

Reyna's Vampyr

By

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REYNA'S VAMPYR

Reyna Leoine has good reason to hate the vampyr after what one did to her mother. Her goal in life is to stay as far away from them as possible. When she compulsively accepts a dare to enter their domain—The Gladiator—Reyna questions her sanity. When the leader of the local vampyr clutch claims her as his, Reyna does the sensible thing. She runs.

Tariq Bastien recognizes his Heart's Blood the minute he sees her sitting at the bar. After centuries of being alone, he has no intention of allowing her to escape him. When she manages to do just that, Tariq goes a little crazy.

Tariq does what Vampaliens do best—he hunts. The more he discovers about her, the less it makes sense. No human should be able to escape him, and he'd recognize one of his kind. When he finally finds her, will the mystery of her past draw them together or drive them apart?

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Chapter One

What am I doing here? I must be out of my mind.

Unfortunately, it wasn't insanity that brought Reyna Leoine to The Gladiator. It was her damnable, childish inability to resist a dare. Specifically, a double-dog-dare. Yep, the words "I double-dog-dare you" got to her every time. You'd think at her age she'd have learned better.

"Just dye my hair blond and color me stupid," Reyna muttered under her breath. She really was insane. There could be no other explanation. Only a crazy person would willingly walk into a known vampyr bar dressed as she was. Might as well have a sign on her forehead proclaiming, "Fresh blood! Come and get it!"

Reyna fought not to fidget. She was extremely uncomfortable knowing the majority of her pulse points were exposed. The borrowed dress draped low on her breasts in the front. The back was completely open. Forget wearing a bra. A swath of silky material lay on the swell of her ass, almost revealing the dimple directly above it. The hemline was so short it came with a color-coordinating micro-thong. This was not her usual style at all. Add in the pair of 'fuck me' stilettos on her feet and the image was complete. It would take everything she had to escape without being jumped or worse, bit.

Wasting time, she glanced around the shadowed interior of The Gladiator. The windowless building stood at least four stories tall and took up an entire city block. She'd been told it also extended another three stories below ground, maybe more. No one knew for sure and those who did weren't talking.

The inside was cavernous. It had three open floors. Each level contained arched alcoves rimming the perimeter, seating groups of two or four. Soft red lighting illuminated the recesses and each was rimmed with tied-back curtains which could be released for privacy. Several of those drapes were closed. Reyna didn't want to know what was going on behind them.

The walkways contained additional seating in the form of Roman-styled backless couches. Some lined the barrier ringing the dance floor. Others were in

groupings to allow larger parties to sit together. Mock fires flickered inside Roman-styled lamps—golden oil lamps on tall pedestals—providing additional lighting.

The servers all wore short white togas fastened on one shoulder, leaving most of their muscled chest bare. The togas were belted at the waist before falling to just about mid-thigh, revealing thick muscular legs worthy of the world's strongest bodybuilders. It was rumored underneath they were naked. The bouncers wore molded leather breastplates, short leather panel skirts, and knee-high black leather boots, similar to Russell Crowe's costume in *The Gladiators*. Lots of eye candy, if you were interested in that sort of thing and didn't mind the whole lot of them being vampyrs.

Reyna shuddered and huddled closer to the bar, all the while trying to send out vibes that said, "Not interested. Do not approach." Despite the way she was dressed, the last thing she wanted was to attract the attention of anyone in here. Just the thought of it left a bad taste in her mouth. She squinted at her watch. Ten minutes down, fifty to go.

She gazed into the mirrored wall behind the bar into the room. Strobe lighting made the masses on the dance floor appear to be dark shadows moving in slow motion. The flooring was made up of lighted squares flowing in random patterns according to the beat. It was enough to make her dizzy.

Sighing, she called the bartender over and ordered yet another drink she didn't want, knowing she had to blend in. Sticking out would only draw attention to herself. Something she wanted to avoid at all costs.

As Reyna sipped on her wine cooler, she mentally reviewed what she knew of Vampyrs, or bloodsuckers as she privately referred to them. Five years ago they'd come out of hiding, proving reality really was stranger than fiction. Not that *she'd* needed proof.

Despite the name, Vampyrs weren't really vampires, but aliens with vampiric tendencies from a planet called Vampalien. Turns out they'd been relocating by the shipload to earth since 2400 B.C. The reason they'd given for doing so was

overpopulation and a growing lack of resources on their home planet. Earth was the closest, livable planet with a similar environment to home.

Lucky Earth.

After the unveiling, mass hysteria was quickly nipped in the bud when humans realized just how powerful—not to mention wealthy—the creatures were, and how they'd infiltrated every segment of the population from highest to lowest. Laws, initiated by Vampyr themselves, were quickly put into place to protect the populace, or so they said. It was rumored these laws were just an open acknowledgement of the ones already in place in Vampyr society.

In response to the newly enacted legislature, humans had come up with a few unofficial rules of their own—survival tactics, if you will. Briefly, she reviewed them in her mind as a reminder and to strengthen her resolve to make it out of here in one piece. After all, she had plenty of time—forty-three more minutes—before she could leave.

Rule number one: Don't look them in the eyes. Vampyr had an abundance of mental powers, one of which was the ability to enthrall humans.

Rule number two: Never say yes to a Vampyr. According to the law, Vampyr could only take blood from willing donors. To do otherwise was considered rape and carried stiff penalties. That is, if the victim remembered they hadn't consented and reported it. Vampyr were tricky bastards.

Rule number three (and the most important one in her opinion): Never let a Vampyr claim you as mate. Once claimed, legally there was no escape. You belonged to them body and soul.

Once again Reyna mentally kicked herself for being so stupid. Her friends—bitches every one of them—had known what they were doing. She should have realized it was a setup. Reyna thought back to earlier today at lunch when she'd blindly walked into their trap...

"What are you doing tonight after work, Reyna?" Lexy asked.

"Going home to tend to her cats," Caitlyn said.

“A lot you know. I don’t have any pets,” Reyna said. There might be felines living in her home but only a fool would mistake them for house cats.

They were at a table in the glass enclosed, rooftop atrium where they usually gathered for lunch. Office personnel who worked on different floors in the building, they’d met and become fast friends in the course of doing business for their respective bosses.

Delany airily flicked off Reyna’s response. “You might as well. With your boring lifestyle, throw a few cats into the mix and your picture could feature in Webster next to the word ‘spinster.’”

“Hey! My life is not boring. Just because I’m not a ho’ like some folks I know.” Reyna directed a pointed look at Delaney. “Or a swinger like other people I could name but won’t,” she gave an arched look at Caitlyn, “does not make me dull. I happen to like my life just the way it is.”

Lexy pointed a finger at her. “So what are your plans for tonight? It’s Friday. Surely you don’t intend to sit home.”

Since she planned on doing exactly that, Reyna remained silent. After the hectic week she’d had, all she wanted to do was go home and curl up with a bowl of ice cream and a good book. She might even watch a movie. The possibilities were endless.

At her silence, Caitlyn said, “Reyna, no. You can’t stay in tonight. You need to go out and live a little. Do something other than hole up in that warehouse you call a house.”

The others nodded in agreement. Reyna frowned. She liked staying home. Home was safe. Home was her sanctuary, where she could relax and be herself.

“I know!” Delaney snapped her fingers. “She can go to that new club, the one everyone’s talking about. I hear it’s all the rage, especially on Fridays.”

“The Gladiator? Yeah, that place is totally blazing,” Lexy agreed, a dreamy expression on her face.

“And packed,” Reyna inserted dryly. “Everybody who is somebody—or thinks they are—tries to get in. The line wraps around the block and stays that way for

hours. I'd never make it to the door, let alone get inside, even if I wanted to, which I don't." Reyna shook her head. While she'd never been to The Gladiator, she'd heard others speak of it and seen reports of it on the news. Just the mere thought of being trapped in a building with so many vampyrs made her shudder.

"Aw, come on. It would be fun. Just standing in line would be better than sitting at home," Delaney said.

"Says you. No way." As far as Reyna was concerned, the conversation was over. She wasn't going anywhere near the place. Driving past it on the way home was bad enough.

"I can get you in."

All eyes swung toward Jacey, the quietest and newest member of their group, at the calm conviction in her voice.

"You?" Caitlyn voiced what they all were thinking.

Reyna was shocked and a bit dismayed.

"I'm pretty sure I can get Reyna in if she wants to go," Jacey said.

"How?" Lexy demanded to know.

"You've been to The Gladiator?" Delaney questioned at the same time.

"It's not important. Reyna?" Jacey dismissed them both, showing a calm sense of self-possession Reyna had never seen her display.

As Jacey stared at her, obviously waiting for a reply, the others continued to taunt Reyna, like bullies on a playground.

"Oh, she's too chicken to go," Delaney said with a dismissive wave of her hand in Reyna's direction. "Let me go. I'll enjoy the experience way more than Reyna."

"I'm no coward," Reyna vehemently protested. "Just because I don't enjoy bouncing from club to club every night doesn't make me a chicken."

"Really? When's the last time you went out? To a club? On a date? Out to eat? The movies or theater? Hell, how about a museum? Anywhere other than home?" Lexy asked.

Reyna opened her mouth, but nothing came out. What she did on her off time was private, not something she could share with this group, no matter how much

she enjoyed their company. Besides, she couldn't remember ever doing any of the things Lexy mentioned, unless it somehow pertained to business. How pathetic.

"I knew it," Delaney crowed. "Reyna's a big scaredy cat."

"Am not. You take that back!" Reyna demanded.

"You know, I have to agree with Delaney," Caitlyn murmured and Lexy nodded. Jacey just sat quietly and watched.

Reyna glared at them all. She didn't have to defend her lifestyle. She had valid reasons for living the way she did.

"Uh-huh. Prove it. I dare you," Delaney taunted.

She could feel her blood pressure rising as her temper began to boil, but tried to play it cool. Arching an eyebrow, she asked, "You dare me? What are we, still in grade school? This whole conversation is stupid." She shook her head and then tried to change the subject. "Anyone heard the latest? They say we might all be getting a cost of living increase. I hope so. There's also talk the cost of our benefits might increase."

Caitlyn nudged Delany. "She's trying to avoid the issue. She's frightened."

"Terrified," Delaney agreed.

Grinning broadly, Lexy said, "If she was a horse, the whites of her eyes would be showing."

Reyna rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I just can't believe how childish you three are being."

Lexy leaned forward in her seat and pointed her fork at Reyna. "Come on, Reyna, I double-dare you. Break out of your rut and get out of the house for once."

"Who knows, you might actually meet someone nice," Jacey said.

"And get laid, something you obviously need," Caitlyn threw in.

Delany frowned at the others. "Can't you see you're wasting your breath? Women afraid of their own shadow rarely come out in public and socialize."

So now I'm afraid of my own shadow? Oooo! She did not just say that, Reyna fumed. She heard a tapping sound and realized she was drumming her nails on the table. Reyna immediately halted the motion.

“She won’t do it. Remember how much trouble we had getting her to come to the office Christmas party. It took weeks of nagging to get her to agree,” Lexy reminded them.

The Christmas party was two years ago and they were still throwing it up in her face? Damn heifers had memories like elephants.

“Oh, that’s right. In that case, I double-dog-dare you. Prove you aren’t scared by going out tonight,” Delaney continued breezily.

Oh, hell, not a double-dog-dare. She’d never been able to resist one of those.

“Not just out, but out to The Gladiator,” Caitlyn added smugly.

“But isn’t it a vampyr club?” she asked. Of all the places they could have chosen, why that one?

“Yes. You got a problem with vampyrs?” Lexy asked. Reyna knew Lexy loved vampyrs by the way she was always gushing over them and updating their group with the latest vampyr news.

She looked around the table at the small group. They all appeared ready to pounce if she gave the wrong answer. Pushing her personal feelings aside, she cast a quick glance at the cloudless sky. Hopefully lightening wouldn’t strike her dead for the whopper of a lie she was about to tell. “Not really.” She clutched her suddenly queasy stomach.

“Then what’s the problem, unless you really are afraid?” Delaney continued to push the issue.

Reyna’s mind scrambled, trying to come up with a believable excuse. The truth was not an option. “I don’t have anything to wear,” she announced triumphantly. “A club of that caliber has to have a dress code.”

“We’re almost the same size. I have a dress you can borrow. You’ll fit right in,” Jacey announced, once more shocking the group.

After regrouping from another astounding revelation from the youngest, quietest, and simplest dresser in the group, Lexy turned to Reyna with narrowed eyes. “No more excuses. Jacey has the dress, I have shoes, and I’m sure Caitlyn will be happy to do something with your hair.”

“And I’ll do your makeup,” Delaney volunteered.

Knowing she was defeated, with an inward sigh she gave in to the inevitable.
“Fine, what are the terms?”

Her friends all high-fived each other and grinned broadly.

“You have to go to The Gladiator tonight,” Delaney said.

“And stay for at least an hour,” Caitlyn added.

“And Monday we want all the details,” Lexy finished.

Reyna turned to Jacey. “You have anything to add?” she questioned sarcastically, beginning to realize she’d been had.

Jacey’s eyes seemed to lose focus as she gazed at something only she seemed able to see. Finally she blinked, shook her head slightly, and her gaze locked onto Reyna’s. “Let yourself have fun.” She looked like she wanted to say more but held back.

Reyna forced herself to sit back in her chair and relax, even though she felt like a cat with her paw caught in a trap. Good thing she’d finished eating. Her normally healthy appetite was gone. “If I do this, you guys will leave me alone? No more pressuring me to ‘get a life,’ as you put it?”

Caitlyn, Delaney, and Lexy’s eyes all met in silent communication. They turned to Jacey and she nodded. “Yes,” they said, almost in unison.

Lexy held out her hand to Reyna.

Reyna made no move to shake it. “What? You’re not going to spit on it to seal the deal?”

“Eww!” Caitlyn said.

“That’s disgusting,” Jacey agreed.

“Not to mention juvenile,” Lexy added.

“And this isn’t?” Reyna asked.

“Reyna, honey, don’t be mad.” Jacey glanced at the other women. “You don’t have to go if you really hate the idea. It’s just that we worry about you. Other than work and us, you never have anything to talk about.”

“No other friends,” Lexy said.

“No boyfriends,” Caitlyn added.

“You don’t even mention family,” Delaney finished solemnly.

“You seem so...isolated,” Jacey said sadly.

Reyna looked at her friends, all staring at her with varying degrees of concern on their faces. This is what living a double life led to, she realized. They had good intentions, even if she didn’t like their methods. “You’re right. I’ll go and try to have fun.”

They all heaved sighs of relief.

“Come over to my place about nine and we’ll help you get ready,” Jacey instructed.

To Reyna’s dismay, Jacey had proved to be as good as her word. Hours later she’d found herself strutting to the head of the line in her borrowed outfit, ignoring the insults and curses hurled at her, praying all the while she’d be turned away at the door. Head held high, she’d marched right up to the tall, brawny, scary-looking Roman Centurion guarding the entrance and held out the coin Jacey had promised would get her inside, no questions asked.

The security guard had given her the once over, blatantly checking out all the skin Reyna displayed. His gaze had lingered a bit longer on her pulse points than she was comfortable with, but used to dealing with predators Reyna knew not to show her unease. Finally he took the coin from her and examined it.

It was Roman in nature, with a picture of Caesar on the front. It shone with the patina of old gold, and Reyna briefly wondered if the coin was real and valuable. If so, how had Jacey acquired it? It must have passed muster for the Centurion handed it back to her and the guards standing at the door let her pass.

Fun, Reyna thought as she cradled her drink to her chest, staring into it as if it held the answers to all the secrets of the universe. Sure, she was having fun...*not*. This place was so not her scene. There were too many people, too many bodies packed together like sardines in a can. Yes, the place was huge but she preferred wide-open spaces with room to run and be free. Like home, she thought with a sigh.

Still trying to avoid eye contact with everyone, she gave herself a pep talk. *Come on, just a little longer and you'll be home free.*

Already she could feel the hot, satiny water of her Jacuzzi tub caressing her naked body. She'd light some candles, put on some soothing music, lay her head back on the bath pillow, and soak away her cares. Closing her eyes, she imagined herself holding up her leg, admiring its slim shapeliness as the suds slid down her slender body. Anything to get her mind off where she was.

Another peak at the watch showed twelve minutes remaining. Time to start making her way to the door.



Tariq Bastien left his penthouse lair by way of the private elevator coded to his voice command. "Third floor."

"Yes, master," the computerized voice said as the doors swooshed closed behind him.

His staff, comprised of members of his Clutch and the few humans he trusted, were more than capable of handling things and keeping everyone in line, but he preferred the hands on approach to business so he made a personal appearance in the club each night. His customers had come to expect it.

The music was loud and pumping. The place packed. As normal, business was booming. He knew the drinks, music, and atmosphere were only part of the appeal. The main lure was the Vampyr themselves. Humans loved them, loved the idea of rubbing elbows with his kind.

In the five years since their official unveiling, they were still just as much of a mystery as when they'd come out, and if he had anything to say about it, they'd remain one. As a result, he kept a close eye on the more...unruly of his kind.

They'd done a hell of a public relations' job, making themselves seem the same as humans with the exception of a few special...*enhancements*, the result of their transition to earth. Sort of like Superman, with fangs. It took a while but the

majority of the populace now believed they were exactly what they portrayed themselves to be instead of the powerful predators they really were.

It had helped when humans discovered a lot of the myths about them—myths they themselves perpetrated—were false. Unlike their fictional counterparts, sunlight didn't kill them. Weaken their powers? Yes. And unlike the movies, they didn't fall into a deathlike sleep as soon as the sun rose, but they were nocturnal, as were most of earth's predators.

As he walked the three levels of the club he nodded to security, dressed as Roman Gladiators, whose job it was to ensure no mishaps occurred. Vampyrs didn't solely depend on blood to survive. In fact, in large quantities Earthlings' blood was highly addictive, providing the same buzz as opiates or narcotics in their purist form to humans.

The last thing he wanted was for some vampyr who couldn't control himself to bleed out a human. Not on his watch, and not after all they'd done to convince humans the image of them as bloodthirsty killers was just a fable and unsubstantial as mist. For the most part it was true, except for when one of his kind first arrived on planet.

The gravity on Vampalien was much denser than Earth. After space travel in zero and artificial gravity, their blood volume was low when they first left the spaceship. For the first three days they'd drain dry any being foolhardy enough to come within clutching distance until their blood pressure gradient equalized. Unfortunately, it was during this time a lot of Vampyrs develop an unquenchable thirst for human blood, much like a cancer patient addicted to morphine.

Tariq stopped and stood at his favorite lookout spot, which allowed him an eagle's view of the entire club. Things were quiet tonight. All the little Vampyrs were playing nice, abiding by Vampalien rules. He was about to turn and go back to his office when it hit him.

Emotions slammed into him. He filtered them through his senses: a human female, impatient, frustrated, and underneath it all, afraid. Then, almost before

he'd finished processing, an overwhelming sense of relief. He hunted the source. Whoever she was, she was broadcasting loudly.

For him to receive it meant only one thing—his Heart's Blood was near.

His cock hardened at the thought. A bloodmate, for him. But which one was she? As usual, a high percentage of tonight's clientele were female. He scanned the crowd, lowered his shields until he locked onto the direction from where the emotions emanated.

There, near the bar on the second level.

A beautiful woman in a black, figure-hugging off the shoulder dress suddenly stood, pushed away from the counter, and strode determinedly toward the exit. It was her. Tariq couldn't let her get away.



Reyna twisted and turned as she pushed her way to the exit. She kept her gaze averted to avoid accidentally making eye contact with anyone. She was congratulating herself on her success when she plowed into a massive, rock hard body.

"Excuse me," she muttered, scowling as she tried to maneuver her way around him. Where'd he come from? The path had been clear a second ago.

A large hand clamped possessively on her elbow, halting her. "You want to dance with me."

Reyna shivered as the deep voice went through her, causing her nipples to peak. Damn, a vampyr. Had to be. Despite the loud music, she heard him as clearly as if he'd spoken directly into her ear, except he'd never bent down and placed his mouth to it. Since her head was level with his chest, it had to be a display of vamp powers. She shook off the hint of compulsion embedded in his command.

"Actually, I don't. I was just leaving." Reyna yanked her arm free and as she did, the lighted dial of her watch swung into view. She still had seven minutes. She

wouldn't put it past Delaney and Caitlyn to be waiting outside to see if she'd stuck to the terms of their agreement.

"I insist." He grabbed her forearm and began towing her towards the lighted dance floor.

High-handed bastard, she thought, glancing over her shoulder to see the exit grow further and further away.

As if by magic, the crowd parted before him, creating an open path to the dance floor. Reyna sighed. One dance wouldn't kill her. Then she was out of here, no matter what.

He pulled her close as they danced. "Tell me your name."

Reyna ignored the command, looking everywhere but at him. A not so subtle glance at her watch indicated she could leave in another two minutes. She counted down the time in her head.

"Look at me."

She snorted. Like that was going to happen.

Finally, it was time. She abruptly pulled away. "Thanks for the dance," she tossed over her shoulder as she turned to walk away. She'd taken two steps when the club went totally dark and the music ceased. Reyna was forced to stop. Even she couldn't see in this pitch black. An expectant hush fell over the crowd.

A single drumbeat broke the silence.

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

Another drum joined in counterpoint.

Tap. Thump. Tap. Thump. Tap. Thump.

The beat started low, then slowly swelled. It was hypnotic and pulsing. Reminiscent of the jungle beats of the deepest, darkest parts of Africa. It dug under her skin and into her bones.

Blue lights lit the floors, casting everyone in white in glowing blue. The rest were dark shadows. Her dance partner stepped close behind her, wrapped an arm around her waist and swayed her to the driving rhythm.

Reyna's instincts screamed at her to get away, but thinking was suddenly hard. Her mind grew sluggish. All she could do was feel. Feel the beat. Feel the hard aroused body plastered to her back. The muscular band he called an arm bound her to him, enveloping her center.

Her vagina grew moist as visions of naked, sweaty bodies engaged in orgasmic activity streamed through her head. Chill bumps spread up and down her arm and the hairs stood up in response. *What's happening to me?*

The male wrapped both arms around her. One slid low to chain her belly, close to her mound. The other rose to rest below her breasts. Then he began to chant in rhythm with the beat. The foreign sounding words did something to her and for a moment, fear caused her to surface from the enchantment holding her enthralled.

Run, Reyna. Fight.

As though someone flipped a switch, her brief struggle ended before it could begin as sensible, careful Reyna faded and the part of herself she'd fought against and tried to deny all of her life rose to the surface and took her place.



"You and I are one. Blood of my blood. Flesh of my flesh. You are the very heart that beats in my breast. From this time forth, no more twain but one. My body I give to thee. Your body I receive from thee to treasure, to pleasure, to hold secure. My life for yours, for all eternity."

Tariq chanted the ritual words, binding this woman to him. He didn't know her name. Didn't know how she felt about Vampyrs or being united with one. None of it mattered. By law she was now his. His to keep. His to protect. Most of all, his to bond with and he kept what belonged to him.

He felt his fangs lengthen and the glands behind his ears began to harden and swell as the venom made its presence known. Once injected, it would mark her as his and prepare her ovum to accept his seed. It would also act as a locator. With it in her system, he could find her anywhere on earth.

Most importantly, it was a powerful aphrodisiac. When it hit her bloodstream, she would be helpless against the lust that consumed her, consumed both of them. While the venom didn't discriminate, the pheromones he released would ensure her desire was only for him. A potent double-whammy for the toxin affected him as well.

He tightened his arm until it resembled a steel band. With his left hand he gathered her hair and twisted it like a rope, using it like a handle to pull her head to the side, exposing her neck. Slowly he licked her pulse point, wanting to savor the moment. It wasn't every day a male found his Heart's Blood.

She moaned and the sound went straight to his groin. He hovered over her, inhaling the sweet scent of her life's essence. The bitter tasting fluid dripping into his mouth pushed him closer and closer to the edge. He forgot the club and its inhabitants. His mind, his very life force was focused on this long awaited claiming. Unable to wait any longer, he struck like a snake.

Her body jerked and she screamed. Tariq knew the venom entered like ice and then burnt like fire, for he too was feeling its effects as it coursed through his system. It seemed to streak like lightning straight to his groin and radiate outward. He only had seconds until it hit his brain and he lost all cognitive abilities.

Gathering her close, he teleported them to his quarters.

The minute he released her, she turned on him like a tigress, her clawlike nails extended. She tore at his clothing, all the while making these mewling sounds that drove him past the dark side of crazy. He froze for a nano-second as his brain seized, then every rational cell in his head shut down and the beast within him burst free.

Two slashes and her dress was in tatters. His cock burst free as she ripped loose the opening of his jeans and tried to climb his body. Tariq roared in approval as he slammed her back against the wall. He had to be in her now.

After that, things were a blur. He remembered rutting like a wild animal, biting, clawing—not all of it him—and blood before passing out.