Subterfuge

I awoke in a massive bed, alone and confused. My head still swam, but this time, luckily, it was not from a blow to the head.

I tried to remember some type of solace in my dreams, but all I could envision were bloody chains and striking whips.

The previous night had ended with hope, but in my groggy state, it all seemed like empty promises.

I had listened to Samuel's tempting propositions and stories over a bottle of wine—and, thankfully, *not* blood.

Samuel left me an entire guest room to stay in for as long as I wanted, and part of me wanted to never leave.

Everything about this underground kingdom felt so exhilarating and safe. And the bed…oh, the bed was the most comfortable I'd ever slept in.

It only made me long for Keith to hold me like he did in that cave.

I could swear he remembered me just from the look in his eyes.

But wouldn't that bring the rest of his memories back?

I tested my equilibrium by placing my feet on the carpet and standing.

I faltered only a little but caught myself on the bed. I could already tell, it was going to be a long day.

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I found Samuel in his lofty throne room. He stood on the higher platform, looking at some papers on the table.

As I approached him, he gathered them neatly and quickly.

"How was your sleep?" he asked with a smile.

"Samuel, this place is beautiful, and you're a really nice person…" I said.

He held his composure as I continued.

"But I'm going to need time to think things through."

Samuel raised an eyebrow. "Hoping for another daring rescue?"

"No, I'm nished with ghting," I admitted.

Thinking of all that had been lost just to keep me safe made my skin burn and my stomach turn in knots.

"Really?" Samuel asked, his expression slightly ushed. "Well, I have already c ered peace if you so choose."

"I know, and I can't thank you enough for your hospitality. Which is why I'm going to stay and think it over," I said feebly.

I didn't know how much longer I wanted to stay, but I knew that leaving would only put me and the others in more danger.

Samuel moved enthusiastically to my side and ushered me to the window.

"Explore the kingdom. Discover all that we have to o er," he said with excitement.

I looked out over the unnatural elds and beautiful gothic structures. At least it was not covered in ns.

The banging from below us started up again, interrupting our moment together.

"Please, you must get out and get some fresh air," he said with a chuckle.

I looked to Samuel and happily surrendered.

Why should I go chasing after someone when I knew I was wanted right here?

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I wandered around the kingdom for what seemed like an eternity looking for something to eat.

Of course, the vampire kingdom wouldn't have any actual food—how stupid of me to think otherwise.

The land was beautiful and made to feel like it was a natural environment.

The city had cobblestone streets and modern buildings interspersed by gothic structures that showed a keen eye for detail.

Light seemed to glow from a sun in the sky, but I knew better than to believe it.

A citizen saw me gazing into the sky and explained it was manmade to help imitate the sun without its harmful e ects.

I couldn't help but laugh in wonder.

What would it be like if I were to be a vampire…? Would I change much?

Being a witch-demon-hybrid was already a mouthful, but to add vampire to the mix? It worried me that all would not go down as peacefully as Samuel promised.

Surely, one of the species would retaliate. I had already seen what it looked like when promises were broken.

Another one could very well hammer home the nal nail in the co n.

In this case, that nal nail would have to be a stake…

Belle.

As I passed one of the alleyways, I heard a faint voice call out to me. The voice was familiar, but I couldn't place it.

I continued on and was about to turn a corner when it sounded again.

Belle… wait!

I retraced my steps and spotted a hidden gure in the shadows.

"Who is there?" I called out.

"Belle," it called again. The familiar voice rang in my head, and I stepped forward.

A gure in the shadows moved. My body went rigid, ready to take o at the rst sign of danger.

But I quickly realized the gure was not in the shadows.

It was the shadows!

"It's you!" I shouted out.

The shadow child moved closer, now certain all was safe.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I don't have much time, but you must know that Keith is here in this kingdom," the shadow child explained.

"What?!" I screamed. "They told me he was left behind."

"That's what they want you to think," the voice called. "Go to him before it's too late, Belle."

"Where is he?" I asked.

"Somewhere further below the surface. Use your magic and let your heart guide you to him," the shadow child explained. "I must go now, but be safe."

Before I could o er my thanks, the shadow child disappeared, dissolving into the shadows.

I walked further into the alley hoping to somehow nd it, but nothing.

"Where are you, Keith?" I mumbled under my breath. "Please. If you're here…"

I took a moment to recollect myself. Samuel had told me he was left alone.

Why would he lie?

I looked down at my hands and tried to focus my mind on nding Keith.

I thought back to the images of our time together, envisioning his features in my mind.

His broad shoulders, his chiseled jaw, and that look in his eyes when he knew what he wanted.

The things he does to my body…

When I opened my eyes, the veins in my arms were glowing blue.

"Take me to Keith," I muttered under my breath.

I thought of the last time he kissed me and how our touch felt hotter than glowing embers…

The look in his eyes when he looked at me…

I felt a raw pulsing energy expanding through my core and traveling through my hands. Vibrant blue magic exerted from them, creating a portal.

Without any doubt, I jumped through it.

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This portal was di erent than the hidden doorways. It made me feel nauseous, almost like traveling on Keith's back.

The more I thought of him, the more my body felt like it was being rearranged from the inside out.

THUD!

I landed on the ground with a hard welcome.

It was a dark, daunting basement where only one hanging lightbulb swayed back and forth ominously, staring as if it too wanted to leave.

CLANG.

CLANG.

CLANG.

The same sound I heard in the room above was now only a few feet away.

I quickly scurried through the shadows, passing various empty metal cells.

Then, I found him.

He hung by two massive chains like an old rag doll, dripping with blood as his head hung low. I could barely make out his features, but I knew it was Keith.

"Keith! Oh, Moon Goddess, what have they done to you?!" I panicked.

Keith slowly pulled his head up o his chest to look at me.

"Belle? No! Leave!" he warned.

"I'm not leaving you like this," I said, as my hands gently brushed his face.

I searched nearby but found nothing to help me reach up to the chains.

Closing my eyes, I focused on the image of his shackles unlocking. It was a simple image, but it was all I could think to do.

I began to feel a pulse rumbling through my veins, and when I opened my eyes, I noticed my arms were blue.

Focusing my hands in the direction of the shackles, I pushed my hands forward, and a blue light tore through the air, slicing the chains like a knife in butter.

Keith crumpled to the oor, and I ran to him.

"Oh, Keith, your hands!" I panicked.

They were swollen and red. When I touched them, he winced and moaned, a sound I had never heard from him before.

He looked into my eyes, and even with his unbearable pain, tried to smile.

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again," he whispered in a coarse, strained voice.

"I didn't think you'd want to," I admitted.

Keith still didn't fully remember—that much, I could tell.

But it was nice to know that even in our darkest times, I could still make him smile.

"Why did they do this to you? He promised me they only wanted peace," I asked while getting to my feet.

They would be coming for him soon.

"They might be neutral in a war, but they still need information. This is just one of their many methods," he said, as he spit blood onto the ground.

"What information could they need?" I asked, poring over all the things I had learned.

Nothing seemed so important they would need to go after Keith.

He looked at me, and again, smiled weakly.

"They think I know where the barrier to the underworld is," Keith said with a chuckle. "Too bad for them, I don't remember shit."

I helped Keith up o the ground, o ering my body to lean on as a crutch.

"How do we get you out of here?" I asked.

"You don't," a serpentine voice called from the shadows.

Hearing his voice sent a shock through my body that a ected my hold on Keith. He began to slip, and I could do nothing to stop him otherwise.

Again, I watched him fall to the ground. This time, I would not be able to help him back up.

Samuel stepped out of the shadows, clapping sweetly.

"Bravo. It seems you played me quite well."

"You lied to me!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

Samuel laughed at the outburst as he watched Keith's immobile body.

"We could've been so great together," he said. "But, alas, you've made your choice. Now, I have to do something I never wanted to do."

Samuel knelt down beside Keith and looked into his battered face. A smile crept across his lips, showing the fangs hidden behind them.

"Get away from him!" I demanded, moving toward him.

Samuel waved his hand, and in the blink of an eye, sent me crashing against an empty cell.

"I wanted to trust you. To give you my love. To bring peace to the world…" He placed a foot on Keith's face, pressing him into the hard ground.

I tried to get to my feet but was once again thrown aside by Samuel's powers.

His green eyes ashed red as he looked down at my aching body.

"But now I realize, there can only be peace when the two of you are dead."