

## AIDEN

Sayyid and I made it to the Triple Creek Hotel in fifteen minutes.

The owner, a gray-haired older woman, recognized me as I approached the front desk.

“Alpha Norwood!” she gasped, putting a wrinkled hand to her embroidered collar.

“And you must be Dorothy Seaver,” I said, extending a hand.

She blushed as she shook it.

“I need to see one of your guests,” I said.

“A Mr. Konstantin,” Sayyid put in.

“Oh, well,” Dorothy said, tilting her head to one side in a gesture of unease. “I don’t usually give out that sort of information...”

“You would if a police detective came with a warrant, wouldn’t you?” Sayyid said. “And the Alpha’s word trumps any judge’s, so...”

Dorothy’s face went blank, and then she nodded. “Of course.”



She held up a key.

“He’s in room four. Go through those doors, out into the courtyard. This is the skeleton key. Let yourselves in.”

*At last*, I said to myself as a wave of relief washed over me.

Sayyid and I made our way out through the pair of French doors Dorothy had indicated, into a large, charming, cobbled courtyard beyond.

*The moment has finally come. I’m going to confront Konstantin and destroy him for what he did to Sienna. To my whole family.*

*To Michelle.*



A pang of guilt made me pause.

*Josh should be here.*

But there was no time to waste.

This was my chance to finish Konstantin once and for all.

And I wasn’t about to miss it.

## JOSH

After a long night spent talking with my mate, we had agreed that it was more important for me to go after Konstantin than to participate in the reality show.

It was a weight off my shoulders, but I still felt guilty.

Like I wasn't enough.

Not smart enough.



Not strong enough.

Not capable enough to find the vampyre without help.

Especially because the stupid fucking watch wasn't working.

When it had led me to the Jalwitz Museum, all the needles and dials had been pointing in the same direction.

Toward Konstantin.

But now, it was like the sludge was... confused or something. It kept wavering, pointing sometimes north, but then swiveling in a circle and pointing slightly to the east.



Then it would stop altogether. It was infuriating.

I'd been staring at it for almost twenty minutes now, and I was about to smash the damn thing with a hammer.

But in the end, I couldn't resist the temptation.

No matter if it was a wild goose chase, I had to check it out.

I grabbed the watch off my desk and headed for my truck.



## SIENNA

Every muscle in my body felt tight and brittle.

The heat from the newly installed light fixtures was making me sweat.

A woman with a large, pregnant stomach sat in a wheelchair in the center of the room, waiting for me to come and bless her.

I took in the line of expectant mothers—it curved past where the eye could see.

I didn't know which was worse:

The fact that I was supposed to interact with



pregnant women right now when I was still trying to find a way to deal with the news that I might never have children of my own...

Or the fact that anyone thought that I could do anything at all to help these women. Like being mated to Aiden gave me magical powers or something.

It was all a fraud.

*I am a fraud.*



Michelle grabbed my arm and pulled me away from Erica, who looked positively volcanic with anger.

“Look, just do the thing, Si,” Michelle whispered impatiently. “Everyone is waiting for you.”

After our conversation the other day, I thought she would be more understanding.

But even I could see that Michelle had simply put a new coat of paint on that stylish mask she was wearing over her damaged soul.

*I wish she didn't need to take her anxieties out on me and only me.*

I was getting tired of being her punching bag.



*Let's just get this over with.*

Glancing at Michelle, then at Charlotte, I tried to move, but the ever-watching red eye of the camera had me paralyzed.

“What am I even supposed to do?”



Michelle huffed, and Charlotte shook her head in exasperation. “It isn’t complicated. You put your hands on their stomach, focus your will, and recite the Sacred Flame Blessing.”

“Focus your will?” Erica muttered from my side.

“You mean, ‘Divine flame, fertile and bright...,’” I said.

“Yes, though you should try to personalize it. Get each woman’s name,” Charlotte said. “Instead of ‘this evening bless each mother’s light,’ say something like, ‘today bless so-and-so’s light.’”

My heart thudded. “Are we absolutely sure Michelle can’t do it?”

“I do know the ritual by heart, I could—” Michelle began.

“Absolutely *not*,” Charlotte said emphatically.



“Sienna, everyone is waiting to see *you* perform these blessings. You don’t want to let them all down, now do you?” Monica asked, looking straight ahead into a camera lens.

*No. I don’t.*

I’d let too many people down already.

Michelle.

Aiden.

Emily.

I couldn’t just walk away.

But somehow, it didn’t feel that simple.

## JOCELYN

Since the lunch we’d shared the day before, I hadn’t stopped thinking about Nina.

I’d spotted her a couple of times, though she’d only waved and smiled at me.

*Giving me space... or avoiding me?*



I wanted to believe that we were in a better place than the latter, at least.

I'd come to the cafeteria at breakfast that morning, hoping she'd be there.

I made myself eat, even though she hadn't been there.

I knew my eating would get back to her through the kitchen staff grapevine, and anyway, I *did* want to get stronger.

To heal.



Even if my own abilities never came back.

Even if the loss took away everything I thought I knew about myself.

Even if no one will ever look at me the same way.

Including Nina...

*Get a grip, Jocelyn.*

But I couldn't help it.

Nina's smile, her laugh, her jokes... and her rarer moments of earnest sincerity...





They had slipped her under my skin... and now there was no ignoring her.

She fascinated me.

I still didn't know very much about her.

I didn't understand how or why she'd become a rogue, then a thief.

*Will I ever get a chance to find out more about her?*

*Really get to know her?*



The idea that I wouldn't—that eventually I would leave this place and Nina behind—was unbearable.

Especially since I had absolutely no idea what my purpose in life was, now that I could no longer be a healer.

After breakfast, I took a walk through the frozen garden.

I kept hoping she would meet me there, like she had before when she'd tried to apologize.

But I remained alone.

Shaking my head at myself, I hugged my arms across my chest, watching my breath cloud in front of me.

*I wish I could harden my heart against Nina completely.*

*She's a liar.*



*She tried to hurt Sienna—rather than ask anyone for help.*

*But she also came to help at the Yule Ball, even when she didn't need to.*

Which made the outrage harder to hold on to.

Nina had been desperate, and she was unaccustomed to being helped—that much was clear to me.

She had learned not to rely on anyone but herself.

And now... now I was afraid she was pulling away from me.

Right when I was starting to believe I could forgive her.

Maybe it was just a sign of how much of a fool I was.



After all, she'd left me before.

*Oh, Joce. You're the patron saint of lost causes, aren't you?*

Except this time, I had a sinking feeling that the real lost cause might be my own heart.

## ERICA



I didn't like this situation at all.

Sienna was in a fragile place—emotionally.

And this performance people were demanding of her was bound to strain her already over-stressed emotional endurance.

As Sienna approached the pregnant woman in the wheelchair, the three cameramen followed her, going in for different angles.

This was a livestream. My anxiety jumped at the thought.

“Hi,” Sienna said, pulling up a stool to sit across from the woman. “I’m Sienna Mercer-Norwood.”

“Carlene Lamar,” the woman said. She had a light-brown complexion and gingerbread curls in a halo around her head.

“What brings you here to the hospital, Carlene?”  
Sienna asked gently.

“I have placenta previa,” she said. “They said it might fix itself, but I’m only a month from my due date, and it hasn’t.”

Sienna’s back stiffened, almost too subtly for anyone to see.



“And you’re hoping my blessing will help?” she said softly.

Carlene nodded, her face twisting with fear. “I don’t want to have a C-section. I’m so afraid of being cut.”

Sienna swallowed and nodded, her blue eyes darting from the woman’s belly to her expression.

Carlene leaned back, offering her belly to Sienna.

The cameras moved in for a close-up.

Sienna placed her palms on Carlene’s rounded belly. “Divine flame, fertile and bright,” Sienna said, her voice breathy.

She squinted and blinked, fighting tears.

The cameras moved closer.



“Divine flame...” Sienna said again. She sucked in her lower lip and released it, rocking a little.

My hands clenched at my sides.

I saw it coming as I watched: Sienna was melting down.

## SIENNA



*They are streaming this live.*

*I have to get it together.*

*God, I wish Aiden was here.*

My hands were numb.

Pressure crushed my chest.

Darkness pushed against the edges of my vision.

It was like I was looking at Carlene through a tunnel.

Her sweet face, so full of fear. Her eyes were pleading for any sign of hope.

I felt so cold.

Tears were pooling in my eyes as I tried to focus on the words.

“Divine flame,” I said for the third time, but it was like the rest of them had deserted me.

*How does it go? “Divine flame, fertile and bright...”*



Sweat broke out over my whole body. My breathing was coming too fast now.

My ears were ringing as the pressure around my chest worsened.

I felt like I was having a heart attack.

*I can't lose my shit right now—not in front of these people.*

*Monica is livestreaming this.*

*You can do this!*

But panic gripped me tightly, squeezing the breath out of me.

Sobs came then: wrenching through me, twisting my insides.

I stood up, backing into the stool, which went rolling.

Carlene was staring at me, shocked.

Michelle's eyes kept darting from me to the camera—as if she wasn't sure where her loyalties lay.



No one was going to help me.

*Stop it, Sienna!*

*Get it under control!*

But I couldn't.

Turning back and forth, I searched desperately for an escape.

Monica stood in the doorway, hands on her hips, watching me with a gleam in her eyes.

Two cameramen blocked the other doorway.

I was losing my mind, and I couldn't get out of here.

I was trapped.



## AIDEN

Sayyid walked a few paces ahead of me as we crept silently down the hotel corridor.

He had already called for backup, but no one was here yet.

I was worried that if Konstantin got the slightest hint of trouble, he'd be gone before we could get to him.

We turned a corner, and Sayyid stopped dead in his tracks. The blood drained from his face.

There, standing outside his hotel room door, was a man wearing a three-piece charcoal suit.

His dark eyes stared into mine. His lips were curled in the barest hint of a smile.

“Greetings, Alpha Norwood,” a voice straight out of my nightmares said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Next Chapter

