SEVEN | THE PAINTED PONY

Aires

“So, are we heading to the U.K. now? I hope the ight isn’t as long; I might be tempted to jump out.”

“No, Mi Amor. Well, actually, I don’t know where we’re heading next. If Wesley was turned into a vampire and not born one, then he would likely take the surname of his master. He could be from anywhere,” I replied.

“Okay, that makes sense. Then we need to ask around here some more. I might have a lead for you.”

Henry pulled off his boots and stretched out across the king-sized bed, lling the space with his ruggedly sexy body. “You should get naked, then tell me,” I replied.

“Then you wouldn’t hear a word I’m saying, and this is a really good lead,” Henry said with a laugh.

“True. Very true. Okay, what did the chica say?”

“She said we need to go to a brothel called the Painted Pony. She said that they have a room that is just for feeding, and they constantly get vampires in there who want a quick drink and roll in the sack before they move on to wherever they are heading. And, January said that some of the working girls have photographic memories; so if Wesley were ever there, someone would remember him.”

“January? Her name was January?” I asked.

“Out of everything I just told you, that’s what you stuck to? Yes, her name is January; what’s wrong with that?”

“Nada. She just looked a little rough for such a feminine name. January,” I repeated, making Henry chuckle. I then pulled out my laptop and did a quick search on the Painted Pony. I didn’t see any mention of vampire-centric rooms but not too many establishments would advertise something like that. So I gured the best way to get answers would be to show up there myself.

“It’s not too far from here. I can pop in to see what they say and be back in a couple of hours,” I said before I caught myself. “Sorry, I meant ‘we’ could pop in. We’re a team, and this is your lead.”

“Brothels aren’t my thing, but I’m denitely not letting you go in there alone. I don’t see how you used to do this by yourself; weren’t you ever afraid?”

“Sometimes. But I was usually more excited, so that pushed me forward. I’m a thrill-seeker, and going into dark places looking for dangerous people is thrilling. At least to me, it is,” I added when Henry frowned.

“This is your sun.”

“Qué?”

“Sunowers need to face the sun. Throughout the day, as the sun moves across the sky, the owers follow it, soaking in the rays. Combat, danger, and mystery; it’s your sun, and you follow it. You need this stuff to get by.”

“Maybe before I met you, I did. Back then, you would have been 100% right, but now you and the babies are my suns along with the rest of the pack. I’m chasing the quickest way to get back home to them and to planning our wedding. I can live without hunting, as long as I still have the training and the occasional bloody ght.”

“You’re such a romantic, baby. I don’t know what I ever did without you.”

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“Eden is so much better than this place. Who paints the walls of a club Pepto Bismol pink?”

“Isn’t Eden a strip club? This is a brothel; they aren’t quite the same thing. But about the paint job: you’re right, and it’s horrible,” Henry laughed.

“Hello Mistress, are you here for our drinking room tonight? And will your handsome familiar be joining you, or will we have the pleasure of feasting on him?” an extremely cliche looking vampire appeared before us and asked.

“Yes, I’d like a drinking room, but this is not my familiar. He’s my ancé, and no one will be feasting on him except me. Send us three of your best girls; we’ve got a lot of energy to burn off.”

When the woman disappeared, Henry took my hand in his and brought it up to his lips.

“Do I even want to know what a familiar is?”

“It’s terrible, and it’s also not you; I wanted to make that clear from the beginning. A familiar is a vampire's servant. They are usually human and bound to their master for their entire life. It’s a sad and miserable existence, and I never saw the need for it.”

“You don’t want me to spoil you and treat you like the queen you are?”

“Only if I can repay the favor and treat you like the king you are. As a familiar, you wouldn’t even have your own feelings of happiness. It would all be about me, and you deserve so much more. Besides, I could never see my best friend as someone beneath me. You’re everything to me.”

“You really are a romantic, Sunower, because that was almost as beautiful as you.”

I playfully jabbed him in the ribs with my elbow just as the hostess reappeared to show us to our room.

“Mistress, I have arranged for the best girls we have available tonight for you and your lover. As a wolf, he can also use his teeth, but ripping esh is against the rules. You can draw blood, but that is it,” she looked over her shoulder at Henry and explained.

“I’ll try to contain myself,” he sarcastically replied.

“That’s all we ask. But mistakes do happen sometimes, and if they do, just be aware that there will be a $500 cleanup and disposal fee added to your bill for the evening. Enjoy.”

She ushered us into an average-sized room that smelled like fresh antiseptic. It was decorated with a large bed, a plush couch, uffy area rugs, and dim lighting; a perfect place for dirty deeds.

“Cleanup and disposal fee? That’s what they call it? So I get too excited and rip one of these girls throats out, and all their life is worth is $500?”

“That’s a lot of money here, Mi Amor, and this is a dangerous business. But don’t think about any of that; we’re not here for the feasting and ripping anyway,” I said.

I pushed him back on the couch then immediately straddled his lap. This was my happy place. Anytime our bodies were pressed close to each other, and I could feel his heart beating through his chest or his breath fanning across my skin, I was in my happy place.

“I’m bathing in boiling bleach as soon as we get back to the room; I don’t care how clean this place smells,” Henry smiled up at me and said. His smile still made my stomach do ips, even after all this time.

“I adore you, Henry Marshall. I can’t wait to become your wife.”

There was a swift knock on the door, but before we could say anything, it was opened, and three tired and run-down looking girls staggered in. Their skin was bruised from head to toe, their necks were covered all around in scars from old puncture wounds, and their eyes were almost glazed over. If this was the best that the Painted Pony had to offer, I hated seeing what their worst was like.

“Hello, Mistress. I am Indigo, this is Lilac, and this is Cerulean. How can we be of service tonight?” the shortest of the trio stepped forward and asked. She had creamy brown skin, thick curly hair, and large reddish-brown eyes. As soon as I caught a whiff of her, my curiosity got the better of me.

“You’re a vampire hybrid, I can tell. What are you doing working in the drinking room?” I asked.

She looked nervous and thrown off by my question but quickly straightened up before answering.

“My father is a high ranking and rare breed of vampire, and his blood is like a drug to other vampires and easily becomes addictive; some have even overdosed on whatever it is that’s in it. My mother is human, so the potency of my father's blood is diluted substantially in my veins; drinking from me won’t kill you, but it will get you higher than you’ve ever been in your life. I’m highly sought after and very well paid, so that’s why I’m in the drinking room.”

“A rare breed of vampire? Really?” Henry asked, just as intrigued as I was. Lilac and Cerulean seemed to be used to the song and dance because they both plopped down on the bed, making their boredom with the topic evident.

“Yes, he is a Rex Vampire; it means king,” Indigo explained.

Rex? Where had I heard that before? I ipped through the years of memories and knowledge that I’d compiled in my time as a hunter, and when I nally found the memory I was searching for, the air was sucked from my lungs.

“What is your father’s name?” I asked. My hands were shaking to the point where I needed to ball then into sts to hide my nerves. Henry noticed, he noticed everything about me, and wrapped his large hands over mine, soothing me.

“His name is Wesley. Wesley Allen.”

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Henry

“I’m telling you, Mi Amor, that little w***e out there is my sister, and that piece of s**t who gave her the fancy blood is my own father. I know it!”

“Okay. Aires? First, if she really is your sister, how about we don’t refer to her as the little w***e? That might cause problems at the family reunion. And how do you know? Her father has a different name,” I reasoned.

“Anyone can change their name; that’s nothing. But all my life, my mother told me that I was special and rare; I just thought it was because of my bear and vamp heritage. But it was because of him. Mama called him Rex, Henry. ‘My Rex left us in the middle of the night.’ My king. He made her call him her king?!”

Aires was two seconds from killing everyone in the building, so I took her arms and gently ran my hands up and down.

“Babe, you call me your king all the time, so relax. This doesn’t mean that Wesley did anything to force your mother; she loved the man just like you love me. Why don’t we get Indigo back in here and talk to her? That way, we can get some answers and stop jumping to conclusions.”

Aires narrowed her eyes at me, she didn’t appreciate my choice of words, but she nodded her head, signaling for me to let in the young girl we’d just a minute earlier abruptly thrown out. I opened the door, and all three women were leaned against the far wall, impatiently tapping their feet and cleaning their nails.

“Are you ready for us, handsome? Did you need a little more time to get it up? I gured a guy as t as you wouldn’t have a problem in that area,” the one I think was called Cerulean said.

“Not you, or you, just Indigo,” I replied, ignoring the comment. “You’ll still be paid for the hour,” I told the girls making their frowns turn to bright smiles.

“Plus tips?” Lilac expectantly asked.

“Not at all. Indigo? Would you care to join us?”

Lilac and Cerulean stomped off down the hall, leaving Indigo looking after them.

“We make our money off of tips; the hourly rate goes to the house. So they won’t be punished for losing money, but they won’t be paid either,” she nally looked at me and explained.

“I’ll see what I can do before we leave.”

That seemed to satisfy her enough, and soon I was standing in a room with my lovely Aires and someone we thought could be her sister.

“How old are you?” Aires asked as soon as I shut the door.

“Twenty-three. Why?”

“And where is your father?”

“Trust me; you don’t want his blood. Drinking from him is like playing Russian Roulette, and if this guy is yours, you’ve got way too much to live for,” she replied, motioning towards me.

Aires pulled out her phone, pulled up the picture she had of Wesley, and then turned it around. “Is this him?” she asked.

Indigo took a few steps closer and took the phone in her hands, staring closely at the screen.

“Why do you have a picture of my father on your phone? Is that what you’re here for? To hunt him? You’re a huntress, aren’t you?”

Indigo seemed excited by the notion, and it made me wonder if all of this man's kids wanted him dead.

“I don’t like the word huntress; I’m a vampire hunter, regardless of if I have a d**k or not.”

“So badass. So, I’m right? Please tell me I am.”

“Yes, you’re right; I’m hunting him,” Aires replied, making Indio squeal with delight.

“I can’t believe it; I’ve prayed for this day for years. He left my mom and me when I was a baby. He took all their money, all her jewelry, and just vanished. All he left behind were a few pictures and old clothes. I hate him.”

“That sounds about right; Wesley did the same thing to my mother twenty-six years ago. But when he was with her, his last name was Grant.”

Indigo’s face went through a myriad of emotions until it nally settled on shock.

“Wait! So you’re telling me that my father is also your father? I have a big sister?”

“It looks like it. Welcome to the family chica.”