

Chapter 2 Diplomatic Shadows

Lenore chose a light pink, glittering dress that glimmered like starlight as it clung to her curves. She smoothed the silken material with her long fingers, her nails newly manicured and shining under the lights. Her hair was up, with little curls that dangled in the back.

Elena picked a sleek, silk black dress with a tantalizing high slit up the side, emphasizing her hourglass gure and drawing attention to the top of her chest. Her thick, dark hair was twisted up, with obedient ringlets that fell like tiny waves down her neck.

The two women were a marvel to look at. As they walked into the ballroom, their arms interlinked, they commanded everyone's attention. Elena may not be their favorite person, but her aura demanded their reverence. The vampires around them could not help but be drawn to the sisters, their blood commanding respect and admiration. An invisible force tugged on the consciousness of their kind, compelling them to bow and pay homage to the duo.

"Lenore, Elena, I would like to introduce you to our special guests this evening, Luther and Silas. They are both noble purebloods. One from the North, and the other hails from the South," King Alaric said as he motioned for his granddaughters to come closer. Luther was a tall, blond vampire with lean, toned muscles, while Silas was broad and bulky. He had dark brown hair and amber eyes that were xated on the two women.

Lenore watched as both men greedily looked her and her sister over. Inwardly, she felt repulsed, and she gripped her fingers into Elena, showing her her discomfort. Her sister shot her a quick glance before turning her dark gaze on the men. They stared at the girls like starving dogs at a piece of meat. It was obvious these men thought they had an in, and Elena was prepared to put them in their place if necessary.

"What beautiful granddaughters you have," Luther said, as he bowed to them slightly.

"Truly an enchanting experience." Silas reached his hand out towards Elena expectantly. Well, this was a rst, Elena thought, as she hesitantly obliged him. His disgusting lips lightly brushed over her hand, forcing her to clench her lips tightly. Something was off about all of this. Surely he had heard the rumors about her, so what was he doing? Her shadows even hissed in protest.

Elena was able to keep control of the whispering darkness until something caught her eye that made her blood boil. She saw Lenore cringe as Luther's fingers gripped around her waist, his bottom finger brushing under her breast. Inconspicuous enough, except for how in tune Elena was to her sister.

Elena's shadows immediately gripped the man as ames danced in her eyes.

"Elena!" Alaric whispered harshly.

"Careful where you place your hands," Elena said, ignoring her grandfather. "Another mistake like that and you will see why they fear me." She could see the white in Luther's eyes before he gave her a quick nod. She let him go, looking over at her sister. Nora, you don't have to dance with him.

"Elena, need I remind you that these men are our guests," her grandfather said in a kind but stern tone.

"As our guests, they should be more respectful, especially to their princesses. And as our grandfather, I am sure you don't appreciate someone copping a feel on your granddaughters." She smiled as his eyes darkened, turning to Luther.

"What is she talking about?"

"It was an accident. I didn't mean to. I was just going to escort her out on the dance oor. I promise it won't happen again." Luther's gentle tone smoothed things over. "I'm terribly sorry, Princess Lenore."

Lies. Elena hissed to her sister.

It's okay Elena. I won't let him get away with it again. Let's just move on with the evening. One dance and I'll be done.

"Elena, do you have something to say?"

She stared at her grandfather, gritting her teeth. It was always like this with him. He seemed to have a chip on his shoulder and always tried to maintain the peace. It was more important to play his role as King than as a grandfather.

"I'm sorry that the shadows accidentally moved on their own. Looks like we are full of accidents today." She shrugged with a small smile. Silas chuckled next to her, taking her arm in his.

"Your majesty, if you don't mind, I'd like to dance with this beauty." Silas' eyes twinkled with something unspoken. Before Elena knew it, she was being led onto the dance oor.

"Shall we?" Luther asked Lenore, who gave him a tight smile and walked out with him onto the dance oor.

The King of the Vampires moved his gaze to Elena with a sigh.

"Alaric!" His queen, Willa, hissed, grabbing onto his arm.

"I know, love. I already know. I'd love to have handled that situation better, but we can't afford to. You know the northern vampires are heavily influenced by Count Becker. We do everything we can to keep the peace. Luther is Becker's son. We can't afford a war."

"You shouldn't scold Elena like that. She misunderstands you."

Alaric shook his head in agitation. "Elena needs to learn to control her temper and be more diplomatic. Look how well Lenore composed herself—"

"Alaric!" Willa pinched his skin with her nails. "I understand political games, but getting a free feel on one of our precious granddaughters shouldn't have a 'turn your head in the other direction' approach!"

"He claimed it was an accident."

"You don't believe that."

"Doesn't matter. Acting out would be an act of war. And right now, we need all the vampires to unite. We don't know what our future will be like."

"Touching our granddaughters should be an act of war. What if that had been me? Do you think I should be diplomatic about it and turn the other breast?"

"Willa!" He scolded, his eyes turning dark. "I see our daughter-in-law is rubbing off on you." He slid his hand around her waist, pulling her closer. "Everything I do and don't do is for the kingdom. I have to think of all the vampires."

"I understand that, but even over your own granddaughters?"

"There is a limit and a line. Unless it is reached or crossed, my hands are tied. Lenore will make a wonderful queen. She understands how to be a diplomat." He sighed, looking over at Elena. "The werewolf in that one really comes out. The short fuse and temper of a feral beast. It will serve her well, but not as queen."

"Lucy will be the next queen. The girls have a lot of time to mature."

"I don't plan on handing the throne over any time soon anyway. I want Derek and Lucy to have more freedom without this burden. For now, we can continue to shoulder it for them. By being in this role, we can protect them from this side of things."

Willa looked at her two granddaughters dancing, frowning slightly. "I don't think they know how much we love them."

"We rule differently than other species, but that doesn't mean we love them any less. We just have a lot of lives in our hands. One wrong move is all it takes for things to spiral out of control."

"They aren't going to choose those men." Willa lifted her gaze up to her husband's.

"That isn't the point of this. It's just to make it look like we gave it a try. Honestly, I want nothing to do with the north."

"What about Silas?" Willa asked, watching Alaric's brows knit together.

"The south is quiet. Too quiet. Silas—is interesting. We will watch his movements closely," he murmured in a soft voice that only Willa could hear.

"You can thank me later."

"Thank you?" Elena coughed out as he began to sway with her. His hand lowered to her waist, pulling her closer.

"Yes. I'm pretty sure he was about to pull you away to privately lecture you." Silas chuckled as his eyes locked onto hers.

He wasn't wrong. That was exactly what was coming. However, why would he save her from it? What exactly was his angle?

"What do you want?" She hissed behind a smile. A soft chuckle left his throat as he spun her gracefully away and back to him.

"I just want to get to know you." His reply was something she didn't expect. No one wanted to get to know her. Unless he didn't know about her. He wasn't exactly from around there, but she assumed the rumors spread far, ending up more twisted than the actual reality.

"Haven't you... heard about me?" His warm, honey eyes smiled at her as he held her closer.

"I have. I know things end up exaggerated, but where there is smoke, there is usually re."

"Aren't you afraid of me?" She asked incredulously.

"No." He replied simply. "I don't fear the unknown. I am curious, and I want to know more. And if you're as dangerous as they say, then I am living my best life. Dancing with a dangerous beauty. I can't think of a better way to go than to die in your arms."

"I bet you use that on all the killer women you dance with." She giggled coquettishly as he held her lightly in his arms and spun her around the dance oor with graceful condence.

The vampire chuckled, his eyes glowing a rich amber as he held her closer. "Only the ones who catch my eye," he replied smoothly, his lips brushing against her ear.

Elena felt him push her body closer to his, and she let him. This was something new and nice. She wasn't the dangerous vampire princess right now. She was simply a woman, dancing with a man she hardly knew, but was making her feel alive in ways she never had before. It wasn't like the excitement she felt when she was around Aba, but it was nice just the same. She could see and feel the want coming from him.

Lenore watched from a distance, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips. Her sister deserved this moment of happiness, even if it was eeting. She scanned the room, her keen senses picking up on the emotions of the vampires around her. A few were envious of the attention Elena was receiving, while others were simply curious about the brave man.

Then her eyes scanned over a familiar dark gure leaning against the wall. It was his dark, possessive gaze that caught her eye before she followed it back to Elena. She looked back at the man and his hard, blank mask, unreadable except for his eyes. Now this was interesting, she thought to herself. It was Aba, Elena's guardian. Right now, though, he didn't look like a guardian, but like a jealous man. However, Elena was dancing with a stranger, and this look might actually be protectiveness. In either case, it would be something she would watch for so she could analyze it better later.

"Thank you for the dance, Luther," Lenore said politely as she stepped away from him.

"Finished with me already?" He asked, blinking at her.

She gave him a big smile before she leaned closer to his ear. "I prefer men condent enough to know they'll be taking me to bed. Not the ones desperate to cheat their way into a cheap thrill." She pushed away from him, giving him a crooked smile. His face began to contort, losing himself for a moment, before he reigned it back in.

"That's okay, princess. I think sleeping with you would be the real cheap thrill." He bowed smugly before he strode away, heading straight to the beautiful woman who had been eyeing him the whole time.

Want me to kill him? Misha asked through their mental link.

He isn't worth our time. Let him go prove to himself what a stud he is so he can feel better about life. Lenore turned into a familiar face. It was Ralph Warner, a local vampire who lived alone, deep in the forest. He was a fun friend who provided delicious benets.

"Would you like to dance, lovely?"

"Only if you will dance with me under the stars later." She smiled as his hand landed on her waist.

"I wish I could, but I found my mate."

Her lips parted before she quickly recovered with a smile. This was how a lot of vampires did things. Because it could take decades or even centuries to find your mate, they would have intimate friends. The agreement is nothing serious, and lasts just until one of them finds their mate. Sure, some waited for their mates, but Lenore wasn't one of them. She wanted to live and experience life. Ralph nding his mate was disappointing, but she was happy for him.

"I guess we'll just have to dance under the lights. Congratulations, Ralph. I am happy for you," she said sweetly as he took her hand. Dancing with her close, but not too close. A new line and boundary had been set, leaving Lenore to find a new friend to spend the night with.

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Silas led Elena over to the punch table where they talked and laughed. It made Elena feel normal for once. A normal evening. She wasn't interested in the guy as anything more than a friend, but even that was nice to have.

"Did you see that Luther struck out with your sister?"

Elena blinked, looking up at him. "No, I didn't notice." She was too busy enjoying her time with him that she momentarily forgot about that creep. But now she felt her hair creep up her arms as she stared at Silas. A pit began to form in her stomach as she began to put it together.

"You and your sister seem really close. You are very protective of her."

Her heart began to pound, and she swore she heard her insides crack. A pain began to squeeze in her chest. Lenore. He danced with her to get to Lenore. He saw how close they were and decided he needed to befriend her. Please, gods, please let this not be true.

Hiding her emotions behind a blank face, she smiled. "Lenore is always there for me and I am always there for her. It's more than a sibling bond. She is special, and the light to my dark."

"Yeah, you can feel that she is special just by looking at her." He paused for a moment as he turned to look over the crowd. "Would you mind if I asked her to dance?"

And there it was. He just wanted to look good to Lenore by being kind to her. It wasn't like she was into him, but to be used like that—it hurt.

"Not at all. By all means," she said politely. Any other time she would have told him to drop dead and let the shadows escort him out on his ass. But he had been kind to her. That was more than anyone else had ever been, even if it was to get to Lenore. He asked her a white, thankful smile, before he turned and walked away.

So here she was. Again. At the punch table. Alone.

A familiar heat embraced her back, moments before the actual touch. A hard, hot hand landed on her shoulder as she lifted her gaze to his dark brown, luscious eyes. Others said he had a smoked cedar scent, but that was never what she smelled. He smelled like smoked honey to her. A warm, comforting scent that instantly calmed her broken soul.

"Aba," she breathed out, leaning into his embrace.

He held her tightly, his body radiating warmth that Elena couldn't help but crave. He had always felt safe and protected in his arms. But something was different about Aba tonight. His grip was tighter than usual, almost possessive. "Is everything okay?" Elena asked softly, looking up at him with concern in her eyes.

Aba's gaze ickered over to the man Elena had been dancing with before he returned his attention back to her. "Who was that?" he asked, his voice cold and clipped.

"Just a man I had to dance with. Nothing more," Elena replied softly. Aba didn't respond. Instead, he pulled her even closer, burying his face in her hair. She closed her eyes. A small smile rested on her lips. In his arms was where she belonged. She was certain of it. There was no one else who could ever make her feel this way.