“You scared the hell out of me,” she murmured, her voice hoarse and her entire body trembling so violently she was practically convulsing.

Her heart turned over. “I’m sorry.”

Kamilah shook her head. “Just let me hold you a minute... please.”

Before she could reply, her vision began to blur and the voices in her had began to echo and mixed with Kamilah’s to become unintelligible, drawing her into a trance. At first she didn’t understand where she was or what she was seeing, until an image of a younger Kamilah flitted through her peripheral vision. She couldn’t have been more than nine, maybe ten, and she was running barefoot along the deck of a boat towards a young boy holding a small wooden horse in the palm of his hand... Lysimachus.

It took Anastasia several seconds to react to the sight of them together. She'd been almost hypnotised by the scene as Lysimachus wrapped an arm around her shoulder, the setting sun reflecting in their identical brown eyes, lighting them up like golden pools of sun-warmed honey. Lysimachus’s masculine face had been tense, his dark eyes focused on the rippling currents of the Nile. Kamilah’s face had been starkly beautiful, even then, her inky black hair brushing her brother’s shoulder.

Light and dark. One terrible, one tragic.

“Annie?,” Kamilah prodded, drawing her out of her vision as she sat her down on the couch and then sat down beside her. Despite the concern in her eyes, she was calm as ever.

“I... sorry,” she breathed as she rubbed at her eyes. “I think I picked up on one of your memories again. I’m not really in full control right now so this might happen more—“

“My love,” Kamilah interjected, “it’s alright. What did you see?”

“You and Lysimachus on a boat,” she explained. “You were children and you were standing at the bow of this really long boat together. He was holding his horse—“

“And he wrapped his arm around my shoulder,” Kamilah finished, a gentle smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. “It’s one of my fondest memories. It wasn’t long after our father died and we were travelling to Memphis from Alexandria.” Her smile grew wider. “I pushed him into the water a few moments after that when he refused to let me play with the horse.”

“You had a thing for almost drowning him, it seems,” she laughed as she lay down with her head rested on Kamilah’s lap.

Kamilah nodded whilst soothingly stroking her hair. “I was quite the volatile little thing. It’s really no wonder my temper is as infamous as it is... I started young. I used to say that I loved vengeance like normal people loved sunsets and long walks on the beach. I ate vengeance with a spoon like it was honey. Poor Lysi bore the brunt of it on quite a few occasions. Especially when we were sent to Memphis.”

“Why were you sent to Memphis? Wasn’t Alexandria like the centre of Egypt then?”

“It was but it was decided my mother needed a break from us to grieve, so we were sent to visit relatives for a few months... but that only lasted a week or so before we had to return.” Kamilah’s eyes sparkled wildly. “I managed to piss off everyone so much that we were sent home. Lysi was miserable, as was I, but he was far too well behaved to act out the way I did.”
“What did you do?”

“I lived in the royal library, among all the books.”

“You resided in a... library?,” Anastasia snorted. “Kami. That is quite possibly the most... you... thing I’ve ever heard.”

“There were suites inside and great balconies that overlooked the city, but yes. I was most content among those shelves, so one night, I simply never left.” She gently tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear for her, smiling contently. “It worried my grandparents terribly because they just couldn’t understand I simply enjoyed reading. It wasn’t very ladylike behaviour, apparently.”

Kamilah gently moved her and lay down behind her on the couch, drawing her as close to her body as was physically possible in the little spoon position before dragging the blanket that had been left draped over the back of the couch over their entwined bodies. The ancient vampire held her against her chest and rested her face against her disheveled hair, and Anastasia sighed happily as one of her hands came to rest under the fabric of her top, flat against the warm skin of her lower abdomen.

“I like it when you tell me your stories,” Anastasia whispered.

“You’re the only one I’ve ever told them to, you know.”

“I am?”

Kamilah’s lips brushed against the nape of her neck and she hummed in agreement. “You’ve changed everything, Annie. All I ever had before you was nightmares. But now I dream. Because of you. You’ve changed me.”

“Not too much, I hope. I happened to like the woman you are.”

Kamilah chuckled. “You like her?”

“I love her,” she said. “With everything I am, I love her.”

“She loves you too.”

Anastasia yawned. “I’m so sleepy.”

“My beautiful girl, dawn nears and all good vampires are to get into their pyjamas and go to bed,” Kamilah said as she climbed off the couch and scooped her up into her arms. She gently brushed her soft hair back from her face, tucking it behind one delicate ear and smiled softly at her. She was so beautiful... but the dark circles beneath her eyes were not. She needed rest as much as she did.

“We can just sleep on the couch—“

“No, after everything you deserve to be tucked into your bed and be fawned over for a bit.”

Leaning forward, she pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Lets sleep, Kami.”

All she could do was smile as she found herself being carted off towards their bedroom. She knew there was no point in trying to calm the hyper-protective mode Kamilah was in, as when she got like this she simply had to get it out of her system — and the truth was, she found it very sweet how determined Kamilah was in making sure she didn’t lift a finger.

“Don’t be a perv,” she laughed over her shoulder, feeling Kamilah’s eyes lingering on her as she
stripped out of her clothes and into her silk slip nightgown.

“Okay, now you really don’t need to do that blushing virgin bit anymore,” Kamilah smirked whilst undressing herself. “I’ve ogled your body at my leisure a thousand times. Matter of fact, I know it so well, I could paint you from memory, instead of just looking at the pictures you’ve sent me.” She held up her phone with a wink. “I have an entire album of nude images of you that you’ve sent me when I’m supposed to be focusing on work and you wish to distract me.”

“I loathe you,” she giggled.

“I loathe you, too, baby.”

“It’s funny,” she said, with a strange hitch in her voice as she wrapped her arms around Kamilah from behind, "but I never wanted to be tied to anyone. Never wanted to be owned or to belong to another person. But now I realise that belonging with someone is completely different. I belong with you, Kami.”

"And I with you."

She kissed her, sealing them together with a bond she didn't mind, and one that would never be broken.

~~~~ Three Weeks Earlier - Glamis Castle, Scotland ~~~~

“I never knew I could hate someone as deeply as I do you,” Anastasia growled as she spat out the blood that had begun oozing from the inside of her bottom lip after she’d bit down too hard when Cleopatra had socked her across the jaw. Everything hurt and she needed to feed so desperately that she felt like she was dying... the brand new cravings for vampire blood so intense it felt like her throat was on fire.

“I often help others discover the outer limits of their hatred. It’s a talent of mine,” Cleopatra sighed as she dragged a dagger up the inside of her forearm. It didn't hurt. Everything else hurt so much that a wound that would've killed her, had she been mortal, barely even registered on Anastasia’s radar. “Now tell me about Kamilah. Where is she?”

“How the fuck am I supposed to know where she is when you have me chained to a wall, you psychotic bitch?”

Cleopatra slapped her across the face again and grabbed her throat, digging her sharp fingernails into the pulse point hard enough to draw blood. Anastasia wasn’t sure how long she’d been there, she wasn’t sure of anything really. The pendant Vlad always wore now hung around the former Queen’s neck and seemed to be weakening her to the point that her memories seemed hazy — almost like a movie you could only remember certain scenes of and not the entire plot — it seemed to be weakening whoever wore it, too.

The magic necklace was actually the least worrisome aspect of her outfit. She’d swiftly collected the fangs of the prisoners she’d killed that day, and had tied them together with a piece of rope Anastasia hoped never to see again, then strung them over her head and wore them as some sort of sick trophy. Periodically, Cleopatra told her where her and Kamilah’s fangs would be once she’d killed them both.
"My cousin is an evil bitch. Why are you protecting her when giving her up could make all of this stop?," Cleopatra prodded, staggering slightly. She’d had the necklace on for a few hours at least and looked like she could eat an entire army.

Anastasia scoffed. “She may be an evil bitch, but she is my evil bitch and I’ll have no other. So, fuck you.”

Cleopatra sighed dramatically. “I could hate her for what she did to me. I bet she hasn’t told you of the time she tried to kill me—”

“You could hate her because of one unsuccessful beheading?” She rattled her chains. “Wow. I never thought you were such a pussy. I’m rethinking my opinion of you.”

She growled and dragged her dagger lightly across her cheek, drawing blood, then prodded a metal tong into her neck. An electric charge surged through the Bloodkeeper’s weak body, making her convulse and strain her bound limbs. It hurt, bad, but she refused to give her captors the satisfaction of hearing her scream... not today.

Smiling sadistically, Cleopatra smeared her blood over her cheek and crooned about how beautiful she was, her tone dripping in condescension. “Just because you're a gutless harlot doesn't mean I don’t find your... attributes attractive, dear. I might be immortal, but I'm still a red-blooded female.”

"Harlot? Who talks like that? Father Time, meet the Flinstones,” Anastasia yawned.

“Where. Is. Kamilah?,” Cleopatra hissed, her grip tightening on her jaw for a moment before she cast another electric charge through her body.

“I’ve tussled with vibrators stronger than your charge throwers,” Anastasia winced through gritted teeth. “Nice try.”

Cleopatra prodded her again but this time there was no physical reaction and Anastasia simply smiled at her.

“You consumed energy. And channeled it at will.” Cleopatra actually backed away from her a little and fiddled with the necklace. “How? That should be impossible...”

Anastasia simply shrugged. She wasn’t going to tell her how her psychic abilities could consume it at will, even with the necklace nearby — she and every Bloodkeeper before her and every vampire were connected through a grid of mystical energy — but Anastasia was the only one she knew of who could radiate it through her immortal body. She’d inherited the talent when she’d Turned.

“I don’t have the time or patience for games. Now, tell me, why are you... glowing?,” Cleopatra asked as she studied Anastasia’s bare limbs that were sparkling softly with the electricity coursing throughout her body.

“I fucked a radioactive alien dick once,” she said, her voice breathy with exhaustion. “0/10, wouldn’t recommend.”

“The next time you're tempted to overuse your powers, remember this, I will bring you back by any means necessary, so if you value your humanity, don't do that again.”

Cleopatra slapped her so hard her teeth rattled and eyes stung, but she refused to react except to say saucily, “You must have heard how I like foreplay.
"I hope you like it a lot, because with your mouth, you'll be getting it nonstop."

"Goody," she said dryly. "Because I so love a woman who needs to prove her strength by beating on other women. Do you hit children and kick cats, too?"

The ancient vampire growled and prodded her once again, only to grow frustrated when her tool failed to produce the desired effect. Her temper could be manipulated, Anastasia realised. It didn't matter that her own mind felt foggy or that she couldn't quite remember exactly why she was being punished, she knew that if she could keep irritating her she might be able to find more weaknesses.

"You stupid girl, you know Kamilah would give you up in a heartbeat to save herself, do you not? That is what she does. She does not know the meaning of loyalty—"

"Maybe the Kamilah you knew might've done that," Anastasia fired back. She'd been mocked too often over her lifetime to take offense. Her skin was as thick as armour. "But I know even if my wife has to scour the entire earth, she’ll find me. She will not falter. One day she will find me and she will kill you."

Cleopatra hummed and stroked the side of her face. "Is that what you really believe? Hmm? That a woman who upset you so much you left her cares for you enough to search for you at all? You’re a fool if you believe for one moment that anyone is looking for you, I’m willing to bet she is in Aiko Nakamura’s arms right at this moment. If there’s one thing I’ve learned in all my years, it’s this: lies are curses you place on yourself."

Anastasia growled. "They’re looking for me. She is looking for me."

"It’s really quite charming how you believe you actually mean something to anyone," she chuckled. "What have you done besides make their lives more difficult, hmm? What makes you think you’re worth missing at all? They’re thanking the gods to be rid of you, child."

"That’s... that’s not true," she hissed.

"Your own mother used to lock herself away from you," Cleopatra taunted. "If the woman who gave birth to you despised your company so... do you really believe anyone would willingly want to spend time with you unless they were obligated? Your so called family are celebrating right now because they are finally rid of you."

Cleopatra leaned in, baring her fangs. Damn her and her vampire-bite addiction, she thought, if this were Kamilah instead of her crazy cousin she would’ve loved it. She shoved the reaction away just in time for Cleopatra’s fangs to break the skin of her wrist.

Warmth rushed down her aching arm, the blaze filling her body, her mind, as an unhealthy amount of blood was drawn from her already weak body. On her other side, Cleopatra’s hand on her arm was like a cool oasis. She fruitlessly tried to shove her off, but whenever she moved Cleopatra’s fangs clamped down harder.

Finally the vampire released her with another groan, sitting back on her haunches. "Your blood is steeped in power." Running her tongue over a bloody fang, she said, "Among other things. I believe I might be high. But I like it. I see why my cousin keeps you around, sack lunch."

A towering vampire with skin like marble and chillingly flawless features was staring down a petite Bloodkeeper with crazed eyes and a cryptic smile. The tension between the two was palpable. Even on the verge of flipping the fuck out or fainting, Anastasia couldn’t look away, and she couldn’t bring herself to be truly afraid of her tormentor. She seemed like the biggest coward
she’d ever met.

When the fire in her body calmed enough she could still see, still think. But the world was spinning and she felt cold. She felt sick.

“You’re... lying,” Anastasia panted, doing her best not to show how raw a nerve she had hit. Doing her best to conceal how the blood loss was making her feel. She knew she was not a bad person. She hadn’t killed any truly good people in cold blood. She rarely told lies. She didn’t kick little puppies. So she couldn’t understand why she always thought people looked at her as if the world would be a better place without her. “Kamilah is... looking for me.”

“Do you honestly believe you have friends who will be mostly loyal to you? Do you honestly believe they haven’t abandoned their protector before this gathering storm; and despite the threatening sky, despite the shuddering earth, they remain, smiling, considerate, and as devoted to you in misfortune as they have been to you in prosperity?”

“I do.”

“You are so naive, it physically aggrieves me. No one can save you, Anastasia, but you can save your own life,” Cleopatra whispered. “Just tell me what I need to know. Give me what I want—"

“I cant save my life, only postpone my death. There’s a difference.” She glared at her. “Kill me if you must, just get on with it already. These empty threats are boring me.”

Before Cleopatra could reply, Vlad came thundering into the dungeon and a hand sliced through the air in a silencing motion before the former-queen could speak, and he stalked to the window. "Have you seen any rats?"

The Bloodkeeper’s mind spun at the sudden shift of subject.

“Rats?,” Cleopatra echoed.

"Rodents that resemble large mice."

"I know what rats are, you blubbering idiot," Cleopatra gritted out. "Why?"

"They're spies." He peered through the curtain into the darkness. Thick fog diffused the yellow lamplight, creating an eerie glow on the castle grounds below. "Have you seen any?"

Rodent spies? The man might have always been extra as hell, but he was now a full blown loon. As inconspicuously as possible, Anastasia smiled. "We didn't see any furry little James Bonds, Vlad."

Vlad and Cleopatra turned to her and Cleopatra actually laughed, before Vlad bolted away.

“I’m surrounded by idiots,” she sighed, sounding scarily like Kamilah.

“Same,” Anastasia deadpanned.

“Anastasia, I will get answers from you one way or another. Either through this painful exercise in futility, as you believe, or through a civilised conversation."

"You call this civilised?” She strained against her cuffs, leaning in to whisper, "Psst, Cleopatra. The tension between us is gruelling."

Beads of sweat started to trickle down Cleopatra’s face and she staggered back, the necklace draining her energy. When she spoke her voice was raspy, “Fate has a way of getting what she
Anastasia watched as she tore the necklace from her body and hung it back up just outside her door, then fled up the stairs. Whatever the green gemstone was, it was obviously painful for other vampires to wear or be too close to for any length of time. It weakened her to the point she couldn’t use her abilities to her maximum potential and it gave her one bitch of a headache with a side of memory loss, but it didn’t hurt her to the extent it did everyone else. Vlad. Cleopatra. The guards. Even the other prisoners. They all suffered terribly because of it.

The Bloodkeeper heaved a sigh and once again rattled the rusty chains that were wound around her wrists and attached to the damp wall above her head. She wasn’t strong enough to break out of them, having not fed for so long and having been tortured as much as she had. Her wounds weren’t healing the way they should, which made her predicament even more sucky than it already was — being chained to a wall with broken ribs, gaping cuts and lashes that were still bleeding, and the torturous effects of starvation and dehydration wasn’t fun in the slightest.

She thought of Kamilah as she weakly pulled on her chains. She thought of how whenever she absently worried her bottom lip with one of her fangs, Kamilah would stare at her and sigh. The Enemy of Old fucking sighed and then rambled about how it’d finally happened to her. Happiness. Then her own fangs would sharpen and she would swear she would kill anyone who tried to take that feeling away from her.

Anastasia knew Kamilah would tear her cousin’s head off for this.

Darkness surrounded her, suffocated her. She tried to pierce it, but her eyes could find no real hint of light. Nothing that would help her escape this prison. It felt like a weight was pressing down upon her, heavy enough to crush her bones. And perhaps it had. There was no part of her that didn’t hurt so much that she wanted to howl with it. But when she opened her mouth, dirt and dust tried to choke her.

Cold.

Dampness.

Pain.

Silence.

No hope.

Then a voice came to her, burrowing down through the soil and coiling around her. How she needed that voice, that presence to alleviate the darkness and pain and salvage her sanity.

“You shouldn’t pull on your chains like that,” the new guy in the cell next to hers murmured through the darkness. They’d brought him in around noon and she’d heard the Order soldiers talking about moving him to a different outpost as soon as possible — for some reason they
seemed scared to have him there, scared to have him too close to her. He was chained up the same way she was, but she couldn’t see his face. He was hidden behind a painful looking iron mask fastened to his face with leather straps. She’d never seen a device like that before, had never heard of one in all the gory stories Kamilah liked to tell. When she grappled with the question of what it was, of why he was in it, her sharply honed mind deduced only one answer: they didn’t want people to see his face. “The chains will only tear your skin and if they are not feeding you, you will not heal and the wounds will become infected,” he continued, his crimson eyes burning through the dark. “Don’t cause yourself any more pain.”

Anastasia’s brow furrowed and she squinted to try and see him more. The dungeons were straight off the set of a horror film. The floor was dirty and littered with the droppings of mice and rats. The worn stone walls were damp with a slick layer of mould. Even the air was heavy and filled with a dark sense of menace. It combined to create an atmosphere that would send most people fleeing in terror. “What’s your name?,” she asked, hesitantly.

“I... I don’t know,” the man said. “I don’t know much about myself... other than this life as a prisoner.”

“How old are you?”

“Physiologically, I’m close to thirty... I think. Chronologically, I’m… not.” He sighed heavily beneath his mask. “You?”

“I was Turned when I was twenty-two, I’m thirty now.” She swallowed thickly. “Do you know how long you’ve been their prisoner?”

“Cleopatra kept me long before The Order was established,” he said quietly. “I don’t know how long I’ve served her but it... it feels like a long time. She must have been someone I trusted at one time.”

"But you don't now?"

“No. Not now.”

“I’m so sorry,” she breathed.

The man was silent for a few seconds and then said, “she’ll grow bored of harming you if you give her what she wants. The more you hold out, the more violent she will grow. Trust me... you do not want to become acquainted with the depths of her cruelty.”

“I can’t give her what she wants,” Anastasia replied. “Giving her what she wants would endanger the person I love most. I have to keep her safe until she finds me.”

“Your wife.”

“Yes, Kamilah.”

“Kamilah,” he repeated, his smooth voice incongruously calm when he spoke. “That name sounds somewhat familiar. Indeed... I believe I might’ve heard her mention her before. Kamilah... Sayeed?”

Anastasia’s brow furrowed as she strained her eyes to try and see the stranger better, but she’d grown so weak that all she could make out was the red of his eyes and the outline of his mask. She knew she probably didn’t look much better, her looks had likely gone from well-kempt former-model to apocalyptic disasterpiece. She cleared her throat, “I... yes. Kamilah Sayeed.”
“Don’t give up hope, Anastasia Sayeed,” he drawled. “Any who can make the likes of me laugh the way you did whilst she was torturing you simply must make it out of this alive. If you don’t mind me saying so, the things you said to her brought a smile to my face.”

Anastasia smiled. “You don’t mind my humour?”

“Not at all. I’ve not laughed like this…” He fell silent for a moment. “I think I’ve never laughed like this. Not that I can remember, anyway.”

“Usually I exasperate people. And I jest at inappropriate times. Such as during fights. My wife always says it’s my gift and my bane to frustrate others.”

“I like your manner, Anastasia. Immortal life is much too long without good humour.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she breathed. “I... what should I call you?”

“Cleopatra calls me Mach,” he said. “It doesn’t feel like it’s my name, but it’s... it’s the only one I’ve got for now.”

“Mach,” Anastasia murmured.

His eyes were full of dread and sorrow as he took her in. When he spoke, his voice was little more than a whisper. “You’re different.”

She nodded. “Yes, I am.”

“I’m so jealous,” Mach whispered.

“Of what?”

His head fell back against the wall of his cell, and through the holes in the iron mask he stared up at the ceiling with the saddest eyes Anastasia had ever seen. “You’re so alive, Anastasia. There’s fire in you. A will to live, when all I want is to be done with this life.”

“When my wife comes for me, you can come with us... if you’d like. I have friends who might be able to help you get your memories back. I... um... when I’m not near that necklace, I’m pretty powerful. I might be able to help you.”

“I...” Mach’s voice caught in his throat. “That would be lovely, thank you. Thank you so much, Anastasia. Life without meaning is the torture of restlessness and vague desire — It is a boat longing for the sea and yet afraid... I... I’d quite like to be free of this pain.”

~~~~ Five Years Earlier - New Orleans, Louisiana ~~~~

“Have you ever fought an opponent you had no defense against?,” the Bloodkeeper asked her wife excitedly as she threw back her seventh tequila shot in less than ten minutes. “Like a fire breather or an acid spitter?”

"Once I faced a female with diamond skin," Kamilah said as she wrapped her arms around her waist from behind, watching the mardi gras parties bloom in the streets below Serafine’s apartment. She scooped her into her arms, kissing her cheeks, then blowing raspberries on her neck, just to be annoying. Giggles filled the air as Anastasia squirmed against her, leaning back and
clutching her tighter all at the same time. “I was transfixed — even as she was choking the life out of me.”

“Holy shit,” Lily breathed, butting into the conversation without a care in the world. She was so drunk she’d somehow ended up laying on the woven outdoor rug that lined the balcony with multiple feather boas draped across her body. “Really?”

“No, I saw that character on X-Men when you two forced me to watch it with you. I just wanted to commiserate. Alas, I have no weaknesses.” The ancient vampire nipped at her wife’s ear. “Save for you. I am, as everyone always takes great pleasure in pointing out, whipped.”

Anastasia couldn’t help but laugh as she reached back and caressed Kamilah’s face. She happened to know that she’d actually enjoyed X-Men more than she’d let on, but she’d been sworn to secrecy and knew Kamilah would deny enjoying it for the rest of her life — out of principle more than anything else. The world may have stopped turning if anyone found out that THE Kamilah Sayeed had enjoyed a super hero movie.

She’d also made her watch every Alien movie. Most of the goriest scenes were accompanied by her bewildered dialogue: ‘Ridiculous, that's not— that's just not right... Bloody hell, this can’t be right.’ Most of the time, Kamilah and modern movies just didn’t mix. In her eyes, actors were morons, Hollywood was dumb, and CGI gave her headaches. She thought television and films were a waste of time, but on the rare occasion when she found one that she liked Anastasia was always sworn to secrecy. Always.

“You're cute,” she murmured, her eyes lighting up in sheer admiration. Whenever they were together, Anastasia often thought about how her heart lay vulnerable outside her chest. Kamilah was quite possibly the most aggravating, antisocial immortal on the planet. So she knew that was why Adrian and Serafine always sort of gawked whenever she showed any PDA. Seeing the woman they’d known for centuries cuddle and nurture a woman the way she did her must’ve been nothing short of bizarre.

“I’m a terrifying, murderous woman who walks around with knives in her pockets,” Kamilah pouted, “and— Lily, what is that racket you are playing?”

“It’s the Biebs!,” Lily beamed, ignoring Kamilah’s obvious dislike for her music and turning up the pocket speaker she carried around everywhere. It was hard not to cringe when yet another Bieber song pumped away.

“It’s not... terrible,” Adrian nodded approvingly when Beauty and a Beat played for the fifth time. “The lyrics are horrendous but the melody is rather pleasing to the ear.”

Great, Anastasia thought, she was surrounded by fucking Beliebers. She wasn’t drunk enough for this.

“I would rather hurl myself into the sun than tolerate that filth for another moment,” Kamilah growled, her eyes flaring red. “Turn. It. Off.”

“Oh shit,” Lily grumbled, her words slurred as she drunkenly fumbled with the speaker. “Kamilah. No.”

“Kamilah, yes,” Anastasia giggled as she looped her arms around Kamilah’s waist and pressed a few soothing kisses to her neck to the most sensitive spots. She may have been the only person in the world who was brave enough to get this close to Kamilah when her eyes were red and her fangs out... and she was certainly the only one who knew when she shifted from anger to arousal.
“You’re playing with fire,” Kamilah smirked as she slipped a hand into her hair.

“Am I?,,” she murmured before nibbling on her earlobe.

“I’ve got a mind to turn you over my knee and spank the spoiled hell out of you,” whispered Kamilah, her voice deep and all growly because she was turned on. Before she could respond, she made a sound of impatience. Damn it. She was turned on, too.

Anastasia simply smirked and crossed her arms over her chest, and Kamilah’s gaze went automatically to her breasts, which were now nicely plumped by her biceps. Kamilah would deny it, but she was predictable as hell when she was horny. It was as though she was pure sexual energy contained in a wrapper of smooth, bronze skin, and damn, it wasn’t fair that a woman should be so cover-model beautiful. “Please do.”

“You want me?”

“Yes.” She studied her intently. She didn’t know if it was the adrenaline still coursing through her veins from the party or just knowing that she wanted her, but she was already wet for her, her body tingling and desperate for her touch. “Your eyes are glowing.”

“So are yours.” Kamilah caressed her face and grinned unrepentantly. “Think it would shock our fellow immortals if I made a habit of grabbing your ass in their presence as a means of marking my territory?”

Again Anastasia laughed, and nipped at her neck. “Everything you do where I’m concerned shocks our fellow immortals, babe.”

Kamilah ducked her head, burying her face in the crook of her neck. “Damn, you feel good,” she whispered, her voice hoarse with need.

It only excited her more. “What do you say we ditch everyone?,,” she whispered, her breath shortening. Sliding her fingers into the length of her silky hair, she drew her head down and claimed her lips in a longer, deeper kiss. Kamilah’s arms tightened around her. Her tongue delved inside to stroke her own. Desire swept through her, heating her blood and driving her to fist her hair. “Hmmm?”

Kamilah groaned with need. She buried a hand in her hair and tilted her head so she could deepen the kiss even more. Her other hand caressed her back and pressed her closer. “How you tempt me,” she rumbled, tightening her hold even more. She trailed kisses across her cheek to her ear. Her warm breath sent more sensual shivers through her.

“If I tempted you as much as you tempt me,” she pronounced boldly, “we would both be naked right now.”

“Let’s go—“

“What is this? Vampire porn?,,” Lily drunkenly interjected.

“Indeed,” Kamilah deadpanned whilst throwing a packet of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos at her face. “Eat your damn Cheetos. The last thing we need is you almost turning an entire nightclub of mortals, again, because you are ‘messy and depressy’... whatever that means.”

“Oh, and you got me snacks to enjoy with my vampire porn!,” Lily squealed. “This is a good one. Muffy the Vampire Layer.”

“Don’t be so antisocial, Kamilah,” Serafine scolded.

Kamilah glared at her. Beautiful, brave and possessed of violent tendencies. She was so cute and she just seemed menacing. Like she could slit your throat, then sit down, prop her stilettos on your corpse, and sip a martini. “I’m not antisocial. I just like to be left alone and only like one person consistently all of the time.”

“You know,” Anastasia muttered, “life was a lot easier when you hated all humans and didn't give a shit what happened to the lot of them... right? Stopping Drunk Lily from making her own cult on a whim is a full time job.”

Kamilah laughed. “I still don't give a shit.”

“My dad always used to say that family is like medicine.” She twisted her lips into a sardonic smile. "Best in small doses.”
Kamilah felt like she was floating through a warm ocean as Anastasia’s power cocooned her, remembering nothing but feelings of safety. Which helped her not fight her hold right away. Instead, she relaxed for a few seconds and accepted the way the power wrapped her in cocoons of enshrining silk that healed her, as if she were a butterfly, soon to emerge with damp wings and no more duties than kissing flowers. That might be lovely — a life of nothing but the sugar offered by flowers and the moonlight on her colourful self, bringing a sigh of joy to someone’s lips.

Wrapped up like this, protected from the surprise assault by Order soldiers on the training studio in the bowels of Ahmanet Financial, for a few seconds there was nothing but peace to Kamilah as the world crumbled around her.

“Stay there,” Anastasia murmured, drawing her out of her trance.

“We need you all to stay there,” Serafine added.

“Anastasia, Serafine—,” Adrian protested.

“Until we kill the psychic,” Anastasia growled as she snapped the neck of a mortal soldier wielding a stake. “You’re not safe without my protection until the psychic in their midst is dead. None of you are. You have to let us do this.”

“Guys!,” Lily pleaded as she fruitlessly struggled against Anastasia’s protective shield.

“Fuck you both very much, if you think I’m going to let you do this on your own!,” Kamilah growled.

Anastasia smirked at her. “Behave yourself for, like, ten seconds, will you?”

She tried to move, but she couldn’t so much as twitch her fingers under the protective weight of power shielding her. She tried to yell at Anastasia and Serafine to let her go, to let her help as she watched helplessly as the Bloodkeeper and the psychic tore through a gaggle of soldiers in white jumpsuits. But she couldn’t. Even exhausted from her ordeal as she was, Anastasia was far too strong for her to fight... for any of them to fight.

Seconds ticked off in her head, seeming more like minutes as Anastasia ran towards a soldier in the back, flanked by Serafine — this was not only a fight for survival, but an exercise in trust for her. The only psychic vampire amongst mortal soldiers stood behind his fragile meat shield, but his abilities were nothing for Serafine and Anastasia. As the women charged Anastasia received a large cut on the left side of her ribs as she was caught with a crossbow. Kamilah growled and found herself focusing more on her wife’s wound than on the majority their attackers, and it occurred to
her that one could only beat one’s head against a wall for so long before determining that the wall was harder than one’s head.

Despite the fact she was bleeding from her side and from her nose, Anastasia flitted through their attackers shining like a thousand fires and a thousand stars; she sighed like a thousand waves; suffered like a thousand great ships, which were worn out in ploughing the waves, in obeying the wind which urged them towards an end, as the breath of God blew them towards a port. Everything liked to live; and everything was beautiful in a life as meteoric as Anastasia’s.

The moment Kamilah was let go she flew across the training room towards her wife, her daggers in hand and cutting down every foolish mortal in her path. They settled back-to-back and the ancient vampire kicked up a bloodied stake from its resting spot on the mats and let it fly at a soldier’s throat... she’d always found it rather poetic to kill her enemies with their own weapons.

“Is she here?,” Kamilah asked whilst slitting a mortal’s throat as casually as if she were discussing what they were having for dinner.

“No,” Anastasia panted. She looked like a pissed-off fallen angel in the middle of Armageddon. “They’re all mortal. I killed the psychic, who was the only vampire with them. They wanted you.”

“How the fuck do you know that?,” Lily breathed as she lopped the head off one of the commanders with one of Jax’s katanas in one smooth motion.

“Psychic,” Anastasia deadpanned. Black smoke wafted around her, covering her from the waist downward. She drifted her bloody fingers through the top of it. It curled and eddied just like real smoke. She was making her presence known to the mortals in no uncertain terms. She stirred the smoke with a forefinger. It looked really beautiful, actually, like she was standing in the mouth of a volcano. Or maybe in the mouth of hell.

“I keep forgetting the force is with you, dude. What more of the holy fuck of a fuckup of a disaster will this group of assholes get ourselves into?”

Together, the five of them moved in tandem throughout the hoard of mortals. Between Kamilah, Adrian, and Lily’s skill in hand-to-hand combat and Serafine’s abilities combined with Anastasia’s they were an unstoppable team, capable of the sort of magic that others could only dream of. Anastasia led them, and in the presence of this ingenuous greatness of soul, Kamilah felt herself genuinely awestruck.

Never before has she been compelled to bend before real superiority of heart, much more powerful than splendour of mind.

“If your kind ever endanger my family’s lives again by pulling some stupid shit like this, I will rip your fucking arms off and beat you to death with them,” Kamilah growled whilst jabbing her daggers into a soldier’s eyes before snapping his neck. She was strong against everything, except against the death of those she loved. She who died gained; she who saw others die lost — she would not lose one more person.

It was a fallacy to believe that a vampire was at her most dangerous when she had nothing to lose… the most ferocious of predators emerged when a vampire of Kamilah’s age had everything to lose.

One of the soldiers attempted to grab her, and she was so close to the wall she had maybe eight inches of space to work with. That was more than enough. Kamilah struck back with her elbow and hit the woman’s midsection and shattered a few ribs. She coughed out all her breath and crumpled to the ground. She had no air in her lungs with which to speak. Her bulging gaze was astonished. It asked her, "What the fuck?"
So she answered the stupid mortal’s question. She showed her what the fuck. She kicked her in the chest, using her foot to leverage her body weight. The blow lifted her off the ground and slammed her back into the wall. When her three comrades rushed her, she showed them what the fuck too. Because The Order wasn't the only one who had a hellish temper.

Kamilah Sayeed had a hellish temper too.

Personal growth was damn hard work. It also took a lot of time, so it was going to have to take a backseat for a while. Because right now, she had a battle to fight and multiple mortal asses to kick.

Blood sprayed in every direction and screams echoed off of the walls as men took their last anguished breaths. They’d show no mercy to the Order. They’d offer no quarter. If these fools had the audacity to wander into Ahmanet with the expectation they’d leave alive... well... as far as Kamilah was concerned the fault lay with them.

As the last mortal fell, so did Anastasia. Her legs gave way and she almost collapsed in a heap, but before she could hit the ground Kamilah caught her and tugged the arrow out of her side.

“So much for resting,” the Bloodkeeper winced. “Kano is gonna be pissed at me.”

“I don’t know whether to hug you or punch you in the face for spending that much energy protecting us! You brilliant, stubborn girl...”

“Hell. It’s me. Do both,” Anastasia mumbled, grinning weakly. “Always remember that you’re strong, babe. So strong...”

“Then why do you always try so hard to stand in front of me?”

“Because you’re mine.” Her red hair flew when she shook her head. “I’ve never had much, but what I do have, I protect. With everything I am.”

“You’re better than any dream I’ve ever had,” she confessed. She kissed her, over and over, printing blood-flavored kisses on her cheek, her throat, her jaw, her mouth.

Anastasia’s smile was slow, sexy, and completely devastating. “You are every dream I’ve ever had.”

“You two saved us,” Adrian breathed, looking between Serafine and Anastasia. In an attempt to wipe the sweat from his brow her smeared someone’s blood across his face, but he was so exhausted that he didn’t seem to notice.

“Anastasia saved you,” Serafine breathed. “It was her power that provided the shield to prevent their psychic from infiltrating your minds.”

“Was nothing,” Anastasia mumbled.

“She needs to feed. We all do,” Kamilah said, cradling her wife to her chest as they left the training room through the back exit and began making their way to The Shadow Den, where they could feed and hunker down. It was safer there than Ahmanet or Raines Corp, as very few outsiders knew its location.

Kamilah cursed herself for agreeing to let her train in the first place. She’d been certain it was too early and too dangerous, but Anastasia had been determined to overcome her weaknesses and would have went whether Kamilah had accompanied her or not... stubborn girl that she was.
“You keep picking me up and carting me around,” Anastasia muttered. “You know, when I’m not that injured or drunk on my ass, I do have two perfectly functional feet.”

“You are just so magnificently portable,” she told her. There was little point in pointing out that she was indeed too injured to walk, a bruised ego would only sour her mood.

Several minutes passed while Kamilah walked and kissed her hair and held her close despite the obvious pain it caused in her sliced ribs. She was petite and looked as though she only weighed ninety-something pounds, it was really no wonder she was as physically exhausted as she was.

The wind played in her hair as it moved through the shadows. The moon looked down from its throne in the murky brown sky littered with light pollution and smiled down at them. The night was brighter than she’d expected after the fight, a velvet carpet strewn with city lights that winked diamond bright and sang faint ice-cold snatches of song, of distant journeys and enchantments in other realms. The magic that seemed to exist in New York always nourished parts of her that had been crippled and half dead.

“We’re staying together until this over with,” Lily declared as they made their way to Jax’s old quarters. His home often served as a meeting place for them, as it allowed them to fool themselves into believing he’d walk through the door at any moment. “No more fucking good-byes. I am so done with that shit and with all of us sacrificing our lives. We’re fucking done, and we’ll all fucking live. The first guy who tells me good-bye ever again, even if he’s just going to the fucking grocery store, gets a fist planted in his fucking face.”

“Why are you insinuating I’m the one you’re going to punch?,” Adrian laughed.

“You’re always getting yourself into dumb shit, bro. You need a good punch to the face every so often.”

“Mood,” Anastasia breathed, flashing her the two-fingered peace sign with her bloody left hand. She winced as Kamilah lay her down on Jax’s bed, clutching at her wounded side.

“You need to be still and let me see your wound,” Kamilah said.

“You like me telling you what to do.”

“Only in bed,” she burst out.

“You’re in bed.” She smiled, the expression gentle and dangerous all at once as she looked at the nasty wound on her side and did her best to block out the pained whines. “I’m sorry,” Kamilah said, her voice hushed whilst she tore open a bag of B-Positive and began pouring it into her wife’s mouth. “Did I hurt you?”

“No. It’s... it’s not you.” Anastasia rubbed at her eyes before taking the blood bag and holding it herself. Mortal blood was still making her nauseous, but she knew she needed it. “You’re the first person who has touched me — not with intent to harm, but with kindness — in a very long time, Kami.”

She ran her hand along the side of her face, her heart breaking when she turned into her palm, nuzzling into her warmth. As if a gentle touch was still too much for her to resist. Tears pricked the back of her eyes. “I won’t ever hurt you,” she whispered from somewhere deeper than the moment.

“Don’t let me hurt you.” The gentle plea matched her devastated tone.
Her words broke her heart, and all she could do was bend down over her and press a long kiss against her sweaty brow. “Your path isn’t an easy one, sweetheart. But it might just end up being spectacular. You have to fight for what you want, and I know you’ll win. Every damn time.”

“Are we informing The Five of what occurred?,” Adrian asked.

Kamilah scoffed. “Aiko probably called the Order and informed them of our location.”

“That’s a dangerous accusation,” Serafine sighed. “Answer honestly, can we trust Aiko?”

Kamilah gave her a sunny smile with blank crimson eyes. “As far as you can throw her.”

Anastasia sighed and weakly tried to sit up, but her arms buckled and she fell back against the pillows. Kamilah placed a gentle hand on the centre of her chest and levelled her with a soft look. Somehow, her softness and fragility had survived everything. And she was not quite sure how to protect that.

“I trust Akeyo and Kano,” the Bloodkeeper said as her wound knitted together. “I’m not sure about the others. The Evolved is difficult to get a read on and Henry seems harmless enough... but I know he’s close with Aiko... and I know someone probably told the Order where we’d be tonight.”

Lily yawned. She had stretched out on the floor, her long legs crossed at the ankle. She said in a drowsy voice, “I could start bitch-slapping people. Sooner or later somebody would squawk.”

Adrian headed in desperation for the coffeemaker. Apparently it was going to be one of those mornings. Funny how often those happened after a long night and a good fight. “You’ll behave yourself.”

“Bite me,” Lily sighed.

“Let us keep this between ourselves for now,” Serafine said as she wandered over to the kitchenette to pour some wine. “I, for one, am much too exhausted to foster international relations tonight. We’ll reevaluate where we stand with them in the morning.”

Kamilah glanced down at Anastasia and caressed her face. She was her beacon to what others called decency, not because she told her how to act but because she made her want to try to be her best self. The bloodkeeper did her very best to smile up at her. “How do I look?”

She snorted. “I’ve lived for more than two thousand years, and you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen... but right now you look like shit.”

“So do you.”

Kamilah laughed softly as the nearly-six-in-the-morning-sleepiness weighted her body as she lay down beside her, so still. Ignoring what everyone else was doing to unwind she heard Anastasia’s breathing even out as they both hovered in that place between wake and sleep. And then Anastasia’s hand wandered lazily down her back and over her hip until she was caressing the small of her back.

There was nothing else in the entire universe, nothing but the two of them together. Her curves, Anastasia’s angles. Their light, and their darkness. Anastasia’s softness, Kamilah’s exquisitely aching hardness.

She found herself thinking, if at that moment someone had to come to her and tell her she had to do her life all over, she would do it again. In the deepest privacy of her ancient soul, down at the
bottom of a well where no one else could hear her, the part of her that had weighed life and death decisions over the last several thousand years took her life and weighed it against all else. She knew that this was exactly where she was supposed to be. Here. With Anastasia.

“You okay?,” Anastasia whispered.

Kamilah nodded. “I will be.”

“You sure?”


“Please always stay mine,” Anastasia whispered.

“Always,” Kamilah whispered back, mere inches away from her lips. “I’m so glad you found me.”

Anastasia yawned. A look came into her glacial blue eyes, an expression she’d have struggled to decipher at one time. She stroked her lips with her thumb and stared at her like she had never seen her before. “Me too.”

With her face tilted up to her, the subtle edge of the fairy lights wrapped around the beams on the ceiling glinted along the edge of one high cheekbone, the tilted edge of one eye, and those beautiful, enticing lips. Obeying an impulse Kamilah couldn’t put into words, she lowered her head and covered her mouth with hers. “I waited more than two thousand years for your touch, Annie,” she whispered against her lips.

Anastasia’s lips brushed softly against hers again and her gentle hands clutched her closer and Kamilah breathed a heady gust of air at her throat. She’d been careful since rescuing her not to be too vocal about how good all of her touches felt, just not wanting to overwhelm her at all after finding out exactly how her male guards had tormented her. But after almost being murdered, again, she just had to say exactly what was on her mind.

She treasured the breaths they took together, and she was stricken with envy for them, for they mingled closer and more completely than their bodies could possibly join. Anastasia’s beauty made her fall out of her own mind and want to stay tethered to earth. She wanted to follow her everywhere, the love of her life, through the lightest moments, and the darkest. She could only be happy if they shared all their pain and their joy.

“You feel my heart?,” Anastasia breathed as she placed Kamilah’s palm against her chest. She gave her a sleepy, innocent smile. “For years, even when I thought I’d sacrificed my life, this has beat for you. Every second, of every minute, of every day, of every year. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She placed her hand over her chest, knowing she was the realest treasure she’d ever had, more precious than sapphires, diamonds and gold. At the core of her ancient, cynical heart, she was an acquisitive creature, after all. “You beat here and always will. Everything I am or will ever be is yours.”

~~~~ Two Weeks Earlier - Kiev, Ukraine ~~~~

Kamilah’s headache wouldn’t budge no matter how she ODed on caffeine, but nobody had ever called her a quitter. The search for Anastasia had become so hopeless that she was genuinely
concerned that she’d never see her wife again. They searched property after property on Vlad’s portfolio and found Order bases in almost every one, but no Anastasia. Madrid, Barcelona, Budapest, Rome, Milan, Berlin, Hamburg, Zagreb, Dubrovnik, and now Kiev. And still nothing.

Aching from battling through yet another one of Vlad’s homes, Kamilah lay down horizontally across her bed, her hair hanging off the edge. Her body was aching all the time now. Anxiety. Constant fighting. No appetite for blood or for food. An inability to sleep. It was a real potion for disaster.

Shoulda, woulda, coulda. They were the Three Stooges of regret. All they were good for was saying whoop-whoop-whoop and smacking each other over the head.

Tears pricked behind her tired eyes as she looked at photos of her wife on her cellphone. Most of her camera roll was made up of images of her, most of them candid moments which Anastasia had no idea she’d captured — Kamilah hadn’t even realised the true value of her photographs until now. Now that she couldn’t see Anastasia’s smile whenever she pleased. Now that the other side of the bed was empty. Now that she was just... gone... and she truly had no idea if she was even still alive.

When Anastasia had disappeared, she had gone to a place she had never been to before. She had panicked — she was still panicking. Kamilah had a short temper at the best of times. Now she was extremely liable to bite somebody’s head clean off if they looked at her funny.

“I miss you,” she whispered into thin air as her thumb ghosted over the screen of her phone. Anastasia was smiling back at her, mid laugh, with a glass of wine filled up almost to the rim in her hand. She had laughed musically and was so happy. Kamilah had been watching her when she snapped the image. She understood the stories that beautiful face told so much better than she ever did before. She knew what true happiness looked like now.

How she had survived more than two thousand years without her, she just didn’t know. She had seen her just weeks ago, goddamn it, and she couldn't wait to laugh with her again, to talk with and hear what ridiculous thing she said next, to cuddle and joke with her about the most ridiculous things, to pin her down and drive into her again until there was nothing left inside of her, nothing left inside of her except her name.

All that time she had worked in the acquisition of Power. All that time she had been ruled by someone else’s tyrannical ambition. All those centuries that she had lived in such a vast yet fleeting journey, and for a split second she had been holding everything she had ever wanted, not striving, not continually learning to be better, not fighting to acquire any of it. She just was, the mysterious, wonderful, the riddle of a creature that Kamilah had once decreed should not be able to exist, and yet she did... Anastasia did — and she might’ve lost her.

Anastasia had poisoned her with affection and compassion, and she taught her what it meant to play again. She gave her hope and tore down her past, all with a fierce laugh in those remarkable blue eyes that just seemed to sparkle wherever they went. She had already taken her soul on an impossible moonlit flight. She had healed her shredded, useless heart too, since she hadn’t been using it until they’d met. She had become her life.

“I will find you. I will never leave you. I will never let you go. I will not let you fall, or fail. I will always come for you if you leave, always find you if you're lost,” she murmured, brushing her thumb over the picture once again. “Always.”

“Knock knock,” Lily said as she rapt on the door and slipped inside.
“I said I wanted to be alone,” Kamilah muttered.

“Relax. I’m not here for your amusement.”

“I’m not amused.”

“Are you ever?”

Kamilah shrugged. “Occasionally.”

“You’re not taking care of yourself right now,” she tossed her a blood bag, “and Anastasia would want me to make sure you’re feeding regularly, at least. So please drink. If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for her.”

Kamilah sighed and nodded her head. She knew Lily was right. Anastasia would be the first to start bitching if she found out Kamilah was denying herself sustenance.

“I don’t understand how we got to this place,” she mumbled as Lily flopped down on top of her bed. She gave her protégé a lopsided smile then looked at her hands. She couldn't possibly tell her that she thought she was something precious and horrific, an enigmatic tragedy like the ruins of a historic battlefield. She wasn’t the sort to voice how much she truly valued a friendship... saying such things to anyone but her wife simply didn’t come to her by nature. “I didn’t even like you when I first met you.”

“Same, sis,” Lily smirked. “You were scary as fuck.”

“Were?”

“Are. You gotta admit Anastasia has mellowed you out a whole fuck ton, though.”

She nodded approvingly as she took a long sip of her blood. “I hadn’t noticed how mellow I’d become until she wasn’t there anymore.”

“You’re worried about her,” Lily shrugged. “Nobody is expecting you to be completely chill about this whole thing, you know. You two are always together. It’s like... you not only love each other but you actually really like each other... and that’s not as common as you might think. We all know how much you love her. So you really gotta cut yourself some slack.”

She sighed and averted her eyes. “I just miss her more than I realised I was capable of missing someone. This is... the longest we have ever been parted.”

“I know,” Lily whispered. “And she’s missing you, too. I know she is.”

“Do you think so?”

“I know so. She’s the one who showed me you do not walk away from those you love. You fight for them, always, with everything you have, even if it means fighting the long fight, and staying on the hardest, quietest, most difficult course.” She sighed. “She knows you’re fighting for her. Okay? I swear down on my life... she knows.”

Kamilah’s words were almost soundless. "I've gotten to a really dark place, Lily. The darkest place I've been in a long time."

"You don't have to be there anymore," she told her gently. "Don't you know what happens at the darkest point of the day?"
“What?”

“A beautiful, brand-new day begins, and it's all fresh and full of promise.” She smiled into her
gaze. "That's why magic in the fairy tales happens at midnight, you know. When you reach that
point, you have the power to change everything.”

Well, she thought. Well, well. Here they were, probably for the first time, just talking to each other.
Not arguing, not being sarcastic, not joking around with each other, just talking. It was nice. It was
surprisingly nice. And the strange thing was, she knew Lily thought so, too. They understood each
other. Over edge of her blood bag, Lily gave her a barely perceptible nod.

“This isn’t the first time we’ve faced death, and I doubt the universe intends for it to be the last,”
Kamilah said, repeating the same words Anastasia told her before fighting in that fateful battle with
Rheya. “We’ve chosen to live a dangerous life, it’s who we all are, and that wouldn’t change even
if we’d never met.”

Lily nodded. She thought she saw something odd as her protégé looked back at her. Her dark eyes
were narrowed, her angular face paler than usual with stress that she was incapable of not joking
through. Kamilah might have been mistaken, though. Dangling upside down like this off the edge
of a bed, everything looked wrong. People moved in weird ways, their smiles all turned down, and
liquid spilled from drinks falling up. It was like looking in a carnival hall of mirrors in a dream.

Kamilah’s eyes stung as she thought of her sweet Anastasia. How could she tell anyone exactly
what she meant to her? There were simply no words that would do the feeling justice, not in any
language. How could she ever hope to explain when she saw her at the Raines Corp for the first
time it had been as if her withered heart had started beating again. She had lit up the room, bright in
an ocean of black and white. And she had thought — her life had been nothing but a dark, endless
night. Then she came out like a rainbow and filled her black soul with unearthly colours and
warmth.

Rain battered against the windows and lightning crackled against the sidewalk a few stories below
the hotel suite they were staying in. There were two kinds of storms, Kamilah had learned. One
was a friendly kind that you could enjoy watching out the window with a cup of warm tea. It
crashed around in the sky with theatricality but no real malice.

This storm was the other, the killing kind. There were horrors that existed in the night, the bitter
wind said, horrors that only children and vampires could see. There were horrors that existed in the
mind as well, that only the individual could bear witness to. The winter wind sang of things that
the mind did not quite remember but that fear never forgot, filled as people were with the haunts
and tragedies that made up the shadows of their lives. We can’t endure them, the wind whispered,
for when the light and warmth were truly taken we are left shivering naked in the dark. Then we
hear a nearby husky chuckle that tells us we are prey.

“Nobody threatens my family and lives.” Kamilah’s voice rolled over the sound of the rain like
thunder. “Nobody.”

“Kamilah?,” Lily prodded.

“Huh?”

“Please try and get some sleep. Just try.”

Kamilah nodded as Lily stood up to leave. “Lily?”
“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

Lily smiled at her despite the agony shining in her own eyes. “It is hard, but I have faith in her,” she said. “She may be small, but she’s already proven that she has a big soul and she is strong. She can handle this. And in the meantime, we’ll keep looking. Okay? I know you feel like you’re all alone in this... but you’re not.”

~~~~ 1916 - Saint Petersburg, Russia ~~~~

Lupine eyes bore into Kamilah and Adrian as they sat themselves down on one side of a rickety dining room table opposite a vampire who’d managed to catch the attention of Gaius from halfway around the world. Both his persuasive and psychic abilities were said to be so unparalleled he’d risen up in mortal circles to become a healer to the Tsar’s sickly son.

“Mr. Rasputin—,” Adrian began, only to be cut off by the scruffy man before them.

“Grigori Yefimovich.”

“Gaius will not be ignored for much longer, Grigori Yefimovich,” Kamilah said dryly. “How much longer do you really think you can avoid becoming his soldier?”

“I only have a handful of nights left to live, Kamilah,” Grigori said plainly, his thick russian accent rough with the amount of alcohol in his system. Despite the fact he was clearly a drunkard, he spoke with a deep clarion power she imagined renegade angels might use, as they called one another to war with God. “I am fated to die at the hands of mortal men. My bloodstream filled with poison, my body punctured by bullets and stab wounds, my lungs filled with water... it is how it must be.”

Kamilah stared at the Mad Monk. She was already angry enough to have been sent to Russia to fetch this imbecile on Gaius’ behalf, listening to this drivel was doing little to soothe her temper. The forced trip was a violation of everything she held dear. It was an unbelievable act of impudence and disrespect, and made her loathe Gaius even more than she’d already grown to. Not only that, it was — baffling. She was murderous, incandescent with fury. She was older than sin and could not remember when she had last been in such a rage.

Even from this far away Gaius was the darkest of voices inside her head, and when he turned his gift of persuasion onto her, she somehow had to take her soul out of her body and hand it to him.

She found Rasputin to be an odd, intense man... even by vampire standards he was batshit crazy. He had been undeniably and very likely criminally insane, but anyone who could talk about being stabbed, poisoned, shot multiple times, mutilated, and badly beaten before finally drowning, deserved a certain amount of respect.

“You think me mad, Kamilah,” the monk smirked. He was calmly demolishing pastry after pastry while they looked at him in shock. He plowed through alarming amounts of beautifully prepared food with evident enjoyment for the cuisine and a monumental indifference for anybody else’s opinion. He had also ate every scrap of the cold meat his mortal housekeeper had cooked for him, and good gods, it looked pretty awful. Somehow she had managed to wreck the simple task of browning chicken in a skillet. The outside had been charred black, and the inside had oozed juice
that was still pink.

“Yes.”

“I am merely cursed with a terminal case of curiosity,” he said. "I am jealous, selfish, acquisitive, territorial and possessive. I have a terrible temper, and I know I can be a cruel son of a bitch.” He cocked his head. "I used to eat people, you know.”

Kamilah huffed and drummed her fingers against the table. “Didn’t we all?”

Rasputin fiddled with a golden flower shaped pendant hanging around his neck. It was studded with emeralds and rubies... and obviously too luxurious for the likes of him to be able to afford.

Adrian seemed to be thinking the same thing. “That’s an interesting necklace you have there.”

“It was a gift,” Rasputin said, “from Anastasia Nikolaevna.” His intense gaze settled on Kamilah as the grand duchess’ name left his mouth and he stared at her, seemingly searching for some sort of reaction. “I’ve always loved that name. Anastasia. It means ‘resurrection’, you know. Last names, I dislike those.”

“Why?,” Adrian prodded.

“Last names… they are like word parasites. They attach to people in strange ways, move across cultural and political lines, travel the world and reattach to others, certainly at whim and seemingly at random. They label a person as coming from a particular class or geographical area or link their identity to another person, as if someone’s identity has no merit on its own unless it has latched on to another.” He sighed. “Anastasia, however, is a striking name.”

“Fascinating,” Kamilah sighed. She studied his eyes to try to find out if what it was that bothered him, or intrigued him so much about the name. He didn’t seem interested in her and Adrian in the slightest, he only seemed interested in the name, and that discomfited her. “I—“

“Now you have interested me,” murmured the Mad Monk.

"I have no idea what you are talking,” she could barely squeeze enough air out of her lungs to get the words out for some odd reason, “about.”

“Anastasia,” he repeated. “One must say it in the slavic pronunciation. Annunciation is important in such a regal name, it makes it sound stronger than the anglicised version.”

Adrian cast a withering glance her direction. “It... yes. It’s a lovely name. Now—“

“I was given this trinket by the Grand Duchess on a walk at Tsarskoe,” Rasputin interjected. “We were accompanied by Admiral Thomas Swann of the British Navy. He’s due to marry one of the imperial family’s governesses. Daneliya Mikhailovna. She has beautiful red hair. Unusual for a Kazakh.”

“Wonderful,” Kamilah deadpanned. This night was trying her patience so terribly she might as well have put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger. Except she didn’t own a gun because she didn’t like them. Besides, pulling the trigger on a gun was pretty final. She had issues with commitment and she was so bloody dead anyway, so why even bother?

Rasputin threw his head back and laughed. “Daneliya has some strange visions.”

“A mortal with visions,” she sighed. She put her hands to her face and rubbed, then dug her fingers
into her scalp, trying to massage some life back into her tired brain. “Schizophrenia... or ‘Female Hysteria’... depending on who you ask.”

“You seem certain,” smirked Rasputin. The way he was looking at her was both... creepy and... thoughtful. She didn’t know what she’d expected from a mad man... but she wasn’t too surprised.

“I have learned so many things over the long years,” Kamilah said. “I’ve taken tribute from sovereigns and witnessed the end of empires. I’m rarely wrong.”

“I would not be so sure, moi druz’ya. A mere human with seemingly not a single spark of power in her and not a lick of good sense, either, can sometimes be of more use than an army of vampires.” He ran his hand through his greasy hair and sighed dramatically. Thunderclouds gathered in his lupine eyes. “You’d do well to remember that bloodline makes the world go round. Behold the power of blood. A woman’s body mass may be small, but her influence can be mighty. The world can fall to her.”

“I do not know why we are indulging in a fit of psychosis right now, but so help me, I will throw your crackbrained ass out the window if you don’t stop right there.”

“No you won’t, Kamilah,” Rasputin breathed. “There’s nothing you could do that I haven’t seen an army of uglier, hairier people do thousands of times before.”

“I’m assuming there is a point to this, Grigori Yefimovich,” Adrian said slowly. It was actually quite comforting to see that he was as lost as Kamilah felt... though she’d never actually admit it.

“I just had a dream.”

“About what exactly?,” Kamilah sighed. “A mortal woman with red hair and schizophrenia?”

Rasputin laughed again and the husky sound was even more dangerous than that from the night before when they’d first met him and tried to talk to him. It shivered along her exposed nerve endings, made the small hairs on her arm stand on end. “It’s hard to describe. She was very dreamy. You’ll see for yourself in a century or so. She will be the most dangerous woman you’ll ever meet, and you may never know a fraction of what she is truly capable of.”

Adrian and Kamilah’s brows both furrowed and Rasputin’s massive head tilted. He regarded them with a gaze made tranquil by the bright moonlight spilling through the grimy windows and the limitless sky.

Time was a funny thing. Instead of marching in at a measured pace, it seemed to flow like a river. Quiet days pooled together, languid with a sense of sameness, and events swirled and eddied, and time seemed to pick up its pace. Then there was the tumbling, dangerous rush of white water over the rocks, and the heart-stopping terror of relentless inevitability as the water fell over the edge, and you knew that no matter what you might do or wish, you could not stop that flow from falling.

All you could do was surrender to the experience and flow with it.

“We’ll... see for ourselves?,” Adrian echoed.

Rasputin shrugged.

“That is not an adequate response, Monk,” Kamilah growled. Her authoritative power lay in the room, a heavy brooding presence. “I require a series of words strung together that make coherent sentences.”
“She walks in beauty, like the night of cloudless climes and starry skies, and all that’s best of dark and bright meets in her aspect and her eyes.”

She had to admit, deep down she was impressed. Not that she was going to commence praising on cue. The eagle in him was perfectly capable of preening his own feathers... but it took a lot to capture her curiosity the way he had. She said in wonder, "You are a riddle."

"Of course I am,” Rasputin said. “And you will inform Gaius that I send my regards from Hell. I’ll see him when he gets there.”

“Gaius doesn’t take refusals lightly,” Kamilah muttered.

“I’m the one who is due to die. Don’t sulk,” he told her. “It doesn’t become someone of your age.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, the age thing? You just had to go there, didn’t you?”

He shrugged. “Give him my best.”

“Please reconsider... perhaps you can postpone your death,” Adrian tried. “He wants to create a safe haven for our kind—”

Rasputin threw his head back and laughed. It was obvious he knew that neither of them believed that. They knew Gaius was a tyrant... and they were both fully aware that they were his puppets and his prisoners. “You can have all the right reasons in the world. They do not mean shit, my friends, if what you do causes harm. My answer is no.”
“Wait, you gotta be shitting me!,” Lily practically screamed with excitement as she studied the glowing necklace that had been set up in the Raines Corp labs. “This was Ra Ra Rasputin’s necklace?!”

“Please tell me you did not just quote Boney M!,” Anastasia laughed. To her, Lily was one of those people who were like Slinkies in human form. Fun. Lots and lots of fun. But sometimes so fun she was incapable of being serious and made herself basically useless, but those sort of people were the best. They could make you smile when you pushed them down the stairs, and then forced you to do it again and again because it provided so much entertainment.

“Who the hell would I be if I didn’t?”

“Grigori Yefimovich Rasputin,” Kamilah interjected before either of them could get carried away and start singing the song. Like every vampire in the room over a certain age, she was oblivious to what was so funny. “Adrian and I met with him three nights before his death in 1916 on behalf of Gaius. He was wearing the necklace then but it didn’t glow and didn’t seem to have any special powers.”

“You fucking knew Ra Ra Rasputin?!” Lily snorted. “You cock-sucking son of a goddamn dick-faced bitch! That is awesome!”

Adrian nodded, ignoring the fact Lily had decided to pour vodka into her Lucky Charms at breakfast because she’d ran out of milk. “He was a strange man.”

“Like, mad strange or just weird?,” she asked as she wrapped her arms around her wife’s waist. She’d been feeling extremely cold all the time and had been trembling at random moments since being found at Glamis, so having a wife who was essentially a walking space heater had been coming in handy. She wasn’t sure if it was the malnutrition or the withdrawals from the vampire blood, or even if it was just the psychological shock of everything actually settling in, but she felt incredibly fragile.

“Oh, he was mad,” Kamilah said, kissing the top of her head as she draped her blazer over her shoulders to give her some extra warmth. “But he was a strong psychic. So strong that he foretold of your arrival into our lives, Annie.”

She looked up at her, her brow furrowed. This woman was all there was for her. She may have been broken, but Kamilah knew that. She knew that she’d been broken for a long time. But before meeting her… it was like those broken bits of her were just scattered all over the place. She’d never felt whole. Not until her. Kamilah had this way of holding those shattered little pieces of her
damaged soul together. It was not an exaggeration when she thought about how she literally held the key to her sanity in her hands. Without her, she’d fall apart.

“The necklace was given to him by the Grand Duchess Anastasia Nikolaevna,” Adrian explained before anyone else could talk. “The youngest daughter of Tsar Nikolai II.”

“I was named after her,” Anastasia murmured as she looked at the necklace through the protective plexiglass framed by thick led rims that Adrian had come up with to try and counteract its power. “My great-great-grandmother worked for the Romanov family and I know she knew Rasputin well enough to have had a few photos taken with him. Anastasia became something of a Swann family name after the Russian Revolution.”

“Grigori Yefimovich spoke highly of your great-great-grandmother,” Kamilah whispered. “Daneliya. She was a Bloodkeeper, I believe.”

She nodded. “She was. Everyone just thought she was mentally ill, though.”

“Am I the only one it strikes as odd that this trinket holds such a connection to Anastasia?,” Serafine asked. “Out of all the necklaces in the world that The Order of Apostolous could have embedded with such a volatile power, they chose this one. Why?”

“To be poetic?,” Lily offered.

“I keep trying to use my abilities to figure that out, but it’s like whatever power is inside the necklace is blocking me from seeing any visions of it after the power was locked inside. I can see Rasputin’s memories of it, with Anastasia Nikolaevna giving it to him, and he was wearing it when he was killed. I see it making its way into Vlad’s hands and I see him wearing it as a statement piece for years... then there’s just nothing. My mind hasn’t healed fully yet, so maybe I’ll be able to see more eventually but... yeah.”

“You mustn’t push yourself,” Serafine said. “After the events of last night, you really must allow your mind to rest, ma petite.”

Anastasia nodded.

“You’ve told us that you now remember the first time Cleopatra came after you, when you were a child,” Kamilah said, “and you recall her wearing the necklace then. Was it glowing like this?”

“Not as brightly as this.” She sighed. “I just don’t understand why she has been after me for years before the Order had even been formed and before I’d even found my way to the centre of vampire society. Like, why would she need this sort of power to protect herself from a ten year old mortal contemplating throwing herself out of a tree? It doesn’t make sense!”

“Your arrival into the vampire world has been prophesied for centuries,” Adrian said. “In different tellings, yes, but in every iteration your power was the one thing that remained the same. She couldn’t have predicted how strong you’d be.”

“Why didn’t she kill me, though? Killing me at the age of ten would’ve been the smartest thing to do if she had some sort of agenda—“

“But you had to Turn for Rheya to return the first time and your Bloodkeeper abilities didn’t really become that pronounced until you started working for Adrian,” Lily interjected. “You needed to live and then die at the proper moment to become the first Bloodkeeper Vampire. Killing you before any of that shit could happen wouldn’t make sense.”
Adrian studied her face for a few moments and then said, “Just because you’re extremely powerful doesn’t mean people shouldn’t defend you, you know. Stop whatever it is that you’re thinking right now.”

Despite the fact she was quite literally a hurricane in vampire form they were all looking at her like she was a cute harmless little bunny that was obviously on some sort of stimulating class-A drugs. She sighed. “You’re still not fearing my mighty wrath, guys. Shits getting old.”

“We’re trying, ma petite.”

“Indeed. Can you not tell how hard we’re trying?,” Kamilah added sarcastically. “You’re terrifying.”

“Scary as shit,” Lily nodded.

“What they said,” nodded Adrian.

“One day I will unleash it and you will flee in terror. Why are you all laughing? It’s only the truth. A bloodkeeper in full-on berserker-mode can wreak major destruction and instill fear into the hearts of all who— stop laughing!”

Kamilah’s arms tightened around her and nuzzled her face into her hair, and Anastasia relaxed into her hold. It was hard not to feel calm when she was with her like this. And she thought about her constantly when she was not. She trusted her more than anyone, and she wanted her to have everything she wanted, even more goddamn knives to add to her collection of weapons. And just being with her like this made her feel… good. But also vulnerable, because she alone knew her better than anyone else did. And she felt panic. Because whenever she stopped to think about just how much this woman could hurt her, she was suddenly fucking terrified. It was like a physical hurt. An ache. She knew now after her ordeal that losing her would hurt worse than anything. And it scared her how much she’d come to need her just to be okay, and just how much Kamilah — this one single, wonderful person — was so bloody important to her.

“We still have not decided if we are informing The Five of the necklace or of what happened last night,” Adrian said.

All eyes fell on Anastasia. “I’d rather not, honestly. I... as much as I trust Kano and Akeyo, I know that if push came to shove they’d stand by Aiko and Japan’s best interest. If she did tell them where we were last night then I— Let’s not, okay? Just for now. I want to understand this whole situation more before we talk to them.”

“Then we close ranks,” Kamilah nodded resolutely. “Family first.”

“Always and forever, bitches,” Lily smirked as she threw her hand in between them all. Adrian immediately placed his on top of hers and Serafine followed, as did Anastasia. Kamilah rolled her eyes and did her best to look unimpressed, but she placed her hand on top and mumbled an Always and Forever with the rest of them.

Part of her odd sadness broke apart as they all shared a laugh. The world may have been going to shit once again but at least they could still laugh like they didn’t have a care in the world. And there it was, that moment, with happiness dancing in her aquamarine gaze and the air around her effervescent with her Power — that moment was what the bloodkeeper would do anything and kill anyone to preserve.

That moment was what she lived for.
That one, and then the one after that, and the one after that, all grouped together in her aching mind like luminous pearls on a string. Each one came to her new, a perpetual gift of joyful surprise, and as rich as she was, and as many jewels as she’d acquired over the years in the lavish gifts her wife insisted on spoiling her with, those small fleeting moments were the sum total of Anastasia’s true treasure.

She still felt sick with guilt for the horrors she’d been forced to bear witness to during her time in captivity. For the things she’d been forced to do and the things she felt like she could have prevented from happening... but for the first time she felt like she might actually come to be okay again. Forgiveness was hardest to give to oneself. Even when she knew the Order had compelled her to do things and erased her sense of self, she still remembered doing them. But nobody could walk that road of forgiveness for her. She would have to find her way by herself.

Sometimes things changed irreversibly. You turned a corner, heard a new song, read a new book, fell in or out of love, or looked at a painting in a different light.

Or you got locked up and tortured.

Then no matter how you tried, you couldn’t unsee or unexperience something to make life what it used to be. The river always flowed downstream. But that wild, dangerous part of her... she knew now where it was running, and to whom. She could never have known that the one place she would find peace was in the heart of the wildest, edgiest creature of all — Kamilah Sayeed.

“I think we need to start observing Aiko,” Kamilah said. “I really don’t trust her at all. For all we know she could be working with Cleopatra, keeping her hidden in the shadows.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do. We don’t trust her, so we make sure she’s not a threat whilst Anastasia recovers enough strength to actually hunt Cleopatra down,” Serafine nodded. “Kano and I have tried, and we’ve tried searching for this Mach person, but we cannot pick up any trace of either of them. We’re simply not strong enough.”

“I’ll hang out with homegirl,” Lily beamed. “I’ll get her drunk as shit and she’ll tell me everything. Maybe even get laid in the process—”

“Lily,” Kamilah sighed as Anastasia laughed into her shoulder. “She is evil.”

“Evil people can still be hot!,” Lily replied theatrically. For a person who preferred to avoid all complications like; parking tickets, speed restrictions, and red lights — which was why she no longer had a driver’s license — fucking the suspected enemy seemed like a drastic plan. “Listen, there is only so many times you can use the same vibrator and surf PornHub before you start getting sexually frustrated. I’d totally fuck an evil arch nemesis into submission. The power of pussy shouldn’t be ignored.”

“The power of— Give me strength,” Kamilah replied with a roll of her eyes. “I guess all I can do is ignore you. If that fails, I have rat poison and a shovel.” She let out a soft growl of frustration and Anastasia couldn’t help but laugh... neither could everyone else, apparently.

“What the hell was that?,” Lily snorted.

"She thinks you’re crazy and would have stabbed you by now if you weren’t basically my sister," Anastasia told everyone, translating her wife’s growl perfectly.

Adrian cocked his head and didn’t even try to conceal his laughter. “You understand her grunts?”

She nodded as Kamilah rolled her eyes again. “I thought it was crystal clear.”
Adrian turned to Kamilah. “If you hadn’t already gone and married her, I’d be telling you to right at this moment.”

Kamilah growled again before burying her face into Anastasia’s long red hair.

“What did she say?,” Serafine asked her.

"Fuck off," she translated. “And that Lily could just buy a new vibrator or any other toy she wanted. Fucking evil incarnate really isn’t necessary in the grand scheme of things.”

“The. Power. Of. Pussy.” Lily wiggled her eyebrows up and down. “I gotta know who is the better lover out of Kamilah and me. Since sleeping with you would be incestuous and would likely end up with me being murdered—“

“Smart girl,” Kamilah nodded, a wicked smirk playing at the corners of her lips.

“The thought of Kamilah tolerating another woman with Anastasia for any reason whatsoever is amusing,” Adrian laughed.

Anastasia couldn’t help but laugh as well. Kamilah would fucking destroy anyone who dared speak of her suggestively or seemed like they were making her uncomfortable... and Anastasia absolutely adored it. She was hers — and her domme didn’t want anyone else touching her. And, if Anastasia was entirely honest with herself, she’d be jealous of anyone who thought of Kamilah that way. They only wanted her to be linked to each other. People who didn’t understand the different ways BDSM could present outside of the bedroom might have said that was unhealthily possessive, but everything between them was always entirely consensual and they knew exactly what each other’s limits were.

Kamilah’s lips were suddenly at Anastasia’s ear. “The only woman who’ll be manhandling you tonight is me.”

“If I let you.”

“You get such satisfaction out of teasing me, don’t you?”

“I still maintain that you like it,” Anastasia smirked. “You have a major kink for bratty Kazakh bottoms being mean to you. It’s all in the accent.”

Kamilah smiled softly but didn’t deny it. “You’re important to me... I don’t like being away from you. And sometimes— all the time, you make me want to smile.”

“Lily,” Serafine said. “I whole heartedly offer my services in this little social experiment of yours, so long as you don’t sleep with the enemy. Anastasia is the only one I haven’t slept with here and I have been... curious... about you too—“

“Well,” Adrian interjected as his face grew bright red and he made his way towards the door of the closet where the protective suits the scientists wore in the lab were kept. “I believe I have some work with this necklace to be getting on with.”

Kamilah and Anastasia both snorted as Kamilah started leading her away from Lily and Serafine to allow their fling to bloom without an audience. Giving her best friend a slight wave and suggestive wink, she turned and strolled away, tucked safely beneath her wife’s arm.

The ancient vampire’s gaze skimmed over her, taking in the various marks of possession that still decorated her flesh from the shower they’d taken before leaving The Shadow Den that evening.
Short of having ‘Property of Kamilah Sayeed’ tattooed on her forehead, she couldn’t have made it any clearer that she considered her hers... and Anastasia wouldn’t have had it any other way.

She knew she was everything to her wife. Everything. Healthy or traumatised, she was all Kamilah wanted, and she was hers wholeheartedly. To be loved, adored, and worshipped like that by the person you loved in turn had to be the most amazing thing in the world.

“We have a few hours to ourselves it seems,” Kamilah said. “We can work everything all out over time. Agreed?”

She might not have known exactly where they were going, but it was definitely a step in the right direction. Another step towards physical and emotional healing. Taking a deep breath, she nodded. "Agreed."

Kamilah’s expression turned serious, and she pressed the button on the elevator. Sliding her long fingers lightly down her arm, she took her hand and gave it a gentle yet firm squeeze. When she spoke her voice was barely above a whisper but each word absolutely dripped with her affections. “Come make love with me,” she said.

After everything — after taking the time to create an understanding between them that was filled with respect and that gave her a sense of safety — how utterly like Kamilah to make everything so classic and direct, and simple.

She tightened her hand in hers. ”Yes,” she smiled. “I’d like nothing more.”

~~~~ Two Weeks Earlier - Glamis Castle, Scotland ~~~~

“You’re not in too much pain, are you?,” Anastasia whispered through the rusty bars of her cell to her friend. They’d both been left unchained, so they were sitting practically side-by-side against the bars that separated their living spaces. Blood tricked down the Bloodkeeper’s neck from the stinging cut Vlad had given her earlier that day. All she wanted in the whole wide world right at that moment was a bath, a pina colada, and the chance to stake the bastard in the heart.

The man in the iron mask shook his head. “I’m as good as I can be. Vlad may be an imbecile but he’s rather skilled at breaking ribs. How is your pain, my friend?”

“You’re worried about me?”

He scoffed at her like she’d completely gone insane. “Yes. One of us has to worry about you. You’re crazy. Nuttier than a fucking fruitcake. You’ve got bats in the belfry. You’re off the wall. Around the bend.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes. “My hand still hurts from when Vlad slammed it in the cell door. I think a few of my fingers are broken... and who knows how long they’ll stay this way if they keep refusing to feed us. I’m going to kill him first when I get out of here.”

“I’ll help you,” Mach said. “Perhaps I’ll put this mask on his face and see how he enjoys it.”

“How long have you had it on?”

“Since arriving here,” he sighed, his crimson eyes sparkling through the cut out slits in the mask.
“Cleopatra said that it’s important people don’t see my face. When I asked her why she... beat me.”

Anastasia sighed and scanned the dungeons once more for some method of escape to make itself known. Fate and destiny had held enough power over her for this lifetime, and she was done waiting for the sky to fall. “We’ll kill her, too. I promise. When my family come for us I’ll get you out of that thing immediately. But for right now, is there anything I can do to help?”

He took a deep breath and sighed. “You help just be being here. I have never had a friend before that I can remember, Anastasia. Your company is doing more than you know.”

“Well, that bit is easy,” she told him with a smile. “Because even if we weren’t locked in here and we’d met like two normal people, I wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

“You are uncommonly kind, my friend,” he murmured. “Your beauty, as stunning as it is, barely compares with the wonder inside you. The absolute sweetness and spirit at your core. The brilliance and the kindness. I can’t quite bring myself to believe that you are real. I am frightened you will disappear if I close my eyes.”

“This is real,” Anastasia said, her hoarse voice cracking and raw. Her heart hurt for him. This gentle hearted man who’d never really known anything but a life in a cage. Hadn’t ever had a chance to let somebody shield him. Well, Anastasia was a fucking shield and she wasn’t going to let anyone hurt her friend again. “You have to know. This is real.”

“When we get out of here... what happens then?,” Mach asked. “I... I have nowhere to go and know no one but you—”

“Make no mistake, you and I will remain solid even if the rest of the world blows up,” Anastasia smiled as best she could. “My family will come and we’ll likely go back to New York. You’ll fit right in, don’t worry. There is a massive community of vampires from all over the world in New York. I swear to you, you’ll never have to worry about being scared or lonely again.”

Even though she couldn’t see his facial features, she knew he was smiling sadly at her beneath the confines of his metal prison. “I wish I knew who I was.”

“I like who you are.”

He chuckled. “You do not.”

“Yes, I do. You’re strong and smart and loyal and kind,” she replied. “Even if I can’t help you unfurl your past once all this is over, you’ve got a strong foundation to build a better future on. You can be anyone or anything you want to be, Mach, don’t let anyone ever tell you differently... and I’ll help you however I can. As much of as little as you want me to.”

“There’s something between us, and it’s big. I feel things I’ve never felt, and I trust you somehow in a way I’ve never trusted anybody,” he confessed. “And I would like to live for a thousand years or maybe more,” he whispered, “with you as my friend.”

Mach rested his head against the bars on his side and Anastasia mirrored his action on hers. It was crazy to her how being tortured together could bond two people. She might not have known Mach for long but she felt just as close to him as she had Jax and Adrian, he felt like another elder brother. He was, whatever he’d done, whoever he was, he was her friend. Right or wrong, she was keeping him in her life. The clock was counting down on both of them, maybe on all of the world. But here, in this moment, there was only the two of them.

“Bloodkeeper. Play,” Cleopatra ordered as stormed into the dungeons and threw a violin through
the space between the bars of Anastasia’s cell as she fiddled with the necklace hanging around her neck. This twilight, she was the one holding court. Upstairs she may have sat upon her gilded throne, decorated with gold-dipped skulls. Her design. But down here she looked like nothing more than a spoiled child. As did Vlad... despite the fact his throne was similar, of course, the skulls were daintier. Fitting.

“I am not a piece of property, damn it!,” she fired back.

"But you are in my possession."

She enunciated, "I think you are a lunatic."

"Since you are too, that works well enough." Her mouth curled into a savage smile. “Play, or I torture Mach. Your refusal will only hurt him.”

“Torture?,” Mach asked with a laugh. “My first piece of information I’ll divulge to you? I wouldn’t recommend trying to torture me again. I dislike it and you know how I grow sulky under pincers. It’s a fault.”

“That is quite enough,” Cleopatra hissed. “The girl has been a terrible influence on you, Mach.”

“Do we get extra points if we fake giving a shit when you speak?,” Anastasia teased.

“Please let me whip her again,” Vlad muttered under his breath.

That was it. She lost her mind. Whether it was the starvation, the pain, or the exhaustion, she didn’t know... but she completely lost it. “Fuck you, Vlad. You fucking asshole of a cold-blooded traitorous son of a bitch.” The words started to flow together so rapidly she lost track of verbs. “You are all robot— no fucking humanity. You don’t feel a thing, you sociopathic dickhead.”

He lifted one eyebrow, and something glimmered in his odd eyes. “Slap that one on my tombstone, bitches!”

“Hey, I have a suggestion, why not put a condom over your head — if you’re going to act like a complete dick then it makes sense to dress like one,” she spat.

“I am a Queen, you will obey me—“

“Here’s something for you to remember, your majesty; you might have been born into money, but you came out of a vagina the same as everyone else. Popping out of one that was rich doesn’t make you anything but lucky, or susceptible to being stuck your own inbred arse. Whichever makes you feel better about yourself.” She flashed her a teasing smile and slowly moved towards the instrument on the floor. “You know, I used to think you were snarling at me, but now I see that... it’s actually just your face, your royal highness.”

“Enough!,” Cleopatra yelled, pointing towards the violin. “I told you to play.”

The Bloodkeeper didn’t have the will to fight her anymore. Perhaps, she thought, perhaps if she just did as she was asked they’d finally feed her or Mach... perhaps they’d stop beating Mach at every opportunity they got. Closing her eyes, she fit the violin under her chin, and set the bow to the strings, ignoring the shooting pains travelling down from her injured fingers into her palm. Faith had never been as blind as this.

The first thing that came to mind was the sound of her fingers breaking a few days earlier. Her life, as she knew it, dying. The shock and the pain of it, and the utter devastation.
They’ve killed me, she thought.

So she played the instrument she’d cherished since her childhood. So she ignored the agony, the hunger. Green magic from Cleopatra’s necklace curled around her as she played, twirling up her aching limbs as music echoed throughout the cold, cavernous dungeons.

Next came the memory of warm, strong hands reaching for hers in the darkness. The unknown clasping her fingers, healing her, lending her strength and reassurance. Kamilah was the only thing in the world she could cling to when she had nothing. She had been her lifeline.

And she played it.

“Stop it, Cleopatra! Please stop!,” Mach yelled. “Don’t take her from me. Please don’t take my friend—”

“Silence!”

Despite the yelling, Anastasia continued to play. She couldn’t have stopped, even if she’d wanted to. Something bigger than herself willed her on. Willed her to keep playing.

Then came trust, the tentative unfurling, when she believed against all evidence that the person who came to her in the darkness would help her in any way she could, would find her no matter how long it took. The impossibly intense adventure of her arms, sliding around her shoulders. The miracle of warmth of her body when she had known nothing but coldness.

That first kiss, oh, the surprise of it! The agonising uncertainty… was it all right to allow this? How could it feel so incredibly good?

Could she possibly kiss her again?

Oh, when could she kiss her again?

Mach growled and threw himself violently at the bars between their cells. “Stop playing, Anastasia! Please! You have to stop!”

But she couldn’t stop. The burning that took hold, the incandescent light that shone despite all the shadows stacked around them. The unbearable, delicious hunger for her touch that was the sweetest pain… that she would give anything, anything, if only she could feel Kamilah’s loving hands on her again…

Always before, when she had played, she’d had the awareness of the violin and the bow as instruments in her craft. Her music had been self-conscious, aware.

Now, as she played, she went somewhere she had never gone before. She lost awareness of the violin altogether. She lost awareness of everything.

She became the music.

She was the story, the vibration.

She became the story of love, the notes written in kisses and caresses on her bloodstained ashen skin. She felt the symphony, the swelling highs in the lifts, and the terrible lows in the falls, and hope was the cruelest note of all, the devastation that came afterward, utterly intolerable.

She felt her mind start to shut down while her chest expanded until she couldn’t breathe. Panic?
She ignored it and kept playing. She poured it all out, all the emotion, the experience, the exquisite
delight along with the terror. There was no hiding any of it from Cleopatra anyway. The only other
being she had truly been so naked with was Kamilah, and she was gone.

Gone, while the love she felt for her had become the very breath of life to her.

Give her back to me, she begged the universe with her music.

Give her back.

When the last note speared through the air, she had nothing left to give... and her mind became
empty. Her memories, gone. Cast into the air along with the music.

Cleopatra studied her, her dark eyes unreadable, her entire body one long solid line as she took in
the Bloodkeeper practically radiating with power and staring blankly back at her. Gone was the
dangerously teasing Anastasia. Gone was the sweet happy Anastasia. This was the real Anastasia,
and she was way too primitive. This was too much. She was way too much. The former queen had
overestimated her power and strength, and she’d underestimated hers.

~~~~ 2007 - Almaty, Kazakhstan ~~~~

“Shouldn’t you be in school, child?,” a woman’s voice said from the bottom of the tree Anastasia
had climbed into in a bid to hide from anyone who might know her and send her back to school.
She didn’t recognise the voice and the woman spoke to her, not in Kazakh or Russian, but in
perfect English... she didn’t know anyone who could actually speak English very well beyond
listing the months of the year and counting to ten.

Hesitantly the ten year old peered out between the branches to see a stranger with raven hair and
deep brown eyes, she was wearing a red trench coat with a sparkly necklace that stood out against
the greenery and the overcast sky, and for some odd reason she was stood beneath a black
umbrella despite the fact it wasn’t yet raining. Her father had warned her against speaking with
male strangers, but he hadn’t said a thing about running the opposite direction if a woman
approached her. So she sat there, frozen, and a little pissed off to have been disturbed. The whole
point of climbing trees was shutting out the whole world, including herself.

Everything in her wanted to run away from everything. To fly back to Milan, where she had been
working as a model only a week earlier — to pay for yet another month of her mother’s expensive
psychiatric medication — back to her glamorous existence working amongst fashionable strangers
who told her how pretty she was and raved about how bright the future was for her. Her face payed
her parents bills. Hiding out here in Almaty in the folds of tree trunks and petals, tucked away
safely among so many plants and people, all she wanted was to be free. To be free of everything.

She wanted to be free so badly that when she walked through the city, she walked flat out, walked
with such force she felt an ache with every step she took coming up through the earth and into the
heel of her striking foot. No one ever said hello to her except for creeps who thought nothing of
ogling an unusually pretty child, and she had begun to make a game of how many streets she could
navigate without having to stop for traffic — secretly hoping that a car would just hit her already.
She did not slow down for a single person and would vivisect crowds of students listening to their
iPods or old women with their grandchildren, creating a wind on either side of her. She liked to
imagine that when she passed the world specially looked after her, but she also knew how
anonymous she was in the grand scheme of things. Except when she was at work as a model because her parents needed the money — when she’d rather have been doing literally anything else and sometimes felt uncomfortable with the grown ups attention — or when she was forced to go to school to learn things she didn’t want to know, no one knew where she was at any time of day and no one waited for her to get home... no one actually cared enough to worry about the things she got up to or the things that went on inside her head. It was an immaculate anonymity.

She cleared her throat as she took in the stranger and dismissed the idea of pretending not to know any English. She no longer believed in talk. It never actually rescued anything. At the grand old age of ten she had come to believe in the sanctity of time alone... but she wouldn’t be rude. She couldn’t be. She’d long since been broken out of the average child’s bad manners. “Maybe.”

She stared down at the stranger with a stare that stretched out towards infinity but made no attempt to move. Perhaps she knew her father and would march her right to him to be yelled at when she climbed down. He’d yell at her for making one of her mother’s Bad Days worse by not going to school, he’d reiterate that this was why she was being sent to boarding school in England next term. Because her mother couldn’t handle her behaviour and he loved her too much to see her suffer. Anastasia knew her father’s love for her mother wasn’t about looking back and loving something that would never change. It was about loving her mother for everything — for her brokenness and her constant hiding. It was about touching that hair with the side of his fingertip when her head hurt, and knowing yet plumbing fearlessly the depths of her ocean eyes.

Her fingers tightened around the branch she was holding as she thought of her father. Of how she had watched him that very morning as he lined up the glass bottles he’d drank from that week on the back deck, bringing them over from the recycling where they usually sat until the were collected. He had been so stressed out that he’d drank more than usual, so he had smashed the bottles before the city could collect them. He’d stood there on the deck surrounded by shards of green glass. The bottles, all of them, had lay broken on the wooden planks, the fancy labels strewn amongst them. He’d stood in the wreckage for a long time as Anastasia had watched from her bedroom window until he’d glanced up and saw her. It was just for a second, he’d stared into her eyes. He’d then fell quiet for a moment, and then he laughed — a strange howl coming up from the bottom of his stomach. He had laughed so loud and deep, before beginning to cry and disappearing inside the house.

Anastasia’s heart seized up at the memory and she glanced down at the long cut along her hand. She’d waited until he’d gone to bed and then picked up the glass herself because she was frightened the stray cats she fed would cut their paws when they visited her. But nobody had told her she was supposed to clean a deep cut out, so she was oblivious to the fact that her cut needed stitches and was already beginning to get seriously infected. It hurt terribly but her parents had bigger issues to deal with, so she’d vowed to be good for once and not complain.

The woman laughed, drawing her out of her own thoughts. “You have decided you have better things to be doing than learning?”

Anastasia hesitantly climbed down from her hide out with a furrowed brow. There was something about this woman that drew her in, something... familiar. She was certain she’d never spoken to her before, as the only real practice she’d had with spoken English was reciting her name and favourite colour in school year after year. “I...,” she wracked her brain for the correct words, “something like that.” The truth was, her parents and her teachers both lamented at how subversive Anastasia was, not because she drew pictures of women that got misused by her peers, but because she was smarter and more talented than her teachers. She was the quietest kind of rebel. The bored kind with an old soul who was merely biding her time in the body of a child until she turned eighteen. Helpless, really. “Who are you?”
"You can call me Cleo, child," the woman said. "What should I call you?"

She froze. Should she give her a false name? Should she run or scream out for help the way her father had told her to do if a strange man spoke to her? Murderers are not monsters, they're men, her father had told her — and that was the most frightening thing about them. "Um... Anastasia," she replied against her better judgement.

"Anastasia," said the stranger. "That is a beautiful name."

For a few moments Anastasia looked into that beautiful, kind of terrifying face and a sweep of curiosity rushed through her. It wasn’t often adults spoke to her directly, unless they were asking how many Good Days her mother had seen recently — to which she always lied and said her head was much better. Cleo may have been the first adult who’d ever looked at her without pity clouding her eyes... but she suspected that would change if the woman found out her mother was the local crazy woman. She shifted her weight between her feet and glanced down at her dirty white Converse that she’d decorated with her collection of Sharpies. "Thank you."

She didn’t quite know what to feel or think as she gaped at the woman. She hadn’t figured out yet what the fuzzy feelings she got when she looked at beautiful women meant. That there was a difference between her and the other girls, that her crushes on female teachers or her neighbour were more real than the other girls' crushes. Hers contained a desire beyond sweetness and attention, it fed a longing, beginning to flower green and yellow into a crocus-like lust, the soft petals opening into her awkward adolescence.

"What are you writing?", Cleo asked her, gesturing towards her Jansport backpack rested against the trunk of the tree she’d been climbing. Her Lisa Frank notebook was laying wide open next to it, her sparkly gel pens scattered across the grass beside the snow globe she’d stolen from her father’s desk that morning. Inside the bubble there was a little penguin wearing sunglasses and a blue-and-white-striped scarf. She liked turning it over, letting all the snow collect on the top, then quickly inverting it to see the snow falling gently around the penguin. The penguin was alone in there, she often thought, and against her better judgement she worried for the little guy despite the fact he seemed to have a nice life. He was trapped inside a perfect world. Alone.

"W-what?" She twirled the hem of her long sleeved Hollister t-shirt between her fingers. She’d done her best to wash out the stains, but the washing machine was difficult to work. The wine and vodka stains her mother had left when she’d gotten mad and thrown two drinks over her a few days before could be seen only in the sunlight, so she hadn’t really become aware of them until later, when she had stopped at an outdoor cafe for a cup of hot chocolate, and looked down at her shirt to see the traces of spilled alcohol. The alcohol had the effect of making the light green cloth a weird yellow colour. This amused her; she had written in her notebook: 'booze affects clothes as it does people."

"A girl like you with a healthy disregard for schooling cannot be doing homework."

Anastasia laughed a little at that and relaxed. She wasn’t going to tell this stranger that she thought she was developing whatever mental illness her mother had which made her head feel too full with thoughts she didn’t always understand, or that she wrote them down to try to make sense of the scary images and voices that assaulted her whenever they were given half the chance to. "I’m writing a story," she lied, staring at the woman’s black hair in awe because it was shiny like the promises in magazines.

Cleo quirked a brow. "A story?"

She nodded. Each time she wrote her thoughts down, she lost a little bit, the smallest drop of the
pain inside of her. It was the day that she started writing down all the things she knew she wanted to tell her family but couldn’t that she realised the horrors on earth were real and it was part of everyday life. It was like a flower or like the sun; it could not be contained. “I've always loved books,” she said. “I am an avid reader, with any number of my own stories rolling around in my head. Writing them down seemed a logical step.”

“Which language are you writing in?”

“Cyrillic— Russian.”

“Why do you write, truthfully? I find it very hard to believe you are merely writing a story, Anastasia.”

“I can't describe what I'm feeling,” she said plainly. Nobody knew how alone she’d always felt. "To anyone.”

“Smart girl,” the woman muttered as her eyes flickered between Anastasia and her notebook. Her skin was dark, her face tanned, little crinkles lay at the corners of her eyes. Sun lines, not laugh or age lines, she naturally assumed. She couldn't imagine a woman this intense ever laughing at anything except, perhaps... someone else's pain. “How is your mother doing, child? You look so like her. Kristina, correct?”

A sudden chill shot down the length of Anastasia’s spine and she took a step away from the stranger. “Premisely who are you, Cleo?”

"You want to know who I am?,” Cleo said.

Anastasia nodded. “Yes.”

“Weli, I am the devil incarnate and you, my sweet, are about to pay the devil's due.”

Before Anastasia could so much as scream, the woman lunged at her and covered her mouth. It was then that she slipped into the darkness, unable to know if she could be seen.

She was alive, she was sure. That was all. She was still breathing, sharp panicked gasps, but still breathing. She heard the thundering of her heart like it was beating inside her eardrums. She smelled the stranger’s breath, she was so close. The damp earth around them smelled like exactly what it was, moist grass where animals lived out their daily lives.

She made herself small in the darkness, unable to know if anyone could see her and help her, unable to figure out exactly what was happening to her. There was a sharp pain in the side of her neck, the feeling of a body that was much bigger than hers and much heavier pressing her tiny frame down against the long grass and then... she started to feel cold. Very cold.

Then she stopped feeling anything at all.

The next thing she knew, she was sat beneath her favourite tree and the street lights had come on. The world felt like it was spinning and she couldn’t quite figure out what had happened. The last thing she remembered she had been ten feet in the air, swinging upside down from the highest branch that could support her weight without snapping. Had she fallen and hit her head?

Anastasia looked wearily around the park, she was the only one around. The leaves had mostly all fallen and been blown or raked away but even still, with the ground waiting to recieve it, there was no snow yet. Odd for this time of year, she thought. Her school bag was laying wide open at her side, her North Face jacket stuffed awkwardly inside, her prized collection of scented gel pens and
her snow globe scattered around her... but her notebook was gone. Once she pulled her jacket out of her bag there was nothing besides a few textbooks and a packed lunch that she hadn’t bothered to eat. But her most prized possession was gone. She felt like she was in science class: she was curious and utterly lost.

With trembling hands she dug through her bag once again in search for her notebook, to no avail. The only thing she found was a scrunched up piece of the pink ruled paper with curly English writing jotted on it in glittering purple ink; Have a doctor look at the wound on your hand, it’s septic. Infected blood is no joke... you nearly killed me. See you soon, C.

“Septic,” Anastasia murmured whilst studying her throbbing hand. The wound was bright red and puffy looking. She didn’t know what septic was, nor did she know who C was. The murky light of the setting sun splitting through the overcast sky came through the branches of the tree above her, and Anastasia looked up past them. Her brain was a storm, her usual insight gone.

She took long deep breaths and tried to hold them. Tried to stay still for longer and longer periods of time to stave off the impending panic attack she felt hovering over her head. She pulled her knees up to her chest and made herself tight and small, like a stone. Curled the prematurely frayed edges of herself up and folded them under where no one else could ever see them.

She felt like she was standing in the wake of a volcanic eruption.

“You can be free,” the voices in her head whispered, “you have to let go. Not all battles can be won. Not all lives can be saved. And no matter how we wish it, not all songs end in joy.”
Keeping her footsteps light and her heart rate low to avoid any possible detection in the Gansevoort storage facility Lily had managed to discover Aiko was frequenting, Kamilah and Anastasia scurried through the darkness. Kamilah with her usual elegant silence and Anastasia crashing behind her like an elephant with a tranquilliser stuck in its butt. How someone under the height of 5’3” and weighing little more than an overgrown child could make so much noise, Kamilah just did not know. It baffled her. Baffled her to the point that she’d simply had enough and resorted to piggybacking her wife through the maze of storage lockers, despite the fact she was positive no one else was around.

“Was that really necessary?,” Anastasia pouted as she was returned to her feet outside locker number 666. How fitting for Satan in heels. “I hate you.”

Kamilah chuckled as she snapped the padlock with nothing more than her bare hands and sheer determination. “No, you don’t. Come here, I’ll apologise.”

The bloodkeeper snorted. “No, you won’t. You’ll feel me up.”

“That too,” she admitted with a smile. “Come here.”

Anastasia giggled and practically threw herself into the ancient vampire’s embrace, and Kamilah felt herself melting. In that moment, there was nothing sweeter than the taste of her name on Anastasia’s lips. She smiled as she kissed her and mumbled, “I apologise for my earlier behavior.”

Anastasia gave her a grin and started giggling even more when Kamilah’s hands drifted down to her backside and gave a playful squeeze. She held her close and kissed her thoroughly. When they pulled apart, they were both breathless, their hearts pounding. “You’re not really sorry.”

She pretended like she was giving that due thought, her hands still rested on her ass — because they were married and she could be as pervy as she pleased. Carefully she said, “I am regretful that I am not sorry. Does that count?”

“Good enough,” Anastasia smirked, stealing another kiss before wriggling out of her grasp and moving to open up the storage locker.

Kamilah’s hands drifted to the hilts of her daggers and she gave Anastasia a tight nod, unsure of what they would find inside. It was beyond her why Aiko had a storage unit in Manhattan when she lived in Tokyo. It had to be something shady. Drugs. Bodies. Some sort of satanic ritual space. Something.

The metal grate made a loud rattling sound as it was pushed up that echoed throughout the empty
warehouse, bouncing off of the grimy concrete walls so loudly that it’d probably alerted every vampire in the city to their whereabouts. The space inside couldn’t have been any bigger than the average jail cell, but it was stacked high with boxes and books. Books in piles and on a dusty old coffee table pushed against the left wall, framed book covers stacked against the wall, books sorted into stacks on every available cardboard box, and of course books on shelves along the far wall. Besides the visible books, there were books waiting in the wings, the boxed books. An overflow of books and odd looking trinkets you’d expect to find stuffed into somebody’s storage unit.

“My notebook!,” Anastasia exclaimed as she clambered over piles of junk to grab a sparkly notebook with rainbow dolphins on the cover. “I lost this the day I met Cleopatra for the first time —“

“When she attacked you,” Kamilah grumbled. Rage bubbled up inside her at the thought of her cousin attacking a poor defenceless ten year old girl who’d just been trying to climb trees in peace to escape her toxic home life. Cleopatra had never been a slip of a woman and Anastasia had always been very frail-looking, which somehow only made everything worse in Kamilah’s mind. “I still don’t understand what use Cleopatra would have for a child’s diary... but now that we’ve found it in Aiko’s possession we know that she absolutely cannot be trusted.”

“I wrote down my thoughts and most of my earliest visions back when I thought I was mentally ill,” Anastasia explained as she flickered open the pink ruled pages. Inside was an array of multicoloured sparkly ink and Cyrillic script printed in a childish version of Anastasia’s distinctive handwriting.

“Is this Russian or Kazakh? I can never tell the difference.”

“Both. Sometimes I wrote in Russian Cyrillic, then others Kazakh Cyrillic, and sometimes French. Whichever I felt I could most fluently articulate my thoughts and feelings in,” she explained as she pointed out examples of the different scripts. “My writing English was still not so good at this point, I only began excelling in English when I went to boarding school and had no other option. Want me to read something?”

“Let me try first,” Kamilah smiled. “It’s been a while since I’ve practiced so find me something easy.”

Anastasia’s face lit up with excitement and she began flicking through the pages filled with her most intimate thoughts. Kamilah had never been very good at deciphering slavic languages. She could speak and understand Russian fairly well but was by no means fluent and had been making a point of trying to learn Kazakh whenever she could. It was important to her that she was able to support and celebrate her wife’s heritage however she could, and learning the languages she was most comfortable with seemed like a good place to start.

“Here,” Anastasia said, pointing to a passage written in sparkly turquoise ink. “It’s in Kazakh Cyrillic. Things I heard someone say to me when I touched an old painting on a school trip to a museum that I didn’t bother to record the name of.”

Kamilah nodded and studied the handwriting for a moment, making a mental note of how neat it was for a ten year old. “Everything flows out and in,” she read slowly, “everything has its tides; all things rise and fall; the... the— I have no idea what the next three words say, baby.”

“Pendulum-swing manifests,” Anastasia said softly.

Kamilah nodded and continued, “In everything; the measure of the swing to the right, is the measure of the swing to the left; rhythm compensates. First a little girl haunted and she would be a
woman haunted. First by accident and then by choice."

“Exactly.” Anastasia rubbed at her neck, presumably where Cleopatra had bitten her that day, and glanced down at the old scar on her hand that still hurt when the weather turned cold. “Not exactly the average thoughts you’d expect from a ten year old child... but then here,” she pointed at another passage written in hot pink sparkly ink that had smudged slightly over time, “I wrote in Russian: In a perfect world I would be taller or older, and chickens could cross the road without being the subject of a joke.”

Kamilah snorted. “That is quite the contrast. To go from something so hauntingly beautiful to worrying about the welfare of imaginary chickens in the space of a few lines... that mind of yours is quite something.”

Pushing herself up onto her tiptoes and moving her mouth to her ear, she whispered something else in Kazakh. It gave her the chills in the best way.

“What did that mean?,” she asked.

Anastasia’s lips grazed the sharp edge of Kamilah’s jaw and she murmured, “Everything good in my life is because of you.”

“Annie...”

“I mean it. When I wrote everything that’s in here down I was scared and I was lonely. My parents loved me in their own way but I was too young to realise how damaged they both were, I didn’t know they were alcoholics because I didn’t understand what alcoholism was or that they were exploiting me by making me model. I didn’t know that those were the reasons I was so sad and scared all the damn time.” She sighed. “Its... it’s very nice not to feel that way anymore, is what I’m trying to say.”

Kamilah kissed her brow and rested her forehead against hers. “You’ll never feel that way again so long as I live and breathe. I’m with you, and you’re with me, and that's the way it's meant to eternally be.”

“How touching,” Aiko’s voice echoed from outside the storage locker. When Kamilah looked up and instinctively shoved Anastasia behind her, she was standing there with both hands rested on her hips and a look on her face so sour it would’ve curdled milk. “Should I imitate a violin before asking you what the hell you think you’re doing here?”

“Why do you have my notebook?,” Anastasia shot back. “Cleopatra took this from me when I was a child. You’re obviously working for her—“

“That is quite enough out of you,” Aiko shot back. “I am not working for anyone. Look into my mind and see that truth for yourself if you must, but I will not tolerate this slander—“

Aiko stopped talking when Kamilah rushed forward and grabbed her by the throat. “My wife says that I can’t kill you for being an asshole. She has a much kinder heart than I do. But if you say one more unkind word to her, I will take you apart. Slowly. Do I make myself clear?”

She nodded her head and Kamilah let her go, ignoring her overly dramatic gasps for breaths as she walked back to Anastasia’s side. She once again shielded her with her body, not wanting her to have to use any psychic energy before she’d fully recovered. When she spoke, her words sounded more like a growl than words at all but the message was crystal clear, “Talk.”

“This was Takeshi Wanatabe’s storage unit,” Aiko explained. “He is the one who spent time in
New York in the seventies and made several discreet trips back here throughout the years. Nothing here belongs to me or The Five. I have merely been cataloguing everything and arranging for things to be shipped back to Japan.”

“Takeshi Wanatabe,” Kamilah echoed. “Why would—“

“She’s telling the truth,” Anastasia whispered whilst soothingly stroking Kamilah’s rigid shoulders with one hand and clutching her head with the other. “It doesn’t take much power to know she’s being honest right now, Kami.”

“Cheers,” Aiko nodded towards the Bloodkeeper. “I don’t mind if you want to start ranting, Kamilah, just as long as you understand I’ll be ignoring your every word.”

“Why would Takeshi have a notebook that once belonged to Anastasia?,” she asked, glancing towards her wife and noting right away that figuring out Aiko was being truthful had obviously caused more of a strain than she was willing to admit. There was no way she’d be able to use her abilities to answer that question whilst nursing a psychic migraine.

“Takeshi was involved with quite a few lovers in his time here,” Aiko shrugged. “I don’t know much beyond that. He was an incredibly private man.”

“Adrian, Serafine, or Lily will help you look through this stuff,” she declared whilst sending a text message onto their group chat with an address and her orders, they were observing the others at a trendy mortal nightclub across the street, “if Takeshi knew Cleopatra then everything in here will have to be studied for connections to the Order.”

“That is not your call to make, Kamilah!,” Aiko snapped.

“Please don’t argue with her right now,” Anastasia sighed. “It won’t end well for you.”

“Is that a threat, Bloodkeeper? And would you quit baring your fangs at me. It’s making me nervous.”

"Good," Anastasia said. "If you want to know why, it's because you smell like vampire blood."

"It's my perfume. Eau de Recent Injury." Aiko raised her left hand to show a small cut on her finger that was still healing. “Try not to drain me dry, will you? I’m rather fond of living.”

“No promises,” Anastasia replied weakly, shaking her head.

“Aiko—“

“I am more than capable of doing this myself!”

Kamilah chose to ignore her remark on the grounds that it simply didn’t suit her. Part of her wished that she could stop looking at Aiko and the world through guarded glasses for just one moment. To just be able to listen to her innermost instincts without worrying their personal drama was clouding her judgement. To be able to not overthink. Feel. But she couldn’t.

“Jesus, Kamilah, I’m not going to fucking hurt her!,” Aiko snapped.

Kamilah simply growled at her, her fangs bared and her eyes a raging crimson fire burning through the dark. With one arm, she continued to hold her wife behind her back. Since the first moment her heart had brushed against Anastasia’s, every instinct she had within her had told her that she was hers and she should protect her and bond with her above all others. Of course she also wanted to
fuck her until neither of them could walk. But that had nothing to do with her being her anchor and the most important person in her life.

Her temper, or perhaps the bone deep fear that something else was going to hurt her wife, got the best of her and she lunged towards her ex with the syringe full of sedatives she’d been carrying everywhere at Anastasia’s request. Before Aiko could even react, the needle was in her neck and the drugs in her system.

“Kami. Seriously?,” Anastasia deadpanned, her arms crossed over her chest and thoroughly unimpressed look painted across her face. “What happened to counting to ten and taking a series of deep breaths before attacking people you don’t like?”

“I promised to do that before stabbing. I said nothing about not drugging people I don’t like.”

“I— I stand corrected,” Anastasia shrugged. “It doesn’t change the fact you’ve just attacked the highest ranking member of The Five, though. The others are gonna be pissed.”

“I will do whatever I have to do to keep you safe,” Kamilah said, stepping casually over Aiko’s unconscious form on the floor. She bent to press her lips to the pulse that fluttered at the base of her wife’s neck. She would lie, cheat, steal, murder. Break vows, drop friendships, abandon responsibilities. Start wars or end them. “Whatever I have to.”

Anastasia drew her into her arms but didn’t comment on the fact Kamilah was trembling. Instead she just tightened her arms around her and gently stroked her back over the top of her blouse. She was the only one who knew that Kamilah’s anxiety attacks usually presented through fits of temper and lashing out. When she spoke, she spoke fluently in Kamilah’s native tongue, her mouth merely inches away from her ear, “Keep taking deep breaths. There is no danger. You're perfectly safe. I am perfectly safe and I've got you. You're mine. I will never let go. I will always protect you. You are my life now. Do you understand anything I'm saying?”

She nodded and nuzzled her face into the warmth of her neck, allowing herself a moment of weakness to be comforted. Nobody knew how often she suffered with her anxiety, she hid her two thousand years worth of accumulated mental trauma too well. It embarrassed her terribly whenever she so much as thought anyone else suspected how weak she was beneath her impenetrable walls, but somehow Anastasia made her feel strong when she was at her weakest. She gazed at her with tenderness and Kamilah’s chest ached with feelings of safety and love for her. She smoothed hair from her brow, soothing her with soft words whispered in the long dead ancient language that Kamilah had taught her — that she spoke so well there was barely any hint of an accent.

“Thank you,” she whispered, kissing her cheek.

The echoing sound of footsteps from outside the locker drew them out of their trance. Serafine and Adrian’s voices conversing in fluent French ricocheted off the concrete walls. It sounded like there was a stampede of elephants running after them — which meant Lily was obviously drunk and in the building.

“Please tell me you didn’t snap and kill her,” Adrian winced.

“I am not drunk enough for this,” Serafine sighed.

“Um, guys, could you please tell me why there’s an unconscious woman laying on the floor?” Rubbing at her nape, Lily frowned down at Aiko and then took a long gulp out of the bottle of vodka she’d obviously taken from the club. “When you said, ‘Come see what I’ve got,’ I thought you meant new sneakers or something.”
“Your injury. Feed or allow us to tend to it, please,” Adrian pleaded after yet another night of burning down The Order’s outposts. After yet another night of not finding Anastasia. “You’re not feeding enough for the bones to knit together quickly. It will take hours to mend at this rate.”

“I’m fine,” Kamilah said as she cradled her broken wrist against her chest. She was healing, just slowly, so she didn’t understand what everyone was getting so worked up about. She didn’t feel like she was actively hurting herself when she’d refused to feed. She felt like actually feeling the physical pain of her injury like this was the only way to take care of herself. She needed to feel something. Anything to distract herself from the constant anxiety and feelings of helplessness that had become so bad she was unable to keep food down.

“Kamilah,” he pleaded. “It is broken in three places. Please.”

“I’m being patient.”

He actually snorted. “You’re being patient?” At her growl, he quickly said, in a tone of total agreement, “You’re being very patient.”

“She said no,” Serafine whispered, rubbing his shoulder. “Go tend to Lily and The Five. Leave us be.”

Adrian looked at her through glazed eyes but he was too exhausted to argue back, so he left her and Serafine alone in the small sitting room of the hotel suite they’d book to spend the daylight hours in before flying to Britain to continue their search. Kamilah wasn’t planning on sleeping, even if she had wanted to she wouldn’t have been capable of it.

She was well aware there was only a few more places Anastasia could be, if she was even still alive. After which she would be presumed dead. At that moment in time, hope was a fragile flicker that she wanted to cup with both hands to protect against the harsh cold winds of reality.

Death was a thief that always wore a mask. Accident, disease, stillbirths, old age, natural causes, war, murder. It existed in the shivering silence between tolls of a bell. It stole everything away while it left its mark, a dark knowledge that lingered at the back of smiling eyes, a hesitation between thought and action in times of danger, a heaviness that tunneled wormholes into happy memories.

Back when she was still mortal, she had heard someone tell Lysimachus after the death of their parents that the love between people has got to be bigger than everything else. The isolation, the separation, the dangers that came and went throughout life. When the love was bigger than all of that — you just do it. You payed the price in uncertainty and sometimes bereavement, because every moment people spent together was worth the cost. Bullshit, she thought, this pain was utterly unbearable.

“You’re thinking of her,” Serafine whispered.

“You promised you’d never read my thoughts.”

“It’s hard not to at the moment, mon amie. You spend every waking moment internally screaming for her... it is hard not to pick up on your agony.”
“I’m not good at this,” Kamilah sighed. “At being away from her. At not knowing if she is okay.”
Taking her good hand from her injured wrist, she pressed it against her aching heart. “She’s in here... and all I can do is hope that she is safe.”

Serafine wiped at the corners of her eyes and gave her a shaky smile. It was too easy for Kamilah to forget that she wasn’t the only one who wept with sorrow, with Anastasia’s unknown fate murmuring death’s silent torment of no tomorrows hanging over her head. She could feel their friends’ hearts breaking, sense their despair, they were all united in misery, in the grief that they shared.

Anastasia was like the sparkling light that danced on streams, her laughter was like a moment of warmth in the fays of sunbeams. She reminded them all of the coolness of a summer rain as it fell on their faces, the gentlest whispers of autumn leaves as wind rushed with haste. That was the strength of Anastasia’s effortless brand of charm. Bright, unyielding, indefatigable love. Love that did not know surrender. Love that did not understand limitations or even basic self-preservation. Love that would batter itself to death before giving in to defeat.

“Do you know how a pearl comes to be?,” Serafine asked as she fiddled with the necklace she was wearing.

"Oysters make them, from a bit of sand."

"Kamilah. From a bit of sand." She rolled a single one of the pearls between her trembling fingers. "All pearls begin as something unpleasant that the oysters cannot expel from themselves, even though they may want to. So they embrace these things that will not leave them, shaping them and smoothing away the sharp edges, until over time, they make of these unwanted things great treasures. Quite beautiful, don’t you agree?"

Kamilah nodded. “Indeed.”

Her burning eyes drifted closed as the pain in her wrist continued to radiate down into her elbow, reminding her that she was actually still living. What did it say about her mental state that a broken wrist had been the most comforting thing to happen to her in weeks?

She didn’t know why, but she couldn’t shake the fear that the real danger was only just beginning and that things were about to get much, much worse than this. How things could possibly get worse, she didn’t know... but she just knew that they would.

She thought of her wife so often that she felt she was beginning to lose it a little. This was what it truly meant to go mad with grief, she realised.

She thought of all the times she had known she must prove herself strong enough to protect her, gentle enough to win her heart, and worthy of the great gift of her love and her unconditional trust. She thought of how she had managed to find the courage to embrace the darkest shadows of the bloodkeeper’s soul, and the even greater courage to bare the shadows of her own soul to her. When all barriers had been sundered, all secrets revealed and accepted, they had forged a bond that Kamilah hadn’t even realised was possible; and they no longer felt like two separate people, but rather one person, one soul, complete for eternity, stronger together than either could ever be apart.

Two lovers, two hearts, one soul.

Only joined could they be truly complete.

Only joined could they survive a darkness as all encompassing as this.
“What is the matter with you?,” Lysimachus asked.

“Why does something have to be the matter with me?,” Kamilah sighed. “This is just my face.”

“I am well aware you always look unimpressed but you seem even angrier than normal. Probably because you have gotten yourself into some kind of trouble. You might look harmless enough, but I know crazy when I see it.” He tapped her nose. “You, Kamilah, are far from sane.”

She huffed. “I think that is the nicest thing you have ever said to me.”

He laughed. “Now tell me what has made you sad. Perhaps there is something I can do to help.”

Kamilah scoffed and rolled her eyes but refused to look at her brother as they walked side by side through the streets of Alexandria. She didn’t want to return to the palace after spending the day inspecting the Pharaoh’s lighthouse on behalf of her lazy cousin, who was undoubtedly either nursing a hangover or indulging in the company of Roman men.

As a young woman of twenty-two, all Kamilah wanted was far more freedom than her station in life allowed. She felt stifled as a woman of royal blood and thirsted after the sort of life Lysimachus lived as a soldier and a prince. A life where she’d answer to no one but herself, have adventures, and be free of the expectations thrust onto the shoulders of women.

“Scoff to your hearts content, it does not change the fact I am your twin and know you better than you would like to admit. What troubles you, sunshine?”

Her childhood nickname brought the smallest of smiles to Kamilah’s stony expression, lightening her dark eyes. She glanced towards her brother and that his impish smile had grown to epic proportions, she asked, “What?”

“You just smiled.”

“I did not,” she pouted, elbowing him on the arm. “One must not tell lies, Lysi. It is unbecoming of a prince of Egypt.”

“I saw it,” he beamed. “The ever-sunny Kamilah Sayeed actually smiled!”

“You were hallucinating.”

He shook his head, chuckling. “No, I saw you smile. I saw those pretty little dimples.”

“I do not have dimples, you fool!” She had to resist the urge to immaturely stomp her foot when Lysimachus practically doubled over laughing at her. Her brother may have been the one person alive who could get her to smile regardless of how troubled she was, and she both loved and hated that he could. It was nice to have someone who knew her so well but sometimes a woman just needed to sulk.

She had never had someone else as deeply enmeshed in her life as her twin was. And she knew she never wanted anyone else to be, regardless of how Cleopatra tried to wedge herself between her and Lysimachus. She did not have any real experience with emotional intimacy, which meant she
was often flying blind — as was Lysimachus. Not being instantly good at something pissed her off incredibly. But her brother was someone she knew she needed and she absolutely refused to live a life that did not have him in it.

“Tell me what is wrong,” he said gently. “Please. We both know that the moment we arrive home Cleopatra will demand we attend whatever party she has decided to throw tonight, which will only further sour your mood. If you do not clear the air before then you will go mad with sadness before the sun rises tomorrow.”

Kamilah sighed and looked away from him again, her eyes locking on the vendors selling vegetables and spit-roasted goat on their street carts. The High Priest of Amun placed a piece of flatbread imprinted with an ankh, the symbol of everlasting life, upon a peasant’s tongue. It looked like it was gritty, the dough having probably been sprinkled with sand blessed by all the High Priests before it was baked that morning. She saw a number of cats laying on satin pillows basking in the sun, knowing they were considered near deity in Egypt. Dogs may have been more loyal, but cats were smarter. There was nothing particularly interesting about what she saw but she’d much rather have indulged in people watching than explaining what had darkened her heart that day.

She remained quiet for a long while, simply watching the peasants and making sure their security detail did not interrupt their lives too much. One function of the income gap Cleopatra seemed unconcerned with closing was that the people at the top of the heap — their family — had a hard time even seeing those at the bottom and often did not even consider them human at all. The pharaohs of Egypt that had come before Cleopatra probably had not wasted a lot of time thinking about the people who built their pyramids, either... but the daily lives of Egyptians had fascinated Kamilah since she was a girl. Just walking through Alexandria made her realise that the way she had grown up simply was not the norm amongst her countrymen... it made her feel incredibly privileged.

In a world where seasons of planting harvests and inundation ruled life and death, it was imperative to bring the gods into daily life to help things along... and Kamilah saw that everywhere she looked in the streets of Alexandria. The more a monarch invested in festivals of cyclical renewal, the more prosperity people assumed the gods bestowed upon them. But if the gods were ignored, bad floods would result, and that meant meager planting and poor harvest, which led in turn to drought, pestilence, disease and death.

Clearly her cousin had not been doing nearly enough to help her people.

When she looked back towards her twin, he was waiting patiently for her to talk. Kindness and undying loyalty shining in his dark eyes. “This morning I had to beg Cleopatra not to betroth me to a Roman politician. She thinks it odd that I am unmarried and childless, and believes my beauty and my body are tools to strengthen her empire.”

Lysimachus’ face contorted. “That treacherous—“

“Shhh!,” she hissed, elbowing him sharply in the ribs. “You must not say things like that so loudly when others can hear you. Saying such things is treason and you know she will not show mercy because you are of the same blood. We must not even rant about her treachery. We were brought up in a sea of treachery and deceit and betrayal. We swam in it like perch in the Nile. We are completely at home in it. We shall not drown.”

He sighed and nodded. “What did you say to her?”

“I was my usual ray of sarcastic sunshine and told her and anyone else who dared try to push me into becoming a Roman housewife to go eat shit.”
You must bear struggles and losses like a soldier, Kamilah often told herself, bravely and without complaint, and just when the day seemed lost, grab a shield for another stand, another thrust forward. That was the juncture that separated heroes from the merely strong. She may have been under her cousin’s thumb, but she would be controlled by no one.

He nodded resolutely, his grip tightening around the hilt of his sword rested against his hip. “She is well aware you dislike the company of men—“

“It is not that I necessarily dislike the company of men, I can appreciate the occasional male, I merely prefer to share myself with women,” she shrugged. “But a royal woman finding true love and living a long and happy life with another woman is unacceptable. It will never be acceptable... Not in these times.”

Lysimachus wrapped an arm around her shoulder as they walked. Out of everyone that Kamilah knew, he could sort-of understand what it was like to be different. He faced no desire to indulge in romance or sex, to the point that sharing himself in that way with anyone repulsed him. But he was a man. Nobody looked at him like he was broken for being twenty-two, childless, and unmarried. Nobody dared question the young warrior prince’s sanity when he openly declared he would never settle down, they praised him for his dedication to the queen and her army — when Kamilah said such things she was labelled a degenerate.

Kamilah’s beauty seemed to be all anyone cared about. For a man, however, it was the opposite. Her brother’s beauty was not felt to detract from his generalship or his good sense. Nowhere was it hinted that an unmarried handsome man could not be a good soldier or prince, or clever, or strong, or brave. In fact, people longed for a resplendent prince. But for a woman... it was as if beauty in a woman rendered all other traits and goals and potential suspect. If a woman was beautiful, she became an object to ogle and manipulate. The beauty that came with womanhood was a curse as far as Kamilah was concerned.

“We could run away,” he said wistfully. “Get ourselves a boat and just sail across the horizon, leaving Cleopatra and Egypt behind to find our happiness elsewhere.”

“You know she would find us,” Kamilah sighed. “Besides, I do not know of anywhere where women are treated any differently than they are here. There is nowhere in the world that accepts love is love and allows two women to walk down the street holding hands. Regardless of where we were, I would be expected to submit to a man and have his children. It would not matter that I do not desire to do either of those things... women simply are not seen as equal to men in any regard.”

“Kamilah—“

“Do not attempt to convince me otherwise,” she snapped. “In the eyes of society, I became your property the moment father died. You know it to be true.”

Lysimachus gave her shoulder a supportive squeeze as pain flickered behind his eyes. He was unlike other men, in the sense that he truly did treat Kamilah like she was his equal in every way. He did not take away her independence or try to pawn her off to the highest ranking suitor that happened to come along and ask him for her hand. He asked her opinion on things and listened when she spoke... and when other men disrespected the women in their lives he actually spoke up. It did not matter if the man was his friend, a relative, or a stranger, he simply would not stand by and allow a woman to be disrespected.

In the eyes of the wider world, he was both respected and as unpredictable as Kamilah was. Nobody but Kamilah could ever predict what he would say or do next. He was a quirky, complex, fierce blaze of fire in her otherwise numb and predictable little world. Like her, despite the fact that
they had everything a person could ever want, he simply was not satisfied with the hands that fate
dealt him. If anything, it had made him bored and restless.

“I was not going to diminish what you were saying,” he said. “I am a man and have experienced
life differently than you have, your experiences are your experiences and I cannot tell you that you
are wrong for feeling a certain way. I am well aware the life of a woman is often unfair in a world
of men. I was merely going to tell you that all I want in this life is to see you happy. You deserve to
live a joyous life with a woman you love dearly... and I am sorry that society simply will not allow
you to do that.”

Kamilah’s expression softened but her eyes remained sad. “I sometimes believe I was born much
too early for my life. Almost like... like I should have been born a couple of thousand years from
now in a different world, far from a life of royal duty and our family’s crippling expectations.”

“As do I,” he breathed. “It may be easier for me to pretend I am too dedicated to my role as a
soldier to settle down or indulge in casual sex the way other men do, but I still feel those things
you do. Part of me wonders if I am broken.”

“You are not broken,” Kamilah said. “People do not like what they do not understand. You
understand yourself perfectly and owe no one an explanation. There is nothing wrong with you.”

“And you must know that wanting love is not selfish. We are all born missing the connections that
make us complete,” he said. “So you should not attempt to deny the fact you are secretly hoping to
find a beautiful woman to love, you should not act like love is unimportant to you when we both
know that it is.”

“I do not exactly have much of a choice—“

“You think because you face situations not of your making that you exercise no choice? That you
are helpless? To the contrary, Kamilah. Your whole life has been full of choices. Hiding from a
hard truth is a choice. Surrender — even to the inevitable — is a choice. Even in death there is a
choice. You may have no control over the time or manner of your death, but you can choose how
you face it. There is always a choice.”

“Must you be so energetic before I have indulged in my daily glass of wine? It is really quite
exhausting.”

Lysimachus smiled at her and playfully ruffled her hair. He was the only one who had never
developed a habit of underestimating the blunt, crazy, homicidal ray of sunshine that Kamilah was.
He would never purposely hurt her. Never. He was a man, which meant he would often mess up.
Regularly. He was not always good with words, he spouted crap when he got angry, and around
anyone else he was about as emotional as a pebble. He was not always good with words, but he
showed her everyday that she was important to him in a way he could not explain or understand.
More important to him than anything else.

“We could usurp the throne,” Lysimachus whispered to her. “Take Egypt for ourselves and create
the world that we wish we were born into. We could declare it the will of the gods and build our
own Sayeed dynasty. You could have a harem of pretty wives and the occasional husband, if you
wanted. I would not judge, so long as you did not judge me for spending my time collecting
swords.”

Kamilah snorted in amusement, as it somehow reminded her of the story they would use to try and
get themselves out of trouble when they acted violently as children. Their father had told them how
the sun god, Re, had raged against humans for violating Ma’at, so he had sent Hathor to destroy
mankind. She transformed into the lion goddess, Sekhmet, and Egypt’s fields had ran red with the blood of her rampage. Seeing this, Re realised his mistake and ordered Sekhmet to stop, but she was too gone with bloodlust to listen. Knowing he had to halt her some other way, Re stained seven thousand jugs of beer with pomegranate juice and poured the red liquid into her path. Believing the beer to be blood, Sekhmet gorged herself and passed out in a drunken stupor. When she awoke, her bloodlust had passed and she instantly returned to being Hathor. Thus the goddesses of love and violence shared a common history.

It had been years since Kamilah had thought of that story.

She rolled her eyes, though. “If I were able to have a wife, just one would be enough. Love suffers long and is kind. Love does not parade itself, is not arrogant or rude, does not seek its own, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. I happen to believe the love of one good woman who captured my heart and soul would be worth far more than all the attention from every other woman in the world.”

Lysimachus smirked at her. “But, theoretically, you would be queen of Egypt. What if you desired sex and your wife did not? That is when a harem would prove itself useful. There would always be a woman willing to fill your desires.”

She threw her head back and laughed. “Harems are appropriate for tyrannical kings alone, brother. They are seen as perfectly natural for any red blooded male but a woman admitting any sexual desire at all is frowned upon. That is why Cleopatra does not have a harem of Roman soldiers and insists on sneaking around after dark. Male leaders are celebrated for their successes, while their excesses are typically excused as the necessary and expected price of masculine ambition. A queen would be dethroned for acting like a king.”

He scoffed and wiggled his thick eyebrows around dramatically in an attempt to get her to laugh. “Conformity is deformity.”

“I am the one who told you that, and you told mother on me.”

“I was eight years old and you stole my horse!,” he laughed.

“I would not have resorted to stealing it if you had just let me play with it,” she shrugged, a full smile spreading across her face as the palace loomed up ahead of them.

They stopped walking for a moment and simply stared at the place where they lived, but did not consider home. They always returned with a sense of dread as the sun was going down. The palace was jammed full of shadows and ghosts of the past that haunted all those who had been unfortunate enough to be born in the gilded cage its walls provided.

There were only three kinds of ink that rulers used to write their stories. Sweat, blood, or tears. Kamilah had warned her cousin to choose her ink carefully, because one day Anubis would weigh her heart upon a scale. If her heart was black and heavy with sins, it would go straight into the mouths of crocodiles at the hour of judgment. But if she was a good and faithful queen, Isis would offer immortality. Cleopatra, of course, had not listened. She never bloody listened.

“Ready?,” Lysimachus asked.

Kamilah was startled by his gentle touch to her arm. She hadn’t realised he was still so close to her, because she seemed so far from herself. “No,” she sighed. “I always feel like I am marching to my death when we are forced to return home.”
“Me too,” he whispered, taking her hand and squeezing it tightly. “But if we shall die we shall die as we have lived; together.”

She swallowed thickly and nodded her head. There was nowhere either of them could run to that Cleopatra would not somehow manage to find them, so they had no other option but to serve on bended knee. It didn’t help matters that humans were naturally scared and confused beings. They not only feared the unknown, but they lived fearing themselves.

It was the nature of life. The stark contrasting hues between light and darkness. One could not exist without the other. There was no true Master, without the power of balance on the scale.
Anastasia couldn’t help but whimper with the pain in her head as she nestled further into the warmth of Kamilah’s body. Her mind had been bent and broken so much recently that prying into Aiko’s mind was all it had taken to induce an aura migraine so severe she had vomited twice in the time it had taken to return to The Shadow Den from the Gansevoort storage facility they’d explored.

It had shattered something inside her that hadn't been broken before.

Under the look of fatigue, the attack of migraine and the sigh, there was always another story, there was alway more than met the eye. Looking through her old diary was about all anyone would allow her to do whilst her head hurt so much — under normal circumstances she’d have been pissed to be treated like an invalid, but after everything she’d decided to give her family’s overly protective behaviour a pass... for a while, at least.

Jax’s bedsit was probably the best place to recover from overusing her powers. It was still lit by a collection of colourful lava lamps and rainbow Christmas lights that she had helped him string one night when they’d hung out and listened to Queen songs on repeat. Nobody had the heart to move any of his stuff or change the absolutely atrocious interior decor he’d mashed together without a care in the world. The sheer quantity of crap in his living space... it was like a terrible episode of Changing Rooms. Every time anyone had visited him it was like it had been redecorated to look immeasurably worse. One could only conclude that he had been doing it on purpose — nobody could be this tasteless accidentally.

Anastasia stared at the crinkled pink pages of the notebook that had once been her saving grace. Much of what was written inside she could remember recording with unambiguous clarity... but some things she had absolutely no recollection of writing down — the most disconcerting things scrawled in the childish handwriting and glittery ink.

The Bloodkeeper’s hand trembled slightly as she delicately brushed her fingertips over the top of a drawing she had no memory of doing. Meticulously sketched and coloured in sparkly ink was an image of the necklace that was now encased behind a thick layer of led to block its apocalyptic powers. The likeness was undeniable. Set in a thin base of gold a layer of various shades of dark green moldavites and emeralds shaped like leaves lay beneath a layer of petal-shaped deep red almandine garnets, which lay beneath a slightly smaller layer of orange siderites cut into the same shape that frames a lighter green circular peridot. She’d even gone as far as to surround the drawing with little golden fleck of glitter to depict how the charm sparkled. Each gemstone had been neatly labelled in Russian Cyrillic, the colours of childish handwriting matching the colour of the gems.
“I don’t understand,” Aiko said as she paced back and forth around Jax’s room, her pride obviously wounded to have been knocked out for irritating Kamilah. “If you had supposedly never seen the necklace until Cleopatra attacked you, then how could you possibly have drawn this before the incident occurred?”

“I told you, when my visions first started I’d see things without having the mental capacity to understand them. That’s why I started writing things down.” Anastasia sighed and adjusted the fever strip Serafine had draped across her forehead. “I literally don’t have any memory of doing this.”

“Shhh,” Kamilah soothed whilst stroking her hair. She had insisted that she lay down and rest and wouldn’t take no for an answer, so Anastasia had reluctantly lay down on Jax’s old couch with her head rested on her lap. “Don’t stress, my love. You’ll only make the migraine worse.”

Anastasia nodded and glanced back at the notebook. “I don’t even understand what I’ve written because I have literally just recorded the information that I heard without any sort of context. If using my abilities wasn’t making me so exhausted I might be able to figure it out but I— this literally means nothing to me.”

“What does it say?,” Lily asked. “I’d offer to read it but those letters look fucking crazy. They’re all backwards and shit.”

“Its Russian and Kazakh, Lil,” Anastasia laughed lightly, rubbing at her eyes in a desperate bid to stop seeing double. She was the only one who could actually read Cyrillic fluently, so they were fucked if she couldn’t get herself together... but at that moment in time there was not even a Scrabble word for how bad she felt. “It says, um—”

“Don’t strain your eyes. Allow me to attempt to translate it,” Kamilah interjected. She could hear her uncertainty in her voice and knew how she struggled to decipher Cyrillic writing, but she said nothing. It meant a lot that she was always so eager to learn and better her understanding of the languages Anastasia understood best.

“Do you even know Russian or Kazakh?,” Aiko asked, stopping in the middle of the room. She was looking at Kamilah in a way Anastasia couldn’t quite decipher. “As I recall you loathed learning languages and put the bare minimum into learning Japanese... something about how language was continuously evolving and dying out.”

Kamilah sighed. “If you must know, I asked Annie to teach me.”

Aiko gaped at her for a few seconds in silence. “You... you did?”

Kamilah simply nodded without looking up from the page. “The first part is in... Russian, I believe...”

“Mhm. You’ve got this,” she murmured. “I might not be able to see very well right now but I’m here if you need me.”

“Ten thousand swords before you, ten thousand daggers drawn,” Kamilah read slowly, her tense muscles relaxing slightly as Anastasia soothingly stroked her forearm. “Ten thousand lives defend you, ten thousand warriors strong. Our blood will spill ten thousand times. In hope, ten thousand sigh. For love we face ten thousand deaths. With joy, ten thousand die. Ten thousand fall before you, ten thousand fierce and tall. Ten thousand souls protect you, most beloved of us all.” She paused, her fingers hovering over the final passage of Kazakh Cyrillic printed in purple ink. It always took her a moment to spot the subtle differences between Kazakh and Russian, but when
she started reading again without clarification. Anastasia couldn’t help but beam with pride. “I am the steel no enemy can shatter. I am the magic no dark power can defeat. I am the rock upon which evil breaks like waves. I am the resurrected warrior of honour, bound by blood to fight, the only keeper of Light.”

“Well done,” she whispered. Her lips brushed softly against her wife’s knuckles and she looked up at her to see Kamilah looking extremely proud of herself. There may have been two of her in her fucked up vision, but the sheer pride shining in her dark eyes was so beautiful she was actually glad to be seeing it twice. Kamilah was all contemplation and enthusiasm. Ambition and strong wine. She could have looked at her forever.

“Oh, what does that mean?,” Lily prodded.

The room fell quiet for a few moments and the universe began seeming really huge within the heavy silence. Anastasia needed something solid to hold on to, so she gave Kamilah’s hand a tight squeeze.

Everyone in that room knew that the tragedy that was her life was not glamorous. They knew it didn’t play out in real life as it did on a stage or between the pages of a book. It was neither a punishment meted out nor a lesson conferred. Its horrors were not attributable to one single person. Tragedy was ugly and tangled, stupid and confusing. And it seemed that secrets became more powerful when people know you’ve got them.

“The resurrected warrior of honour,” Adrian repeated, thoughtfully rubbing his nape. “Rasputin informed us that your name meant resurrection on the night we met him. You’re also the most powerful amongst us, and you have been bloodbound to many a fight. It’s obviously a prophecy of some kind.”

“But I’m not a seer,” she replied. “I can see little glimpses of the future and have strong intuition, but it’s not enough to make any sort of set in stone prophecy. I see the world as it is and as it was, not as I wish it would be or as it will become.”

“Anastasia, I really don’t think any of us know what you’re really capable of,” he replied. “Who is to say that this is not some sort of prophecy... some sort of warning for what is yet to come.”

The room fell silent once again. That was something she had always loved about Adrian: he was so enthusiastic, so relentlessly interested in the world, that he had trouble imagining the possibility that other people would be confused by what he was saying. Even when they told him so outright. But also, he didn’t like to let anyone off easy. He wanted to make people think — even when we didn’t feel like thinking.

“I think I need to see the necklace up close,” she said. “See what happens when I wear it or touch it —”

“Absolutely not!,” Kamilah interjected. “Need I remind you it wiped your memories?”

“I’m well aware of what it did to me, Kami. I was there. I felt it and I saw firsthand what Cleopatra did to Mach with it. I saw how it hurt everyone who was near it for too long—,” she snapped, stopping herself as a burst of pain shot between her temples. “— Sorry. But I’m only saying what we’re all thinking. My abilities haven’t been working properly since the magic from that necklace got inside my head and we are on a time limit. We don’t know where Cleopatra is, she has my blood, and she is go to try and resurrect Rheya. I think the key to finding her might lie within the necklace and I am the only one who isn’t as sickened by it as everyone else is. If I have to get sick or suffer in order to beat her, then so be it.”
“You’d really risk sacrificing yourself for this?,“ Aiko asked. She looked at her strangely, through slitted eyes and a furrowed brow, as if she were trying to work out what the catch was. As if she were trying to see through her to uncover some sort of larger plan or plot against her specifically.

“Yes,” Anastasia replied without missing a beat. She knew she might, in fact, go crazy again when she actually touched the necklace, as had happened to a lot of people who broke certain rules. Not the people who played at rebellion but really only solidified their already dominant positions in society... but those who took some larger action that disrupted or altered the social order. Who tried to push through the doors that were usually closed to them. They did sometimes go crazy, those people, because the world was telling them not to want the things they wanted or do the things they knew needed to be done. It could seem saner to give up — but then one went insane from giving up.... and, frankly, as the first Bloodkeeper Vampire, Anastasia did not have that luxury. She could not turn a blind eye to the sufferings of others.

“You almost died because of that thing, you little shit!,” Lily protested. “Touching that thing could be fucking suicide for all we know. You need to stop being so damn self destructive and realise that some of us can’t live in a world without you in it!”

“Lily, I might be confused as hell, but I am not going to let others get hurt because I’m confused and scared. I will not be that person who turns a blind eye to suffering to save herself, do you understand me? I will not. Ever.”

“A part of me died when you didn’t recognise me,” Lily confessed. “And it was the best part. You are the closest thing to a sister I’ve ever had. Literally the first person who ever accepted every part of me and loved me so much I started to love myself, too. Do you honestly think I can face a life without you? This thing could fucking kill you for all we know!”

Anastasia sighed and chewed anxiously on her bottom lip. Love was when you gave someone else the power to destroy you, and you trust them not to do it. But if doing what was best for the most people could potentially hurt the people who loved her most if it went wrong, was she a bad person? She wasn’t a person who needed to be liked all the time so much as she was a person who liked to be notorious, who was born to be notorious whether she liked it or not. It was better to lead than to follow. It was better to speak up than stay silent. It was better to open doors than to shut them on people.

She sat up and tore the fever strip off her aching head before turning to look at Kamilah. Her face had paled and she was clinging to her hand with a vice-like grip that would’ve bruised if she were mortal. And when she spoke, her voice was so fragile that she hardly even sounded like herself at all. “You just don’t get it, do you? You have no idea how important you are to me. I need you to be okay, Annie. I can’t be without you, you have to be here and okay or I would not be able to fucking function.”

“Kami,” she whispered, gently turning her face so that she was actually looking her in the eyes and then looking around to make sure everyone was listening. “I’d a million times rather live and risk and have it all end badly than know that there was something I could’ve potentially done to fix all of this but was too cowardly to do. This is bigger than just me and you... it’s bigger than everyone in this room. The mortals. Mach. What do you think will happen to them if The Order manages to resurrect Rheya?”

Kamilah swallowed thickly and shrugged her shoulders. “I can’t lose you again. None of us can.”

“When you can do the things I can and you don’t... the bad things happen because of you,” Anastasia said quietly. “I am a leader amongst the vampire communities across the world and it is high time I started acting like one.”
“You don’t know who you could potentially become if you touch this thing and it erases your memories again,” Adrian said.

“Who will I be if I don’t?” She looked slowly around the room, at everyone staring at her in awe. Even Aiko had fallen silent. “This power inside me makes me different from all of you. I don’t understand the whole of it just yet but I don’t have to in order to understand that I have a responsibility to use it for good. I will not sit around waiting for other people to do stuff and angsting about stuff they’ve done, without doing anything myself. I owe it to all of you, to the mortals, to myself... and to Mach.”

“You would really risk everything to save him?,” Serafine asked.

“I would quit breathing for any one of my friends if it was asked of me.”

“It was a stupid question, I suppose. You did sacrifice your mortality to save the world from Gaius,” Serafine laughed weakly. “If this is what you wish to do, ma petite, you have my full support. You know I’d follow your noble heart into hell itself.”

“You’re a better woman than I took you for,” Aiko whispered, bowing in respect. “I... I apologise. Sincerely. My problem is I can think whatever I think — girl power, solidarity — but I still feel the way I feel. Which is jealous. And pissy about little things that have nothing to do with you personally.”

A small smile twitched at the corners of Anastasia’s mouth and she nodded approvingly in Aiko’s direction. “I’m sorry, too.”

“Jesus christ,” Lily muttered. “You always seem to remind us that we’re selfish bastards without even meaning to. You’re not one of us, that way. You don’t have a selfish bone in your body.”

“Well—“

“Wasn’t a question,” Lily laughed weakly. “Just know that if you forget me again, I’ll kick your ass.”

Kamilah looked at her with her eyelids half closed, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She had a hungry mind, constantly turning things over, looking not for answers but for understanding. Anastasia laughed impatiently. “What?”

“I both love it and loathe it when you get stubborn like this,” she murmured, drawing her closer and resting her brow against hers. “I just don’t like the thought of what could potentially happen to you if you put this thing on but I am not your keeper. If you feel like it is our best option to understanding exactly what it can do, I trust you. I’m just... I’m frightened. If this thing takes you from me again—“

“Nothing could ever take me from you, Kami. I’ll admit it to you now, and to anyone, anytime. Even when I was locked up, you were the thought that got me through. The last thought before my memory was wiped, you. The one thing that comforted me when I was little more than an animal, you.” She smiled as best she could. “I need you. I love you. You are mine. My woman, my soulmate, my beloved. My everything.” Her lips brushed against hers softly. “Even if the necklace does confuse me, we know that our love is strong enough to bring me back. You’ll always find me.”

Kamilah drew her in for another kiss that was electric and soft, and tentative and certain, terrifying and exactly right. She felt the love rush from her to Kamilah and from Kamilah to her. They were
“My life was so barren before we met, Annie. I couldn't feel anything anymore. Didn't let myself fell anything.” Reaching up, she stroked her lovely face, her eyes achingly vulnerable and her hand trembling. "Then you came along with your courage and teasing and passion and woke me up. Now I feel so much that, at times, it overwhelms me," she admitted. "I laugh. I want. I live. Because of you.”

~~~~~ 1 Week Earlier - Glamis Castle, Scotland ~~~~

All day the screams echoing from upstairs had been growing steadily louder since the man in the iron mask had been taken from the cell next door by a woman with long hair, and as the torture masters of The Order worked their way down the line of new prisoners Anastasia knew she’d be forced to execute later. A few hours ago, however, the screams had fallen mysteriously silent.

Anastasia found herself wondering if the torture masters had finally tired themselves out. She knew more likely, she’d be next, and they’d just gone to sharpen their blades. It was the one thing she was certain of, besides her name. She couldn’t remember anything outside of her squalid little cell that had become caked with her blood in the weeks she’d spent there. All she knew was crying when she was supposed to be sleeping like a woman who’d seen centuries go by, not like the thirty-year-old woman she’d been when she’d been taken. Not like she was frustrated or hadn't gotten her way, but like life was bitter and missing something important she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Like her emotional and physical wounds couldn't be healed.

In her cage, she was like a lion. All she could do was pace with her lack of memories until her atrophied legs gave out, then she could crawl until she couldn’t move. Her battered body was a record of her past. As she moved back and forth, one may have been able to see it all: the emaciated frame, the twig-like legs, the powerful hands enclosing like long sharp claws around the bars, the astonishing speed of her responses regardless of the fact they were starving her.

As far as she was aware, she had born in this prison. She had never in her life stretched those legs. Never darted farther than twenty yards at a time. Only once did she use her fangs. Only once did she feel them sink into flesh. And it was her keeper's flesh. The woman keeper who told her she cared for her, who promised to feed her but never did, who said she would never dream of letting the men harm her, who told her that if she obeyed she would protect her. Who in her mercy forgave her mad attack, saying this was in her nature, to be cruel at a whim, to try to kill all that was good.

She had come into her cage as she usually did early in the morning to change her water, always at the same time of day, in the same manner, speaking softly to her, careful to make no sudden movement, keeping her distance, when suddenly she sank down, deep down into herself, the way wild animals did before they sprang, and then she had risen on her shaky legs, and swiped her in one long, powerful, graceful movement across the arm. How lucky for her the woman had survived the blow. The keeper and her friends had shot her with a gun to make her sleep after that.

Through her half-open lids she knew they’d made movements around her. They gorged her with vampire blood through tubes in her nose. They’d observed her. They’d written comments in notebooks. And finally they rendered a judgment. She was normal. She was a normal wild beast, whose power was dangerous, whose anger and frustration could kill, they had said. Be more careful of her, they had advised. Allow her less excitement. Perhaps let her exercise more. She understood none of this. She understood only the look of fear in her keeper's eyes.
And now she paced and crawled when she couldn’t pace any more. Paced and crawled as if she were angry, as if she were on the edge of frenzy. The spectators imagined she was going through the movements of the hunt, or that she was readying her body for survival or some sort of transformation. But she knew no life outside the cage. She had no notion of anger over what she could have been, or might be. No idea of rebellion.

It was only her body that knew of these things, moving her, daily, hourly, back and forth, back and forth, before the bars of her cage. The mind could forget what the body, defined by each breath, subject to the heart beating, did not.

“Up,” Vlad ordered as he marched into the dungeons.

Anastasia didn’t move. Her legs were sore and weak from all her pacing, and even if she’d wanted to rise to her feet she wouldn’t have been able to without passing out. She needed to feed.

“I said get up,” he repeated. Tantrums were typical of Vlad. “Bitch, are you even listening to me?”

Again, she didn’t move. “I pretended to, so let that be enough,” she forced out through gritted teeth.

Without another word he pulled out a handgun and shot her three times in the chest. She’d been kneeling a little bit away from the back wall, but fell with the force of the impact and whacked her head against the damp stone. The bullet holes opened wide and her heart jittered around in her rib cage as her weak immortal body tried to expel the foreign bodies lodged in its tissues. Blood gushed rhythmically from her open wounds, then from her eyes, her ears, her mouth.

It tasted like salt and failure. The bright red shame of being unloved soaked the dirty floors of her cell, the ancient bricks of the wall, the rusty iron of the bars. Her heart spasmed around the bullets, unable to stop beating as they fell out of her gaping wounds and clattered on the bloody floors.

Her body screamed with pain as she forced herself to sit up, to look at him. “You’ll Pay. For. This.”

“Vlad!,” the woman she’d attacked yelled as she stormed into the dungeons. “Did I not make it perfectly clear I didn’t want you to shoot her again?”

“The bitch deserved it,” he spat. He stood his ground, with an arrogant, insolent stance. Although it was hard to believe, clearly the idiot didn’t have a clue either who he had shot and what she was capable of, or who he had engaged in a pissing contest. Had he been living under a rock?

“You imbecile!,” the woman said, slapping him across the face. “We can barely contain her as is! You cannot agitate her unnecessarily—“

Anastasia growled and flashed her fangs at her keepers, shuttling them both up immediately. She may not have known much, but she knew that if someone had a problem with her, well it was their problem to deal with. Why should she feel bad about it? She was not responsible for what other people did or did not feel.

“If you just let me fuck the bitch into submission—“

The woman hit him again, harder this time. In the system of chivalry, women tended to protect women against men... even when those women were also torturing the women they were protecting. In her current state, Anastasia couldn’t understand what this woman was protecting her from. She had no understanding of rape or how it was often used to torture women.

“What was that for?,” Vlad yelled.
In lieu of an actual answer, the woman kicked him between his legs so hard he fell over. She stabbed her dagger through one long, muscled arm, past bone, and all the way out the other side. He howled in pain, hurling obscenities at her. Well, she had warned him; he’d chosen to ignore her, so there was really no need for that kind of language.

Anastasia couldn’t help but laugh a little as the woman grabbed Vlad by the ponytail and dragged him up the stairs, leaving a long trail of blood in their wake. Part of her hoped she’d hear his screams eventually, even though she knew she wouldn’t.

Knowing that her captors were occupied, she slumped against the bars of her cell and pawed helplessly at the bleeding wounds in her chest. Her eyes drifted towards the one tiny window and she saw that the evening the sky had taken on the same colour as fire. Everything took on that colour at this time, the sky, the stone of the castle, even the ground. Just before the sunset the red in the sky would deepen to the exact colour of the blood that was currently oozing out of her chest. She imagined the sky bleeding like she was. Imagined the heavens suffering with her.

Little did Anastasia know that she was trapped between two worlds, warmth bleeding into cold.

~~~~ 2014 - Beadles School, Hampshire, England ~~~~

Anastasia couldn’t remember the last time she’d slept. The nightmares were getting worse, her school work was suffering, and some of her teachers were beginning to worry.

As if she hadn’t felt like enough of an outcast, being sent half way around the world to a foreign country because her parents would have preferred it if she’d never been born and they could drink themselves to death. She hated England. She’d hated every moment she’d spent here since 2007 and missed Kazakhstan so much that she cried in the shower every day. She missed the people. She missed her friends. She missed speaking in languages she actually understood and sounded as smart as she actually was in, articulating herself in English was still so hard. She just missed home.

For many of the students, the school was as much a refuge as it was a prison — in that regard, Anastasia was no different than her peers. Though they were cut off from the world and all the trouble they enjoyed stirring up out there, they were also cut off from the demands and expectations that placed on the shoulders of most teenagers by their families.

There was always an odd distance between her and the people she liked here and the people she met, a barrier thin as the glass of a mirror. She had made friends, knowing that she needed to make some friends. Whether she liked the company or not, it was important to have friends, but it was no secret to anyone that she was generally a miserable person until she had a few drinks in her system or a hit of whatever party drugs were being offered. At the grand old age of fifteen she’d embarked on a path towards self destruction that no one could halt and she highly doubted she’d live to see her twenties — the question was, did she want to die from the inside out or the outside in?

“I watched you at dinner last night,” said Miss Walker, her music teacher, “and the night before. When was the last time you ate, Anastasia?”

Anastasia looked up at her favourite teacher through sad eyes and fiddled with the bow of her violin. She seemed to be the only one who suspected the sudden decline in her school work and insistence that she wanted to play only sad music might be more than just a phase of intense teenage mood swings. But how could she possible explain that she failed at eating, failed drinking,
failed not cutting her arms into shreds? How could she explain she was failing friendship, failing sisterhood and daughterhood? How could she explain she feared mirrors and scales and phone calls? How could she explain she was so angry with the world that she starved her brain and sat shivering in bed at night instead of dancing or reading poetry or eating ice cream or kissing a handsome boy or a pretty girl?

She had changed a lot in her almost-sixteen years of life. She was no longer the quirky and happy child she’d been once. In fact, she was sad... sad enough that nobody even recognised who she’d become. She was young and distracted, and her teacher was bearing down on her, trying to get her to pay attention, trying to help. But she was looking out, looking for someone who would truly see her and understand.

“I’m fine,” she smiled after a moment of deep contemplation. There was no way she could explain that when she looked into a mirror all she saw was a ghost, a ghost of who she’d been and of who she might have been. No one would understand that her every heartbeat screamed that every single thing was wrong with her.

Miss Walker sighed and sat down beside her on top of one of the desks that lined the empty classroom. Since starting school here she had been more of a friend than a teacher to her... she couldn’t have been more than twenty-five and they liked many of the same bands and movies, and she always encouraged her in lessons. Whether it was complimenting her skills on the violin or expressing her delight that she’d taught herself to play piano fairly well over Christmas break... she always had something nice to say to her.

“Correct me if I’m wrong but you seem sad,” her teacher said softly. “In my experience, teenagers don’t dye the ends of their hair bright pink and stop eating when everything in their life is going well. Did something happen when you went home over break?”

Anastasia laughed lightly, even though she was completely numb. She laughed because it was expected of her... that seemed to be the only reason she did anything these days. She wasn’t dead, but she was not alive, either. She felt caught in between the worlds... caught in between so many different worlds. A ghost with a beating heart.

“I’m just homesick and wish I was turning sixteen tomorrow at home instead of being here, that’s all,” she lied. She felt like the madness she had inherited from her mother had worn her down. It was easier to do what it said than argue. In this way, it had taken over her mind. She no longer knew where it ended and she began. She believed anything the voices in her head said. She did what they told her, no matter how extreme or absurd. If it said she was worthless, she agreed. She pleaded for it to stop. She promised to behave. She was on her knees before it, and it laughed.

“England is very different from Kazakhstan and I— I struggle assimilating to the culture and finding things in common with my classmates. Even writing and speaking in English and understanding what people say to me is still very difficult.”

“English is a very difficult language to learn but you are coming on in leaps and bounds. Not many people would be able to learn as quickly as you have.”

“English is still not always so good,” she sighed. “I’m not as smart and funny in English as I am in Russian or Kazakh because I have to translate everything before speaking or even writing things down... and sometimes I mess it up.”

“You are smart and funny in every language. Please don’t be so hard on yourself, having to translate everything is hard work and you are doing wonderfully.”

Anastasia nodded and bit down on her bottom lip. “It’s just... difficult. Very difficult.”
“It can’t be easy being on your own here.”

“I’m on my own there, too,” she mumbled. Miss Walker raised an eyebrow at her, but before she could say anything Anastasia told another lie, “Because my parents are very busy with work. They work so much that they are only home on Saturday and Sunday.”

“You know if you wanted to tell me what was really going on, you can, and anything you said to me would remain in confidence. You don’t have to lie.”

She bit down on her bottom lip and looked down at the chipped black and neon pink crackle nail polish that decorated her fingernails. Her hands looked a weird mottled purple colour because her circulation had become so bad, and it was noticeable enough her friends and classmates had commented on it. Here she was frozen, when she deserved to burn.

As she sat there beside her favourite teacher, beside the one adult in her life she actually trusted, all she wanted was to be honest. She didn’t like liars and she absolutely despised the person she was becoming... but the the truth wouldn’t leave her mouth. It was like the words lodged in her throat and would sooner choke her to death before willingly being set free.

Would anyone tell her honestly if everybody saw and heard the stuff she did and were merely better at acting as though they didn’t? Was the kind of insanity she had inherited just a matter of dropping the act? If some people didn’t see these things, what was the matter with them? Were they blind or deaf or something else? Or was she really the one who was messed up?

Would anyone understand that as far as she could see, life demanded a certain set of skills she just didn’t have? Would anyone understand when she said she wanted to kill herself, it was only part of herself she wanted to kill: the part that wanted to kill herself, that voice that dragged her into the endless suicide debate and made every window, kitchen implement, and railway station a rehearsal for a glorious tragedy? Suicide was just another form of murder, after all — premeditated murder. It wasn’t something a person did the first time the thought entered their mind. It took a lot of getting used to those thoughts. And the correct means, the right opportunity, the perfect motive. A successful suicide demanded good organisation and a cool head, both of which were usually completely incompatible with the suicidal headspace Anastasia had found herself trapped in.

How could she explain her darkest thoughts when she was still trying to explain her situation to herself? Her situation was that she was in agony and nobody knew it, even she had trouble knowing it most of the time because she managed to convince herself she weak instead of acknowledging her pain. So she told herself, over and over, ‘You are hurting.’ It was the only way she could actually manage to get through to herself. Perhaps that was why she cut her own arms, she was trying to demonstrate externally what was an inward condition. She wanted the world to know she was in pain, despite how much she also felt like she’d rather die than have someone know how bad things had gotten.

“I think I’m just tired. Jet lag, maybe,” she lied, figuring she looked tired enough that it would be believable. She didn’t want to explain that she had become the kind of person who found social situations tiring after a while. “Kazakhstan is not an easy place to get to and from. A lot of travelling, you know?”

Miss Walker sighed and placed a gentle hand on her arm, little did she know that beneath the fabric of her cardigan her cuts were still weeping into their bandages. “I won’t force you to open up but I’m here, alright? At any time. I’m here and I will listen to whatever it is that you have to say.”

Anastasia nodded and smiled, but little did she know that her smile looked more like a grimace. Life was hellish at the best of times, she knew that. But, her pained smile hinted, she’d cut all that
out of her... and she didn’t know if she’d ever feel alive again.
Kamilah’s heart thundered in her chest as she watched her wife fiddling with the very trinket that had wiped her memories from a safe distance across Adrian’s lab. Like the gold from which it was made, Anastasia was steadfast. She hid many secrets within her heart and her mind, just as the bands of the gold hid the backsides of the jewels from view. But it was the gemstones that best captured who Anastasia was in Kamilah’s eyes: bright on the surface, fiery within, and utterly impossible to break.

Little puffs of glittering green magic danced in the air around Anastasia’s fingers as she repeatedly turned the pendant over in her hands, the light reflecting off of her pale skin and casting her body in an eerie green glow. She was shakily writing down information in her old notebook and whispering to herself in Kazakh, as she often did when she was immersed in a vision, but Kamilah could only pick out the odd word here and there. She was speaking much too fast for her to understand entire sentences. Blood. Ice. Fire. Those were the only words she could hear, over and over again.

It bothered her more than she thought that it would, not being able to understand exactly what it was she was saying... not being able to do anything but watch and wait. Patience had never been her strong suit but she was aware that sometimes beautiful things came into our lives out of nowhere. We can't always understand them, but we have to trust in them. She wanted to question and understand everything, but sometimes it payed to just have a little faith.

“Well, shit,” Anastasia panted as she sat the necklace back in its box. Clearly whatever vision of the past she’d seen had been important for all the information and wisdom it held. But it was very easy to get lost in it. This was an exercise in keeping the knowledge of the past with them as they pursued the present.

Kamilah was at her side in an instant, using every ounce of energy she had in her to run across the room and wrap her up in her embrace just incase her legs gave out in her exhaustion. The necklace might not have made her as sick as it made everyone else, but it very visibly tired her. When she turned to face her, the drawn look on her face was one of absolute agony as if whatever she’d seen had just ripped her whole heart out.


“Kami,” the bloodkeeper laughed, giving her a gentle kiss to shut her up. It felt so good just to be held by her. The tender pressure of her lips soothed her, like a warm drink in the dead of the winter, when every part of her felt so cold. “I’m okay. I promise I’m okay. You caught me.”
Kamilah studied her intently for a few seconds before nodding her head. How easy it was to fall in love with every moment of her existence. “I’ll always catch you before you fall.”

“What did you see?,” Kano asked. “The moment your skin made contact with the jewels you entered a trance unlike any other I have ever witnessed with you.”

Anastasia took a deep breath and pointed to the open pages of her notebook, where she had written the same thing in cyrillic over and over. The same sentence repeated multiple times, filling up two entire pages.

“What does it say?,” Kamilah asked. “I am,” she attempted to read, “something... Sayeed?”


“You saw... my brother? A vision from the past—“

“No,” she interjected, taking her face in her hands and forcing her to look at her as her eyes began to well up. “Lysimachus... he is alive. It was him, Kami. Mach. He’s been with Cleopatra all this time and it— it was him beneath the iron mask. He’s alive.”

“That’s not—,” Kamilah forced out in a state of complete and utter disbelief. “He— What?”

“Can I show you?,” Anastasia asked as she took the necklace back out of the box and put it on.

Kamilah nodded.

Gasps echoed throughout the lab as Anastasia raised her hand towards Kamilah’s temple, her fingertips glowing with the same green power that had come from the necklace. That had never happened before. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

When her hand made contact to her skin Kamilah felt like she was glowing, as if lit from within. She could still clearly see her glacial blue eyes and her full mouth. Her gentle hands that both loved her and held her, and slender shoulders. She felt like she could reach out and fold herself into her love's light... more a part of her than she had ever been before.

Kamilah reached for her and closed her eyes at her touch as their fingers entwined, expecting something too otherworldly for her vampire body to withstand. But no. It was simply, reassuringly, Annie. Her Annie. The soul that fit into hers.

Anastasia took both of her hands in hers. Kamilah closed her eyes, inhaled, and when she opened them she saw the power sparkling around Anastasia’s body in the form of massive green wings unfurling. The sight was so magnificent she had to do a double-take. Fully extended, the power would have filled the entire lab and then some, but Anastasia reined them in, close to her body. They shimmered and glowed and looked altogether too beautiful... and a quick glance at their friends was all it took for Kamilah to see how awestruck everyone was as Anastasia somehow manipulated the necklace’s power.

Gorgeous, glowing rays of green light... This was what true beauty and goodness looked like — a spectral, luminescent woman so pure it hurt to look directly at her, like the most glorious eclipse, or maybe Heaven itself. She felt free of everything that weighted her down on Earth. Free of danger, free of any pain she’d ever felt. Free of gravity. And so in love.

The best part of her whole life was right now. This moment was what she would take with her from her journeys through the ages: she was worth everything to her and she was worth everything to her
in turn. The only way to experience that deep level of their love was to enter each new moment together, as if time were made of clouds.

Kamilah reached out and tried to touch the magic with one hand, but her fingers slipped straight through the illusion her wife had moulded for her. The magic was warm and satin smooth on the outside, but inside the little clouds of green smoke, she could feel it was full of power. She could feel it coursing through Anastasia, into her. She felt so close to her, understood her completely — As if for a single fleeting moment they had truly become one.

Then she heard it. The voice. Her brother’s voice... for the first time in more than two thousand years... she heard his voice as clearly as if he was standing right next to her. ‘I am Lysimachus Sayeed. I am Lysimachus Sayeed. Lysimachus Sayeed. Lysi. Hear me. Help me. I am Lysimachus Sayeed and I am alive.’

The voice sank through her skin and straight into her heart. Lysi’s voice. He was calling to her. He loved her. Needed her.

Her heart was pounding impossibly fast. Then she realised she was feeling both of their ancient hearts, racing each other as they had since before their mortal lives had begun. Her and Lysimachus. A kind of desperate conversation, one they couldn’t have with words. A love that had spanned the globe across two millennia and never faded. Connected, still.

Somewhere in the center of her ancient soul, a rusty chain began to unwind. It freed itself, link by rusted link, from where it had rested, unobserved, waiting for him to come home all this time. Her hands, which had been balled up and pressed against the small of Anastasia’s back, unfurled with it. The chain continued to drop, to an unfathomable depth where there was nothing but darkness and the loss she’d felt when Cleopatra had informed her that her brother had been killed in battle. At last it snapped to its full length, anchoring her to something much bigger than herself. Despite the thousands of years that had passed, despite the fact that she had changed so much since the last time he’d seen her, and despite the fact she already knew his memories had been taken from him long ago, as long as she was connected to him and knew that he was out there waiting for her... she knew that she would be okay.

She would fight with and for the only thing she knew was good enough, noble enough, powerful enough to be worth risking everything... Love.

Would she find him?
Without question.
Would she save him?
Always.

“What just happened?,” she whispered in disbelief. “What was... how?”

“It’s just power. Not good or bad without intent behind it,” Anastasia explained. “Toxic intentions make it toxic and good intentions... well... make it good.”

“He’s alive. Where is he?,” she laughed as tears freely poured down both of her cheeks. She couldn’t think about the fact she’d been deceived into believing he was dead. She couldn’t think about what he might’ve been through. He was alive. Her best friend, the better half of her. He was alive and he had already become friends with the love of her life. “Annie, where is he? We have to go to him immediately. Can you restore his memories? He—“
“Yes. When we get to him, I know what I must do,” Anastasia nodded as she took the necklace off and locked it in its case once more, her chest heaving. “They’re in Almaty. I wasn’t able to connect to Cleopatra but I saw through his eyes, they’re at my parents house. She has him locked in my old bedroom... lots of Order soldiers are in the house.”

“Your parents house,” Lily echoed. “Are your parents okay?”

“My parents are in Switzerland right now, as far as I’m aware,” Anastasia replied, leaving out the fact that they were both in a clinic detoxing from years of alcohol abuse. “I can only guess she went there looking for Mama, as she is also a bloodkeeper despite the fact she is mortal. If she needs more of Rheya’s blood... perhaps she assumed she would be an easier target than coming after me again.”

She buried her face in Anastasia’s shoulder. And while the truth that Lysimachus was out there both excited and scared her, being in her arms made her feel like the sea finding its shore, like a traveler returning after a long, hard, distant trip— finally returning home.

“Then we go to Kazakhstan at once,” she said. “I’ve already had to wait so long.”

“How long has it been since you saw him exactly?,” Akeyo asked.

“Not since the twenty-eighth year of my mortal life... but not so long that I’ve forgotten that he’s worth everything. Every sacrifice. Every pain.”

She knew that in order to save her brother, Cleopatra had to die. After what she did to Anastasia, the bitch deserved a slow and painful end. But despite everything, the tiniest most sentimental ember of Kamilah’s heart still loved her cousin... or rather, the memory of the girl she’d been before she’d become queen of Egypt. She hated who she became the moment a crown had been placed on her head. But when the final battle came, she’d kill her. Both she and Cleopatra knew exactly where they stood.

“So, going back to the necklace,” Adrian said. “You said it’s... it’s good?”

“I said the power inside can be used for good, but it is so powerful it tires me to use it for too long and hurts anyone else unless the power is filtered through me,” Anastasia explained. “That’s why they were gorging me with so much vampire blood, to weaken me because they were scared of what would happen if I got my hands on it. The stones were made by Nicolas Flamel, the only mortal man to have achieved immortality without Turning, and embedded with a rare sort of blood magic—“

“Blood magic,” Kano murmured. “Tell me, Anastasia, did Cleopatra and Vlad ever feed on you?”

“Many times.”

“That was how they were able to wear it at all,” the child vampire declared. “With your blood in their system they rendered themselves temporarily immune to its power.”

“Right,” Anastasia nodded. “That’s why Adrian couldn’t touch it without getting sick. That’s why Lysimachus would throw up when Cleopatra used it on him, because he’d neither drank my blood or had me standing in front of him to filter it—“

Across the room, there was a loud clatter. She looked up to see that Lily had literally fallen out of her chair at the shock of everything that had just happened. The last time she'd glanced at her, she'd been leaning back on two legs, and now it looked like gravity had finally won.
As she stumbled to her feet, Serafine went to help her. She glanced over and offered a hurried wave. "She’s okay!" she called cheerily. "Get up and stop mumbling about Harry Potter!," she whispered loudly to Lily.

"Anastasia," Aiko whispered. "Do you know what's coming?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I might not be a very good prophet but I... I think I do."

"And you know that we’ll be with you until the end?;,” Adrian said.

Anastasia smirked. “Always and forever.”

~~~~ 1 Week Earlier - Glamis Castle, Scotland ~~~~

"Kamilah, please let someone help you—“

“No one will dare touch her again!,” Kamilah snarled, cutting Adrian off as she pulled her unconscious wife closer to her chest. Her arms wrapped around Anastasia and she lifted her up, holding her against her, her hands clutching at her back. She’d always been extremely thin and sometimes, it’d worried her terribly, but her bones had never been as pronounced as this.

Kamilah’s face and the back of her neck were slick with sweat, her whole body was shaking, and her shoulder blazed with pain, but she didn’t care. She didn’t care. She didn’t care. She simply stared at the woman in her arms, her fingers brushing over her bruised forehead, her eyebrows, her cheeks, her chapped lips.

The woman who’d looked at her like she was a stranger and tried to slaughter their family. Who didn’t know her own name. Who didn’t know what a wife was. The woman who’d had chains wound around her limbs and protected a pile of corpses the way a wild animal protected its food.

"The very first time I saw you,” Kamilah whispered to Anastasia, “it wasn’t any different than any other time I’ve seen you since. The world was newer, but you were just the same. It was... Love at first sight.” She rested her brow against hers, despite the fact she knew she couldn’t hear her. “Just like always. The only difference was, in the beginning, you were offlimits to me. I was being punished by myself, and I’d fallen for you at the worst possible time. Things were very violent in my life. Because of who... I am... I was expected to stay away from you. You were a distraction. The focus was supposed to be on doing my duty.” She sighed. “And if you haven’t noticed, I’m still very distracted, baby. I love you so much... and I... I will never let anything like this happen to you again. I swear it.”

Something like a sob and a sigh and a moan escaped Kamilah’s exhausted body and she kissed the top of Anastasia’s dirty hair again. Her hair was her prized feature and she cared for it meticulously but now it was greasy and matted with blood and god only knew what else. Her beautiful face had been streaked red with blood. Kamilah never thought she would ever see Anastasia in such a state. It made her hurt.

She pulled her further to her chest and cried into her hair, not caring who saw her or that her expensive suit was now caked with blood. All the throbbing in her head had come back, and the ache in her shoulder, and she felt like her body weight had somehow doubled.

“I’m sorry, my love,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.”
“She really broke this one’s nose and hit him with a blunt instrument,” Lily said as she inspected one of the men that Anastasia had killed.

“Clawed this one’s face to shreds and stabbed him in the lower stomach too,” said Serafine.

Adrian looked across the cell at her in disbelief and picked up a bloody hammer that had been thrown into the corner. “She is so sweet, it’s just hard imagining her swinging a hammer at someone’s head...”

“What have they done to her?,” Kamilah sighed, the necklace that had already made Adrian throw up when he tried to inspect it catching her eye. “Has anyone any idea what sort of magic this is? Kano?”

“I... I can’t say,” the psychic replied as he nudged the charm with the end of a tranquilliser blow pipe they’d found whilst inspecting the dungeons. Anastasia was the only living person in the building. She’d obviously snapped and killed everyone upstairs and here in the dungeons. “Whatever this is its... it’s making accessing my abilities incredibly taxing.”

“A cursed necklace?,,” Lily asked. “Please say it’s a cursed necklace.”

“A curse is only a curse if one allows themselves to be cursed by it, child,” Kano said. “Anyone has the power to free themselves of any curse — curses are merely preludes to blessings.”

There was nothing mean about Kano’s voice. In fact it was almost too nice. Like they were all too dim to grasp whatever was so obvious to him. Which made Kamilah absolutely furious. “Speak plainly,” she growled. “Now is not the time for rhymes and embellishments!”

“He doesn’t know what it is, Kamilah,” Adrian said calmly.

“How could she be so close to it, though?,” Kamilah asked.

“She’s not like us,” Lily said matter of factly. “You know she’s extra in every possible way.”

Kamilah sighed and nodded as she stood up with Anastasia in her arms. She’d already wrapped her frail looking body up in her jacket despite the fact she knew that wrapping her up in her jacket wouldn’t do a damn thing to make this situation any better... she just knew how much her wife liked wearing her clothes.

“What are we going to do with her?,” Aiko asked.

“You have done quite enough,” Kamilah fired back.

“Kamilah—,” Adrian began, only to be cut off.

“Just stop,” she snapped. “Don’t start with me right now. Please. Just let me go find a bathroom so I can clean weeks worth of dirt and blood of off her before we start convincing ourselves she is beyond repair.”

“Do you want a hand, mon amie?,” Serafine asked quietly. “I can try to find her some clean clothes and warm towels whilst you get her into a bath.”

Kamilah simply nodded, as she didn’t have the energy to say another word or smile. Seeing exactly what her wife had been forced to survive, it made her want to stand up next to her and fight. Fight to stay alive long enough to live out a long and happy life next to her. Fight for the only thing she knew that was good enough, noble enough, powerful enough to be, worth risking everything for.
Love. Family. Friendship.

She would not stop until she beat the devils who did this to her. Until every single last one of them was dead.

This fight had begun with absence and desire.

She would see it end with blood and fear.

~~~ 1563 - Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur, France ~~~~

Kamilah didn’t so much as try to conceal her anger and exasperation towards Gaius as the two of them made their way towards the home of a reported seer by the name of Michel de Nostredame. The five most unattractive traits in people were cheapness, clinginess, neediness, unwillingness to change and jealousy. Jealousy was the worst, and by far the hardest to conceal... and the bastard didn’t even try to conceal he disapproved if her attention wandered to the same person more than once.

She’d tried her best stop feeling as terribly as she did, knowing that it wouldn’t end well for her if she kept it up, but she grew wearier of Gaius each and every moment she was forced to spend with him. Her anger, resentment and jealousy of everyone who wasn’t stuck in her position didn’t change the heart of others and it certainly didn’t change the heart of Gaius — it only changed hers. If she even still had one, she assumed her heart was now a withered, darkened old thing... but she felt more like a ghost than a woman these days. A ghost with a beating heart.

Oh, how she envied the mortals. Mortality was the most romantic story ever told. Just one chance to do everything you should. Then, magically, you move on.

“My queen, would you stop frowning? You have such a pretty face. Anger does not become you. What has upset you?”

She knew that if anyone asked her how she was, she was meant to say fine and deny the fact she was upset. She was not meant to want to say that she cried herself to sleep long after dawn because she hadn't spoken to another person besides her abuser in weeks. Fine was what she should say. Yet instead of denying she was upset, she scoffed and yanked her hand out of his reach. The royalty role play had grown tiresome centuries ago but the imbecile just wouldn’t drop it and somehow still did not know her well enough to know she needed her space when she was angry. Some part of her loved him still, the sick and twisted part that refused to accept he’d murdered her and roped her into an unending life of misery and killing. But the sane part of her that realised the fool was obsessed with her and that their relationship was really more of a hostage situation than anything else absolutely loathed him. But where did one start when they wanted to start their life again? Could she ever actually be free of him? He’d have sooner killed her than willingly let her go.

Would love even be so different with someone else? Was love even possible with someone else? Love was supposed to be easy, wasn't it? Then why did she always feel so tormented?

He roughly grabbed her hand and yanked her towards him. It hurt but she would not show him weakness... she couldn’t. “You will answer me when I speak to you.”
“What do you wish for me to say, my king?,” she growled.

“Apolologise,” he ordered. His crimson eyes were rimmed with a thick, shimmering gold shadow, and it shone on his face in the moonlight, making him look like an angry wildcat.

“For what exactly? Ignoring you or having sex with the same woman more than once and then commenting how nice it was to not have to finish myself off? Which one made you feel more emasculated—,” she stopped goading him and let out a sharp hiss of pain as he began squeezing her wrist so hard that her fingers began to go numb. Her bark was always worse than her bite where he was concerned. “Gaius... you are really hurting me—“

“Say you are sorry.”

For a few moments she remained silent, if only to prove that she could as his grip on her arm continued to tighten. One's dignity may have been assaulted at every turn, vandalised and cruelly mocked, but it could never be wholly taken away unless it was surrendered. A quick glance down revealed that his nails had drawn blood and the circulation in her hand had been almost entirely restricted, one more squeeze and her bones would shatter. “I’m sorry,” she forced out through gritted teeth. “Please let go of me—“

“Elaborate.”

“What?,” she gulped.

“For... for betraying you. I should never have allowed that mortal to take me to bed or lied about how good it was when you asked,” she rambled, “I... suppose I was merely jealous that you had bedded a pretty Spaniard last month and wished to make you feel the same way.”

He smiled and let go of her arm, only to gently caress her face with the same hand that was stained with her blood. He was so egotistical that he actually believed everything that came out of her mouth when she was trying to placate his anger... he simply did not have the social intelligence to realise not a word she said rang true. At this point, she’d do and say just about anything to get him to stop hurting her. Anything.

“I will make it up to you tonight, my queen,” he smiled, making Kamilah’s blood run cold. The last thing in the world she wished to do was share herself with him, to pretend she desired him at all and wasn’t on the verge of tears every time he took her to bed and acted like he was doing her a favour. Nothing he did felt good and he cared little about anything besides his own release. It never stopped. He never stopped. He never left her alone.

She said nothing, but gave him the best fake smile she was capable of as she began mentally preparing herself for all the ways he’d violate her once they’d met with the warlock seer. Part of her wanted to run... but she knew there was quite literally nowhere on Earth that he wouldn’t find her. He apparently couldn’t die from being staked with any old piece of wood... she’d seen him survive multiple chest wounds. There was literally nothing she could do to escape his grasp... to become something other than his dark mirror who was valued for her bloodlust and what lay between her legs more than anything else.

Part of her blamed herself that things had gotten this bad between them. Gaius had always been a violent man who thought nothing of taking his temper out on her, and there had been a few times that Kamilah had snapped and hit him back... but she’d stopped doing so once she realised just how cruel he could and would get. She knew now one didn’t have to wait for someone to treat them bad
repeatedly. All it took was once, and if they got away with it that once, if they knew they could treat you like that, then it set the pattern for the future.

She just... she didn’t know what she could do to make everything stop. She hated the person she’d become. She despised the company that she kept. She couldn’t even look at her reflection in the mirror without seeing the catalyst for all of her trust issues, as when she looked in the mirror she met the one person that had betrayed her the most.

“Here,” Gaius said as they came to a stop outside the man’s house. It was an odd thing to see him actually knocking on the door instead of just barging on it, as if behaving like a real king for a moment would conceal the fact he would act like a devil at the first opportunity. He held no respect for mortals, werewolves, or fae, but he had always been wary of witches and warlocks... probably because he knew they were capable of killing him. Magic was desire made real, after all.

“Gaius Augustine. The Second Son. The Undying Centurion,” an elderly man beamed as the wooden door flew open. Immediately Kamilah noted the state of his tangled beard and the eccentric long black robes he was wearing. Typical. Those who bore magic seemed incapable of keeping themselves tidy. The man blurted out most available titles except for ‘Your Majesty’ and ‘King of Darkness.’ These were implied nonetheless. “I received your letters. Nostradamus.”

Gaius reached out to shake the man’s hand. “It is a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance, sir. May I introduce my queen, Kamilah Sayeed.”

“Charmed,” Kamilah said curtly.

Nostradamus’ attention turned to her and his eyes lit up as he reached for her hand. “My, my... you have a touch of destiny about you.”

“I—“

“Please, come in!,” Nostradamus interjected before either she or Gaius could ask any more questions.

He shuffled when he walked and his home was a state... which, given his appearance, wasn’t much of a surprise. All she knew of this man was that he was a scholar and a seer who bore magic. A scholar unlike the majority who had been throwing around absurd theories since the turn of the century. In her experience, academics only ever did one of two things when they discovered information that didn’t fit what they already knew. Either they swept it aside so it didn’t bring their cherished theories into question or they focused on it with laserlike intensity and tried to get to the bottom of the mystery. Nostradamus tended to focus on what he could understand and simply record what he couldn’t as prophecies... interesting, really.

Of course, the mortals who hung on his every word thought him a holy man. Were he a woman he’d have been burnt at the stake for witchcraft... but it was a world of men. Mortals could so easily convince themselves a man who bore magic was a messenger of god, whilst a woman was a devil in a dress for the very same reason. Part of Kamilah wanted to know how mortals managed to come up with a view of the world that had so little magic in it. How they could be so blind to almost everything that went on in plain sight. She needed to understand how they convinced themselves that magic and the supernatural world wasn’t important.

“You play chess,” Gaius said as they sat down at a round table. A chessboard sat in the middle of the table, the pieces positioned in a way that made it clear that a game had been halted half way through.
“Yes. There is more to the game than protecting your queen, you know,” Nostradamus said. He looked at Gaius strangely, in a way Kamilah couldn’t quite figure out, before he turned to her and looked at her the same way. It felt like he was trying to peer into the depths of her soul.

“I don’t understand why people find it so difficult to remember that it’s the king who’s not expendable,” Gaius commented.

“The king just sits there, moving one square at a time,” Nostradamus replied with a dismissive wave of his hand, his eyes never leaving Kamilah. And the way he looked at her was so intense, his big brown eyes probing into her, like he approved of everything she held inside. “The queen can move so freely. I suppose a smart man would rather lose the game than forfeit her freedom.”

She cleared her throat and looked away. It made her uncomfortable when anyone looked at her for too long, never mind a warlock. Kamilah’s desire — for blood and escape, chiefly — was so strong that it put everything else at risk. But vampires weren’t the only beings who had to manage such strong impulses. Much of what qualified as magic bound to someone’s blood was simply desire in action. True witchcraft and wizardry was different — that took spells and rituals. But magic? A wish, a need, a hunger too strong to be denied — these could turn into deeds when they cross a person’s mind... and she had no idea what this man was thinking when he looked at her.

“You know why we’ve come, Nostradamus,” she said, steeling herself to look back at him. “Gaius wishes to know where our kind might find safe haven. The world grows smaller every day, the mortals more dangerous. If you could kindly tell us what we wish to know, we will be on our way.”

“Opportunity is fleeting, experiment dangerous, and judgement difficult,” Nostradamus said casually as he rhythmically rattled his long fingernails against the tabletop. “Safety is inherently transient for those cursed to wander the earth for eternity.”

“We are well aware of that, sir,” Gaius responded, slamming his fist against the table. “The Order of The Dawn are a shadow upon every wall. They chase us across every horizon. Torment us. Poison the minds of mortals and do all that they can to ensure bad hunting. There must be somewhere we can be free.”

Despite Gaius’ tantrum, Nostradamus didn’t even turn to look at him. Instead he continued watching her, and she thought the old man was either incredibly foolish or braver than she’d initially pegged him as. “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives,” he said stoically, his eyes boring into Kamilah. “It is the one that is most adaptable to change.”

“Answer the question,” Kamilah urged him. She knew Gaius would snap and kill him if he didn’t tell him what he wanted to know, if he wasn’t satisfied with his answer. The last thing they needed was to be on the run from people with magic as well as mortals.

She glanced towards Gaius, who she could tell was absolutely fuming. His anger was so intense it practically radiated off of his skin in waves, poising the air around him. He didn’t even have to speak or do anything to convey the fact he was seconds away from tearing the seer’s head from his shoulders. The most terrifying monsters always looked just like ordinary men.

She watched in silence as the parts of him she knew and had convinced herself that she had ever actually loved dearly — the poet and the scientist, the warrior and the adventurer, the king and the leader — fell away until only the darkest, most forbidding parts of him that she feared remained. He was only the monster now. But he was still the man she had to act like she loved in order to survive.
Loneliness in a crowd of people was the worst kind of loneliness, but she couldn't help it. She felt so, so damn lonely.

“Gaius,” she whispered. “Please, my king. Be patient.”

He looked at her and nodded. “I will give you the honours if he doesn’t comply, my queen.”

She froze. The last thing she wanted to do was torture an elderly man into talking. “Nostradamus... please. There must be somewhere—“

“A land still known best by those mortals who already call it home. Where no vampire has ever tread,” the old man said. “Another century of storms will rage and oceans roar, until you stand on sea and shore. As you blow the wondrous horn, old worlds die and new be born.”

“The new world?,” Gaius echoed, a sadistic smile spreading across his face. “So it is possible. A safe haven for vampires for me to rule as I choose.”

Kamilah resisted the urge to scoff. How he could possibly be so foolish... she just didn’t know.

Nostradamus nodded and looked back at her. “Be careful, Kamilah... You are a creature of the crossroads, neither here nor there. ’Tis a dangerous place for a lady to be.”
Chapter Notes

Inspired by; The Call by Regina Spektor.

Not many people knew Kamilah well enough to be able to tell when she wasn’t feeling great within herself at a single glance. Given her reputation, it was all too easy to think that her sudden and unprompted fits of temper or withdrawing into herself to the point she was almost nonverbal were just Kamilah being Kamilah. But Anastasia knew better.

She knew that when Kamilah had grown impatient with everyone for seemingly no reason, it was an inward condition that had metastasised to the point she couldn’t control it. She’d always bottled most things up until it led to one spectacular meltdown that usually ended up with the two of them drinking or sparring to eke out her frustrations whilst she tried to verbalise exactly what it was that was bothering her. But even being as gentle and tentative as Kamilah was towards Anastasia when she was the one feeling down, she was a woman who’d been abused for the better part of two thousand years... and because of that she wasn’t always capable of treating herself the same way or expressing herself.

All one really had to do when she got like that was be a good listener and make her feel safe. Nobody really wanted to keep secrets, not even Kamilah. She wanted to be able to talk about what she was feeling. She left clues everywhere, and if one payed attention, it was easy to piece them together and help her out.

For a long moment the Bloodkeeper simply watched her wife, who hadn’t yet noticed she was awake. Everyone else had fallen asleep long ago and Adrian’s jet was filled with a chorus of soft snores as they soared towards Kazakhstan. With more than eighteen hours of travel ahead of them, with stops to refuel, it was no surprise that almost everyone had indulged in a few cocktails to wash down a Nyquil that would relax them enough to actually rest peacefully. But Kamilah obviously hadn’t slept. The two of them were crammed onto one of the twin beds that could unfold between two of the chairs, their favourite fluffy blanket from home haphazardly draped across their bodies. Kamilah’s eyes were focused out of the large window, gazing off into the stars. So many stars, it seemed like a celebration, a grand, illicit party the galaxy was holding after the humans had been put to bed.

“Can’t sleep, love?”

“It’s beautiful out there.”

She smiled and there was a small hesitation, before she asked, "The sky?"

"The sky is gorgeous up this high, this intense black colour." She pressed her fingers to the glass and traced the wavy patterns on the horizon. “Truth be told I... I can’t stop thinking,” Kamilah sighed, adjusting herself on the narrow bed so that their brows were touching on the pillow. “Is it
wrong of me to be nervous to see him again? I feel... ridiculous. It’s Lysi. I shouldn’t feel like this.”

“No. Nothing that you are thinking or feeling is wrong, and being nervous doesn’t make you weak or silly,” she assured her. “Two thousand years is a long time not to see someone, even if it is your twin brother.”

Kamilah nodded her head and let out a shaky breath. Some of the tension that had gathered in her limbs visibly eased up, the way it always did when she was neither ridiculed or punished for what she was feeling... when she was actually listened to without being dismissed. When she spoke again her voice was fragile and so paper thin that she hardly sounded like herself at all, “Annie, what if he doesn’t like me? What if— What if he hates the person I’ve become and decides he wants nothing to do with me?”

“Kami—“

“I don’t regret a second. Not one moment of everything I’ve been through... because it is what lead us to find one another. Everything happens the way it’s supposed to. But that... doesn’t mean Lysi will approve of anything I’ve done. When he finds out who I became when I was with Gaius and what he did to me—“

“Kamilah,” Anastasia interjected, stopping her before she could blame herself for what Gaius did to her. “The way Gaius treated you was not your fault, nor does it make you weak or cowardly. You are not to blame for the things he gaslighted you into believing—“

“But I still did horrible things,” Kamilah winced. “I knew what I was doing. I chose to kill and cast a reign of terror wherever I roamed. At first I didn’t want to but when I realised he’d hurt me less I started to enjoy it. What does that say about me?”

“People will do almost anything to make the pain stop, Kami. I know I did when I was at Glamis. If you’re hurt and hopeless enough you do things you know are wrong because you’re desperate for any kind of relief you can find. Does it make you a bad person? No. Bad people don’t feel bad about the things they do, they don’t try to change.” She caressed her cheek. “The amount of strength it took for you to become the version of yourself that you are now is astonishing. The Kamilah Sayeed that I know and that Lysimachus will come to know is smart, kind, loyal, and funny. She is... the best person I’ve ever known.”

When Kamilah pressed her lips to hers, Anastasia’s breath hitched in her throat. It happened the way the sun rose, the way a flower blossomed, the way fain fell from the sky, the way the dead stopped breathing. Naturally. Inevitably.

There was a dark resource within everyone, a reservoir of hurt and pain and anger upon which people drew when the need arose. Most people rarely, if ever, had to delve too deeply into it. That was as it should be, because dipping into it cost and you lost a little of yourself each time, a small part of all that was good and honourable and decent about you. Kamilah often spoke of how each time a person used it they had to go a little deeper, a little further down into the blackness. Strange creatures moved through its depths, illuminated by a burning light from within and fueled only by the desire to survive and to kill. The danger in diving into that pool, in drinking from that dark water was that one day you may submerge yourself so deeply that you could never find the surface again. Give in to it entirely and you’d be lost forever.

Sometimes, Kamilah just had to be reminded she’d had the strength to claw herself back out.

“You’re a lot like he is, you know,” she whispered whilst gently stroking the length of Kamilah’s hair with the side of her fingers. “Even in the position we were in at Glamis, he was so kind to me
and so strong... just like he is in all of the stories you’ve told me about him.”

“Really?,” Kamilah smiled.

Anastasia nodded. “All he wants is to know who he is, where he comes from, and to find a place to call home. Can you imagine how thrilled he’ll be when I restore his memories and finds out that you’re there to greet him? Just think how surprised he’ll be when he finds out you’ve taken care of the little toy horse all this time!”

Kamilah actually laughed at that, her laugh watery and her eyes overly bright. “I just... I can’t believe he’s actually alive. That he’s really out there waiting for me. That I’ll—,” he voice cracked and a few tears spilled over her lash line. “I’ve missed him since the moment he left for war. I’ve missed him so much... and I never thought I’d see him again.”

“I know you have, my love,” she murmured, wiping her tears away with her thumb. “When your memories are taken like that, you might not know exactly who it is that you’re missing but you know you’re missing someone important. He told me quite a few times that he felt like he missed someone... and I’m willing to bet that someone is you.”

“I’m really going to see him again,” Kamilah murmured, as if trying to convince herself that this wasn’t some cruel joke the universe was playing on her. She shook her head in disbelief and laughed again. “He’ll like our garden, I believe. He always loved botany.”

“Between the two of you, I’m sure the garden will rival Marcel’s in no time.”

“He collected swords when we were young,” Kamilah said, excitedly. Her earlier anxiety fading away as she thought of all the possibilities that would come from reuniting with Lysimachus. “He’ll enjoy my collection of daggers... perhaps even add to it.”

“Great,” Anastasia replied sarcastically. “Another Sayeed with a fetish for sharp and pointy objects. Please tell me I won’t have to worry he’ll inadvertently stab someone every time he leaves the house.”

A huge toothy smile spread across Kamilah’s face and she shook her head. “He was always much more levelheaded than me. If anything, he’ll join you in lecturing me every time I threaten someone with the business end of my blades.”

They shared a laugh at that and Kamilah nuzzled further into the warmth of Anastasia’s body. “Your brother loves you dearly. You know he does,” she whispered. “No stretch of time is too long to diminish a love like that. I’m willing to bet that things go back to exactly how they were the moment he sees you... it’ll be like no time has passed at all.”

“Not exactly how they were. Better than we ever imagined things could be, I hope,” Kamilah murmured, giving her a tight squeeze. “There’s a third member of the Sayeed family to account for now.”

She huffed in amusement. “Thank god I already know he likes me or I’d be freaking the hell out right now.”

Kamilah smiled softly. “It means a lot to me that the two of you are friends. He never approved of anyone I chose to spend time with in Egypt. He was always very supportive of my sexuality and never would have stopped me from experimenting but in his eyes, nobody was ever good enough for me. And he was almost always right about everyone, too, as most people cared more about my proximity to the throne than they did for me.”
“Idiots,” Anastasia huffed.

Kamilah chuckled. “I was looking for you the whole time, I think. That’s why I could never settle or find some semblance of inner peace — I can have none without your presence in my heart... and I think I always knew that. Deep down I always knew I was missing something... I just didn’t know it’d take wandering the earth and more than two thousand years to find it. To find you. With you, I feel whole for the first time in my life. Like there’s hope somehow. I forgot that it even existed. You gave me hope.”

“It’s crazy to think how much it took for us to find each other. To think of everything that could have happened differently in those two thousand years that would’ve stopped it from happening.” She moved forward and pressed her forehead to hers, the sweetest, spellbound feeling spilling from her heart. “I need you, too, Kami. I would rather have had this moment with you — just this one night — than centuries with someone else. This is where I’m supposed to be.”

Kamilah sighed happily and gave her another kiss. “Tell me what you’re thinking about. I won’t be able to sleep... would you just...”

“Talk to you?”

“Mhm. About everything. Anything. Let me hear that beautiful accent... it relaxes me.”

“Okay,” Anastasia smirked as she brushed her thumb across her bottom lip. “I’m thinking about fucking your mouth, to be exact.”

“Of course you are,” Kamilah beamed, a soft blush rising to her cheeks.

“I am.”

She snorted. “Stop looking at my mouth.”

Anastasia’s eyes darkened, as she saw her wife’s pupils dilate. She mouthed back, just as silently. “What if I don’t want to stop looking at your mouth?”

“I suppose I’ll have to think up an appropriate punishment,” Kamilah whispered, her lips brushing against hers with every word. “I can’t have my good girl acting out, now can I?”

“In that case, I’m just gonna keep looking at your mouth and let you think up the most sadistic punishment you can think of. Okay?”

Kamilah snorted and playfully nipped at her jaw. “That’s a dangerous game... but are you sure that after everything you’d still want to indulge in that sort of play? I’d understand if you wanted to tone things down for a while.”

“I trust you.” She sighed happily. “That sort of stuff is fun when it’s with you because I know you’ll stop the minute I tell you to and you know what my hard limits are... and you don’t ever push them. You make me feel safe.”

“That’s all that matters to me.”

~~~~ Almaty, Kazakhstan ~~~~
“Girl, you might’ve mentioned Almaty is cold as balls in winter!,” Lily lamented. “Fuck me side ways, if I wasn’t dead already I’d get hypothermia and drop dead at your feet. How the hell are you wearing over the knee socks and not freezing to death?”

Anastasia couldn’t help but smile as she lead the ragtag group of shivering vampires through the woods that surrounded her parents property. For a long time she had wanted to bring everyone home, not necessarily to meet her family... just to show them the country that she loved so much. The smell of woodsmoke and old snow pushed back her long red hair as they trudged through the blanket of fresh powder that covered the ground. The magic that came with being home did that. It wasted her away. Once it gripped her by the ear, the real world got quieter and quieter, until she could hardly hear it at all.

“I’m used to it. We’ll get you a large glass of Koumiss after this,” she replied, glancing down at the inappropriate outfit she’d chosen. An all black get up with a leather jacket Jax had gifted her, and over the knee socks with a short tight skirt might’ve been good for getting into Kamilah’s pants, but it was a terrible choice for this. “It’ll warm you right up.”

“What the hell is Koumiss?,” Lily asked.

Anastasia snorted. “You don’t wanna know... but it’s alcoholic, that’s all that matters.”

“So... the plan is to observe and, perhaps, reach Lysimachus. We are not getting into a fight tonight,” Adrian said. “Aiko, Akeyo, and Kano are approaching the property from the South side, and The Evolved and Henry are surveying the surrounding area for possible outposts and threats. Kamilah—”

“I have already sworn I will not try to reach my brother or attack Cleopatra until we are sure it is safe to do so,” Kamilah interjected. “Have I ever given you a reason not to trust me in battle?”

“It has been an emotional few weeks... and you did insist upon decapitating every soldier you executed when we were searching for Anastasia. I just don’t want your emotions to cloud your judgement.”

“She’ll be fine,” Anastasia said quickly, before Kamilah could so much as open her mouth to snap back. “I have the necklace in my bag and my abilities are getting stronger by the minute. Even if anyone does think about going off the rails, I can stop it.” She took a deep breath. “When we get to the edge of the woods, I’m going to try to slip inside Lysimachus’ mind. I’ll be close enough to talk to him... I don’t know if I’ll be able to restore his memories from here but I’m going to try.”

“Lily and Adrian will observe the Order soldiers,” Serafine said. “And I will try to penetrate their minds... see what I can find out.”

“I’ll guard you, Annie,” Kamilah said, “and keep a look out for my treacherous cousin.”

“If we somehow get separated, we meet back at Esentai Mall... if it takes you longer than half an hour to get there then we have to assume the worst. Don’t go back to the hotel unless you have me, Serafine, or Kano with you... we have to be sure we’re not being followed,” Anastasia added. “And if someone does get captured... just... just stay strong and know that we’ll come for you as soon as we can and I’ll erase whatever traumatic memories you want me to. No man left behind.”

“If any of you fuckers even think about dying on me, I’ll raise you back up just to kill you myself,” Lily muttered. “Stay alive.”

The rest of the walk was quiet, the freezing cold air thick with tension. The snow was falling
straight and slow, adding another layer to the drifts and covering roads, trees, bushes, and bodies, the living and the dead as one beneath its silvery veil. It reminded her far too much of the earliest days of her childhood, when she’d spend her every waking moment darting between the trees regardless of the weather in the hopes that if she ran fast enough she’d somehow outrun all of her problems. She was as scared now as she had been back then, but now she knew that being scared wasn’t the problem. It was not running away from the things that scared her that was the hard part.

At the edge of the woods, Serafine, Adrian and Lily split off from the group. A pang of anxiety shot through Anastasia’s chest as she watched them disappear into the trees. You never knew what would happen when someone left in days like these. Sometimes, she thought that she concerned herself so much with the possibility of losing the people she loved that she never truly took pleasure in the fact of their existence as much as she should’ve done.

They knew Lysimachus was being kept upstairs in Anastasia’s old attic bedroom, the circular window looked out onto the backyard and over the treetops. So Anastasia picked a particularly thick area of fir trees and shrubbery for them to hunker down behind whilst she attempted to see what age could accomplish.

“I can’t promise I won’t pass out... this thing may amplify my abilities but it drains me just as much,” Anastasia said to Kamilah as she carefully removed the necklace from its box and draped it around her neck. “I’ve never attempted something this big with it...”

“If you pass out, I will carry you back to the hotel,” Kamilah replied, unsheathing her daggers and standing protectively at her back. “Good luck, baby. I’m right here.”

Anastasia closed her eyes and took a series of deep breaths, and then wrapped both of her hands around the pendant. Tapping into the deep well of the powers bound to her blood had her heart develop a kind of amnesia, where it remembered everything but itself. For a moment she had reached the point of ecstasy that she had always wanted to reach in her training, which felt like the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows, and wonderment in the bleakness of the mortal realm, and the sensation of death kicking at her heels to move on, with a phantom dogging its own heels, and the potent and inconceivable radiances of the world that most people never noticed shining bright in her mind like a thousand diamonds.

“Mach,” she whispered inside her head, over and over again. It felt wrong to use the name Cleopatra had given him, as opposed to his real name... but until he had his memories back that was the name she knew she should use. It was all he knew.

“Anastasia?” She heard his voice echoing inside her head, his confusion so intense it was almost dizzying. “You’re... I’m going crazy—“

“You’re not going crazy, my friend. I’m inside you’re head,” she replied. “We’ve come to rescue you.”

“We? You’re... you’re you again?”

“I’m me again. My wife found me and we managed to restore my memories,” she explained. “We’re in the woods outside the house observing what’s going on, my family and my friends.”

“There’s... there’s a lot of soldiers here, Anastasia. Many more than we ever saw at Glamis. You have to be careful, if they capture you again—“

“I know. We see them.” She sighed and looked at the encampment that had been set up on her parents land... with all the perils that came with living on such a secluded piece of property,
somehow this was the very last thing that anyone would think could happen. “We’re watching them now, taking notes from every angle. It might take us a day or two to come up with a proper plan of attack but I promise we’re coming for you.”

“I never thought I’d see you again, my friend,” he said. “I still don’t remember much—“

“I can help. If you’ll let me. I can help. I know who you are... and I have someone here who I know you’ll want to see.”

“How? Who?”

“It’s a surprise. Do you trust me?”

“More than I can recall trusting anyone. Do what you must.”

“Come to the window.”

A few seconds was all it took for Lysimachus to appear at her bedroom window, free of the mask that had cruelly covered his face at Glamis. There was a choked sobbing sound beside her as Kamilah fell to her knees on the snow, a hand covering her mouth to try and stop the sound from travelling.

She reached back to grab onto her hand, to draw from the strength of her connection to Lysimachus as she delved into his mind. After having performed a similar stunt on Gaius, she knew exactly what she was looking for... and even if she hadn’t known what a psychic block looked like it wouldn’t have taken long to figure out. A dark web was interwoven throughout his mind, tangling all his earliest memories in an abyss of pain and terror.

A lifetime was but a moment in that place, and each mind was a maze that she could easily get lost in. She slipped from present to past, sliding down the snake heads of memory into what was and what would never be again. In the darkness Anastasia closed her eyes and focused all her energy on the blackness before her, as all that was lost was found again.

She came out of her trance covered in sweat and trembling so much that Kamilah had to hold her upright, but she mustered enough energy to raise a hand to her wife’s temple. “Talk to him.” she mumbled through laboured breaths, her nose beginning to bleed under the mental strain. “I don’t... I can’t hold the connection for long. Talk.”

“Kamilah,” Lysimachus sobbed, placing his hands against the cool glass of the window.

“Lysi,” cried Kamilah. “At last.”

"You found me," he whispered. “You and Anastasia. You found me.”

"Always.” With a trembling hand, Kamilah rummaged around in her pocket and produced the small toy horse in her palm. She held it where he could see, and he let out a watery laugh, his forehead resting against the window. “I can’t believe it’s really you. There’s so much I—“

“I know. Me too,” he replied. “I am so sorry for leaving to fight in cousin’s ridiculous war. I should’ve listened to you. I never should’ve left.”

“Lysi... don’t be sorry. I’m the one who should be sorry for believing a word she said when she told me you were dead. I should’ve searched for you.”

They both let out identical choked sobs, each running a trembling hand through their hair the same
way. When Lysimachus spoke, his voice trembled, “I am sorry for all of the ways that I failed you. I am sorry that I was not there to save you from Gaius Augustine, or to die alongside you fighting him. I am sorry that I couldn’t escape her, and that you kept me with you so long, trapped in your heart, bound in sorrow and remorse that was never yours to bear.”

“I forgive you. I forgive you for leaving me, and I forgive you for not returning...”

“And I forgive you for your anger, and your grief,” he said. “Let this be an end to it. Let us leave it in the past and focus on building ourselves a better future... where we will be free of Cleopatra once and for all.”

She nodded, her eyes darting between Anastasia and her brother. “My wife—“

“Is wonderful,” Lysimachus interjected, beaming with pride. “My first friend in over two thousand years... the first to show me a shred of kindness... the one who saved me. I do believe you have finally found a woman who is worthy of your heart, sunshine.”

Anastasia laughed weakly, her eyes darting down to the blood stained snow in front of her as blood continued to gush from her nose. “We don’t have much time. Mach— Lysimachus—“

“Lysi,” Lysimachus said. “You are my sister now, and family calls me Lysi.”

“Lysi,” Anastasia smiled up at her bedroom window as the world began to spin. She met his eyes. Those crimson eyes, even after everything that had happened since first meeting whilst chained to a wall in a dungeon felt like family, like safety, like home. There was an undeniable charm about him, not merely the knowledgable airs of one who had seen all of the worst life had to offer, but the blaze of someone who managed to believe in change, in spite of the hardships he had faced. “We’re coming back for you. I swear it. You— You have to keep acting the same way. Don’t let her know you know who you are. She can’t know we’re coming... just be ready for us.”

“I shall,” he nodded. “You two take care of one another.”

“I love you,” Kamilah sniffled. “We’ll return as quickly as we can.”

“I don’t doubt it and I love you, too.” He smiled warmly. “Don’t cry for me. No more tears. We’ll be together again soon and then we will never be parted again.”

“Until another day, brother.”

Anastasia’s breath hitched in her throat. Kamilah had told her that her social sect in Egypt had once had a dozen ways to say hello in her native language, but there was no official word for good-bye.

When it came to parting ways, they sometimes said ‘in peace you go’, but more often than not they chose to say ‘until another day’. Until another day had been a saying for strangers in the street, and lovers between meetings, for parents and children, friends and family. It softened the blow of leaving. Eased the strain of parting. A careful nod to the certainty of today, and the mystery of tomorrow. When a friend left, with little chance of seeing home again, they said until another day. When a loved one was dying, they said until another day. When corpses were entombed, bodies given back to the earth and souls to the gods, those grieving said until another day.

Until another day brought solace. And hope. And the strength to let go and go on.

It wasn’t a good-bye, not really. It was a see you later.

“Until another day, my dear sisters,” Lysimachus whispered.
Letting the connection drop and allowing Kamilah to carry her back through the woods was been the easiest part of leaving, despite the fact Anastasia had naturally assumed it would be the most impossible feat. As it turned out, willing herself not to look back was much harder.

As they moved back through the maze of trees, down the gentle slope of the foothills her childhood home had been built on, she was relaxed by being amongst the trees. She’d always loved the serene brutality of it, loved the electric power she felt with each breath of fresh, mountainous air. But even her love of the woods was not enough to stop her eyes from flickering to the house that crowned the property once more, and she thought she could almost make out the shape of a man standing alone at the highest window. At this distance, he was little more than a shadow, but she could see the hungry crimson of his eyes glinting in the darkness.

Anastasia raised her hand, and so did Lysimachus, a single unspoken saying between them.

Until another day.

~~~~ Seven Years Earlier - New York, NY ~~~~

“You called her darling? And she let you?,” Jax snorted as he adjusted the leather jacket he’d had made for her to match his. As it turned out, dying and taking four days to Turn scared the shit out of people. Everyone had been far too over attentive since she’d come back from the grave, but Anastasia had decided not to protest too much... better to let them get it out of their systems.

“She likes it, thank you very much.” She rolled her eyes. “Are pet names not a normal thing in vampire relationships?”

“She put me in a coma for three days when I called her that as a joke one time back in the 1860s! My balls never recovered from her smashing them into my spine!,” Adrian lamented into his glass of scotch.

“That explains so much,” Jax said dryly.

Adrian shot him a glare that would have soured milk before looking back at his assistant as she flitted around the office with a glass of wine in her hand. He had told her that he wanted her to take it easy, but Anastasia had decided to ignore him. Allowing herself to be babied for the sake of others mental health was one thing but she wasn’t about to sit around idly for the hell of it.

“She loves you a great deal, you know,” Adrian said. “Kamilah... she’s always been a— how do I put this nicely—“

“Aaaaw,” teased Jax. “Did Adrian just say literally the most obvious thing—“
Anastasia cringed. Men. They were impossible. "He did not— that wasn’t—“ She balled her fists against her sides. "Can we get back to these invoices—“

"Is she blushing? She sounds like she's blushing."

"She's blushing," Adrian confirmed, taking a long sip of his drink. "Please tell me you’re not that oblivious. She calls you Annie, for crying out loud!"

"That hardly means she loves me—"

"She fucking Turned you and lets you call her whatever the hell you want and just looks at you like the sun shines out your ass when you do!,” Jax practically howled with laughter. “Not to mention that she stood by the sarcophagus the whole time you were in it and threatened to stab anyone who got within ten feet of you—"

"I’m sure you’re exaggerating—"

"He’s not,” Adrian cut in. “At all."

"At all?,“ Anastasia echoed. Kamilah Sayeed was the fantasy of every queer girl in the world who’d once been a proud member of the Twilight fandom — never realising that vampires were real and that she’d ever actually become one of them. Kamilah was so far out of her league, her world, that she should have stopped thinking about her the second she’d met her. Should have stopped thinking about her immediately after she’d threatened to drink her blood, instead of becoming embarrassingly turned on by the thought. If she were at all professional she should never think about her again, except maybe as her boss’ best friend — and the woman who’d saved her life.

And yet, the memory of her fingers against her skin refused to fade.

It was still so bizarre to her that Kamilah even gave her the time of day. Here she was, a twenty-two year old idiot who struggled to speak English coherently whenever she so much as looked at her... and they’d somehow been dating for close to a year. She was somehow happier than she’d ever been and had noticed that Kamilah seemed much happier and more at peace with her own existence than she had when they’d met. She was now a fucking vampire, for crying out loud... which in itself was going to take a minute to get used to... but on top of all that, the thought that Kamilah might actually love her back— She necked the rest of her glass of wine in a bid to wrap her head around it.

Relationships had never worked well for her. People liked her well enough until they realised just how quirky she really was. The cheeriness, the humming, the giggling, the optimism, the little Kazakh cultural quirks she refused to drop, and the ‘being a morning person’ thing — or ‘dusk person’, now that she was a vampire — would then begin to wear on them. Eventually, they tended to get frustrated with her all the time, would try to change her, and then they left... so the fact that hadn’t yet happened with Kamilah...

“The way she is with you, who she is with you,” Adrian said, stilling her with a hand on her shoulder, “I’ve never seen her this way. She might not have told you that she loves you yet, but she does. You mean more to her than anyone I’ve ever known—“

“But Gaius—“

“No,” he interjected. “She never smiled with him, Anastasia. She never got excited whenever she heard someone mention his name. She never protected him as fiercely as she tries to protect you—
she stood guard at the side of the sarcophagus for more than twenty-four hours with her daggers drawn... even after we buried you she—“ He cut himself off and abruptly looked away.

“We had to drag her from the graveyard,” Jax interjected, “kicking and screaming. It was like someone had torn her heart from her chest. I haven’t seen someone cry like that since my grandpa died and my grandma was left alone after sixty-six years of marriage. You don’t cry like that for anyone but the person you love.”

“Do you love her?,” Adrian asked.

“Yes,” she confessed quietly. “Honestly, it feels like I’ve loved her since the moment I met her. The first time I saw her it was like something I didn’t know I’d been missing clicked into place and the world made more sense than it did before. It sounds ridiculous—“

“I felt that way with my beloved Eleanor,” Adrian smiled sadly. “Kamilah looks at you the way I used to look at Ellie. You can see it in her eyes... you’re it for her.”

“Make sure you have an open bar at the wedding,” Jax smirked. “Since you all appreciate my karaoke skills, I’ll perform. Just don’t make me wear a tux or ask me to sing anything released after 1996.”

Anastasia huffed and playfully shoved him off her desk so she could continue neatening up her work space.

“Hey, don’t interrupt my protective big brother bit,” Jax laughed. “I’m being emotional and telling you your girlfriend is good enough for you.”

“You’re tipsy,” she laughed. She secretly loved how Jax had taken her under his wing the moment he met her, becoming the protective big brother she’d always wanted and needed. "And its not like it's that hard," she said, looking up at him after sitting her little penguin snow globe back down on her desk. "To be good enough for me."

"Yes," he said. "Yes, it is.”
Dawn was the time when nothing breathed, the hour of silence and stillness, of pure serenity. Everything was transfixed, only the light seemed to move as it rose in the distance above the Zailysky Alatau mountains. Kamilah stood at the large windows of the penthouse suite they’d rented at the Ritz-Carlton, her arms crossed over her chest as she watched the snow falling outside and waited with bated breath for Adrian, Serafine, and Lily to arrive back. Something had to be amiss. Adrian was never anything but irritatingly punctual.

She glanced over her shoulder at her wife, who’d been passed out from exhaustion on the couch since they’d arrived back, and at the Five, who’d returned not long after they had. For a moment she simply watched Anastasia curled up in the foetal position beneath her blazer. Fast asleep, dreams moving behind her restless eyelids. She wished she knew what she was thinking, wished she could see where she went in her dreams. But most of all she wished she could slip into her head and see the world the way she did.

All night Kamilah had been watching her sleeping, monitoring her every breath and heartbeat after the exhaustion had sank into her bones once again and made her feel body feel weak. She endured what was unbearable for the benefit of others, and she bore it without complaint. Kamilah had watched the moonlight come and go, casting its shadows across her face in black and white. She’d never seen anything more beautiful.

Heaving a sigh, she looked back out the window and tried to think of anything besides Lysimachus or the fact that their family was missing in action. Overruling the impulse to charge into Anastasia’s parents home to reach Lysi before formulating a proper plan was unbearable. So she watched the quiet city as the night rolled into day, seeing an occasional smoky smudge against the fresh blanket of snow as someone went about their life with no idea a vampire war was brewing a few miles away.

Once the world had been so full of wonders, but despite the supernatural world no longer being concealed, it was no secret that the world belonged to humans now. The creatures of the night had lived for centuries in the shadows; fae, vampires, werewolves, and witches. Hiding in plain sight, fearful of discovery, ill at ease even with each other. It was still so strange to think that people knew of their existence.

“You are worried for their well-being,” Aiko said as she joined her at the window. She stood a safe distance away and didn’t look at her, her eyes focusing on the world of mortals as it began to spring to life on the other side of the glass.

“Oh, Indeed.”
Aiko nodded. “Anastasia,” she said after a few moments of the biggest and most awkward silence in the history of awkward silences, “is she well? Her nose took a while to stop bleeding, even after she fed.”

“She strained herself far too much helping Lysimachus,” she responded. “Once the migraine wears off she’ll be fine.”

Another silence. Kamilah had always thought that silence was peaceful — or, rather, when she was alone with her wife it was. The two of them could be together comfortably in silence and it would never become awkward... but this... it was so awkward it bordered on being physically nauseating.

“I am sorry, you know,” Aiko whispered after a moment. “For the trouble that I caused between the two of you.”

Kamilah glanced at her then, but Aiko didn’t notice. There were only two emotions that kept the world spinning year after year. One was fear. The other was desire. As much as she’d wanted to believe that Aiko was an evil bitch, she knew that wasn’t the case — all of the time, at least. She’d merely had desire inside her heart, and she indulged it. Heartbroken people would always indulge it in foolish ways.

“I’m not sorry for leaving you, because we both know it had to happen... but I am sorry for doing it the way I did,” she said eventually, knowing an apology was probably well overdue. “Sometimes one must choose whether to be kind or honourable. Sometimes one cannot be both.”

“Why did you leave?,” Aiko whispered. “You never gave me a reason. You merely said it was a hard choice... but in the end that was the choice you made, and it doesn't matter how hard it was for you to make it. It only matters that you did.”

“We snuck around behind Gaius’ back for a century. I cared for you deeply but I was broken inside... my whole life since the moment he murdered me was all lies and secrets. Aiko, they are like a cancer in the soul. They eat away what is good and leave only destruction behind.” She ran a hand through her hair. “I was missing something that you couldn’t give me. I don’t necessarily know what that something was, all I know is that I had never felt whole until the moment I found Anastasia.”

“You hurt everyone,” breathed Aiko. “Everyone whose life you touch.”

“Not her,” Kamilah whispered. “I hurt everyone but her. And I never actually meant to hurt you the way I did. It just... happened.”

“What does she have that I don’t?”

“You’re asking me why I love her?,” Kamilah laughed weakly. “It’d be easier to explain to you why water is wet than to verbalise the intricacies of my feelings for her.” She sighed. “There was a moment back when she was mortal and hadn’t yet shown any interest in Turning, and I pictured having her for fifty, sixty more years. I thought I might be ready then to let her go. Convinced myself I would be fine. But as time went on she became Annie, MY Annie... and then Gaius murdered her right in front of me and I held her in my arms as she bled to death. The silence after her heart stopped beating was deafening and I realised that I wouldn’t be any more ready to lose her at that moment than I would be in fifty or sixty years. Which was not at all.”

“So you Turned her,” Aiko whispered, “because you couldn’t face a life without her.”

“Without her this world is meaningless to me.”
Aiko looked at her sadly, then glanced towards Anastasia. The way she looked back at her...

Kamilah got it then. Aiko wasn’t just obsessed with her, as she’d suspected. She was actually still in love with her the way she had been back in the thirteenth century, and it was killing her. She wouldn’t get over her. She couldn’t.

Perhaps there were some memories that seemed insignificant to one person, but were monumental in another’s mind. Some things that time simply would not erase... Forever may not be long enough to make the pain of some losses forgettable, only bearable.

“Since I met you and I asked you to Turn me, everything I’ve done has been in part because of you. I can't untie myself from you, Kamilah — not my heart or my blood or my mind or any other part of me,” Aiko sighed. “But I feel like you’ve always sort of hated me, even when we were together. When sex was involved, it felt like I was the only person in the world you wanted to see, and it felt like you wanted to be with me. But when sex was over, so was the way you looked at me.”

“I don't hate you, Aiko. I hated you when you sent an army to capture me after I left you, and when you kissed me and hurt my wife, and it’d upset me to hear you say terrible things about her... which made me so angry that I thought that I hated you,” she explained. “But I don’t... I don’t hate you. I just can’t like you very much whilst the wound is still fresh.”

"I don't hate you, either."

“I'm glad to hear that—"

"I wish I could hate you," Aiko interjected. Her voice was calm despite the fact her eyes were sick with misery and centuries old pain. "I want to hate you, though. I try so hard to hate you. It would be so much easier if I did hate you. If I could. Sometimes I manage to convince myself that I do hate you and then I see you and I—"

“And you what?"

"What do you think?" Aiko shook her head and looked away from her. "Why should I tell you everything about how I feel when you’ve never told me anything? I told you back then that being with you was like running up against a brick wall, only I can’t make myself stop. I still love you but I... I want to fucking hate you. I hate myself for not being able to hate you. I want to hate her too, and I’ve tried... but, good god, I can’t. Do you know how hard it is to dislike her, even a little bit?"

“Indeed. I was foolish enough to try, once, for about five minutes.”

“Out of the three of us, she is actually the person I like most. I can’t find one thing about her that I dislike.”

Kamilah nodded. “She’s nothing but goodness.”

“She is,” Aiko breathed, shaking her head in something akin to disbelief. “It pains me to admit it but she truly has been good for you, it seems. You’re... much different than you used to be.”

Kamilah nodded and let out a shaky sigh. “There was one morning I woke up and she was right there, I felt... calm.” It was hard for her to explain, but she wanted Aiko to know. “You know I was used to feeling restless inside. She brings me peace.”

Aiko smiled and nodded. “I can see that... and I... I wish you nothing but happiness, Kamilah. Really, I do.”
“I wish the same for you.”

They fell into a silence once again, but it was a companionable one. The air around them no longer felt stiflingly muggy with hurt, despite the fact there was much that had been left unsaid. Sometimes the things that people don’t say could be louder than the things that they did.

“Jesus!,” Akeyo exclaimed as the suite door opened and Adrian, Lily, and Serafïne stumbled inside. They were covered in blood and snow, their clothes torn and their hair a mess.

"Actually, it's just me. Sorry to disappoint," said Lily. Despite her bravado, her face was paler than Kamilah had ever seen it and she was covered in a thin sheen of sweat. One quick glance at her arm was all it took to figure out why— she’d been bitten by a Feral. "Although I've been told the resemblance is startling."

“What the hell happened?!,” Kamilah demanded.

“Ferals in the woods,” Adrian panted.

“Lil!,” Anastasia sobbed as she made her way towards her best friend with all the grace of a blind moose. She screamed out loud as Lily fell like a stone and landed in a heap just in front of her.

“If I made a joke about just dropping in," Lily said weakly, "would you write me off as a cliché?"

“Damn, you.” The bloodkeeper tried to help her back to her feet, but her own body was still too weak from restoring Lysimachus’ memories to move her even an inch. “Warn a girl before you do a face-plant on the floor next time. I could have looked all heroic and caught you or something.”

As Lily laughed her head rolled back against Anastasia’s shoulder. “You should’ve... caught that on film. One last TikTok before I go—“

“Don’t talk like that!,” Anastasia cried. “You’re gonna be fine—“

“Anastasia,” The Evolved said as she scanned Lily’s body, “You know there is no cure, child.”

“Is this the part where you start tearing off strips of your shirt to bind my war wounds?,” Lily tried to laugh.

"If you wanted me to take my clothes off, you should have just asked, you incestuous freak,” Anastasia laughed, tears streaming down her face. Even now it seemed that she and Lily were incapable of normal communication. “Lil, what—“

“I thought I'd lie on the floor and writhe in pain for a while," Lily grunted, "It relaxes me."

"It does? Oh— you're being sarcastic. That's a good sign, probably—“

“She has an hour, two at most,” Akeyo whispered to Adrian.

“Drink my blood," Anastasia said, silencing the room of frantic vampires. She’d wanted to keep the properties of her blood a secret to prevent anyone from wanting to turn her into a lab rat; But needs must. “Just a little bit so you don’t sicken yourself.”

Lily moaned in agony and her head rolled on Anastasia’s shoulder. The bite on her arm was necrotic already, the infection turning her veins pitch black as it tracked its way towards her heart. “Dying. Get. Booze. Don’t make me die sober.” Her body shook, and she clutched onto Anastasia’s arms.
Using her own fang, Anastasia gashed a long red line across her wrist. It was sickeningly deep. Her blood began flowing so quickly that it dripped onto the marble floor, staining it crimson. “Open your eyes for me, Lil.”

Lily tried, but the light stabbed her eyeballs. “Just let me die in peace,” she begged. “I need alcohol —”

“For god sake,” Anastasia sighed as she pushed her wrist against her mouth. “You’re not dying on me, you dumbass. Now drink. You’ll get your damn booze later.”

Lily’s eyes flared red as Anastasia’s blood stained her lips and she tightened her hold around her slender wrist, her nails digging into her porcelain skin. She drank from her frantically, lapping up as much as she could before Anastasia drew her wrist away and sealed the wound.

Gasps echoed throughout the suite as the wound on Lily’s arm began to knit together at lightening speed. The incurable toxins poisoning her blood being rendered harmless by the power bound to Anastasia’s. Her blackened veins lit up a vibrant shade of gold beneath her skin and then faded away, Anastasia’s power not only healing her, but making her stronger.

“Holy shit,” Lily deadpanned as she turned her arm over, searching for any sign of injury. “You taste good.”

“So I’ve been told,” Anastasia smirked.

“Good is really an understatement in this case because I fucking love the taste of your blood. It’s the best thing I’ve ever tasted, and I’d like to pack it into little Capri Sun pouches and sip on that shit all day, every day.”

Anastasia snorted. “You’re so fucking weird.”

“You’re pretty extra yourself, girl.” Lily glanced up at Kamilah. “Please don’t kill me for saying your wife tastes good.”

Kamilah snorted and affectionately patted the top of her protégé’s head. “I’ll let it pass this once.”

“What just happened?,” Serafine asked, sinking down to the floor to inspect Lily’s arm for herself. Everyone watched as she ran her fingertips across her newly healed dark skin, even normal wounds didn’t knit together so quickly directly after a feeding. “You just— Feral bites have always been incurable.”

“You’re forgetting that my blood is as much the first Feral’s as it is the first Vampire’s. I’m immune to their bite and can temporarily transfer the ability through my blood to an infected person,” Anastasia sighed, resting her head against Lily’s. “If only I’d known earlier... I could’ve saved Jax.”

“How long have you known?,” Adrian asked.

“Only since the experiments they put me through at Glamis. For honesty’s sake I may as well let you all know that I can walk in the sun for longer than you can, too.”

“So it’s true. You can walk in sunlight like Rheya could,” Aiko said. “There have been rumours since the moment your heritage was revealed but I never... I never took stock in them.”

“I thought perhaps the ability might have worn off or become diluted in the blood over time,” Henry added.
"If I’m ever outside and feel the urge to burst into flames, I’ll let you know,” deadpanned Anastasia.

“I fucking glowed!,” Lily shrieked. Clearly, almost dying wasn’t traumatic enough to quell her boundless excitement for literally everything. “Your blood made me glow! Anastasia!”

“Chill the fuck out,” Anastasia laughed.

“I am a badass, and I recognise that you, too, are a badass— wait, didn’t you promise me booze?”

The room erupted into laughter. Somehow the exhaustion made everything seem so much funnier than it would otherwise be.

“Yes. I’ll get you some strong Koumiss. It tends to make people a little crazy if you haven’t drank it before. One minute you’re drinking, the next minute you're running naked through Ile-Alatau National Park with sparkly antlers on your head and neon green shutter shades from Claire’s over your eyes, being chased by park rangers. Not," she added far too hastily, "that this has ever happened to me.”

“That totally happened to you,” Lily snorted.

Anastasia sighed. “You’ve seen me worse.”

“You’re an idiot,” concluded Lily amidst her laughter.

"I've never claimed to be otherwise.”

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“Cleopatra was in the building,” Serafine explained. “I couldn’t penetrate her mind but I penetrated the minds of the others around her. Multiple psychics who have been stalking you, Anastasia, for years. Together they orchestrated the attack in New York. They plan to do the ritual on the Dark Solstice.”

“I could not peer into her mind either,” Kano added, “which leads me to believe that she has been consuming the vials of blood she took from Anastasia at Glamis. We know her blood was powerful enough to shield whoever consumed it from the harmful effects of the necklace, it’s only logical to assume she is shielding her mind with it too.”

“And we know they’ve released Ferals into the woods... as some sort of lousy fucking security system,” Lily scoffed as she sipped on her fifth glass of Koumiss.

“Lower ranking Order soldiers are also patrolling the property in pairs,” Akeyo said. “There’s gotta be at least three hundred people camped out there. Mortals. Vampires. Even a few werewolves. The vampires are feeding on the mortals, and they rarely ever leave the property.”

“They’re keeping weapons in the tool shed,” Adrian said. “I was able to break inside without breaking the locks but I saw through the windows.”

“There are also weapons in the greenhouses,” Aiko added.

“Well, fuckadoodledoo,” Lily slurred.
Anastasia sighed and gently took the glass away from her. “You’ve had enough Koumiss.”

“There doesn’t seem to be any outposts in the surrounding area,” Henry said.

“Lysi is being kept in my old room, in the attic,” Anastasia added. “I restored his memories and he is willing to fight with us.”

Kamilah placed a gentle hand on her wife’s shoulder. “He’s good with a blade and an excellent marksman.”

“We’re outnumbered,” The Evolved sighed. “Greatly.”

“The greatest and most powerful revolutions often start very quietly, hidden in the shadows,” Akeyo said. “And we have Anastasia.”

“I think we’ve proven before that as far as changing the world is concerned, that begins with deciding you can,” Anastasia said. “Jax always used to say: if you can breathe, you can fight, and if you want to keep breathing, you’d better fight.”

“We got vampire jesus on our side,” snorted Lily. She pointed at Anastasia, “That's you,” she said. “You shall be called Darth Sayeed from now on, cause the force is with you and shit.”

“What the hell has she been drinking?,” sighed Kamilah. Fucking drunk vampires were the worst. Their head games had head games. “Lily, order something from room service right this moment. You’re drunk and I will not be spending another moment of my life holding your hair back whilst you stick your head in a toilet bowl to vomit.”

“All I’m saying is I’m supposed to be the reckless one. You’re the psychopath. Anastasia is the broken, savage beast with the force. And Serafine and Adrian are the ones who have their panties jammed up their assholes and are supposed to keep the rest of us in line—“

“I don’t wear panties,” Adrian deadpanned. “I have never worn panties in my life.”

Lily raised both hands in the air and scoffed. “Excuse me, boxers.”

“Lily,” Kamilah hissed as she threw a room service menu at her. “Order. Food. Now.”


“I will stab you in the throat unless you order yourself something to eat.” She glared at her so intensely the image of her would likely be seared so firmly into Lily’s brain that it seemed like her neurotransmitters had gone and printed propaganda posters of her to hang up around the place. “Right now. I am in no mood for this.”

“I don’t know how to read this language—“

She sighed. “You are holding the menu upside down. It’s written in English.”

“Ahhh,” Lily snorted.

“Shhh, Kami,” Anastasia giggled, wrapping her arms around her waist. She smiled and then focused her eyes right on her. It was like drowning, drowning in seas of glacial blue water. There was nothing in the world except for those eyes. “She almost died, just let her be drunk and happy.”

Kamilah sighed once again but refrained from slipping into the protective-mode she always seemed to whenever Lily got herself intoxicated. It was easier this time than it was most others to
focus her attention elsewhere, as she knew the sooner they formulated a plan of attack, the sooner she’d be reunited with Lysimachus.

She never knew if they sounded like cryptic geniuses, or raving loons that made no sense whilst in this stage of planning. There was no idea too crazy or elaborate to be heard.

In any war or battle, a plan was more or less a rough expectation of what they expected to happen. Typically, they showed up and then all bloody hell broke loose... but it was invaluable to know the exact layout of wherever they were going and rough numbers of who they’d be expected to attack.

Were it anywhere else, Kamilah would’ve suggested just burning the Order out like they had done whilst searching for Anastasia. However, burning down her in-laws home seemed like a rather passive aggressive thing to do... even by her standards. Not that they didn’t deserve it for everything they’d put Anastasia through. If she thought she could burn down their house just to be petty and get away with it... well, she probably would.

She totally would.

As everyone talked she held her wife from behind. She had to bend slightly to put her cheek against hers. Her breath against her ear made her shudder with each deliberately spoken word she added to the brainstorming session. Her reactions were always so amazing.

Anastasia caught at her hand, pressing it between her own. The touch was like white fire through her veins. Her skin on hers even in such an innocent manner felt like Anastasia kindling her, the heap of ashes that she was, into fire. She had wondered once why love was always phrased in terms of burning. The conflagration in her own veins, now and every time Anastasia had ever touched her, gave the answer.

“Are you getting overwhelmed?,” she whispered. “You’re blinking faster than you normally do, which means you’re becoming overstimulated.”

“A little. Everyone’s thoughts are louder than normal and I’m still tired from helping Lysi,” Anastasia replied, rubbing at her eyes. “It’s like I can hear what they’re saying but I can’t make head nor tails of it... like the sound of all these English and Japanese words are just hitting me.”

Without another word to anyone, Kamilah went about whisking Anastasia away from all the noise. The Dark Solstice was three days away and they wouldn’t attack until then, which gave them plenty of time to alter their plan... not everything needed to be done at that moment.

None of them felt anywhere near ready for what came next and it was clear Anastasia was not ready to soldier on through her exhaustion and make the best of things. Her armour was battle-damaged, weakened, and she couldn’t go into battle that way. She couldn’t win a fight when she had nothing left inside to fight with.

So nobody questioned it when they left. Nobody asked them to stay. Everybody knew that Anastasia would likely be their greatest weapon when they finally charged into battle, as in every generation of her bloodline there had been a chosen one. Yet Anastasia had been the only one to actually use her abilities, to do whatever she could to better the world. She alone had stood against the vampires who’d tried to hurt mortals and betrayed their kind, the mortals who’d tried to hurt vampires, and all the forces of darkness.

It was her fate.

But fate was never fair. She was caught in a current much stronger than she was; struggle against it
and she’d drown not just by herself but those who tried to jump in and save her. Swim with it... and she’d survive.

She was THE Bloodkeeper... and with her on their side, how could they lose?

~~~~ Seven Years Earlier - Prague, Czech Republic ~~~~

“I missed you,” Kamilah whispered, her eyes drifting closed in a state of sheer bliss as Anastasia massaged conditioner into her hair. It’d taken her by surprise how much she’d missed her pretty mortal whilst she was in Paris. How panicked she’d become when Adrian had plucked up the courage to tell her about what had happened in the crypts... and then everything afterwards. “A great deal,” she added. “When you left, it felt like the world got darker.”

“You sound surprised,” Anastasia murmured, her lips grazing her shoulder blade with every word, her accent a little thicker from how she’d exhausted her with training... and everything afterwards. “It’s been a long time since I’ve missed anyone like that.”

“I missed you too,” the mortal confessed between a series of chaste kisses being littered across her back. “I’ve missed Kazakhstan since the day I left but I had never missed a person before, because Almaty is home... you know? It was quite a shock when I realised I missed you the same way.”

The softest smile twitched at the corners of Kamilah’s mouth. A part of her had worried that Anastasia hadn’t missed her at all whilst she was gone, as she knew how much fun she and Jax always had when they were together. “You did?”

“You sound surprised by that, too.”

“Perhaps I’m just not used to people missing me for the right reasons.” She sighed. “Perhaps I’ve... never allowed anyone to get close enough to actually miss me when I leave.”

“I won’t be pushed away,” Anastasia whispered. “I won’t be kept at a distance. I won’t tolerate walls or barriers – not just because I won’t allow there to be anything standing between us, but because you don’t need to protect yourself from me. You hear me, Kami? I’ll move at your pace, but you have to let me in. You have to get used to not being alone anymore.”

Kamilah turned in the mortal’s loose grasp, the warm water spilling over both of their bodies. She slowly backed her up against the frosted glass wall, towering over her petite frame as she studied her sweetly flushed face. The sun was streaming through the specially glazed skylight opening, low and hazy. Which was the only way she could tell how late it was. Time seemed to have stopped entirely. Kamilah hadn’t had a day go by so dreamily, so lazily, since she was a little kid. Since before she’d even understood the concept of time or been aware of its passing.

How bizarre it was, to think that because of this twenty-two year old, who saw the extraordinary in the ordinary, the magic in the mundane, she could feel again.

When she looked at her, it felt like she was on fire. She felt alive around her like there had been this volcanic eruption of two thousand years worth of emotions in her. Yet, she was deathly afraid, and overwhelmed with the cold fear that this woman alone held the power to break her — that she loved a mortal being with a lifespan of only a few decades. As if that wasn’t enough of a dilemma, her aching soul was calm around her. Calm in a way it had never been, even in her own mortal life.
As if it knew she had found a home, and it was sometimes just all too much. All too much for her to bear.

“How can you always be so consistently patient with me?,” she whispered. Anastasia was the worst kind of stubborn where she was concerned, simply because she wasn’t stubborn or pushy at all. She was so, so patient. Patient, but determined. A stubborn person could be distracted, or tricked. But not her. She just held on and on and on, never giving up until Kamilah let her walls slowly begin to fall, long after everyone else would have stopped caring. “Almost like...”

“Like you’re worthy of it?”

Her breath hitched in her throat and she had to break eye contact. “I’m pushy, selfish, insensitive, aggressive, and I like my own way,” she said quietly. “I’ve done things that... if you knew... you would never look at me the same way again.”

“Kami.” Anastasia reached up and caressed her cheek, her touch featherlight as she drew her eyes back towards her. “It’s not my place to pass judgements on your past. I’m only twenty-two and I feel like I’ve gone through so many transformations and life changes that I’ve been a hundred different people. Just six years ago I was a suicidal self-harmer who did recreational drugs and drank more than I ate, I was caught in the grips of Anorexia, I treated the people around me horribly and I treated myself even worse.” She soothingly dragged her thumb across her cheekbone and Kamilah leant into the touch. “I can’t even begin to imagine how many transformations you’ve gone through in over two thousand years. Who you are now probably isn’t who you were a hundred years ago, or a thousand years ago... you’ve changed so much since I first met you, for crying out loud!”

Kamilah let out a watery laugh and moved forwards, resting her brow against Anastasia’s. For so long she’d had no other option but to keep parts of herself hidden. So hidden that she worried that there was never going to be any way to show someone else without them running away.

For so long all she had wanted was to change her fate, to force it down another road. She’d wanted to stand in the river of time and make it flow a different direction, if just for a little while. Being with Anastasia felt like that was finally happening. That girl made her feel like she dreaming. Whilst wide awake.

“The only woman I can pass judgement on is the one I know, okay?,” she continued. “You don’t have to worry that I’ll suddenly think you’re a monster for something you did like six hundred years ago and start treating you differently because of it. We both know that your life was extremely complicated for a long time... and I know you blame yourself for a lot of what happened, but it’s not as black and white as you think. Abusive situations like yours that go on for such a long period of time never are. You have to try to forgive yourself. Forever is such a long time to bleed.” She paused and gave her a soft kiss. “You can confide in me as much or as little as you want, whenever you feel comfortable doing so. I’m not him. I’m not going to lash out at anything you say. I’m not going to judge you or belittle you. You’re always safe with me.”

“I know I am,” Kamilah whispered as Anastasia trailed her fingers down her arm in slow, torturous strokes. Her head fell forwards on her shoulder, her eyes fluttering closed, as Anastasia’s lips continued to move against the side of her neck. “I’m not always the best at expressing it but... I know.”

“You’re an exceptional woman, but don’t be afraid of happiness.”

“How can one person be so good to me all the time?,” she breathed. The vampire’s smile was so bright and cheery that anyone from the outside looking in would genuinely believe she’d just found
heaven.

“This is just what you’ve always deserved, okay? You deserve to be listened to and treated with respect.”

Kamilah’s expression softened in awe and she swallowed so hard she was sure Anastasia’s mortal ears would be able to hear the lump go down her throat. She had no idea what to say to that, literally no idea. Anastasia often had a way of driving her speechless. She said these things so casually and self assuredly that it was actually dizzying... especially after years of knowing nothing but the complete polar opposite. It was quite a big adjustment to make.

Whilst she’d been in Paris, Kamilah eventually realised that the reason she felt so peaceful was because Anastasia wasn’t taking stock. When they were together she wasn’t trying to figure out all the ways she was sexy, or cool, or funny, or smart. She just stood in front of her and let her keep on being whoever she really was. And no one had ever done that for her before, except Lysimachus.

She knew what she felt for Anastasia wasn’t merely love, lust or any kind of relatable mortal emotion. To part from her would hollow out her person: she would warp into another woman entirely, and not a woman that she would be proud of, because the power and the sadness inside her would take over, just as it once had — when there had been nobody home, nobody inside. Only a shell of a body. The echo of a sound. The vibration in the air that followed her soundless screams in the night.

“I’ll fuck up, but I will never purposely hurt you,” Kamilah said. “I’m going to piss you off a lot, Annie. I’m not— I’ve never had a healthy relationship before so I’m going to mess up, say the wrong things, probably be crazy jealous at times, and annoy the shit out of you with how overprotective and interfering I can be. But I’ll never take you for granted, never purposely hurt you, and never betray you in any sense of the word — I swear that to you.” She kissed her lips. “I want to be the one who makes you smile, who makes you laugh, who makes you feel safe, and who makes you come every night. I’ll do my damn best to make sure all of that happens.”

Anastasia giggled. “I like the sound of that very much.”

“I'm keeping you, Anastasia Swann.” This woman was magical as far as she was concerned... by mortal and vampire standards she was absolutely extraordinary. Maybe that was what magic was — looking into darkness and seeing a light most people missed. “You're mine.”

Startled by that very sincere announcement that almost sounded.... binding, Anastasia didn't speak for a moment. When she did, she did so with the biggest smile on her face. “Yours?”

“All mine. You got under my skin.” Her ancient heart thundered through every inch of her body as Anastasia rose onto her toes and pressed a kiss, light as a caress, to her mouth. Never breaking her stare. She read all the unspoken words there and wondered if she read the ones not yet voiced by her, either. “There's no going back.”
“Seriously, I left my cape in New York,” Lily slurred as Anastasia tried to usher her back to her bedroom. Her newfound life-altering passion for Koumiss and baurzaki was difficult to keep up with. For three days she’d drank and eaten nothing else. “Girl, just give me a cape, and I’d be legit as fuck. I wanna look like the Phantom of the Opera. Is that too much to ask?”

“Edna says no capes,” she deadpanned.

“When did you get so clever?,” Lily snorted.

“When I realised I wasn't as clever as I thought. Now go to sleep.”

Lily cracked up as she stumbled into her room with a bottle of water in hand. Anastasia was just thankful she was even up at this hour, otherwise Kano would’ve been left to try and dissuade her from going out in the midday winter sun in search of more Koumiss and Kazakh delicacies she couldn’t get anywhere else.

Outside the windows the midday sun was already high in the sky. Neither she or Kano could sleep, so were indulging in bowls of cereal to try to distract themselves from the weight of their abilities leading up to their attack.

“I’m going to die tonight, aren’t I?,” Anastasia whispered before taking another bite of her Cheerios. She wasn’t sure why she was whispering when everyone else was dead asleep... but the voices in her head told her not to fear. It would take more than a single truth to wake these vampires, they slept like the dead.

It was the Dark Solstice and they should’ve been celebrating upstate with the clans of New York. Strange how it didn’t even feel like a holiday at all. They hadn’t had time to get gifts or decorations. Nothing. It was like being in the twilight zone.

She’d mentioned a vision of her own death to Kamilah in passing when she’d been rescued from Glamis, but she’d conveniently left out the fact that in the blurry snippet she’d seen, she’d been in her childhood bedroom. She’d seen Kamilah screaming for her against the unmistakable lilac walls that her parents had never bothered to redecorate after she’d moved out.

If there was one thing all the losses in her life had taught her it was that life was short, fleeting, and way too precious to waste waiting around for happiness to hit you over the head and make itself known. Happiness wasn't something you found, happiness was something you made — by living in the moment, by cherishing the people in your life right now, by finding the courage to change those things you didn't like. So that day she’d made love to her wife. She’d gotten tipsy with her best friend and played Nintendo Switch. She’d done everything she felt like she should do, given
that she felt like death was looming over her shoulder.

“I cannot say, my dear Bloodkeeper,” her tutor said softly. “Tonight there will come a moment that will change the course of history, a moment where one life must be sacrificed in order to prevent Rheya from rising again. If you perish and the ritual is complete...,” he trailed off and rested a small hand on her forearm. That sentence didn’t have to be finished. “A moment will come where your life and another’s intersect... a choice will be made... someone must die.”

“Will I make the choice?”

“No,” Kano whispered. “The choice that will be made will be the defining moment of someone else’s story. You may be part of it, but this time around it is another who must do what you have already done and choose to save the world rather than running from the call of destiny.”

“Who?”

“You know I cannot tell you and if you really wanted to know, you’d be inside my head already,” he said. “If you know who must die in order to preserve the world’s equilibrium, you will try to prevent things from happening as they must. A heart and mind divided against themselves cannot stand... and you must stand, Anastasia. You must.”

Anastasia sighed. “I’m tired of people having to sacrifice themselves for me. My life isn’t more valuable than anyone else’s. There is more to living than simply not dying. How am I supposed to live well if people keep dying to keep me alive?”

“You forget that your power is the one thing that guarantees the stability of the new world that you created when you washed away the old,” the child vampire said as serenely as ever as he poured himself another bowl of cereal. “Your life is more integral to the balance of things than you wish to admit.”

“Kano—“

“Who else do you suggest is strong enough to be a shield for the weak, a light in the dark, a truth amongst falsehoods, a tower in the flood, an all-knowing eye to see when all others are blind?,” he prodded. “You are the heir of the first, child. A vampire unlike any who has come before. As long as you live and breathe, the world shall be held in perfect balance.”

“But—“

“No buts,” he scolded, levelling her with a glare that was nowhere near as menacing as he thought it was. He seemed to forget sometimes that despite being more than five hundred years old he was trapped in the body of a six year old child. “Without you there is an imbalance of power. It is an imbalance that would be easy for the mortals or other supernatural communities to exploit. Just because you convince yourself you are worthless does not mean that you are.”

“I’m just sick and tired of people suffering pointlessly because of me.”

“Pointless, needless suffering and pain? I don’t suppose it would help it I told you that was the way life is and the only pain you cause is that which you consciously choose to inflict. The good suffer, the evil flourish, and all this is mortal passes away. It is the way of the world.”

Funny thing about having choices taken away from you over and over again — it tended to make things all kinds of crystal clear. You either felt relief all the way into your bones because it was the right decision even if you hadn’t made it, or every cell inside you cried out in rebellion and loss and regret because you learned — too late — what it was you really wanted. It tended to make you
resentful of the world. Of being made into a pawn.

She had been so angry for so long, anger and resentment always under the surface of everything she did. Whether she was shopping with Lily or sitting in the garden watching Kamilah tend to her plants or alone with her violin and piano, the anger was always with her. The resentment and weariness at always being the one forced to pay for things she wanted no part in.

All she really wanted was a peaceful existence filled with a few good people. Was that really too much to ask for? Was there always going to be some sort of catastrophe waiting around every corner?

Her head hurt enough thanks to Lily and new found love of Koumiss, and talking to Kano wasn’t helping things — there was a world of questions in everything he said. And the Koumiss in her system wasn’t helping things. God, she detested Koumiss. In fact, while every part of her ached and death seemed so close for a multitude of reasons, she detested everything. Except Tylenol. All she needed in her life right then was Tylenol. Or maybe to just crawl into a hole and crash.

She couldn’t finish the rest of her cereal, nor could she sleep... but she returned to bed. She just needed to be wherever Kamilah was.

Sans clothing, she climbed over her sleeping form and settled into the middle of the mattress. Like her wife was a magnet — or her North Star — Kamilah’s body turned to press into the nook along the side of her smaller frame. Her bareness managed to be soft and hard at the same time — the tanned skin soft and smooth, the muscles hard and ridged from thousands of years of training. She inhaled deeply, taking her soothing, lavender scent into her, and let out a long exhale that relaxed her into her further. Now. Now she could be content to never move again.

For a long moment, Kamilah held onto her as tight as she could, like even in sleep she was her anchor. And then she pulled back enough to rest her forehead against her shoulder, the pain that had rolled off of her moments before in a fit of stress replaced by a heavy weariness. She stroked the back of her head and neck, soft caresses meant to comfort her. She loved holding this woman in her arms as she slept, loved knowing that maybe she wasn’t the only one in need of some comfort and protection and reassurance.

Sleep didn’t come easy to Kamilah. Nightmares were a huge problem and her insomnia was so bad that it often kept her up for days at a time. For her to sleep at all, she had to feel safe... years of not knowing what Gaius would do to her when she was so vulnerable had seriously fucked up her sleep cycle. So the fact she clung to her the way she did whilst she slept was always a major sign of how much she trusted her.

She pressed a kiss against the crown of her head. The last thing in the world she wanted was to somehow end up getting killed and forcing her to suffer that loss again, but her one consolation was that she’d reunite her with Lysimachus. If that was the last thing she did in this life, she’d die a happy woman.

“I’m not sure what’s going to happen in this life, but it’s you and me. It’s you and me, ‘til the end. In the darkness and in the light,” she whispered in Kazakh. “If I die today, don’t follow me. I know you’ll want to... but don’t. I will wait for you. I’ll never really leave you. I love you, endlessly.”

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Thundering footsteps beat the frozen ground as Anastasia charged towards her parents house. On either side of her, her friends ran faster and faster. Snow and mud lay thick on the earth, and rogue snowflakes drifted through the night sky. Anastasia ran — probably swifter than her sore legs could manage for any significant length of time. Running towards Cleopatra. Towards The Order of Apostolous. Towards Lysimachus. Possibly towards her death.

Everything hurt. The necklace around her neck was already draining her energy, despite having not yet tapped into her psychic abilities to do anything but kill a few soldiers. Trees ripped at her limbs and hair; stones and shards of ice scraped against the polished black leather of her boots. She scrambled through the woods, breathing so hard she couldn’t muster the air to say a word to anyone as they downed Ferals and lower ranking members of The Order.

They must reach the house. Cleopatra couldn’t be allowed to escape or complete the blood ritual that would reawaken Rheya. They couldn’t fail Lysimachus after getting his hopes up.

Behind her, twin daggers shrieked as they were drawn from their sheaths as she was tackled to the ground by a snarling wolf. She fell, slamming into mud and rock and snow. Her ribs burned with pain as the snow beneath her became red. The growling sounds of the approaching beast filled the air as she struggled to rise. But the slush and ice held fast, and she could not run without slipping and falling again. Reaching for a bush, her hands bleeding, the wolf now close behind, she turned in time to see Kamilah’s daggers being plunged into its neck.

It’s pained howls echoed throughout her parents property as Kamilah repeatedly sank her blades into its flesh. “Don’t. Touch. My. Wife,” she yelled as it fell limp beneath her. “Are you okay, baby?”

Anastasia laughed weakly. “Never been better.”

Kamilah helped her to her feet and they scanned the shadows again, bracing themselves for more assailants as they quickly approached the back deck of the house. From the circular window at the top of the house, an all too familiar young woman watched them, and she flashed them both a conspirator’s grin.

Without a word, she and Kamilah sped inside and left the others to fight together of the outside.

Inside the house hadn’t change much since she’d last visited years earlier. Her visits to her parents were sparse enough that it felt strange to be back here, almost like walking into a museum somehow. Moonlight slanted in through the parted curtains and open doors, laying bars of silver across the floor that glinted off of shards of broken glass.

The most terrifying thing were the paintings that had been handed down through the generations, that had once hung proudly around the large dining room table that was only ever used on formal occasions. Every single one had been cut from its frame and ripped into strips, which were scattered across the floor. It must have been done with a knife or by a really angry vampire — canvas was almost impossible to tear with your bare hands if you were mortal. The empty frames looked like bones picked clean... which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Pictures of ancestors in high ranking soviet military uniforms were sickeningly inappropriate, anyway.

“You okay?,” Kamilah asked as she inspected one of the empty frames.

“I just find it ironic that I was the asshole when I suggested switching these paintings out when I was a kid but a group of fascist revolutionaries evidently shared my opinion.”

“Demons run when a good one goes to war. Night will fall and drown the sun. When a good one
goes to war,” the voices in her head murmured, as if taunting her. “Friendship dies and true love lies. Night will fall and the dark will rise. When a good one goes to war. Demons run, but count the cost. The battle's won, but one is lost.”

“Kami, stay behind me,” Anastasia hissed as she shoved her way in front of Kamilah, one hand held tightly around the glowing pendant hung around her neck. “You do exactly as I tell you in here—“

“But—“

“Kamilah. If I tell you to run, you run. If I tell you to save yourself, you do exactly that,” she deadpanned, holding her gaze. She threw her hands up in the air in a gesture of utter exasperation. Inside her head — so loudly that Anastasia could hear her — Kamilah noted with interest that when she did it, a few green sparks escaped from her fingertips, like fireflies escaping from a jar. “I’m not playing... and I don’t want to make you but I will if I must. The only way I can protect you is if you trust me.”

Kamilah sighed and nodded. “I do. You know I do. But if you engage in any ridiculous acts of heroism and yourself killed in the process I will not be amused! I know you'd risk everything to protect us, and that's what worries me. You still don't know enough about this world to be properly terrified.”

“I'll be fine. Besides, sometimes there is no other choice.”

“My, aren't we bossy today. Give a bratty bottom an inch of control and it goes straight to her head.”

“Fucking spank me, why don’t you?”

Kamilah glared at her like she would’ve stabbed her, were she anyone else. Just as she opened her mouth to talk something caught her eye from behind Anastasia and she protectively shoved her out of the way. There was only a slight struggle as she attacked a male vampire with weird looking tattoo sleeves going up each arms, eventually sheathing her daggers and staking him with a broken pencil that had been left rested on top of the notepad beside the old landline.

Anastasia looked down at the staked vampire at her feet as he crumbled to ash. “Kami?”

“Mhm?,” Kamilah hummed, straightening her blazer.

“You staked a vampire with a number two pencil.”

“I didn’t actually check the number.”

“Have I told you lately how freaking awesome you are?”

Kamilah tried to smile, but her heart was audibly fluttering in her chest now, and not in a good way. She was anxious to get upstairs to her cousin and Lysimachus. “Compliments later, my love.”

“Find another pencil and I’ll pin this one down, too,” she said as another member of the order came charging down the staircase with a cue from her father’s pool table in his hand. Some weapon.

“You know how weird that sounds, right?,” Kamilah snorted as she threw her another pencil and watched on proudly as she threw herself at the man and jammed the pencil into his chest. “Right, never mind. Good job, baby.”
Kamilah crowded right up into her space, pressed her body against hers — trapping her against the glass of the door behind her, plunged her hands into her hair until she was cupping the nape of her neck, and devoured her lips with hers. A last kiss before heading up the stairs.

Anastasia knew their last kiss was meant to be quick and chaste, but after the first touch of her lips fire leaped up and roared through her belly. Her fingers yanked Kamilah close, digging into her back, and her arms crushed her to her as if wanting to meld them together. She knotted her fingers in the length of her silky hair and bit down on her bottom lip, making her groan. Her lips parted, and her tongue swept in to dance with hers. There was nothing sweet or gentle in their last kiss; it was filled with sorrow and desperation, of the bitter knowledge that they had something perfect... that very well could be taken away from them before dawn broke.

She lead the way up the stairs onto the landing, where she and Kamilah moved like avenging angels through a gaggle of idiotic mortals who’d probably been promised a Turning if they assisted The Order. Some mortals would do just about anything to live forever. They broke wooden stakes off of the bannister to kill the odd vampire in their midst. With every vase or ornament that smashed and splatter of blood that sprayed across the walls, she couldn’t help but internally cringe. Her parents were going to kill her.

A strike of green magic blinked up her torso, and she did her best not to roll her eyes at it as she used the daggers Kamilah had gotten her to dispatch three very well-trained, powerful mortal mercenaries. The power bound to her blood and to the necklace just begging to be used as she and her wife danced a well choreographed routine over their dismembered bodies. Protecting each other’s backs. Giving no quarter.

She silently begged the power to mind its own damn business. Resisting its pull was difficult at the best of times, but right now it bordered on being physically painful as it burned inside her veins. Trying to pull her into the dark. She could destroy everything and everyone in this house with a wave of her hand, if she wanted to. She was that powerful. But then she’d destroy everyone she cared for along with their enemies. She’d destroy herself, too, like she almost did when she’d fought Rheya.

Green magic sparked up on her arms and moved across the back of her hands and blinked out at the tip of her middle finger as she slit a middle aged woman’s throat and gracefully stepped aside to avoid the spray of blood. She stared at her hand, open-mouthed, not sure if she should laugh or be offended by the fact that she was pretty sure her power just told her to fuck off. She laughed. Cheeky fucking magic!

“Cousin,” Cleopatra drawled as they burst into the huge attic bedroom. All the furniture had been removed and she was stood in the centre of a circle that had been painted onto the wooden floor in blood, surrounded by lit candles and malevolent men and women cloaked in hooded robes, hiding behind painted faces and chanting demonic incantations while inflicting sadistic wounds on Lysimachus who was knelt before Cleopatra.

“Winter is here,” the cloaked figures chanted out loud, one by one. They’d been the voices in her head that had haunted her. The figures lurking in the shadows who’d left the tapestry fragments for her to find. The shadow on every wall. “Winter is here. Winter is here. Winter is here.”

Kamilah looked at her in abject horror as she was finally able to hear how they’d droned on and on inside her head for years. How they’d never stopped.

Lysimachus looked up at them and smiled through gritted teeth, blood dripping from his mouth and nose as Kamilah tried not to look too interested, though she was obviously visibly distressed to see them both up close for the first time since her mortal life more than two thousand years ago.
“Stop!,” Anastasia yelled, dispatching a cloaked woman as she reached for Lysimachus. She sent her flying across the room with a flick of her wrist and then threw one of her daggers and her makeshift stake at her chest, pinning her to the lilac painted wall with a choked grunt. She struggled for a moment, the stake protruding from her wet, grayish skin. A desperate flail of her leg as she shattered to dust caught the edge of a candle, sending it flying into the circle, where the flames spread across the painted lines and burned brightly.

“Now, Anastasia,” Cleopatra sighed. She had an all too familiar hungry look in her eyes and it frightened her. “Did I not already tell you how rude it was to attack people?”

She tried to penetrate her mind, tried to cut off her supply of oxygen... anything. But nothing happened besides her own energy depleting. How much of her blood had she consumed in order to be entirely immune to her powers? How much had she blocked out from her time at Glamis?

Fear threatened to paralyse her the same way the exhaustion did as her abilities continued to be rendered useless, but she stood her ground. She kept trying to do anything she could to her. Conquering fear didn’t mean not being afraid, it meant being afraid of something and doing it anyway. It meant saying no to fear-no you can’t rule me, no you can’t hold me back, no you can’t keep me from the things I want the most.

She was no one’s sacrifice. Not then. Not now. Not ever. Because they weren’t just fighting for their own honour. They were also fighting for the honour of a good man who could no longer stand up for himself after sacrificing in the final battle with Rheya. Doing right by him wasn’t a choice, it was a duty.

“Eat shit,” she snapped, staggering slightly.

“A word to the wise, cousin, your pet is far more well behaved if you starve her out for a few weeks,” the former queen cackled.

Kamilah growled. “You ought to watch your tongue, or I shall remove it and force you to eat it.”

There was a familial resemblance between them, though Cleopatra’s features were not as finely chiselled as Kamilah’s and she was also a little heavier. But it was more in the way they carried themselves that the resemblance could be seen. They were both very regal in their manner, their voices husky and commanding, and there was a strange sort of carelessness to them both that made their every move seem completely effortless.

Cleopatra threw her head back and laughed as she tugged on Lysimachus’ hair, exposing his neck. He didn’t react at all. “Are you not going to ask me why I told you he was dead?”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Kamilah snarled. “It only matters that you did. You hurt the two people I love most and I am going to kill you.”

“He doesn’t know who you are, Kamilah—“

“Yes, I do,” Lysimachus growled as he slammed his head back into Cleopatra’s face. The shock of it force her to let him go, and the moment she did Anastasia used her abilities to create a gap in the flames for him to leap through and he surged towards the dagger and stake that had flown across the room when she’d attacked that cloaked woman.

Summoning as much psychic energy as she possibly could as unfamiliar footsteps echoed up the stairs, Anastasia focused all of her attention on the cloaked figures. Her immortal tormentors. Her mother’s tormentors... and who knew how many of her ancestors. Blood began pouring out of their
noses as they screamed in agony as she tore their minds apart from the inside out, forcing them to relive their worst memories as she slowly burst vein after vein, bleeding them all to death. She made their own worst fears come true. She made sure the last thing they saw was the thing that scared them the most, in the hopes that they’d feel the very same fear they’d inspired in generations of Bloodkeepers.

Kamilah and Lysimachus both lunged to try to protect her as she collapsed into the circle with Cleopatra, but neither of them caught her in time. Her body just gave out under the strain of drawing on the blood magic bound to the necklace to penetrate so many psychic minds at the same time, under the strain of using her own abilities to draw on their bad memories.

As more Order soldiers burst into the room, Lysimachus and Kamilah had to turn their attention away from her as she struggled to try to move an inch. Her limbs burned in agony, refusing to follow her commands. Refusing to do anything but tremble beneath the weight of her exhaustion.

“Something to remember when fighting me, Bloodkeeper,” Cleopatra panted. The orange light from the fire caught in her golden-brown eyes as they shifted to an angry shade of crimson.

“Hmm?,” she grunted, managing to roll to deflect her attack.

“I don’t lose.” She grinned at her, and before she could comprehend the words, something cut into her feet and— She had the sickening feeling of falling. She gasped as her spine collided with the wooden floors, splintering it, her other dagger flying from her hand. Cleopatra pointed her blade at her heart and cut the chain of her necklace. “I win.”

“Annie!,” Kamilah screamed, throwing herself at the flames as they doubled in size and grew warmer — so warm they started to burn blue. Lysimachus grabbed her by the waist and hauled her back as the others appeared behind them.

All eyes were back on her studying her face silently. Panic raced through her. It wasn't working. She couldn't do this. She couldn’t fight. She’d exhausted herself... but she’d reunited Kamilah with Lysimachus. At least she wouldn’t be alone now... at least she’d have a reason to want to live.

They were going to have to get out, regardless of whatever state she was in. She knew she'd leave, too... even if it was in a body bag.

“Run,” she mumbled as she tried to kick Cleopatra off of her. “Kamilah. Run.”

Kamilah screamed and ignored her, trying once again to throw herself at the flames as both Lysimachus and Adrian fought to restrain her. “Stop! Take me instead, cousin! Take me! You resent me, so take me—“

“The Bloodkeeper must die,” Cleopatra said. “One life is not equal to another, Kamilah. Her blood must be spilled.”

A soft noise, almost a sob escaped from Kamilah. She hesitated, as if fighting the compulsion to hurl herself through the flames... she was smart enough to know that once she was in the circle, the likelihood of her leaving alive wasn’t high.

“Run,” Anastasia said to her, knowing she’d use her last breath to try to save her. “Kami. Leave. Please.”

Cleopatra merely laughed and took the pendant tightly in her hand. The moment she did both Serafine and Kano fell to their knees in agony, hands framing their skulls. Their tortured screams echoed off the walls, reverberating through Anastasia’s body. God, those screams. They were the
kind she'd remember forever if she somehow lived through this, that would invade her dreams and haunt her in quiet moments. The kind her older self would look back on and know, once, she'd really lived. The kind that, no matter what, she could never, ever forget.

“Lysi,” she forced out, practically choking on the blood from her own nose that had poured into her mouth. “Make her leave.”

If she had learned anything, it was that Lysimachus’ warrior instincts were still working. If she said danger was coming, he would respond instantly, no matter the self-torment he felt. She didn't want anyone to leave in despair. She wanted them to leave here alive, as she was likely going to die and they’d be forced to face Rheya once again... without her. They had to live. It wasn’t just a matter of her loving them so much she wanted them to be safe, if Rheya returned they were the only ones who knew how to kill her. The world could quite literally depend on their survival.

“Annie!,” Kamilah screamed. “Baby! No, you—“

“I love you,” she murmured, looking at Kamilah as Cleopatra’s fangs pierced her neck. Pain surged through her, but she wouldn’t react. She couldn’t. It would only distress Kamilah more. “Kamilah, I love you. My heart is always with you. Now go. Kami. You have to go.”

They didn’t have to see her die, again. She wanted them all to have one less nightmare.

It was beyond her current state of abilities, though. She couldn’t make them leave. She was no therapist. She was about to tell them once again that they had to get out of there, about to make his soldier reflexes kick in, when suddenly Cleopatra was tackled to the ground, the necklace flying out of her hands.

Her vision had become so blurry in her exhaustion that she couldn’t she more than a muddle of flurry shapes... but a distinctive teal blazer that was now burnt to a crisp was clear enough for her to make out. She tried to push herself up, to help somehow, but her arms and legs buckled.

Sometimes you plodded through life with nothing changing from one month to the next no matter how much you yearned for a revolution to erupt beneath your feet. And sometimes the whole world imploded and rebuilt itself in a matter of seconds. Anastasia couldn’t turn away as her former enemy turned saviour crumbled to ash before her very eyes, leaving behind only a charred teal blazer as a stake was unceremoniously plunged into her chest, drawing a turbulent eight hundred year long existence to a close.

“Aiko!,” screamed Akeyo. It was a scream of loss so immense there was no speech for it. It was the cry of having the sky over your head, the air in your lungs, ripped away from you forever. It was the way Lily had screamed the night she’d watched her die at The Met.

On the other side of the flames, Kano and Serafine struggled to their feet and managed to quell the flames between them. Within a matter of seconds a strong pair of arms wrapped around Anastasia from behind, scooping her up like she weighed nothing. Kamilah’s arms were around her, and she was kissing her frantically. “You enjoy making my heart stop, don't you, you foolish, brilliant, stubborn girl?!?”

“What did I say about listening to me?,” she panted against her neck as her necklace was pressed into the palm of her hand.

“You should know by now that I do not take direction well.” Her lips pressed against her sweaty brow. “Forgive me,” she murmured, and she heard the faintest of tremors beneath her voice. “But I can't... I won't... give you up. Not now, when I've just found you.”
“Kami—“

“Don’t you leave me,” she whispered, tightening her hold. Her mouth skimmed her shoulder, up her neck, sending butterflies swarming through her insides. “Never leave me again. Stay with me. Forever.”

“And always.”

Battered and bruised but still fighting for dominance, Cleopatra struggled to her feet and patted herself down in search of the trinket in Anastasia’s hand. The moment she realised that Aiko had managed to knock it from her grasp, she froze. She might’ve been immune to psychic attacks with so much of Anastasia’s blood in her system, but if cut down with a blade or a stake she’d fall just like other vampires would.

“Rheya must return!,” she hissed as she stumbled backwards, grabbing an iron candelabra as some sort of blunt force weapon. “The first will rise again—“

“Enough,” Kamilah deadpanned. There was a note in her voice that would of scared her if it had been directed toward her. But Kamilah held her protectively against her body, holding her so tightly that she’d likely have shattered bone if she were mortal. “Brother, would you like the honours?”

“I would.” Lysimachus’ face lit up as he began stalking towards Cleopatra. This was not the selfish petty pride that made bullies of lesser men but rather the quiet determined dignity that turned men into heroes and made heroes crawl back to their feet from the bitter dust of defeat and stand tall once more. “I have suffered your torment for more than two thousand years, cousin.”

“The two of you were planning to leave me!,” Cleopatra said as she violently swung her makeshift weapon. Lysimachus merely side stepped the blow. “I did what I had to do and I was well within my rights. I was queen of Egypt and you were my subjects!”

“You wouldn’t do as I commanded!,” Cleopatra shot back like a petulant teenager. “I wanted—“

“It doesn’t matter what you wanted!,” Lysimachus shouted. “It was who I am! You took all that away from me and it didn’t even belong to you!”

She surged forwards and came at Lysimachus with the candelabra. With one swift movement after another Lysimachus dispatching his abuser of more than two millennia with the same deadly grace that had once made the people of Egypt call him a warrior blessed by the gods.

Tears he’d never allow anybody to see spiked his eyes like acid as he jammed one of his daggers into the side of Cleopatra’s neck and shoved her against the flame licked lilac wall as she choked on her own blood. He’d lived with fear, he’d lived with pain, but now he’d finally be free. He closed his eyes, screwing them shut tight as he twisted a stake right into her heart.

Within a matter of seconds the woman who had inspired a hundred different legends, crumbled away to nothing. There was no fanfare. No ceremony or earth shattering event that would signify the death of a queen who’d believed herself a goddess amongst men. Nothing. She merely faded away to dust like any other vampire.

No matter how hard Evil tried, it could never quite match up to the power of true righteousness, because Evil was ultimately self-destructive. Evil may set out to corrupt others, but in the process corrupted itself.
Lysimachus stumbled away from Cleopatra’s ashes and went about ushering everyone out of the burning building before saying a word. Kamilah held her tightly in her arms and Lysimachus kept a protective arm around his twin’s shoulder, his hand coming to rest on the back of the Bloodkeeper’s head as he lead them to safety before the old house could collapse on them.

The moment they were outside and they collapsed in an exhausted puddle on the snow, he made a sound like a choked laughed before he reached out and pulled them both into his arms. Anastasia was aware of everyone watching them, but she shut her eyes resolutely and buried her face against Kamilah’s shoulder as Lysimachus held them close. He smelled of salt and blood, and only when his mouth came close to her ear did she understand what he was saying, and it was the simplest litany of all: their names, just their names.

“I missed you so much,” Kamilah cried into his shoulder. She was holding them both like her life depended on it, as if she was scared that at any moment one or both of them would disappear and leave her alone again.

“I’m here now,” he soothed. “I’m here and I’ll never leave you again. I’ll never leave either of you.”

“You’re here,” Kamilah murmured, reaching out to touch him, hardly believing this was real.

“You came back for me,” Lysimachus smiled, his voice trembling. “Whatever happens from here on in, we’re together now.”

“Always,” said Kamilah.

She wasn’t sure how long they were sat there holding each other, she only knew that at some point the tremors in her body stopped, her hold loosened, and her breathing evened out.

That she’d found solace in Kamilah and Lysimachus — a man and a woman who’d both had no solace for themselves for more than two thousand years — was the sweetest fucking thing she could ever remember experiencing. And it made her feel strong in a way she hadn’t in what seemed like forever.

Kamilah and Lysimachus both leaned back to get a good look at her, bloody and drawn as she was. She was looking up at the sky, where a pale crescent of moon darted in between thick sweeps of cloud and fog and smoke from the blaze. Flakes of white snow had fallen and mixed with their dark brown hair. Both of their cheeks and lips were flushed with the infamous Kazakhstani cold. She smiled up at them. Filthy as they both were, covered in blood and sweat and tears, seeing them together for the first time was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen.

“I’m okay,” she tried to laugh, despite the fact she could hardly even support the weight of her own aching head if she tried to move it from Kamilah’s shoulder. Despite the fact they were surrounded by piles of ash and the corpses of dead mortals and wolves. Despite the she’d literally participated in burning down her childhood home and almost been murdered. “Really—“

“You’re a terrible liar,” Lysimachus laughed. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“One or twice,” she smirked.

“Every time you attempt to tell a lie, more like,” Kamilah sighed. She bent her neck and pulled her in for a long, bloody kiss. She pulled her closer, that tenderness giving way to sudden desperation. She didn’t care if people were watching. She almost lost her tonight. That was cause for a passionate kiss if ever there was one. It was frantic, her hands on Anastasia’s hips, running up the
curves of her slender waist, bringing her as close to her as possible. Her kisses weren’t soft or delicate, but that wasn’t what either of them wanted anyway. They wanted passion and fire, to remind them they were alive. “Tell me truthfully,” she mumbled, “you’re not really okay.”

She sighed. Leaning back against Kamilah’s chest, she tipped her head back and reached up, cupping her sweaty cheek. She drew her mouth to her and kissed her softly. “No.”

“You will be. I’m going to take care of you.”

“As will I,” Lysimachus added. “Anything you need. You are my sister as surely as if we shared the same blood, and I will help you recover from this thing however I can. However long it takes. Whatever backup you need. I am here, as you have been there for me.”

Kamilah released a shaky breath and brushed her cheek with the back of her hand, catching a loose strand of red hair between her fingers. “I need to take care of you. Not because you can’t do it, but because I need… Annie, I need to touch you and see you and prove to myself in a thousand other ways that you’re okay, that you’re still here with me. That I didn’t lose you tonight. Okay?”

Anastasia’s friends were gathered all around her and her found family, as the home where she’d been mistreated and neglected as a child burned behind her. It was one of those fleeting moments when she remembered the desperate loneliness of when she was younger, hopelessly torn between fearing for what she might never have, and what she might lose if she ever let anyone see her for what she really was. She secured her hold on Kamilah and felt a small incredulous burst of happiness in her chest: that she could actually have all this.

She looked around the backyard, at every single person covered in blood and exhausted all the way down to their bones. They were her family. The people who had claimed her. In good, in bad, in broken parts or in whole, they were the ones who showed up, who stayed, regardless. It wasn’t just about flimsy blood relations or shared chromosomes, but something far wider, bigger. They’d each had many families over thousands of years, in multiple corners of the globe. Their family of origin, the groups they moved through, and this family that they had found and created. None of them perfect, and no one could expect them to be. But they had each other, and that was what mattered.

They said that time healed.

No, it didn’t. Not ever. At best, time was the great leveler, sweeping everyone who lived and breathed into coffins eventually. People would find ways to distract themselves from the pain. They bought pretty things. Drank expensive alcohol. Had mind blowing sex. Time was neither scalpel nor bandage. It was indifferent to their sufferings. This fresh wound would close eventually, the same way every wound eventually did.

The ash and blood and sweat would be scrubbed from their hands, but they’d never forget this harsh reality check of what the world could potentially descend into if they didn’t stand up for what was right. The scar tissue they’d each be left with would not be a good thing. It would merely be the open wound’s other face, a permanent reminder of the dangers that lurked in the shadows. Watching. Waiting. Always ready to pounce. Always strong enough to drag them into the darkness.
Overwhelming Light ~ Kamilah

Chapter Notes

Inspired by; Light by Sleeping At Last.

~~~~~ Upstate New York - One Year Later ~~~~~

The vibrant colours of the winters night moved around Kamilah, every shadow and fleck of light swaying, dipping, and rolling across the gilded ballroom the way a room did in the eyes of a person after one too many drinks, and woven through it all, the colliding scents of wood fire and fresh blood, snowmelt and pine, pipe smoke and rich wine. At turns sickly sweet and bitter, and all of it dizzying. The Dark Solstice was like something out of a fever induced dream or a brightly coloured children’s story book — much less of a gothic occasion than most mortals would care to believe.

Outside the large windows that lined the east wall of the palatial ballroom, ships and boats blanketed the glittering waters of the docks that lined The Hudson River. Vessels of all shapes and sizes, from brigs and galleys to schooners and frigates, bobbed on the murky waves that reflected the quickly approaching dawn, their sails billowing in the freezing December breeze. Dozens of ancient emblems marked the fabric on their masts and flanks — thanks to the more flamboyant immortals who chose to arrive upstate by old fashioned means as opposed to simply taking the train — but over them all, red and green banners printed with festive symbols and twinkling Christmas lights of every colour had been hung to mark the most important vampire holiday of the year. They glittered like gemstones against the sunrise.

“I still don’t know whether to be offended or impressed that my cats like their Aunt Annie better than they like me. I pride myself in being a good cat father, yet they follow her everywhere like a shadow,” Lysimachus murmured to Kamilah as the two of them watched Anastasia and little Lula Jacobs playing with the two grey British Shorthairs he had recently rescued, Jahi and Bahiti, in front of the large obelisk in the middle of the ballroom. Almost every eye in the room was on her, everyone always watched Anastasia as if she were a bomb. Would she explode and cause a disaster or pop and cause a miracle that had to be seen to be believed?

“Do you recall how our riding instructor told us as children that animals were the best judge of character? It seems he was not exaggerating as much as I suspected.”

“I’ll never forget how you accused him of turning your horse against you when she threw you off.”

“I was six and Khonsu liked me until he showed up and started criticising my form,” Kamilah scoffed. “Anyway, I still don’t know how the two of you managed to convince me to agree to having cats under our roof.”

That was a lie. She knew exactly how she’d been roped into expanding the Sayeed family by another two members. One night, bored and restless, Anastasia had found a stack of dusty board games in a closet, and bribed her with sexual favours into helping Lysimachus learn Scrabble, checkers and Yahtzee. Surprisingly, Lysí found that he enjoyed these “human” games, and was
soon asking them to play more often than not. This filled some of the long, restless evenings when insomnia struck and kept Kamilah’s mind off certain things. Unfortunately for her, once Lysi had learned the rules, he was nearly impossible to beat in strategy games like checkers, and his long life gave him a vast knowledge of lengthy, complicated words he staggered everyone with in Scrabble. Though sometimes they’d end up debating whether or not old Egyptian terms were legal to use and then getting into some rather ridiculous bets.

The cats were a result of Kamilah’s fundamental inability to back out of a challenge. From the moment Anastasia and Lysimachus had become friends, together they were her undoing. She could deny neither of them their hearts desire. So there she was, a first time cat owner.

She secretly liked the cats well enough, but she would never dream of admitting it out loud. If she did, she would quite literally never hear the end of it. Adrian and Lily would tease her endlessly. Serafine would simply give her that irritating smirk of hers that made her want to stab her. But Anastasia and Lysimachus would team up and somehow manage to convince her to adopt at least ten more cats and before she knew it, she’d be living in a zoo.

“You say that but we both know that you find them amusing,” he replied whilst adjusting the asexual pride cuff links he’d taken to wearing almost everyday. He no longer had to hide who he was and was surrounded by people who wouldn’t for a moment allow him to believe he was broken. Those cuff links were like badges of honour and he wore them with pride.

“Jahi decided to use one of my Birkins as a scratching post. I didn’t appreciate that. Do you know how much those things cost?”

He snorted. “That is my eldest son you are talking about. You should be a good Aunt and forgive him, you are one of the wealthiest people in the world.”

“You should teach your son some good manners... and make sure you let him know that if he so much as looks at my azaleas come Spring I will stab him while you’re at it.”

“This seems like the only appropriate situation to say that boys will be boys.”

“Just give me a second.” she breathed. Oh, how she wanted to hate these Birkin destroying balls of fur... but the heart was a strange beast and not ruled by logic. “Attempting to give a fuck... Attempting harder to give a fuck... Sorry, there was an error; fuck not given.”

Lysimachus laughed and wrapped an arm around her shoulder.

Standing there in the ballroom, watching the traditional Dark Solstice celebrations unfold before them, it was difficult to believe that only a year earlier they had been in Almaty. That it’d only been a year since Aiko had sacrificed herself. Despite the complex nature of their relationship, Kamilah had mourned her. In the final moments of her life, Aiko Nakamura had redeemed herself in her eyes. By saving Anastasia and managing to knock the necklace out of Cleopatra’s hands, she’d saved the live of every soul on Earth. She’d died a hero’s death.

At first, it felt as if she had simply vanished forever, and all traces of her eight hundred years on this earth destroyed. But later, when the shock of loss hadn’t overwhelmed all other feelings, every time anyone thought of her, or heard her voice in their head, or remembered a happy time together, they realised she was still a part of this world and would never be totally gone. Much like Jax Matsuo was. Their influences would be felt for generations to come.
Anastasia had struggled immensely after Aiko died, the same way she had after losing Jax. She’d only had two options: she could shoulder all the blame and become a martyr. Provided anyone knew what or who she was martyring for. Or she could accept that some things were important enough to fight for and realise there would always be sacrifices along the way. Being alive because of Aiko’s decision must have been hard. Nothing Kamilah or anyone else could say would give her any peace. She’d had to reconcile her actions in her own heart.

After the events in Almaty and facing The Order of Apostolous, everyone had different things that they grieved for. Different things that required time and effort and support to recover from, and it was not always easy. Everyone grieved in different ways. For some, it could take longer or shorter. Kamilah still didn’t know if grief ever really disappeared entirely. An ember still smouldered inside her. Most days, she didn’t notice it, but, out of the blue, it’d flare to life.

Such was the nature of an immortal life.

Life was like molten glass. It flowed, it was flexible, it could be moulded and shaped and held infinite amounts of vast potential. No matter what, there would always be a number of uncertainties in the melt. They would always be there in one form or another. Always. Unlike molten glass, life could not be fixed or frozen into a pretty vase and placed on a shelf to gather dust.

There would always be another storm. History would be forever doomed to repeat itself. It was the way the world worked. People would once again commit the sins of their grandparents and their sons and daughters would pay, would be forced to weather the storms. Snowstorms, rainstorms, windstorms, sandstorms, and firestorms. Some would be fierce and others would be small. As vampires, they had to deal with each one separately and do as much living as they could between the tragedies, but they needed to keep an eye on what was brewing for tomorrow.

Living was a risk. Every decision, every interaction, every step, every time they got out of bed in the morning, they took a risk. To survive was to know they were taking that risk and to not get out of bed clutching to the illusions of safety mortals liked to fool themselves into believing.

Making a choice to finally stand for what was right felt like the least Kamilah could do with the rest of her life. Her soul was no longer drenched black with the blood of her victims, she may not have been able to go back in time and stop herself from doing all the terrible things she had done, but she could do better going forwards. When she eventually died, that heavy blood filled essence would no longer sink to the bottom of the earth where she would burn in eternity for her crimes — Because it took more courage to heal the world’s hurts than to inflict them.

There were different kinds of strength. She knew that now. It didn't always come from a sharpened knife or a willingness to fight. Sometimes it came from endurance, where the well ran deep and quiet. Sometimes it came from compassion and forgiveness.

Sneaks, spies, monsters, defenders, heroes, masterminds, tenacious bastards — it didn’t matter what people chose to call them. They were the ones who would fight at the side of the Bloodkeeper to do whatever it took to stop those who believed they were entitled to power at the expense of others. It wasn’t just Anastasia’s destiny, it was all of theirs. A family business, of sorts.

Kamilah sighed happily as her eyes flitted around the crowded ballroom, taking in her family. Lysmiachus smiling proudly at his beloved cats as they stole all the attention in the room. Adrian and Serafine waltzing elegantly across the dance floor, their movements so graceful that anyone who didn’t know them would wonder if they had been professional ballroom dancers, but their fluid gestures were those of trained killers. Lily strutting around the room in a ridiculous black cape with a glass of Koumiss in each of her hands. And her sweet Anastasia, who was now making her way towards them. The individuals who had peered deeper than anyone else ever had and found
her soul. A little tattered and with some holes, but there all the same.

She’d once declared that she’d been born too early for her life, but she had never dared imagine just how true a statement that had been. If someone had told her two thousand years earlier that she and Lysimachus would one day have all of this, that they would one day be a part of something so much bigger than themselves... she’d never have believed that it was possible. She had truly believed that all of this would only ever be wishful thinking, plain and simple, dangerous for her to indulge in. Hope, happiness and freedom had not been in her future as far as she’d been capable of seeing back then.

But she had learned that love could transcend race and time, and that it could be beautiful and perfect and worth fighting for but also fragile and heartbreaking, and sometimes sacrifice was necessary. That sometimes it was you against the world, and there were no easy answers. That you had to know when to hold on... and when to let go. And even if that love came back, you could discover something in someone else who had been there all along.

“I missed you,” Kamilah beamed as her wife approached her. The blue gown she was wearing had been her handiwork and she’d overestimated her own willpower. Vastly. Resisting the urge to drag her off and fuck her until neither of them could walk was a job in and of itself.

She had lived for over two thousand years. In that time, the ideal of beauty had changed many times. Large breasts, small, thin, curvy, tall, short, they had all been the height of beauty at one time or another. But in all that time, she had never desired anyone the way she desired her wife. It didn’t even matter what she was wearing. She wanted her, all the time. She’d always want her. Until every sun went dark in every sky, until she was nothing more than long-forgotten cosmic dust, she would want her. And even then she suspected her particles would still long for hers.

“I was just over there,” Anastasia laughed.

“I still missed you.” She took three steps and was wrapped in her arms, where she belonged. No confusion. No worries. No troubles. To this woman she had offered her heart, entrusted he’d soul and given her life. For a few moments Kamilah simply stood there in her arms listening to the blood thrum inside her and the orchestra playing ancient melodies, and marveling in a crazed, despairing way that it could still refresh her and strengthen her, even now. Nothing vanished quite like pain — when pain did vanish, that was. Because most of the time pain never faded, and Kamilah was old enough to know that. Yet her aching soul had — by some miracle — settled, and now all she knew was inner peace. It was so amazing to her the wounds one could carry for eternity. But what had fascinated her most these last few years was how the right person could heal them, and how some kisses were worth waiting more than two thousand years for... and were worth living and fighting for. “It’s a very large room, in case you haven’t noticed.”

Anastasia giggled against her shoulder. “Is that a concealed dagger or are you just happy to see me?”

Kamilah huffed and made a weak attempt to look innocent, but Anastasia knew better. She couldn’t meet her eyes without blushing, so she focused her attention on the necklace she’d given her as a marker of this years solstice. The delicate butterfly charm sparkled beneath the soft glow of the Christmas lights. Silver spots between the sapphire wings glinted in the twinkling lights, and a white gold chain hung from a small hole in its body. She’d thought of her the moment she’d seen it through a little Jewellery store window. Delicate in appearance, but with a strength unnoticed at first glance.

“Should I guess how many concealed weapons you have or should I strip search you?”
Her dark brown eyes danced with delight. “A strip search is the only way to be absolutely certain.”

“Is there any particular reason you’re carting around a small armoury at your own party, Kami?”

“I hate everyone here, save for five individuals,” she smirked. “And, well, you look like that. It’s my duty to torture anyone I notice staring at your breasts or ass for too long.”

“Nothing says you care for me better than offering to torture my enemies.”

She grinned. “No sense doing things halfhearted, my love. And to think, some women have to endure listening to poetry.”

“You are a lost cause,” Lysimachus snorted into his wine glass.

Kamilah sighed and turned to glare at him. “Don’t even start with me when you are the one who tried to bring a nine hundred year old sword strapped to your belt—”

“It’s a nice sword and the golden hilt matches my eyes. Just because I’m not trying to impress anyone doesn’t mean I can’t set out to be the most dashing vampire at the party, Kamilah.” He smirked. “I am stunningly attractive after all. A sword would only accentuate my beauty, no?”

“The whole point of carrying weapons in this day and age is to conceal them so that when your enemy is distracted, you can gouge out their eyes—”

“Were you two always this murderous or this a new thing?,” Anastasia interjected.

“As children we had an entire room filled with knives,” Lysimachus beamed. “We always found it cathartic to throw them at each other when we argued... until she almost cut my ear off when I refused to let her play with my horse and our mother confiscated our weapons.”

“That was all your doing,” Kamilah smirked. “If you hadn’t worn father’s helmet that covered your eyes and tripped up the stairs I wouldn’t have come so close to murdering you.”

“You were the most terrifying seven year old child to ever have existed and you were threatening to behead me!,” Lysimachus laughed. “You should’ve seen her, Anastasia. She chased me through the palace with our father’s sword and shield, both of which were bigger than she was, screaming like a banshee at the top of her lungs—“

“You had the sword first and I did tell you that you were better off fighting hand to hand than wielding a weapon you didn’t know how to use. I was more skilled with a sword than you were then, so it was easy for me to simply disarm you and double your troubles. You were under attack and had to counter your own weapon.” Kamilah smirked. “If you’d just listened to me or allowed me to play with the horse, we might’ve been allowed to keep our collection—“

“Even then you stabbed first and thought about it later. Without Anastasia around to be your good sense, I didn’t stand a chance. It’s a miracle I survived childhood.”

“Its a miracle you survived? It’s a miracle I survived! You tried to feed me to a camel one time—“

“We were four!”

“I am not drunk enough for this,” Anastasia laughed. “Lily has started spiking Koumiss with Baileys, I’ll continue listening to this when I have a few drinks in my system. Maybe then I’ll understand how it’s even possible to try and feed a person to a camel.”
All three of them started laughing and Kamilah drew her wife closer to her. She bent down and pressed her lips against hers. Her demanding tongue tasted so damn good, and her teeth scraped deliciously against her lip from the aggressive way she pursued her over and over. The bloodkeeper’s hands stroked and massaged at her hair and neck and Kamilah just surrounded her. The difference in their height made Kamilah lean down over her, especially in heels. The way she forced her head back commanded her to open up to her. She felt completely enveloped in her, in her ardor, her scent. The world dropped away. There was just Annie. Her Annie.

Kamilah smiled against her lips, that weariness for life that had once seemed to settle on her like a coating of dust now nothing more than a terrible memory. It felt like their very souls had bonded. Her pleasure was Kamilah’s ecstasy. Her blood pumped in the Bloodkeeper’s heart. She took her as she was, broken bits and all. Now she knew there were ways to belong to someone that didn’t take anything away. A relationship shouldn’t impose limits — and if it did, then it was wrong. A lover should help you exceed your potential, not clip your wings.

“Dance with me,” Kamilah murmured as she slowly backed her onto the dance floor, not wanting to break their closeness for even a moment. At Anastasia’s smile, her heart shifted a little in her chest; it seemed to swell and beat against her bones until she couldn't hear. Throughout all her histories, she had found no one she loved more than her… no one.

“Remember when you told me how difficult it was to make your heart beat faster?,” Anastasia teased.

“Would you like to know a secret?”

“You know I would.”

She leaned forwards so that her cheek was rested against Anastasia’s, her lips close to her ear. When she spoke, her voice was barely even a whisper, “When I told you that, my heart was racing. Your mortal ears thankfully couldn’t pick up on it, but you’d already slipped under my skin, invaded my blood and seized my heart, ömirimidin maxabbatı.”

Kamilah’s warm breath at her ear sent a shiver down Anastasia’s spine. “Kami—“

“I’ve been practicing,” she whispered.

Anastasia’s eyes met hers, and for a moment, her face was open and vulnerable in the moonlight and warm glow of the Christmas lights. She caught a hint of wonder there as they stared at each other. Slowly, she leaned forward. Kamilah caught her breath, a tiny gasp escaping as Anastasia’s lips brushed against hers. “I love you, Kami.”

“As I love you. So, so much.”

Anastasia’s reply offered infinite solace in a single word. “Always.“

Kamilah rested her brow against hers as their bodies moved in a gentle sway, and she found herself completely lost in pools of glacial blue. The most remarkable thing about her were those eyes. They were laughing eyes, at once both joyous and tender: they were the radiant pale blue of a sky slipping toward evening in Heaven, when angels who had been sweet all day found themselves tempted to sin, and also the red of rubies glistening next to the open flames of Hell. Those eyes lit up the darkness that surrounded Kamilah and had followed her every step for two thousand years. It’d been her who’d shown her that she was who she chose to be. No matter how much light was shed upon her, if she still chose to remain in darkness, that was her doing, not anyone else’s. And for a life that had known no mornings, only eternal night, her light was life.
She didn’t think she’d ever have this. A family. Someone who was hers. Didn’t see it coming. For thousands of years she had carried chaos with her like an overcoat, never truly knowing peace. Never truly knowing love. Or happiness. She had watched the world, but had never really lived in it until finding her. But despite everything, she wouldn’t wish for a different life. This life had brought her to Anastasia.

Anastasia was not the same person as when they met, but... neither was she. Time had refined them, but instead of pushing them apart, they were closer than ever. Kamilah now knew she did not need to be afraid of falling when there was someone around to catch her. With the love of her life beside her and her family at her back, she feared nothing, not even death.

Magic existed in the world of endless night. True, honest magic that no mortal could see. Who could doubt it, when there were night blooming gardens and wildflowers, the music of the wind and the silence of the stars? Anyone who had loved had been touched by magic. Any vampire who managed to find their heart’s home and the other half of their soul across the bounds of time had been touched by it. It was such a simple and such an extraordinary part of the lives they lived. It made the little moments get caught like fossils in amber, ever-perfect, ever-beautiful... ever full of magic.

~~~~ fin. ~~~~

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