



a shade of
vampire

BELLA FORREST

BOOK ONE

By Bella Forrest

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PROLOGUE

I never once imagined that my life would play out the way that it did. To be fair, I guess I could say that life never really unfolds the way we expect it to.

I know my father's didn't, but I doubt there's a teenager in the world who could expect her life to play out like mine.

I'd just turned seventeen when my life changed completely and irreversibly. It was only one night before that I was thinking of the future, of my dreams and aspirations. I wanted to become a social worker or even a lawyer in hopes of helping others like me who were abandoned by their families. Today was my birthday, and at my age, it felt like I had my whole life ahead of me. Granted, I wasn't so sure that it would be much of a great life, but at least I was certain that I was going to have *a life*.

That following evening, I wasn't so sure any more. How could I have been when, within the span of twenty four hours, I'd gone from high school senior and certified wallflower to captive of the prince of the largest and most powerful coven of our time?

When I was nine years old, my mother, Camilla, was sent to a lunatic's asylum. I'd always known there was something strange about my mother, but I never expected her to completely lose her mind. What happened to her really left its mark on me.

After this, my main goal in life was to survive without losing my mind and turning out like my mother.

Then, after *it* happened, on the evening of my seventeenth birthday, my only goal was *to survive*. Never mind my fear of going insane. I was convinced that I'd already gone crazy anyway.

There was no way to predict what would happen to me after that night.

During her better days, my mother already warned me about this. She said that I should expect life to dish out my own fair share of surprises.

But Derek Novak was a surprise that was far from fair...

I was taking an evening stroll along the shore, feeling the soft sand under my bare feet with every step. The heavy waves were crashing against the shore, the sound coming as music to my ears. My skin was tingling with every blow of the gentle summer breeze, the distinct scent of ocean salt filling my nostrils. As I dabbed cherry-flavored Chapstick over my dry lips, they formed a bitter smile. The balm only served to add its sweet taste to the numerous sensations coming at me at that particular moment.

I've always found myself completely attuned to all five of my senses, but that night, I was attuned to all but one. My sight was blurred by the tears I was trying to hold back. I couldn't appreciate the exotic scene around me. All I could think about was the disappointed expression on my best friend's handsome face.

Benjamin Hudson was the only person in the world who could make me feel the way I did that night.

Perhaps the sadness I felt was mostly due to the fact that I still held expectations – expectations I knew would only ever cause me pain.

I reasoned to myself that I had the right to be hurt. It was my birthday. He was my best friend. I shouldn't have forgotten.

But he did. Again.

I knew the disappointment in his chiseled face was more toward himself than toward me. I knew I could beat himself up endlessly over his careless slip-ups, and do believe me when I say that he had many of those. So, that night, I was wondering to myself whether I had just over-reacted.

I would find myself deciding that I did, in fact, over-react and that it was time to get the heavy weight off my chest. I'd turn back toward the villa the Hudsons rented for their family vacation, determined to just get back to having fun with the most important person in my life, and then I'd remember...

I'd remember what it felt like to see him with his arms over Tanya Wilson, the gorgeous blonde he'd had the hots for all summer long.

The image quickly threw all thoughts of kissing and making up with Ben out the window.

"Gosh, Sofia... I'm so sorry... I'm an awful best friend..." were the words that came out of his lips when he realized his mistake. I walked out on him and ended up at the beach, wanting to hit myself over the head for being so sensitive.

I debated against my actions, thinking that I was being unfair. After all, it wasn't Ben's fault that I fell for the biggest cliché of all time when I decided to grow non-best-friend-like feelings for my best friend. That was why seeing him with Tanya hurt so much, especially realizing that I could never be like Tanya. I simply wasn't the type of girl that a guy like Ben would go for. I knew that and yet I still allowed myself to fall for his charms. I hated myself for it, but it was what it was. At that time, I was so sure that he was indeed the love of my life.

But could anyone really blame me for thinking like that?

Ben was as dreamy as dreamy gets. He was tall, well-built, smart and had that dashing smile that would put to shame those of the models gracing the covers of any magazine. He was fun, confident

and popular. He was also sweet and kind whenever he wanted to be. More than any of that, he saw me. He gave me the time of day when no one else – not even my own parents – would. It was with Ben that I never felt invisible...except when Tanya was around.

As I took that evening stroll, I knew I was fooling myself. There was no way I could stay mad at Ben for too long. I liked to think of myself as strong and independent, but truth be told, I couldn't imagine a life without Ben in it. My dependence on him scared me. It was frightening realizing that I needed another person as much as I needed him.

I'd been walking along the sea shore for about an hour when I suddenly sensed that I wasn't alone. Someone was approaching me from behind. My heart leapt. I was so sure it was Ben, that when a stranger showed up beside me, I couldn't hide my disappointment.

He must have noticed, because a smirk formed on his lips. "Were you expecting someone else, love?"

I eyed him suspiciously, remembering how many times my father told me not to talk to strangers. I looked him over from head to foot, taking in his appearance. I held my breath. I couldn't find words to describe how fine a man he was. He was almost beautiful. The first thing I took notice of was how his blue eyes were about three shades brighter than any I'd ever seen before. It was such a stark contrast to his pale – almost white – skin and his dark hair. I next noted how he was easily more than half a foot taller than I was. His height, broad shoulders and lean build reminded me of Ben, but he had a presence that was far more imposing than my best friend's.

My gaze settled on his face.

I realized that he was inspecting me just as closely as I was him. His eyes on me suddenly made me feel uncomfortably vulnerable. I gave my father's advice a second thought, but quickly canceled out all notions of heeding to his counsel when I reminded myself that he stopped caring a long time ago. I straightened to my full height and mustered all the courage I had to keep myself from running away from this stranger.

Big mistake.

The confident smirk didn't leave his face for even a moment. "Like what you see?"

I frowned, annoyed by his audacity. "A bit full of yourself, aren't you?"

He stepped forward, closer to me, and leaned his head toward mine. "Don't I have the right to be?"

He knew he looked good and wasn't about to act like he didn't.

"Whatever," was my oh-so-brilliant comeback.

My shoulders sagged with defeat as I took a step back, overwhelmed by how close he was. I rolled my eyes and did a one-eighty, not quite in the mood to play whatever game this stranger was proposing.

I would soon realize that I was about to play his game whether I liked it or not. He grabbed my arm and turned my body to face him. The motion alone made every single internal alarm I had go off in a frenzy.

This man was danger and I knew it. I tried to wriggle away from his touch, but I was no match for his strength.

“Tell me your name,” he commanded.

I was about to refuse, but was horrified to find myself blurting out my name in response. “Sofia Claremont.”

He traced his thumb over my jaw line. “Hello, Sofia Claremont. You’re one stupid girl for taking a walk alone at this time of night. You never know what kind of evil a pretty little thing like you could have happen to come by.”

I found myself wondering exactly what kind of evil he was. But I was suddenly overcome by the sensations that were surrounding me. My senses took everything in at once. I heard the waves, felt the sand beneath my feet, smelled the ocean salt, tasted the flavor of cherry on my lips and saw the stranger’s manic appearance as he stuck a needle to my neck. The effect was instant. I was barely able to gasp, much less scream. I went from sensing *everything* to sensing absolutely nothing.

My last conscious thought was that I may never see Ben again.

I blinked several times, hoping that I would see a bit more clearly if I did it enough. No chance. I was enveloped by darkness and it didn't look like that was about to change any time soon.

I sensed my claustrophobia about to kick in, afraid that, for all I knew, I could be in some sort of extremely enclosed space, but the cold, airy feel of the room soon assured me that I was not.

I tried to move about the space and quickly realized that the lack of lighting was the least of my concerns. For one thing, I was being held by metal restraints on my wrists and ankles.

I could barely even raise my arms without requiring a considerable amount of effort. I tried to pull against my chains. They were fastened to the wall. I felt straw beneath my bare feet. I ran my hands over my body and felt the soft linen fabric of the white cover-up I pulled over my swimsuit before my untimely walk earlier that evening.

I had intended to go for a swim.

Yet another one of your brilliant ideas, Sofia. Now you're locked up in some sort of dungeon wearing your swimsuit and a cover-up that's nowhere near enough to fend off the biting cold. Genius. Just genius.

I gritted my teeth, loathing myself for being so careless about my own safety. I caught myself before I could turn myself into my own personal villain. The severity of the situation hit me full force and I was unable to suppress a shudder. *What have I gotten myself into?*

I'm in a dungeon. The word alone caused alternating images of stories I read about places like the London Tower and the kinds of torture prisoners endured there. I balled my fists, realizing for the first time how much I loved my fingers, as images flit through my mind of someone sticking sharp objects under my nails.

If my goal in life was to not go insane, then this sure as hell was not helping me meet my objective.

I sank to the ground, pulling my legs against my chest with my arms, remembering all those times I felt like something was wrong with me. Familiar fears of turning out like my mother did began to assault me. Growing up, I'd seen psychologist after psychologist trying to figure out "what was wrong with me". I apparently had ADHD when I was a kid, OCD during my preteen years. Just recently, they were testing me for bipolar disorder. Given this situation, I was sure I'd develop an extra disorder or two.

Let's add post-traumatic-stress disorder to the bunch.

I heard sounds – footsteps – coming from outside the room I was in.

Eight seconds later, the door unlocked and swung open. The incandescent lighting flickered on. It took a couple of seconds for my eyes to adjust to the sudden flow of light. My first instinct was to take in every detail of the room I was in. With the light, it looked less archaic than it was in my imagination. The walls were actually made of concrete and not of mortar and brick like the castles of old.

I stared at the floor and frowned in confusion at the straw beneath my feet.

"The hay adds a nice touch I think. Makes our captives feel like they somehow time traveled to the

Dark Ages.”

My eyes were quickly drawn to the source of the voice. All I could do was glare at him.

It was the stranger from the beach.

There were so many questions I wanted him to answer, so many curses I wanted to blurt out, but I held my tongue. Considering my predicament and my very limited mobility, irking my captor didn't seem like the wisest thing to do.

He eyed me from head to foot the same way I did to him when we were back at the beach. This time, however, I could sense his hunger. He was predator. I was prey. I shuddered to think of exactly what kind of predator had just caught me in his trap.

His eyes were spanning the length of my legs as he approached me. He seemed to find amusement in my anxiety.

He stopped about a foot away from me and grinned as he studied me closely. The fact that he seemed pleased by what he saw made the situation even scarier than it already was.

“Who are you?! What do you want from me?!” I asked the questions not so I could hear the answers, but just needed to break the silence, in hopes of hiding my erratic heartbeats.

He raised his hand and brushed a stray strand of my auburn hair away from my face. I couldn't help but flinch from even the slightest hint of his touch. Everything about him told me that I wasn't safe around him.

His next actions solidified my suspicions that his intentions toward me were less than noble.

He pushed me to the wall and pinned me to it by leaning his full weight against me. It felt like he was trying to crush my ribs and every other internal organ I had.

“Welcome to the Blood Shade, Sofia.” He leaned closer, his breath cool against my ear. “You really are quite a beauty, aren't you?”

From his lips, it sounded more like an insult than a compliment.

My fears were being replaced with anger. I gathered all the strength I could to lift my hands in an attempt to push him away. As I struggled, I became fully aware of the coarseness of the concrete wall behind me, scratching through the sheerness of my cover-up and grating at my bare back.

He chuckled when I failed to budge him even slightly. “You'll only hurt yourself.”

“I demand that you let go of me. Now.” I said the words with more confidence than I felt.

If there was even the slightest trace of true confidence in me, he managed to make it disappear when he grabbed a clump of my hair with one hand and my jaw with the other. He leaned his face close to mine, the tips of our noses almost touching.

“It will do you well to learn that here, you are not in a place to make impetuous demands.” The words came out of his lips in a hiss.

It was appropriate for him; he was revealing to me exactly what he was. A snake. His hands eased off

of my hair and away from my jaw before he began to freely grope my body in places no other person apart from myself had ever touched before. His eyes never left mine even as I tried to wither away from his touch.

“There’s no escape, Sofia. If you want to survive, you must realize that in this kingdom, you exist to obey. Do as you’re told and we just might allow you to live.”

I spat on his face. It was the only act of defiance I could manage, considering how I was positioned to take whatever abuse he saw fit to throw my way.

I had a feeling of victory that lasted for about a second, before he wiped his face clean with the back of his hand. His other hand found its way back to my jaw.

“You asked me what I wanted from you. There really is only one thing you could give me, Sofia.”

I glared at him, determined to die with dignity and self-respect. “Oh? And what’s that?”

His answers sent chills down my spine. “You.”

Before I could even let that fully register, fangs protruded from his mouth. He pushed my head to the side, giving him easy access to my neck. It felt like I was in a dream but, as much as I tried to pin myself awake, there was no escaping it.

I was convinced that my greatest fear had come to pass. I’d already gone insane, because at that moment, I was a hundred percent sure that I was about to be eaten alive by a vampire.

“Lucas!”

I could already feel the sharp edge of his fangs on my skin when a shrill female voice brought me an unexpected reprieve.

He growled with frustration and roughly pushed me away, causing my head to jerk back and bump against the concrete wall.

I glared every sort of sharp blade imaginable at my captor. *So your name is Lucas.*

He seemed to be reading my mind, because an ugly frown marred his handsome features.

“Yes. The name’s Lucas, my sweet innocent. Not that knowing that will do you any good.”

“What do you think you’re doing?!” the female voice once again demanded of him.

I strained my neck to see who my savior was, but Lucas was blocking my view.

“What do you *think* I’m doing, Vivienne?” His chest heaved and sighed as he said the words. He looked just about ready to rip the head off of this Vivienne woman. “So sorry about this, Sofia dear.”

Of course. How dare she interrupt your dinner. Happy birthday, Sofia. You just happen to be the birthday feast.

He looked at me as though I was his ally. “It seems my sister couldn’t just let things be and let me enjoy my feast.”

My heart sank at that piece of information. How could I expect this creature’s sister to help me get out of the nightmare he’d brought me into? Her next words cemented my fears and made it clear that there was no escaping my doom. At least not with her help.

“She isn’t yours to feast on.”

“I found her!”

“You found her *for Derek.*”

I was already busy musing over what these words implied. *Great. Save me from one vampire so that another can sup on me instead.* I wasn’t too preoccupied, however, to ignore the change of expression on Lucas’s face at the mention of this Derek person.

“She’s one girl, Vivienne. What harm would it do to take one girl for myself? I always get to keep the lovelies I find on these hunts. *Always.*”

“You already have plenty of beautiful women in your quarters. You need not keep this one. Corrin made it clear that the young women found tonight are to be reserved for when Derek wakes up.”

Lucas eyed me intently. He was looking at me so closely that I was sure he was already well acquainted with every single mole and freckle on my face.

I could see his Adam’s apple move as he gulped, deprived of the morsel he was so desperate to have *me*. I wasn’t sure what to feel. I was relieved to escape Lucas, but was also filled with dread over what

Derek was. There was no guarantee that he would be any better than my current captor.

Lucas once again took my face in his hands and traced his thumb over my lips.

“This fragile little twig couldn’t possibly be the one. I don’t understand why everyone seems to worship the ground Corrine walks on. No matter what that witch says, Sleeping Beauty has shown no signs of waking up any time soon.”

“Derek will wake up soon. The sooner you accept that, the better off we’ll all be.”

“I’m your brother too. Why do you constantly choose him over me?”

“Despite what you think, it has nothing to do with the fact that he’s my twin. It has everything to do with who you are and who he is. I love you, brother, but you must accept that you weren’t meant to rule.” Her words were spoken gently, but firmly, an unmistakable hint of affection coming with every utterance.

I could see the pain in Lucas’s eyes at the bold statements coming from his own sister. At that point, I knew I must have truly gone mad, because I actually felt sorry for him. I knew what he felt, what it was like to have no one on your side. I didn’t think anyone deserved to feel that way.

He quickly reminded me, however, that he was my tormentor and made me completely reconsider my position in the matter. Whatever anger or sadness he felt, he took out on me. He clamped one hand over my neck, constricting my breathing. A claw protruded from the thumb he had over my lips and he began pressing the end of it over my mouth. I couldn’t help but whimper as his sharp nail drew a small line of blood over my sensitive lower lip.

“Lucas! Stop it!” Vivienne once again raised her voice in reprimand.

He let go of me, allowing me to gasp for breath. He backed away and stared down at me like I was the most disgusting thing he’d ever seen in his life.

“I’m just trying to help you wake your beloved Derek up, Vivienne. Take this little minx to him and make her kiss the Sleeping Beauty. The taste of her blood just might wake the prince up.”

He began to head for the door, but stopped to glare at his sister before completely heading off.

“Isn’t that how you think all this is going to play out when he wakes up? Just like a fairy tale?”

I can’t express how relieved I felt when he finally left the room. The words exchanged by the siblings remained in my head, but I was too overcome by emotion to even attempt to make sense out of them. My knees were shaking so I gave in and sank to the ground before finally looking up to see what exactly Vivienne looked like.

If I thought Lucas could be beautiful, Vivienne was even more stunning to behold. She was a couple of inches shorter than her brother, but had the same dark hair and pale complexion. Her eyes, however, were different. Against the light in the room, her eyes almost looked violet, with hints of deep purple.

She was eyeing me warily, as if I was a heavy burden that she had to bear.

“Thank you,” I told her, genuinely meaning it even though I had no idea what she had in store for me.

There was a deadpan expression on her face as she looked at me.

“Understand, girl, that you are nothing here. You’re nothing but a pawn, a piece used to make the board move. Your best chance at survival and proving your significance is to win Derek’s affection. Considering everything I know about my brother, I’m not sure that’s even possible.”

Her words dealt my hope a final crushing blow. She made it perfectly clear that wherever this place called the Blood Shade was, I had no allies. No friends. I had only myself to rely on. That, I thought, was the most frightening aspect of my predicament. After all, how could I rely on someone whom I couldn’t trust?

The moment my eyes shot open, I could hear everything, smell everything, feel everything within at least a quarter mile radius around me. I was sure that the sensation alone would bring my body in complete shock, until my vision settled on a familiar face. The woman I had trusted enough to provide my escape from everything.

“Cora?”

It was strange. The last thing I remembered was Cora’s face as I’d faded off into slumber. It felt like I had only slept for a few moments before being jolted awake. I wondered if something had gone wrong with the spell. Looking at the witch, I couldn’t help but wonder how it was possible that she looked younger. I found my answer when the buxom beauty with light brown skin and long, cascading locks of chestnut hair shook her head.

“I’m not Cora. I’m Corrine.”

I lifted myself up from the slab of stone that served as my resting place...for how long, I could only muse. I took in my surroundings - I was in a candlelit hall with marble floors and giant pillars. The first word that came to mind when I surveyed the place was *sanctuary*.

I eyed the young woman I was alone in the room with, wary of her intentions. It took a moment for her strange clothes to register. I became aware of how I was dressed and realized that perhaps more time had passed than I initially thought. At that point, it didn’t really matter.

The bottom line was that I wasn’t supposed to wake up. *Ever*.

Contemptuous that I would wake when I so explicitly asked to be given an escape from which I would never wake, I shouted a command as prince of the Blood Shade.

“I want to see Cora. Bring her to me.”

I hated the authoritative tone my voice naturally took on. Who was I to issue commands? I was not a prince – much less the savior Vivienne painted me to be.

The prophecy she spoke soon after we were turned into vampires immediately haunted me as I recalled it.

The younger will rule above father and brother and his reign alone can provide his kind true sanctuary.

I still remember the look on Vivienne’s face when she uttered those words. More than that, I saw the expressions of my father and brother. Resentment.

I snapped myself out of the bout of nostalgia I was sinking into and raised a brow at the woman before me. *Why isn’t she moving?* I was surprised by my own indignation at the idea of her not immediately jumping on my order.

Despite my misgivings about ruling, I wasn’t used to others not obeying me. After a hundred years of fighting for survival and leading my coven to the Blood Shade, I’d grown accustomed to being revered and followed. I wasn’t sure I liked that about myself, but it was what it was.

“Would you like us to dig her grave up, your highness? I doubt her corpse will do much good to clarify whatever questions you have in mind.”

I grimaced. *Your highness*. A reminder of the day my father took to heart the coven’s silly notion to establish himself as king of the Blood Shade. However, the title did not bother me as much as the news of Cora’s demise and this young woman’s manner of addressing me. I swallowed hard as I grabbed the edges of the stone slab I was then sitting on.

The sensations coursing through my veins made it clear exactly what my body was crying for at that moment. Blood. I was famished for blood. Another bitter reminder of the past I meant to escape when I gave the witch permission to put a sleeping curse on me.

Desperate to divert my thoughts to other matters, I shifted my gaze toward Corrine.

“Who are you?”

“I’m the witch of the Blood Shade, descendant of the great witch, Cora.”

I paused, keeping my eyes on her. That information alone commanded my respect. *No wonder she speaks to me as she does*. If she was Cora’s descendent, it was better to keep her as ally rather than foe. I heaved a sigh, not quite sure I wanted to hear the answer to my next question.

“What century is it?”

“The twenty-first.”

I removed my gaze from her as I let that information register. *Four hundred years. I escaped for four hundred years*.

Corrine began circling me like a damned vulture. I could sense her distrust. She was scrutinizing me, perhaps wondering what my awakening meant for the Blood Shade.

I wanted to tell her that it meant nothing, because I fully intended to escape from it all over again. But there were so many questions running through my mind, although I was uncertain if I really wanted to hear the answers to them.

“Why am I awake?”

“It’s simply time.”

I clenched my fists. “Time for what?”

“For Derek Novak to stop acting like a coward and face what he was meant to do. Rule.”

My jaw tightened, my teeth gritted. “I didn’t ask for this.”

“Neither did any of us, but if his highness is entertaining any notions of going back to his dream for reprieve, then I suggest you forget them now, Prince. Until you’ve played your part, there’s no means of escape. Cora made certain of that.”

“What do you mean...”

Before I could finish my question, the double doors made of fine acacia swung open and my older brother, Lucas, and my twin sister, Vivienne, strode into the chamber.

Lucas gave me a curt nod. I nodded back. That was the closest we ever got to showing each other brotherly affection.

Vivienne, on the other hand, threw her arms around my neck, whispering how glad she was that I was finally awake.

I couldn't keep myself from telling her exactly what I felt. "That makes one of us."

And then it happened. I could feel my gut clench in an excruciating twist. The smell was overwhelming – practically intoxicating. When I saw them, I couldn't help but wonder whose idea it was to bring about this sort of cruelty upon my wake.

As my sister stepped aside to allow me full view, I remembered everything. I remembered why it was so important for me to stay asleep.

Five beautiful young women – innocents – no older than I was when I became a vampire, stood before me. I could sense their fear and the predator in me was desperate for release. I hated myself for it, but I wanted nothing more than to suck every last drop of blood out of every single one of them.

My eyes were glued to the young man Vivienne was embracing only moments ago. There was no question in my mind that it was him. He was the one Vivienne told Lucas that I was here for. He was the one the guards and servants were whispering about. He was Derek Novak.

Soon after Vivienne left me inside the dungeon, guards arrived to bring me to another area of the place they called the Blood Shade. I and several other women around my age were brought out of a network of underground caves they called The Cells. I assumed it was the Shade's prison system of sorts. My first instinct was to try to figure out where we were.

All I saw were the tallest trees I ever laid my eyes on – I assumed they were giant redwoods that I read about in books. They surrounded us on all sides except for one – our side – which from what I saw, consisted of a huge mountain range, whose ragged cliffs spelled danger. It was in the intricate cave system of this mountain range that they managed to carve out dungeons that they kept us all in. I was impressed by how they were able to pull it off, but I couldn't help but wonder if human blood washed in turning the Cells into a reality.

From the Cells, we were guided through a well-traveled pathway across a dark, murky wood, before we arrived at a very large clearing at the center of what seemed like a massive forest. Whispers from the guards who were escorting us to our destination informed me that we were at "The Vale". I assumed that it was the Shade's center of civilization. I guess I could say that it was the Blood Shade's main town, built up of several structures, whose architectural styles were the likes I've never seen before – almost like a mix of modern and Victorian architectural design with certain elements that looked like they just popped out of fantasy or sci-fi movies. I was still marveling at the places we were passing by when they ushered us to a place that reminded me of a spa Ben often dragged me to for massages.

It was at "the spa" that we were pampered, perfumed, and exquisitely dressed in gowns made of fine silk - the kind which I could only dream of ever affording.

We asked several times why we were being treated so, and received no answers at first, until one of the women styling our hair got tired of the questions and replied.

"Rumors are that you girls are to be part of the prince's harem. All of the Blood Shade's Elite have harems of their own. You girls are lucky enough to be chosen to serve the legendary Derek Novak himself. That's all I'm going to say, so you best shut your pretty little mouths up."

I had so many questions after that. Being a part of *anyone's* "harem" sounded terrifying to me, but I knew that prying for more answers would most likely lead someone into trouble. So, I satisfied myself with keeping my ears open to the hushed whispers being exchanged around me. All I gathered was that the prince had been asleep for hundreds of years and that "the vampires" see him as some sort of "savior".

I also realized that the women dolling us up were all humans. I wondered if they too were kidnapped like I was.

Once we were ready, the guards who had escorted us to "the spa" came for us. I'll never forget the look on the face of one of the guards when he saw us.

“The prince is one lucky bastard,” he muttered beneath his breath, before instructing us to stand up and follow them.

We were marched along the Vale’s breath-taking structures on to a cobblestone pathway that led to another area of the dark forest surrounding the Vale. We eventually reached a clearing that led to a structure that reminded me of pictures that I saw of the Taj Mahal – only this one, I assumed, was a lot smaller.

“Welcome to the Sanctuary, ladies,” one of the guards said, a smirk on his face as he openly ogled us with his amber gold eyes.

They made us enter the front door. It was in the well-lit corridor in front of us that we saw Lucas and Vivienne. I could feel Lucas’ eyes on me, making my insides squirm. Vivienne instructed us to follow them and we did. We soon turned a corner and walked into a large candlelit chamber.

Standing there, I found myself unable to pry my gaze away from Derek Novak, wondering about all the fuss surrounding him. He was what every teenage girl would most likely describe as *hot*, which was rather ironic considering how pale and cold he looked. He had the same features as his brother but there was something more refined about him, with a hint of boyishness in his features. I could instantly tell that he was younger than Lucas. I entertained the thought that perhaps I was indeed better off under his mercy than Lucas’. However, the words Vivienne spoke to me before she left still haunted me.

“Your best chance at survival and proving your significance is to win Derek’s affection... I’m not sure that’s even possible.”

“What is the meaning of this? Why would you bring them to me?” Derek spoke up. His voice was deep and powerful. He was breathing heavily as he said each word.

“Take them away from me.”

“We can’t do that.” Vivienne shook her head. “You’ll need to learn to control yourself with them. We will give you blood to feed on soon enough, but right now, you need to keep yourself in check when around them.”

“If you don’t want them to die, why bring them to me *now*?!” His voice rumbled through the cavernous hall.

Everything about his demeanor – the way his chest heaved, the way his fists clenched – made it clear that he was doing everything in his power to keep himself from attacking any one of us – perhaps even all of us.

I shuddered at the display of temper from this young man, whose immediate command we were going to be subjected to.

Vivienne didn’t seem fazed at all. In a calm, collected voice, she responded to her brother.

“Because you and I both know that if you are to face what lies ahead of you, you need to be able to control your impulse to satisfy your hunger. These women were handpicked to become part of your harem. They’re the loveliest among a recent hunt we made.”

Despite my predicament, my ears perked up at that last statement. *Lovely* was not something I'd ever been described as before.

Lucas chuckled. "This is cruel and unusual punishment, Vivienne. I told you that. Derek hasn't had blood for the past four hundred years. He can't be expected to not want to rip these girls' heads off. Hell, I've been feeding for the last four hundred years and I still want to have my way with them."

Derek, still looking like he was about to attack us at any moment, simply gave him a sideward glance before he roamed his eyes toward each of us girls – one by one.

"A harem? A hunt? Since when do we have these? Who are these girls and where exactly did you 'hunt' them?"

Lucas, Vivienne and the other woman present in the hall exchanged uncomfortable glances.

It was Vivienne who eventually answered the question. "They're humans abducted from the outside world. We *hunt* humans from the outside world to become slaves here, to do the work necessary. Those who prove to be useless are fed on. The choicest and most beautiful among the captives are kept by the Elite as part of what we began calling a *harem* a long time ago. Some of the favored Lodge members also have one or two beauties of their own. The humans who form the harems are kept alive for a year and whoever owns them get to decide their ultimate fate after that."

"It's really just an excuse to be able to have them at their prime," Lucas added with a smirk.

From the look on Derek's face, he didn't seem very happy about the explanation he'd been given. I eyed us from where he stood – the distance between us only a few strides away.

I couldn't help but wonder what was going through his mind.

"I know what you're thinking and no, you can't let them go, brother," Lucas spoke up, sounding like he was talking to a five-year-old. "They've seen the Blood Shade. We can't afford to risk the cover. They stay or they die."

Derek's expression turned to complete disgust. "They can't be any older than we were when we were turned."

"I know," Lucas grinned, speaking as though it were the most amusing fact known to their kind. "They're all seventeen."

"The knights and guards take them at that age, because as you know, blood tastes sweeter once they reach the fullness of their womanhood at eighteen," Vivienne explained.

Lucas scoffed at the notion. "Please. It's all the same, but really, Derek, enjoy them. Just looking at them is already a feast. After the year ends, imagine all the wicked things you can do with them."

Derek stood to his full height – a couple inches taller than his older brother and began walking toward us. My very first reaction was to flinch as he approached.

At that moment, the only way I could think to describe him was *hungry*.

I stood there, sure that my knees were about to give way beneath me. I shifted my weight from one foot to the other and in doing so, found the back of my hand brushing against the hand of the blond

haired girl standing beside me. I could feel her shaking. I grabbed her hand and squeezed it, hoping both give comfort to and draw it from her.

The motion attracted Derek's attention. I'd never felt more vulnerable than I did the moment Derek Novak's electric blue eyes settled on me. His gaze betrayed the thoughts roaming his mind. I was a lamb – a lamb ready for slaughter.

I couldn't pry my eyes away from her. I wanted to stop, but I found myself inching closer.

She was beautiful to behold – not just because her physical appearance drew me in above and beyond that of the other girls. No. In my eyes, she was most beautiful because at a time when she had every right to be terrified, she managed to show comfort to another person who needed it.

The moment I saw her grab the hand of the girl beside her, all the others paled in comparison. She showed me a humanity I longed to return to.

But I was the predator. She was my prey. And even as I admired her for that one simple gesture, I was battling to prevent myself from relishing the sweet delicacy that she was to my kind.

I muttered several curses under my breath. I knew my sister well enough to know why she was putting me through this. She knew my struggle to maintain control when it came to satisfying my hunger. So it was the first thing she put to the test. Why on earth she was testing me was still something I had yet to figure out. Vivienne was known for her mind games, but especially with the young innocent redhead who caught my eye standing before me, I couldn't help but think that this was Vivienne's cruelest game yet.

I studied the young woman whose emerald green eyes boldly settled on me. I took in the sight of those dark auburn locks cascading down her shoulders and framing her delicate face. There was a certain innocence to the slight blush of her freckled cheeks that made me ache inside. Her eyes and the way they were fixed on me – unflinching in their courage and audacity – made me want to shrink away from her.

I knew she was studying me and I would've given anything to find out what was going through her head as she looked me over.

A familiar ache gripped my chest with every step I took closer to her. She was everything I no longer was. She represented everything I lost when my father turned me into this monster.

When I was about two feet away from her, I immediately regretted ever going near her, because the sight and smell of the slightest bit of blood on her lower lip became my complete undoing.

Lightning speed and strength I forgot I had pushed her backwards until her back hit one of the sanctuary's giant marble pillars with a loud thud. Guilt and shame filled me for causing her pain, but I was giving in to my nature, desperate to draw her blood and taste it.

I swallowed hard as my eyes centered on the cut on her lip. I knew that the moment I did anything to taste it, I wouldn't be able to control myself. There was no going back.

“Derek, no...”

My uneven breathing and erratic heartbeat drowned out my sister's protests. As far as I was concerned, there was no one else there with us. It was just me and this innocent – this innocent I was about to totally destroy.

I wrapped an arm around her small waist and lifted her up the pillar, supporting her weight with my hips. She tried to push me away, tried to free herself from my grip, but it didn't take long for her

realize that there was no escape. I was too strong for her and she was at my complete mercy. She knew it. I knew it, and I hated myself, because at that moment, there wasn't a single bit of mercy running through my blood-deprived veins. There was nothing in me but an animalistic and primal need that was begging to be satisfied – *hunger*.

What is it with these people and shoving me up against hard surfaces?

I was fully aware of the gravity of my situation, and yet that was the one thought that circled my mind the moment he lifted me so that my face was directly in front of his. He had me pinned against a black marble pillar. My back was suffering from the abuse it'd been receiving all night long – first from Derek's brother and now from him.

Lucas was probably right when he referred to me as a “fragile little twig”. It was exactly how I felt with Derek pinning me there, all my attempts to push him away and break free failing miserably. I wasn't even sure if he was aware of how strong he was, but he exuded a power that I didn't sense even with Lucas. I felt like a china doll, as though he could shatter me the moment he wished to do so.

Everything about Derek Novak was overwhelming my senses. The feel of his body pressed against mine, the chill of his breath against my skin, the sound of his uneven breathing, the light scent of his musk mixing with the myrrh they applied on me before we were brought to him.

He stared at me and I stared back. I could almost see the wheels in his head turning and every bit of his demeanor showed how conflicted he was about what he wanted to do. And yet, there was also determination in his sharp blue eyes that left me grasping for any bit of hope.

When his free hand grabbed my head and pushed it to the side to clear my neck as he bared his fangs, all I could think of doing was beg, “Please don't.”

I could hear Vivienne trying to plead with him, reminding him that he could control this. He needed to regain control.

I didn't understand what was going on or why they were doing what they were doing. I just knew that I was at Derek's mercy and yet, unlike what I experienced with Lucas earlier that night, right now nothing about what Derek was doing made me feel violated.

That scared me. This man had me shoved up against a hard surface, trapping me with his strong arm crushing me. He was about to sink his teeth into my bare neck and drink my blood. I had every right to feel violated, but I didn't. *What does that say about me?*

“Derek... you don't want to do this... you have control.” Vivienne just kept at it.

I looked into Derek's eyes wondering if it was getting to him. It seemed it wasn't, because he pushed me against me as he leaned forward, his fangs beginning to press against my neck.

Even as all five of my senses were assailed by sensation after sensation brought about by my unfamiliar and strange predicament, I recalled something Ben always told me when I began to pity myself and blame my circumstances for my sorrow.

“I know an excuse when I hear one, Sofia. Don't you dare dupe yourself into believing that you're the victim.”

I tried to push him away, but surrendered to the idea that it was no use. Instead, I pressed my cheek against his, the warmth of my skin fading with the coldness of his.

“*You can control yourself. Don't do this to me.*” I whispered into his ear.

To my surprise, just when his fangs were about to break my skin and draw blood, he stopped. I couldn't feel the fangs retract and it was just his lips pressed against my neck. "I can't," he responded. "You're too beautiful, your blood too enticing, too sweet..."

Tears began to stream down my face – partly because everything that'd been happening came crashing down on me, overwhelming me, and partly because of how much I ached for Ben as I spoke the same words that he had so many times before.

"I know an excuse when I hear one. Don't you dare deceive yourself into believing that you're the victim, Derek Novak."

I could hear a soft gasp escape his lips the moment I said the words. I couldn't help but sigh with relief when his arm's grip around my waist loosened. His lips remained pressed on any part of my skin it could brush against as he eased me down so I could stand on my feet again. I felt so small and fragile standing so close to him. The moment my feet hit the ground, my knees buckled and to my horror, I found myself leaning to him for support.

"You'll be alright," he whispered loud enough for only me to hear.

I wanted to throw a bitter, sarcastic retort at him. *How could he say something like that after what I was just about to do to me?* I found, however, that I had no energy left in me to put up a fight.

His eyes were still on me as he spoke. "Tell me your name."

It sounded more like a command than a request, but I found myself responding anyway. "Sofia. Sofia Claremont."

He then began to speak louder, obviously addressing everyone else in the room other than me. "Sofia is to be my personal slave."

"And the others?" Vivienne asked.

Derek didn't even look at them. "You decide."

Other words were exchanged, but I managed for the first time in a long time to numb all five of my senses. The thought circling through my mind was overwhelmingly sickening.

What exactly does he mean by "personal slave"?

Four hundred years. Gone. Just like that.

As Lucas and Vivienne led me out of the Sanctuary, apparently Corrine's dwelling place, I couldn't help but marvel over what they'd managed to turn the Blood Shade into over the past four centuries. Before the spell, the island we'd occupied and called the Blood Shade was nothing but a fortress surrounded by a dark forest with its towering redwoods and giant sequoias. We made a small clearing in the middle of the forest and called it The Vale. That was where we began making plans regarding what the Blood Shade would someday be like. I never thought it possible that the plans would actually materialize, but here it was – right before my very eyes – more amazing than it was in my imagination.

As we left the Sanctuary and eventually entered into what was now the Vale, I asked question after question to satisfy my curiosity and make me forget my hunger. Sofia and the other slaves were walking right behind us, escorted by the guards. I was still so conscious of Sofia's proximity, still overcome by the scent of her blood.

"What happened to the wild animals that occupied the forest?" We'd made plans to keep our residences atop the redwoods, because of what a nuisance the wildlife had turned out to be.

"They're around," Vivienne explained as we took a leisurely pace strolling past the Vale. "Cora helped us gather most of the wild animals into certain parts of the island we call *dens*. Some of the fiercer ones, however, are kept in the Cells."

"The Cells?"

"The prisons," Lucas butted in. "They're located at the Black Heights – you know," he shrugged, "the mountain ranges. The dungeons and slave quarters are kept there."

I raised a brow. "Sofia?"

I didn't miss how Vivienne's eyes shot toward me in question. I knew she was intrigued by the concern I was showing the girl. At that time, there was no way for me to explain to my sister exactly how I saw Sofia: a ray of light. The truth was I didn't even fully understand myself.

"Harems stay at the Residences with their keepers," Vivienne explained, assuring me that Sofia wasn't going anywhere without me.

I nodded. "And what exactly are the Residences?"

"You'll find out soon enough. That's where we're going." There was a certain smugness to my brother's tone. I imagined he was mighty pleased that he had four hundred years' worth of experience and knowledge over me.

I stared back and forth from my sister to my brother, wondering about the amount of knowledge and wisdom they'd managed to accumulate over all that time. I didn't know if it was my bias against my brother or the fact that we were never close due to how our father always pitted us against each other, but Lucas didn't seem to be any wiser than he was when I went under Cora's spell a long time ago. Vivienne, on the other hand, had a sager aura about her and I couldn't help but feel some sort of reverence toward her.

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