

# ONE

MANHATTAN'S MEATPACKING DISTRICT,  
PRESENT

"Give me your mouth," Wrath demanded.

Beth tilted her head back and leaned into her mate's arms. "You want it? So take it."

The growl that came out of that massive chest was a reminder that her man was not, in fact, a man. He was the last purebred vampire left on the planet—and when it came to her and sex, he was fully capable of going wrecking-ball to get at her.

And not in the stupid-ass Miley Cyrus poser-sex way—and provided Beth was willing, of course. Although really, when a woman had the opportunity to get with six feet, nine inches of hard-ass dressed in black leather, who just happened to have pale green eyes that glowed like the moon, and black hair down to the aforementioned concrete posterior?

*No* was not just out of her vocabulary; it was a foreign concept.

The kiss that came at her was brutal and she wanted it that way, Wrath's tongue thrusting into her as he shoved her backward through the open doorway of their secret hideaway.

*Slam!*

Best sound in the world. Well, okay, second-best—number one being what her man made when he came inside of her.

At the mere thought of it, her core opened even further.

“Oh, fuck,” he said into her mouth as one of his hands slipped in between her thighs. “I want this—*yeah* . . . are you wet for me, *leelan*.”

Not a question. Because he knew the answer, didn’t he.

“I can smell you,” he groaned against her ear as he ran his fangs up her throat. “The most beautiful thing in the world—except for your taste.”

That gravel in his voice, the straining in his hips, that hard length pressing into her—she orgasmed right then and there.

“Fuck me, we need to do this more,” he gritted as she ground herself against his hand, working her hips. “Why the fuck haven’t we come down here every night?”

The thought of the mess that waited for them back in Caldwell drained some of the heat out of her. But then he started massaging her with his fingers, working the seam of her jeans against her most sensitive place while his tongue probed her mouth the way he did when he was . . . um, *yeah*.

Gee whiz, what do you know, surprise, surprise—everything about his being King and the assassination attempt and the Band of Bastards just floated away.

He was right. Why the hell didn’t they make time for this slice of heaven on a regular basis?

Giving herself up to the sex, her hands tangled in his waist-length hair, its softness at odds with the harshness of his face, the strength in his incredible body, that iron core of his will. She’d never been one of those silly chippies who dreamed about a Prince Charming or a fairy-tale wedding or any of that Disney musical bullcrap. But even for someone who had had no illusions and no intention of ever signing a marriage certificate, there was no way she would have pictured herself with Wrath, son of Wrath, King of a race that as far as she had known back then was nothing more than a Halloween myth.

Yet here she was, head over heels with a straight-up killer who had a trucker’s vocabulary, a royal bloodline as long as his arm, and enough attitude to make Kanye West look like a self-esteem reject.

Okay, he wasn’t *quite* that egocentric—although, yup, he probably would cut Taylor Swift off in a heartbeat, but that was because rap and hip-hop were his music of choice and not ’cuz he was being a hater.

Bottom line, her *hellren* was a his-way-or-no-way kind of guy, and



the throne he sat on meant that personality defect was embraced on bended knee as the law of the land.

Talk about a perfect storm. The good news? She was the sole exception, the only person who could talk sense into him when he really got his hackles up. It was like that with all of the Brothers and their mates: Members of the Black Dagger Brotherhood, the race's elite group of fighters and meatheads, were not known for being easygoing. Then again, you didn't want pussies on the front line of any war, especially when the bad guys were of the ilk of the Lessening Society.

And those goddamned Bastards.

"I'm not going to make it to the bed," Wrath moaned. "I gotta be in you now."

"So take me on the floor." She sucked on his lower lip. "You know how to do that, don't you?"

More growling, and a big shift in the planet's orientation as she was popped off the ground and laid out on all that polished wood. The loft that Wrath had once used as a bachelor pad was right out of central casting: It had a cathedral ceiling, an empty warehouse's decor, and the matte black paint job of an Uzi. It was nothing like the Brotherhood mansion where they lived, and that was the point.

As beautiful as that place was, all the gold leaf and crystal chandeliers and antique furniture could get a little stifling—

*Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiip.*

With that happy noise, she lost another outfit in her wardrobe—and wasn't Wrath proud of himself: Flashing fangs long as daggers and white as the driven snow, he proceeded to turn her silk button-down into a Swiffer, shredding the thing off her naked breasts, buttons flying everywhere.

"Now, that's what I'm talkin' about." Wrath tore off his wrap-arounds and smiled, exposing his dental hardware. "Nothing in the way . . ."

Looming over her, he latched onto her nipple while his hands went to the waistband of her black jeans. All things considered, he was pretty polite as he unhooked the catch and unzipped, but she knew what was coming. . . .

With a violent jerk, he laid waste to what had been a two-week-old pair of Levi's.

She didn't care. Neither did he.

Oh, God, she needed this.

"You're right, it's been way too long," she hissed as he went after his own fly, popping the buttons free, unleashing an erection that still managed to take her breath away.

"I'm sorry," he bit out as he grabbed her behind the neck and mounted her.

As she opened her thighs wide for him, she knew exactly why he was apologizing. "Don't be—*Jesus!*"

The blazing possession was exactly what she wanted—and so was the rough ride he gave her, his heavy weight crushing her, her bare ass squeaking against the floor as he pounded into her, her legs straining to link around so he could go even deeper. It was total domination, his great body pistoning in an erotic pump that got ever faster and more intense.

But as good as it was, she knew how to take things to the next level. "Aren't you thirsty yet?" she drawled.

Total. Molecular. Stoppage.

Like he'd been hit with an ice ray. Or maybe a truck.

As he lifted his head, his eyes lit up so brightly, she knew if she looked on the floor next to her, she'd see her own shadow.

Digging into his shoulders with her nails, she arched up to him and cocked her head to the side. "How about something to drink?"

His lips curled off his fangs and he let out a cobra's hiss.

The bite was like being stabbed, but the pain faded into a sweet delirium that carried her to another dimension. Floating and grounded at the same time, she moaned and pushed her fingers into his hair, yanking him even closer as he sucked at her throat and thrust into her sex.

She orgasmed—and so did he.

Duh.

God, after a dry spell of how long? At least a month—which was unheard of for them—she realized how much they both had to have this. Too much static from all the demands around them. Too much stress polluting the hours. Too much toxic crap they didn't have time to process with each other.

Like, after he'd been shot in the neck, had they really talked about it? Sure, there had been the *OMG, you're alive, you made it* stuff . . . but she was still flinching every time a *doggen* opened a bottle of wine in the dining room or the Brothers played pool after hours.

Who knew that a cue ball smacking into a rack sounded exactly like a gun going off?



She hadn't. Not until Xcor had decided to put a bullet into Wrath's jugular.

Hardly the kind of education she'd been looking for—

For no good reason, tears flooded her eyes and broke free, tangling in her lashes and seeping down her cheeks even as another round of pleasure flooded her body.

And then the image of Wrath's gunshot wound billboarded her vision.

Red blood on the bulletproof vest he'd worn. Red blood on his muscle shirt. Red blood on his skin.

The dangerous times come home, the ugliness of reality no longer a hypothetical bogeyman in her mental closet, but a scream in her soul.

Red was the color of death to her.

Wrath froze for a second time and jerked his head up. "*Leelan?*"

Opening her eyes, she had a sudden panic that she couldn't see him right, that that face she looked for in every room no matter the hour was gone, that that visual confirmation of his life wasn't going to be there for the taking anymore.

Except all she had to do was blink. Blink, blink, blink . . . and he was back with her, clear as day.

And that made her cry more. Because her strong, beloved man was blind—and though that didn't make him handicapped in her opinion, it did cheat him out of some fundamentals, and that just wasn't fair.

"Oh, fuck, I hurt you—"

"No, no . . ." She took his face in her hands. "Don't stop."

"I should have gone over to the bed—"

The sure way to get him refocused was to arch under him, and she did, undulating and rolling her hips so that her core stroked him. And Hello, big boy, the friction registered, rendering him tongue-tied and torn.

"Don't stop," she reiterated, trying to draw him back down to her vein. "Ever . . ."

But Wrath held off, stroking a piece of hair away from her face. "Don't think like that."

"I'm not."

"You are."

There was no reason to define what "like that" meant: Treasonous plots. Wrath at that ornate desk, strangled by his position. The future unknown and not in a good way.

“I’m goin’ nowhere, *leelan*. You don’t worry about a goddamn thing. Understand me?”

Beth wanted to believe him. Needed to. But she feared it was a promise far harder to keep than speak.

“Beth?”

“Make love to me.” It was the only truth she could put out there that wouldn’t burst the bubble. “Please.”

He kissed her once. Twice. And then started to move again. “Always, *leelan*. Always.”

Best. Night. Ever.

As Wrath pushed himself off of his *shellan* an hour later, he couldn’t breathe, he was bleeding at the throat, and his Man of Steel cock had finally gone wet-noodle.

Although knowing the damn thing’s stamina? He had five, maybe ten minutes before Mr. Happy got to grinnin’ again.

The big bed in the center of the loft’s vast space had been upgraded since his Beth had mated him, and as he stretched out on his back, he had to admit that having sex on the thing was so much better than doing it on the floor. That said, as he recovered, its sheets were unnecessary as he could have fried an egg on his chest from the exertion. Blankets were an absolute hell-no. Pillows had been lost quickly because there was no headboard, but the advantage was leverage from any compass point.

Sometimes he liked to put a foot down and really dig in.

Beth let out a sigh that was longer and more satisfying than a Shakespearian sonnet—and talk about a hell-yeah? Wrath’s chest inflated like a hot-air balloon.

“I do you okay?” he drawled.

“God. Yes.”

More with the smiling. It was *The Mask* all over again, nothing but Jim Carrey, Pepsodent white over here. And she was right: The sex had been beyond fantastic. He’d fucked her across the floor until they were in range of the mattress. Then, like the gentlemale he was, he’d put her on the bed . . . and had her another three times. Four?

He could do this all night—

Sure as an eclipse could wipe out the moon, his cosmic relaxation disappeared and took all warmth with it.

There was no *all night* for him anymore. Not when it came to kickin' it with his female.

"Wrath?"

"I'm right here, *leelan*," he murmured.

As she rolled onto her side, he could feel her staring at him, and even though his vision had finally given up the ghost and conked out on him entirely, he could picture her long, thick black hair and her blue eyes and her beautiful face.

"You're not."

"I'm fine."

Shit, what time was it? Had it been longer than the hour it had felt like? Probably. When it came to the grind with Beth, he could lose motherfucking days.

"It's after one," she said softly.

"Fuck me."

"Would it help to talk? Wrath . . . can you tell me where you're at?"

Ah, hell, she was right. He had been checking out a lot lately, retreating to a place in his mind where the chaos couldn't get to him—not a bad thing, but it was a solo trip.

"Just not ready to go back to work."

"I don't blame you." She found his mouth and brushed her lips against his. "Can we stay a little longer?"

"Yeah." But not long enough . . .

A subtle alarm sounded on his wrist.

"Goddamn it." Putting his forearm across his face, he shook his head. "Time flies, huh."

And responsibilities waited for him. He had petitions to review. Proclamations to draft. And e-mails in his inbox, those fucking e-mails that the *glymera* pulled out of their asses on a nightly basis . . . although those had been drying up lately—probably a sign that that bunch of fruit loops were talking among themselves. Not good news.

Wrath cursed again. "I don't know how my father did this. Night after night. Year after year."

Only to be killed brutally too young.

At least when the elder Wrath had been on his throne, things had been stable: His citizenry had loved him and he had loved them. No treasonous plots cooking in back rooms. The enemy had been from without, not within.

“I’m so sorry,” Beth said. “Are you sure there aren’t some things you can put off?”

Wrath sat up, brushing his long hair back. As he stared off ahead, seeing nothing, he wanted to be out fighting.

Not an option. In fact, the only thing on his dance card was going back to Caldie and rechaining himself to that desk. His fate had been sealed many, many years ago, when his mother had gone into her needing, and his father had done what a *bellren* should . . . and against all odds, the heir had been conceived, and birthed, and then nurtured long enough so he could see both of them killed by *lessers* right in front of his still-functional, pretrans eyes.

Crystal clear, the memories were.

It hadn’t been until after his change when the ocular defect had begun to manifest itself. But that weakness was, like the throne, part of his hereditary due. The Scribe Virgin had had a prescribed breeding plan, one that had amplified the most desirable traits in males and females and created a caste-like system of social hierarchy. Good plan, up to a point. As usual with shit like Mother Nature, the law of unintended consequences had decided to slap a bitch—and that was how this King with his “perfect” lineage had ended up blind.

Frustrated, he jacked out of bed—and naturally hit one of those pillows instead of the floor. As his foot flipped out from underneath him and his balance went carnival funhouse, he threw out hands to catch himself, but didn’t know where he was in space—

Wrath slammed into the floor, the pain exploding on his left side, but that wasn’t the worst part. He could hear Beth scrambling through the messed-up sheets to get to him.

“No!” he barked, shoving himself out of her range. “*I got it.*”

As his voice ricocheted around the open space of the loft, he wanted to put his head through a plate-glass window. “Sorry,” he muttered, yanking his hair back.

“It’s okay.”

“I didn’t mean to bite your head off.”

“You’ve been under a lot of stress. It happens.”

Christ, like they were talking about him going soft during sex?

God, when he’d started in with the King shit, he’d done that internal-resolution bullcrap and made a commitment to rock that crown, be a standup guy, step into his daddy’s boots, blah, blah, blah. But the unfortunate reality was, this was a marathon that was going to last his



entire breathing life—and he was flagging after only two years. Three. However long it had been.

What the hell year was it anyway?

Shit knew he'd always had a short fuse, but being locked in the midnight of his blindness with nothing except demands he didn't jones over was making him volcanic.

No, wait, that was a little more temperate than where he was at—and the underlying issue was his personality. Fighting was his first and best calling, not ruling from a chair.

The father had been a male of the pen; the son was of the sword.

“Wrath?”

“Sorry, what?”

“I asked if you wanted something to eat before we leave.”

He pictured going back to the mansion, *doggen* everywhere, Brothers in and out, *shellans* all around . . . and felt like he couldn't breathe. He loved them all, but goddamn, there was no privacy there.

“Thanks, but I'll just catch something at my desk.”

There was a long silence. “All right.”

Wrath stayed on the floor as she got dressed, the soft shifting of her jeans going up those long, luscious legs like a funeral dirge.

“Is it okay to wear your muscle shirt?” she asked. “My blouse is done for.”

“Yeah. Abso.”

Her sadness smelled like autumn rain and felt just as cold in the air to him.

Man, to think there were people out there who wanted to be King, he thought as he got to his feet.

Fucking. Crazy.

If it weren't for his father's legacy, and all those vampires who had truly, deeply loved his sire, he would have blown it all off and not looked back. But pulling out? He couldn't do that. His father had been a King for the history books, a male who had not just commanded authority by virtue of the throne he sat on, but had inspired honest devotion.

Wrath lost the crown? He might as well piss all over his sire's grave.

When his *shellan's* palm slid into his own, he jumped. “Here are your clothes,” she said, putting them into his hands. “And I have your wraparounds.”

With a quick shift, he pulled her against him, holding her to his

naked body. She was a tall female, but even so she barely came up to his pecs, and as he closed his eyes, he curled himself around her.

“I want you to know something,” he said into her hair.

As she went still, he tried to pull something worth hearing out of his ass. Some string of words that were even in the same zip code as what was doing in his chest.

“What,” she whispered.

“You are everything to me.”

It was so incredibly, totally not enough—and yet she sighed and melted into him like that was all she’d wanted to hear. And a bag of chips.

Sometimes you got lucky.

And as he continued to hold her, he knew he’d do well to remember that. As long as he had this female by his side?

He could get through anything.

# TWO

CALDWELL, NEW YORK

"**L**ong live the King."

As Abalone, son of Abalone, spoke the words, he tried to gauge the response of the three males who had knocked upon his door, marched into his home and were standing in his library, staring at him as if measuring him for a shroud.

Actually, no. He tracked only one expression—that of the disfigured warrior who stood far behind the others, lounging against the silk wallpaper, combat boots solidly on the Persian carpet.

The male's eyes were hidden beneath the overhang of a heavy brow, the irises dark enough so there was no telling what color they were, blue or brown or green. His body was enormous, and even at rest, it was a bald-faced threat, a grenade with a slippery pin. And his response to what had been said?

No change in his features, that harelip nothing but a slash, the frown the same. No emotion shown.

But that dagger hand flexed wide-open and then curled into a fist.

Clearly, the aristocrat Ichan and the lawyer Tyhm, who had brought this fighter over, had lied. This was not a "conversation about

the future”—no, something like that would suggest that Abalone had a choice in the matter.

This was a warning shot across his bloodline’s bow, an all-aboard call to which there was but one answer.

And yet, even still, the words had come out of his mouth as they had, and he could not change them.

“Are you certain of your reply?” Ichan asked with an arched brow.

Ichan was typical of his breeding and financial net worth, refined to the point of femininity in spite of his gender, dressed in a coordinated suit and tie with every hair in place. Beside him, Tyhm, the solicitor, was the same only even thinner, as if his considerable mental prowess sapped his caloric intake.

And both of them, as well as the warrior, were prepared to wait for the answer they’d been given to change.

Abalone’s eyes went to an ancient scroll that had been framed and mounted on the wall by the double doors. He couldn’t read the small Old Language characters from across the room, but there was no need to go in for a close-up. He knew each one by heart.

“I was unaware that there was a question posed of me,” Abalone said.

Ichan smiled falsely and strolled around, fingering a sterling silver bowl of red apples, the collection of Cartier desk clocks on a side table, the bronze bust of Napoleon on the desk by the windowed alcove.

“We are, of course, interested in your position.” The aristocrat stopped in front of a pen-and-ink drawing on a stand. “This is your daughter, I believe?”

Abalone’s chest got tight.

“She is about to be presented, is she not?” Ichan looked over his shoulder. “Yes?”

Abalone wanted to shove the male away from the image.

Of all things that were considered “his,” his precious young, the only offspring he and his *shellan* had had, was the moon in his night sky, the joy that marked the household’s hours, his compass for the future. And he wanted so many things for her—not in *glymera* terms, though. No, he wished for her what her *mahmen* and he had found—at least for the years until his female had been called unto the Fade.

He wished for his daughter abiding love with a male of worth who would take care of her.

If she was not allowed to be presented to society? That might never happen.



"I'm sorry," Ichan drawled. "Did you answer and I missed the reply?"

"She is due to be offered soon, yes."

"Yes." The aristocrat smiled again. "I know that you worry appropriately at her prospects. As a father myself, I am in your shoes—with daughters, you need to make sure they are mated well."

Abalone didn't release his breath until the male resumed his lazy loop around the room. "Does it not give you a degree of security to think that there are such clear demarcations within our society? Corrective breeding has resulted in a superior group of individuals, and we are required by custom and common sense to preserve our associations with like members of our race. Can you imagine your daughter married to a commoner?"

That last word lingered, carrying the pronunciation of an expletive and the threat of a cocked gun.

"No, you would not," Ichan answered for himself.

In truth, Abalone wasn't so certain. If the male loved her enough? But that was not the point of all this, was it.

Ichan paused to glance over the oil paintings that hung in front of the family's vast collection of shelved first editions. The artwork was, naturally, of ancestors, with the most prominent among them mounted over the marble fireplace's grand mantel.

A famous male in the history of the race, and of Abalone's bloodline. The Noble Redeemer, as he was known among the family.

Abalone's sire.

Ichan waved his hand around, including not just the room, but the house, all of its contents, and all the persons under its roof. "This is worthy of conservation, and the only way that happens is if the Old Ways are respected. The tenets that we, the *glymera*, seek to uphold are the very basis of what you hope to provide your daughter—without them, who knows where she could end up."

Abalone closed his eyes briefly.

And didn't that make the aristocrat assume a kinder, gentler voice. "That King you just spoke of so reverently—he's mated to a half-breed."

Abalone's lids flipped open. As with all members of the Council, he had been informed of the royal union, and that was the extent of it. "I thought he was mated unto Marissa, daughter of Wallen."

"In fact, not. The ceremony took place just a year before the raids, and the assumption was that the King had followed through on the

promise to Havers's sister—but suspicions arose when Marissa was subsequently unioned with a Brother. Later, it came out to us through Tyhm—he nodded to the lawyer—"that Wrath had taken another female—who is *not* of our race."

There was a pause, as if Abalone were being given the chance to gasp at the revelation. When he didn't become woozy from shock, Ichan leaned in and spoke slowly—as if to a mental deficient. "If they have offspring, the heir to the throne would be a quarter human."

"No one is of truly pure blood," Abalone murmured.

"More's the pity. Surely you will agree, however, that there is a tremendous difference between distant human relations . . . and a King who is substantially of that horrid race. But even if you are not offended—and surely that is not the case—the Old Laws provide the dictate. The King is to be a full-bred male—and Wrath, son of Wrath, cannot provide that for us in an heir."

"Assuming this is true—"

"It is."

"What do you expect of me?"

"I'm simply making you aware of the situation. I am nothing more than a concerned citizen."

Then why come with the violent backup? "Well, I appreciate your keeping me informed—"

"The Council is going to have to take action."

"In what form?"

"There will be a vote. Soon."

"To disavow any heirs?"

"To remove the King. His authority is such that he could change the laws at any time, eradicating the provision and further weakening the race. He must be taken down lawfully as soon as possible." The aristocrat glanced over at the drawing of Abalone's daughter. "I trust that at the Council's special session, your bloodline will be well represented by your seal and your colors."

Abalone glanced at the fighter leaning against his wall. The male seemed barely to breathe, but he was far from asleep.

How long until ruination came upon this house if he did not pledge his vote? And what form would it take?

He imagined his daughter mourning the loss of her only parent and being forsaken for the rest of her future. Himself tortured and then killed in some gruesome way.



Dearest Virgin Scribe, the narrowed eyes of that warrior were trained on him like he was a target.

“Long live the proper King,” Ichan said, “is more like it.”

On that note, the natty “concerned citizen” took his leave, filing out of the room with the attorney.

Abalone’s heart thundered as he was left alone with the fighter . . . and after a moment of screaming silence, the male uncoiled himself and went to the silver bowl of apples.

In a low, heavily accented voice, he said, “These are for the taking, are they not?”

Abalone opened his mouth, but all that emerged was a squeak.

“Is that a yes?” came a murmur.

“Indeed. Yes.”

The fighter reached up to his chest harness and withdrew a dagger, the silver blade of which seemed long as a grown male’s arm. With a quick toss, he flipped the weapon up in the air, the light flashing on the sharp edge—and with equal assurance, he caught the handle and stabbed one of the apples.

All without breaking eye contact with Abalone.

Removing his due from the bowl, his hard eyes drifted over to the drawing. “She’s quite beautiful. For now.”

Abalone put his body in the way of the depiction, prepared to sacrifice himself if it came to that: He didn’t want the warrior even looking at the picture, much less commenting on it—or doing so much worse.

“Anon, then,” the fighter said.

He left with the apple held upright, impaled to the core.

When Abalone heard the front door shut in the distance, he all but collapsed, falling onto the silk-covered sofa with limp limbs and a pounding heart. Even though his hands were shaking, he managed to take a cigarette out of a crystal box and ignite it with a heavy crystal lighter.

Inhaling, he stared at the picture of his daughter and knew true terror for the first time in his life.

“Dearest Virgin Scribe . . .”

There had been signs of unrest for a good year: rumors and rumbling indicating that the King was falling into disfavor among certain quadrants of the aristocracy; gossip that an assassination attempt had been made; insinuations that a cabal had formed and was prepared to move. And then there had been that Council meeting where Wrath

had come forward with the Brotherhood and addressed the assembled with a bald-faced threat.

It had been the first time people had seen the King for . . . well, longer than Abalone could remember. In fact, he couldn't recall when anyone had had an audience with the ruler. There had been proclamations disseminated, of course—and edicts that had been progressive and, in Abalone's mind, long overdue.

Others didn't agree, however.

And were obviously prepared to force the hands of those who didn't concur with them.

Shifting his eyes to the portrait of his father, he tried to find some bravery in his deeper self, some kind of bedrock to plant his feet upon and stand up for what he knew was right: If Wrath had mated a half-breed, so what, if he loved her? A lot of the Old Laws that he was reforming were discriminatory, and if anything, the King's choice of *shellan* showed that he walked the talk of his modernizing.

And yet there was some old-school in the King, however: Two aristocrats had been killed recently. Montrag. Elan. Both violently and in their homes. And both had been associated with dissent.

Clearly, Wrath was not going to sit back idly whilst plots simmered against him. The bad news was that his enemies in court were stepping up the stakes as well, bringing their own muscle.

Abalone reached into the pocket of his smoking jacket and took out his iPhone. Pulling up a number from his contacts, he initiated a call and listened to the ringing with half an ear.

When a male voice answered, he had to clear his throat. "I need to know if you've been visited."

His cousin hesitated not a moment. "Yes. I have."

Abalone cursed. "I don't want any part of this."

"No one does. But this legal angle of theirs?" His cousin took a deep breath. "About the heir? People are responding."

"It's not right. Wrath has been doing good things, moving us in the ways of the modern world. He's abolished blood slavery and set up that home for abused females and their young. He's been fair and even handed with proclamations—"

"They've got him on this, Abalone. They're going to win this one—because there are more than enough left who are repulsed by the notion of a half-breed queen and a seriously diluted heir." His cousin's voice dropped lower. "Do not be on the wrong side of this, my blood.



They're prepared to do anything that's necessary to secure a unanimous vote when the time comes, and the law is what it is."

"He could change it. I'm surprised he hasn't."

"No doubt he's had a few more pressing matters to contend with than some dusty old books. And frankly, even if he reworded the provision? I don't know if there's enough support to carry him."

"He could retaliate against the aristocracy."

"What's he going to do—kill us all? Then what?"

When Abalone finally hung up, he stared into the eyes of his father. His heart told him the race was in good hands with Wrath, even if the King isolated himself in many ways. But his cousin made a lot of sense.

After a long while, he made another call that sickened his stomach. When it was answered, he didn't bother with any preamble. "You have my vote," he said roughly.

Before Ichan could laud his good sense, he ended the call. And promptly dragged over a wastepaper basket so he could vomit.

The only thing worse than having no legacy at all . . . was not living up to the one you'd been given.

As Xcor strode out of the aristocrat's house, he was annoyed to find that Ichan, the Council's representative, and Tyhm, the lawyer, were waiting for him in the moonlight.

"I think we were persuasive enough," Ichan announced.

So much pride in that haughty voice—as if the male had already placed his sagging arse upon the throne.

Xcor looked back at the Tudor mansion. Through the diamond-pane windows, the male they had confronted was on the phone, smoking a cigarette like his lungs required nicotine more than oxygen. Then he paused and stared up at something. A moment later, shoulders sloping in defeat, he put the cell back to his ear.

Ichan's phone went off and he smiled as he took it out of his pocket. "Hello? How lovely of you to call—" There was a pause. "Oh, I think that's so wise of you—hello? Hello?"

Ichan put the cellular device away with a shrug. "I shan't even be offended that he hung up on me."

And another one falls to the logic.

Xcor gripped his stolen apple and wrenched it from his blade.

With a sure hand, he began to peel the bloodred skin from its crisp, white flesh, whittling around and around until a curling strip formed beneath his weapon.

As opposed to his favored stance of assassination, this new legal approach to a forced abdication was going well. They had another half dozen members of the First Families to meet and brief, and then it was time to make this official at the Council level. After that? The killings would have to be done—no doubt one or all of the aristocrats they were dealing with would have delusions of the crownal variety.

Easily cured, however, and then he would have what he wanted.  
“. . . meal of our choice?”

As Ichan and Tyhm looked at him, he realized that he'd just been asked out to eat.

Xcor let the strip of skin fall to the snow at his feet. No doubt the dandy inside had groundspeople who would pick it up, although given how unsettled the dear boy was, mayhap he would venture out for a walk amongst his fucking topiaries and see it himself.

Threats were best made on multiple levels.

“The field awaits me the now,” Xcor said as he carved out a section of flesh and bared his fangs, bringing his knife up to his mouth along with the piece.

The crack as he bit down had its desired effect.

“Yes, well, of course, indeed, for truth,” Ichan said, his words like a ballerina spinning off her pointed shoes and careening into the orchestra pit.

How cute.

And then there was a pause, as if the adieu was to be repaid. When Xcor merely cocked a brow, the two dematerialized sure as if there were emergencies afoot at their respective manses.

So irrelevant these pawns were—he had used some up already and no doubt one or both of the pair that had just departed would find their graves in service to him.

Inside the great house, the Council member they had come to see was still hanging his head—but not for long. Someone entered the room, and whoever it was, the aristocrat didn't want them to know of his upset. He pulled himself together, smiling and holding out his arms. As a young female went unto him, Xcor figured her to be the daughter.

She was beautiful, it was true—the drawing had been accurate.



But she was not a patch on another.

Unbidden, memories flooded his mind, images of fair skin and hair, and eyes that were capable of stopping him in his tracks sure as a bullet, tangled his thoughts until he was the one tripping over his boots even as he remained standing.

No, however pretty and young that daughter was, she was but a far-off echo of loveliness compared to his unattainable Chosen.

“You must stop this,” he said into the cold night breeze. “Stop this the now.”

A fine command, indeed—and yet it was several minutes before he could calm himself enough to focus and dematerialize from the front lawn.

A blink later and Xcor was finally in his element: The alley before him was an urban armpit, the snow filthy from the tire grab left over after countless dump and delivery trucks had passed o’er this stretch behind half a dozen cheap restaurants. In spite of frigid December gusts, the stench of spoiled meat and denaturing green matter was enough to make the inside of the nose tingle.

Breathing in, he searched for the sickly sweetness of the enemy.

He had been born deformed and cast away unto the world by the female who had brought him forth from her womb. Reared in the Bloodletter’s war camp, he had been honed as a blade in that sadist’s fire pit of aggression and pain, any weakness pounded out of him until he was as deadly as a dagger.

This theater of combat was where he belonged.

And he was not alone for long.

Wrenching his head around, he braced his weight into his thighs. A group of human men came into view, clearing the corner, walking in a pack. When they saw him, they stopped and drew in on themselves.

Xcor rolled his eyes and resumed his promenade in the opposite direction—

“Whadafuckyadoin’,” came the shout-out.

Turning back, he eyed the five of them. They were wearing some sort of coordinated theme of tough human: leather jackets, black skull caps, bandannas tied to the bottoms of their faces.

They had clearly intended to come upon someone or someones else.

Not the kind of foe he bothered with. For one thing, humans were so inferior physically, it was like biting into that apple. Secondly, they

were liable to involve others of their species, either on purpose through that dreaded 911 thing or inadvertently, by causing a noise that alerted passersby.

“Whadafuckyadoin’!”

If he stayed silent, mayhap this would escalate into a coordinated song-and-dance number? How frightening.

“Go about your night,” he said in a low voice.

“Go about your—whatreyasomekindaforiegnfuck?”

Or something to that effect. Their accents were difficult to decipher—moreover, he was disinterested in making much effort on that front—

From out of nowhere, a car careened around that corner, its tires losing traction as its driver pounded on the brakes.

Gunshots rang out, echoing through the night, scattering the assembled, including himself.

Wrong place, wrong time, Xcor thought as he caught a slug in the shoulder, the pain blazing through his head—and making it impossible for him to dematerialize.

He wanted nothing of this silly fight amongst the rats without tails. But it appeared as if he were going to have to engage.

He was *not* dying as the result of a human’s bullet.