

VAMPIRONY

(a fictional account of the
vampire psychologist.)

by Stacie Benton

cleaver to a gun fight
protection methods
exit strategy
(always have one)
vampire practicum
getting a bad feeling
excerpt from the factbook
notes to remember
protection methods
vampire 101: trust
effects of citrus

Book Two (so far)

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Vampirony – Season 3

The Grey Wolf tore the fledgling into pieces. He sprinkled the pieces with the water of death and they instantly grew together; he sprinkled the dead body with the water of life and the fledgling shook itself and flew away with the she-crow, safe and sound. The Grey Wolf then sprinkled the pieces of the body of Tsarevich Ivan with the water of death and they grew together; he sprinkled the dead body with the water of life, and Tsarevich Ivan stood up, stretched himself and said: “How Long I must have slept!

“Yes, Tsarevich Ivan,” The Grey Wolf said, “and thou wouldst have slept forever had it not been for me...”

- Russian Fairy Tale

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Prologue – Through the Wilds

He awoke with a start. He lay on the floor of a leaf-strewn forest, the pine boughs thick above him, nearly blocking out the stars. His body was naked and cold, almost numb and yet burning. He sat up. Looking over himself, his skin was littered with fresh scars that itched. He rubbed at the puckered skin over his wrist only to see it smooth out, lose its discoloration, the scar vanishing before his eyes.

Flexing his right hand, it seemed not of his own body, like some alien, new thing that didn't quite fit at the end of his arm. Taking a moment, he realized there were parts all over his body that felt out of sorts with other parts of him, as if these bits and pieces had not always been one.

A breeze rustled the rust colored leaves around him. Autumn. Had he been running for so long? All he could remember was the running away. Not where he'd come from nor where he was going to. Not his name or age or family. No personal thing about himself could he recall. He was trapped in a living nightmare of pain, terror, and endless repetition.

His eyes darted around the forest, trying to discern anything from his surroundings that could answer what his addled memory could not. The woods were thick but the trees did not entirely blot out the sky. Just above him, pieces of a full moon reflected white light into his widening eyes. For a moment, he was mesmerized, the light suddenly washing clean all the corners of his mind, all the dread, the doubt, the anger, the fear.

He let his lids fall shut, hoping to hold in the white light, letting it build in his mind until it churned from a pure white into a glowing pale yellow, harkening back to its source, warming him from the inside. But before he could let the light complete its orbit, taking him back to day, back to a place and time he felt safe and he understood just who and what he was, a single howl split the night open again.

They were back and with that single sound, the previous night's events ambushed him. Teeth and snapping jaws, drool, hot breath, and blood. So much blood. As the memories of his nightly ritual returned, more joined in the call for the hunt and he remembered what came next. They would surround him, trip him with their extended claws, and he would roll into a ball on the ground. Their collective jaws would snap at him as he fought them off, kicking, punching, screaming, biting and clawing in his own right. He had managed to break a leg or two, wrestle one to the ground, poke out an eye of another, but there was always another to take that one's place.

And always, the wolves would bite at his flesh, slashing open his back, his side, blood gushing out of his wounds. He would shriek in pain but finally, they would clamp their jaws around an ankle, an elbow, a wrist. Then shaking their mighty heads, the wolves would tear him literally limb from limb, eating him bit by bit until he lost consciousness. Only to awake whole again. But it always started with the running.

He jumped to his feet, putting the sounds of howling and barking at his back, ready to begin again what was written as the skein of his fate. He took a single step forward but something stayed his other foot.

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The foot felt odd, like all of his other discombobulated parts, but underneath it, he felt a connection into the earth. Something under his very feet reached up into him, keeping him rooted there. The ground seemed warmer than before, like he'd been running south toward some more temperate land. There was a scent to these trees that roused some wisp of a recognition that sped away with a heavy breeze.

The barking and yipping drew closer and still he could step no further. He lifted his foot up to see what lay underneath, what was impeding his flight, what familiar thing was fighting back his fear. Under the white light of the moon, he saw flecks of mica in the sand that dusted his sole.

Behind him, growls heralded that the wolves had caught up to him. He set his foot back down, twisting the ball of it into the cold sand, feeling its energy feeding him strength. Then, with great deliberation, he turned toward the wolves.

This night, on this ground, he would take one of them with him and have his own feast.

A Few Words About Heroes

It wasn't the news of the second vampire attack, the complete shock of seeing the office/deli building trashed, or even the retroactive worry over Nick and Morena taking on what could only be classified as some sort of vampire revenant on their own that thrust me into the first stages of manic depression. It wasn't even the hours spent in the hospital yet again trying to dodge domestic abuse questions and blood draws. And strangely it wasn't even the after-effects of the powerful drugs used to keep me sedated and the new drugs fighting the pain and borderline panic.

Nope, it was the memory of a perfect moment being held in perfect calm and feeling the warmth of a perfect smile that was sending me running into the arms of what modern psychiatrists call "denial." There was a hint of promise in sentiment of last night's rescue and I couldn't afford to let these things spin out of control. Every feeling back into its appropriate compartment, I always say. But I was having trouble lining up all the unruly children, making sure they washed their hands, got in line boy girl, and didn't pull the pigtailed of the little girl next to them in line.

I found myself still checking my watch, counting the hours until dusk, and hating myself for it. And while I hated coming out of the romantic fog to find foundations of the very occupation I had committed years to slipping away, at least I was again focusing on the right things instead of pining away for...what, I didn't even really know.

This morning, I had let Lucy and Maurice's mysterious but capable henchman Ritterreitter clean things up, showing more expertise at moving a vampire in rigor dormitus than I felt comfortable with (especially since it was my vampire. Ugh, no no no.) With the help of three workers from Starving Students, he had deftly overseen draping my sleeping marbled vampire client in heavy tarpaulin and boxing him up in one of the crates from the building site.

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Then problem one arose. Morena and I couldn't agree on what to do with him. Over the phone, she assured me that the Office wouldn't suffice. (This was, of course, before I had ventured over there to see the devastation for myself.) She proposed shipping him to his condo. Which I was absolutely not going to do with strange henchmen, even if working for my half vampire gypsy twins. Especially since they *were* half vampire.

So there was only one thing to do. I shipped him to my hotel room. At the time, my heart was all in a flutter with how he'd wake up in what approximated to my bedroom. And I hate myself now for that sentimentality too. I think I was blushing when I signed the shipping papers. Ritterreiter seemed to find it amusing and for a moment, I thought he was going to ask me if he could deliver anything else, with a mighty leer.

And then he did.

"Shall I have an appropriate meal delivered around dusk for you? Perhaps a rare Kobe steak with broccolini and a hearty Pinot Noir? Your, um, cargo is likely to need a good feeding."

My eyes bugged out. The presumption was there and the red in my cheeks deepened for wholly different reasons.

"He doesn't eat meat," I voiced softly, confused.

His smile deepened. "Oh, the meal's not for him."

I snapped out a response as I handed him his clipboard.

"That *won't* be necessary. He's not a pet."

Then the leer turned to genuine surprise. "Oh, my apologies. After the damage he sustained, I just assumed he served you. All quite unnecessary as we had things well in hand." Before my brain could keep up and ask all the important questions about who he thought he was and how exactly did he fit into all this, he spoke, "Not to worry. We will handle him with kid gloves and have him happily situated in your room at the Hyatt." Then he turned on his heel and waved to the three helpers, all wearing similar khaki pants and tank tops, "Handle with Care, Crow." Then they carted the crate over to a furniture truck with a lift. As much as my senses already on overload would allow, they looked rather sullen about the task.

As I watched them load the crate, I felt all energy begin to sap out of me and nausea begin to well up. I covered my mouth with my hand and made a few horrific hacks, part cough part dry heave. I tried to take in a shaky breath. I needed to pull myself together. I needed to get over to the office/deli. The phone call with Morena did nothing but alarm me, even with her assurances otherwise.

"Some ginger ale perhaps, Miss Quinn?"

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I blinked but was so far gone as to not be capable of any more surprise so just took the proffered bottle and began to take small sips.

“Banana?”

I blinked my response again and watched as this mysterious henchman peeled the banana down for me with the precision of one acquainted with the finest food service standards. Then, he handed the half peeled banana to me, “Miss.”

“What are you? Alfred Pennyworth?”

He laughed. “Just a faithful servant to the Gypsy Twins. And now, miss, I think we should get you to the nearest ER. Likely more conspicuous than we’d like at this hour but haste is probably in order.”

I paused for a moment.

“No, I need to go with the crate.”

“You have my word as representative of the Irregulars it will be delivered with care.” Just then, the furniture truck slowly ambled across the street and into the back alley of the Hyatt. I trusted the twins as they had always trusted me. And he served them.

I paused for another moment. “Then I need to go to my office. To look after my friends.”

“They are being picked up as we speak and transported to the hospital, although I hear their injuries are minor. Everything has been arranged. Please let me help settle the rest of your affairs for just now. You need medical attention.” Then he smiled.

I would’ve slapped that smug look off his face if I’d known that he was part of the reason I needed medical assistance. But true to his word, as he was helping me through the ER doors after having changed into a police officer uniform, I spotted Nick striding out towards me.

“Holy shit! What happened to you?” Nick asked, with his usual charming turn of phrase. I ignored it and gave him a big hug.

He didn’t know what to do. “Uh...”

“Just forget I’m your boss for the moment, ok?” I rasped.

He grabbed my arms as he pushed me back to look me over. “Whoa, you sound like Lucy’s Smoking Voice from *How I Met Your Mother*.” His face had a few bruises but nothing too bad. I smiled. Then I started crying. His voice mail message made it sound like the end of the world had arrived and somehow, he and Morena had made it through. Relief was loosening all the shock from me and tears just fell as Nick led me over to the check-in desk.

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As Nick did the talking with the desk nurse, I did manage to see one last glimpse of Ritterreiter as he handed a doctor in a lab coat a small bottle, having a very calm conversation as the doctor's face showed surprise. RR slapped the doctor on the shoulder as the doctor looked over to me, holding the bottle.

Then I was caught up with checking in, trying to remember insurance information, and having the doctor hurry over with a couple of blue smocked orderlies who stuffed me in a wheelchair and tossed an insurance card to the desk nurse.

Yes, Ritterreiter had thought of everything. And I was happy to pass in and out of awareness as the doctor ran blood work, checked my vitals, and then scampered off to consult. During which Nick was able to relate what happened in a very clever manner. He told me about a really bad slasher film he'd seen.

Apparently, the story to the hospital was that I had been the victim of an attempted date rape drugging during a house party. Nick and a friend had interceded when the two culprits had tried to remove me from the apartment. Witnesses had been procured, the police had filled out a report, and now all that was left was to check me out and get me to ID my assailants, who had fled the alleyway once they'd been beaten.

When I'd tried to ask Nick where Morena was, he told me she'd had to clean up and then go chat with the officers doing the investigating before they would need to talk with me. Which they did. As the doctor had given me an IV, I was feeling marginally better just in time to get really pissed. Morena had taken blood. It was obvious when she strode into my private room. She glowed in that preternatural way.

Yes, the romance was dying face first in the dust that was settling. And I was getting a headache by the summation Nick was hitting me with. Trying to fit all the pieces together was going to have to wait until after sleep...like a week's worth.

Luckily, my throat was only bruised, a few stitches closed the wound in my neck and shoulder, which had already begun to knit closed, and my face, well, purple and green were going to be my colors for a while. Morena waited to harass me about her boyfriend. Nick actually seemed to be high on life, just happy to have made it through their ordeal. I took my pills for nausea, pain, inflammation, and didn't hesitate to pop the sleeping pill. I was gritting my teeth, feeling arms around me that weren't mine. I felt stuck in the nightmare of post romantic stress disorder and I needed out...now...before I said something I regretted.

By the time the cops and doctors had finished with me, all the pills had put me in the most wonderful numbness. I pushed past Nick and Morena when the cab drove up and got in without a word. I couldn't handle words. Words meant feelings. And I couldn't afford them right now. I just needed to get

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somewhere to sleep. Yes. Sleep away all these tatters of deeper feelings than I could ever remember having, even for Dan.

I was vaguely aware of the hotel staff helping me out of the cab and something about a message waiting at the front desk. I waved it away and let someone help me up to my room. I barely registered it was Nick, who had somehow managed to get into the cab before leaving the hospital. I didn't want to see anyone from this place or time. This whole trip had been an awful mistake and when I'd had a proper night's rest, I was going to pack up and head back to Ohio. Substitute teaching didn't seem like such a bad gig after all.

The porter helped Nick get me up to my room, which seemed to be on a different floor now. I'm certain Nick didn't think I was still wily enough to slip through the door and lock it behind me, not letting him in but there it was. These drugs were great. Just what I needed to be numb but just aware enough to get away from everyone and everything. I would've snickered if I could.

I stumbled across the huge space. What, they had put me in a suite? Whatever for? I was struggling to get to the bed. All my stuff had been moved, including this huge crate I didn't remember having and my trunk on which I stubbed my toe in the darkness. I made straight for the alcove that held the bed. Luckily, all the windows had double thick drapes that had been pulled shut. Perfect!

I crawled onto the bed and was just about to succumb to blissful oblivion when I heard a racket back in the main room. The bedroom alcove was only semi-private and so I tossed my head to listen but it was too late. Drugs settled it and for the second time in twenty four hours, I let the wonders of modern pharmacology put me under. My heroes had always been chemists.



"I don't care if you think it's a bad idea. We're sticking together. I'm not losing anyone else today."

Morena strode into the room determined. It was one thing to be ignored at the hospital, ignored in the cab, but she would not be denied, treated like she didn't just put her life on the line. Or her blood, rather.

"Oh, there you are."

Sophie was out hard on the bed. Even when Morena went to shake her awake, she just snored. Morena stifled a curse. There had been a look on Sophie's face when she'd first walked in with the detectives. Blank, jealous shock.

She gave Nick a nod and then pointed to the sofa. "You take that one. I'm sure it pulls out."

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“Look, I get it. It looks like Irina and her Grandmother split and you want to keep an eye out. But I want to sleep in my own bed after taking a horrendously long soak in a tub. And clean clothes. And mom’s gyoza.” Morena seemed to be eyeing the furniture and how best to move it. The thought was confirmed when she started pushing at the back of the couch. “Hey, can you just relax for a second?”

In between grunts to move the huge upholstered beast, she spoke, “What would help me to relax is if you help me move this and then check all the doors again.”

“No.”

The simple rejection of her request got her attention and she stood and faced him. Where was the scared kid from just hours ago who looked like he was pissing his pants? Replaced by this guy whose face was split by a smile he tried to contain but ended up looking even goofier trying. She put her hands on her hips, stuck one hip out.

“What?”

Nick gave one incredulously laugh. “Just stop for a second. We just killed the bad guys. Both of them. Without even knowing there were two of them. I’ve never been so terrified in my life and now, man, now, I just wanna get out in the sun, go hug my parents, and eat like it was the end of the world...and we stopped it. We won!”

She shook her mane once.

Nick gestured to her. “And you look like you’re ready for an assault from Resident Evil. That couch would work better as a barricade.”

She tossed her head to look. Hmmm, not a bad idea.

Nick laughed, “I can’t believe you just considered that.” He took a few steps over. “Do you ever dial it down a notch? I mean, you kicked the shit outta a vampire. And we offed her. We survived. We’re alive and practically unscathed. Can’t you just enjoy that for a few?”

But what happens next? What else is out there? What are the ramifications of their actions? They need to report back to Sophie, needed to assess who these people were that helped move Jesper, needed to fortify their position and plan for the next assault.

“Jesus, can’t you just relax for a few measly minutes? You’re getting me all nervy again.”

No, she didn’t know how to do *relaxed*. She didn’t even have a weapon to clean, which often took her mind off things. Her face remained blank. What was left to do?

Nick sighed heavily and took a few more steps over. “Look, I appreciate this.” He meant to gesture to the soldier of badassness that she was but it looked more like a wave. “I mean, you saved my life back

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there. But right now, I don't want to think about anymore death, or vampires, or any of that. I'm fucking ecstatic that I'm alive and I want some unagi. And probably a beer. Maybe a shot."

She just kept staring at him. She had been in this with him but right now, her utmost thought in her mind spilled out of her tongue from a small sense of betrayal.

"You're just young."

He shook his head, his eyes got big for a second, and then he responded, "Wow. Yeah, kick that one out. I'm young alright. Young enough to still want to savor the fact that in the course of twenty four hours I saw my life flash before me AND get to tell the tale. I've got a family to go home and hug. I suggest you go do the same."

When he couldn't think of anything more to say, he waved his hand again and walked toward the door. She spun to watch him go.

"We can't just leave her."

Nick paused with his hand on the doorknob. When he looked back at Morena, he wasn't sure if his fatigued mind that was so high on life at this moment was tricking him into thinking she was talking more about herself than Sophie.

"She's not going anywhere. Doc said she'd be out for hours. Plug in her phone and go home. I'll check in on her later."

When Nick walked out and shut the door firmly, Morena got the sense that he meant much much later. If he came back at all. He had a family to think about. Maybe after seeing what he had to lose, he would decide that a young man didn't need this in his life.

Morena felt very sad by the thought and couldn't grapple with why. She looked back down at the couch she'd been trying to move. Did she really think a fully fledged vamp couldn't just throw this about the room like a LEGO block?

She came around the front of the couch and sat down, feeling very rigid and ill at ease with the angle and depth of the sofa back. She wasn't sure what she should do next but going home seemed irrelevant. There were no hugs to be found there. The only hugs she'd had lately were from the creature in the crate straight in front of her. Jesper. She wondered what he looked like in there but as it was sun up, she wasn't about to open the crate to find out, even in the darkened room.

Even with her long legs, she felt like the couch was going to swallow her up, butt first. So she swung her legs up onto it, twisting and laying back, her head on the armrest. Then, she shifted a pillow under her head instead to be more comfortable.

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What to do now? Well, there were so many questions. So many things to still clean up. But the reality was Morena couldn't leave Sophie to wake up by herself and think poorly of Morena. That look on her face at the hospital when she'd walked in. She knew that look. She'd been staring at it in the mirror for weeks.

But something had changed last night and now that she had the time to think on it, she realized that she wasn't jealous any more. She sincerely doubted that Jesper had been aware of the other threat and yet, she remembered his words. She would never forget them.

Nick. You need to make sure he's safe. Watch over him.

Maybe Jesper had had an inkling that things could go sideways. Sounded like the text message he'd sent on decapitating a vampire was more instructions on the inevitable instead of a back-up plan. He'd sent her, vamped up, to protect Nick. He trusted her that much. It had been a long time since Morena had allowed herself to be close enough to anyone to be trusted like that.

And in hindsight, she'd delivered. The edge of her mouth ticked with the urge to smile. Jesper had trusted her with protecting Nick and she had done just that, even though he hadn't known it would mean facing another vampire. After he had apparently defeated his opponent. But she had managed it anyway. She'd fought the bitch and, with a little help, she'd won.

Now the smile was spreading over her lips. Maybe Nick was on to something about this strange euphoria after a brush with Hell. In the past, when she'd been in combat, or on protection detail, there was always some jackhole superior to report to, and paperwork, God she had hated the paperwork. There was always someone questioning her tactics, her approach, her execution, did she need to spend so many rounds, just how many perps had she engaged with, why had she pursued, why had she not pursued?

What gave her the right to disobey direct orders? So many friggin' questions every time. So she was always too busy to just be grateful, to just thank her preparation, her discipline, her lucky stars even that this was not the last time, not her swan song.

Sure, she'd had some questions to ask and answer at the hospital. But the carefully constructed story around the truth of their injuries was easy and all too plausible. It gave her a moment's pause and froze the smile on her lips. She hated calling in a favor. Favors tended to bite you on the ass when you weren't prepared. She'd been burned by a favor that had been called in and called in badly.

But she realized she hadn't really had to bend things all that much. Sophie was a friend visiting from out of town. While at the hotel, she'd met a guy. He wasn't a good guy. He took her to a party. A bad party. She'd wanted to leave. He wouldn't let her. He made her drink something. Nick, a good guy serving at the bad party, figured out how bad things were and he and a friend tried to get her out of there.

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She really hadn't spun things too falsely and as the detectives had begun to nod their heads affirmatively, she suspected this was a pattern they'd seen. The story had been Nick's idea. She'd have to find out where he'd gotten it from. But from there, the two detectives, one an old friend of her uncle's back in the day, and the other, a guy she'd dated briefly before leaving Seattle to join the diplomatic service, hadn't needed much more evidence or more prodding. They bought in that a bad thing had happened to a good person and they went to do the right thing. They were the good guys trying to do right by a good person.

Sophie was a good person. The way she'd started crying after hugging Nick at the hospital kept replaying in Morena's head. And then there was the look. It was more of a cascade, that look in her eyes when Sophie had seen Morena striding in, not a blemish on her face. At first, there was shock. Nick was standing there just finishing up the ending of the slasher film "Bad Russian BarBQ." Then, as Sophie's eyes moved and took in how Morena moved without a hint of injury, there was the revelation. Her eyes widened. Then they narrowed and she'd looked away.

Morena needed to explain. She felt certain if she did, Sophie would get it. Why it mattered so much, she didn't know.

Shit if she didn't. Even though they'd been in different parts of the city, they had all fought the worst kinds of creatures. They were comrades now, compatriots. That kind of experience forged a bond. Sophie's vampire class, her honesty, and her tutelage had saved Morena's life and allowed Morena to save others. To be the hero again. It had been a long, long time. And maybe this time, she'd truly deserve it. She'd work harder this time, she wouldn't lose focus, and she'd always, always remember who had her back.

She was rubbing her aching leg as she dozed off, the marrow deep in her bone pulsing, working overtime to repair the damage done when she'd kicked the door. That moment when she felt useful, needed, determined, and able, that feeling and the joy of being alive eased her into dreamless sleep.

The Proper Recollection of Tea

He watched with amusement as she gracefully turned the tea pot around with both of her dainty gloved hands, then took it up by the handle now facing her, and began to pour into his empty cup. When he lifted his eyes to her face, her normally smooth brow was furrowed in concentration. It teased the corner of his mouth into a smile. When she was finished pouring and her mind free to move on to other things, he watched an imperious eyebrow shoot up.

"It's not just all the damnable coffee. They don't even sit for high tea here let alone offer it with milk! Barbaric!" The tea pot absorbed her mood when she set it down with a thunk.

The smile fully flourished.

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“Now, now, don’t be fussy,” he told her in a voice that held more admiration than reproach.

Her bottom lip pouted as she then poured the favored white liquid from a cow shaped vessel into her cup, leaving his plain. He wasn’t sure why she still insisted on pouring tea for him when he never drank it but there were manners, he supposed, so ingrained as to be habit. And he liked this habit of theirs although it had changed all of a sudden.

Most times they took tea in a dark corner of the cold and antiquated library. She never mentioned minding although there was an aloofness there that would eventually give rise to the same old discussion. The library itself had brightened several years back, as if someone had just returned to a summer house and was going through the process of uncovering the rooms and airing them out, with the library being the last to tackle.

The way the light in the hallway just beyond the door would grow, sometimes by feet, sometimes by inches, was often a topic of conversation. He could tell that she was nervous after all these years waiting. “What if *she* doesn’t like me?” she’d asked one particularly cold morning when a storm beat against the leaded library windows. “Maybe that’s why *she* never comes in here.” He’d assured her that it would happen and who wouldn’t adore her as he did. She’d worry her bottom lip, like she was doing right now, before changing topic. She’d wondered why it was rainy that day. And cold, so very cold.

But this morning, they had arrived here as if in a dream and it was bright and sunny. And definitely not the library. Their table and chairs sat on a cobbled patio just outside the house, the table an old round mahogany three legged number covered in a bright white lace cloth. The service was white bone china with traditional blue design; the pattern of most particular interest was a fire breathing dragon of Chinese variety. Overall, the entire setting was stylish and economized, food set out but only just enough for one.

Above them, the expanse of an oak’s canopy shielded them from the indeterminate light and nearby a grand horse chestnut tree delicately bloomed in white and pink glory. All along the side of the house, the garden was in bloom and flowers buzzed with insects where the light bathed them. He could even smell the moss in between the cobblestones and the gentle perfume from a lilac bush somewhere.

That all would have been remarkable enough if somehow this little oasis was not situated just a stone’s throw from a large tightly bound wooden crate. The edges of their tea garden reality didn’t reach to the crate; it stood in solemn stark white silence with one notable oddity. It sat under a tree laden with large yellow fruit.

She picked up her saucer and stirred her tea, that eyebrow still perilously arched above her critical eye as she turned her head slightly toward the crate just opposite them.

“I don’t really understand what *she* sees in him.”

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His smile faded. He knew they were bound to get to that but he had been hoping they could enjoy their surroundings a bit more. He was rather enjoying it himself. It had been a very long time indeed. And never in a garden such as this.

“Dear,” he let whatever passed for Vox in this place sweeten his words, “it is for *her* to decide. You know that.”

She set the saucer back down, the china clinking loudly. “Well, I don’t see why *he* gets to rearrange all the furniture.” She then swooped in with steely utensils for a scone with clotted cream, slapping the cream onto her plate. “And what’s *our* lemon tree doing there outside instead of in the greenhouse? Traitorous fruit!”

He leaned forward and covered her hand clutching the knife as she struggled to control the emotions all over her face. It had been a long time that she had been bottled up inside and she, of course, wanted to run about freely across the whole of the estate. But knowing her, she would try running things as soon as any measure of freedom was realized.

That was why he had long ago taken her to the basement, to the darkest corner of that forbidding place and shown her who dwelled there. When she had recovered from the shock and asked him how it had happened, he had had to explain the danger of too many memories kept too close to the surface without rules. It would drive *her* mad.

As was often the case, his tenderness toward her made her more vulnerable and gave rise to glistening eyes. “It’s not fair. I haven’t had any time with *her*. I want to speak with *her*. I have so much to tell *her*.”

He reached into his jacket pocket and retrieved a handkerchief. But as she looked up at him, he moved closer and brushed the tears from her cheek with his thumb, cupping her face. She smiled meekly and covered his hand with her own.

Then he watched her eyes turn calculating and steeled himself against the barbed comment that was to come.

“Dan never got to rearrange the furniture. He never even got into the house.”

He pulled his hand away and sat back with a shake of his head. She was just starting on this topic, if history was to prove. “Darcie...”

She picked up a napkin and dabbed at her eyes. “Dan never even recognized *our* existence. Ridiculous soulless man! To think he’s raising *our* daughter without supervision. Poor child probably doesn’t even know what real tea is!” She snapped the napkin as punctuation.

“Exactly my point, love. *She* is living *her* life. We must let *her* do that. It is *her* lifetime. We must stand at the ready and be prepared when *she* needs us.” The words were direct but necessary. Darcie knew the

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dangers, had seen the results, and completely agreed with the compromise. She just needed reminding from time to time.

"I know my duty. I am prepared." Darcie shot him a steely look. "Do you think I comb through every article *we've* ever read and have written whole books full of hypotheses just to pass the time?" Her face softened in a way he loved to watch. She smiled sheepishly. "Well, I suppose I do. Mostly." The sheep turned to wolf.

"We've found other ways to pass the time here. Can we not enjoy this brilliant day as well as our tea?" he asked fervently. Then, with a bit of a sulk, he added. "I'm beginning to think you grow tired of me, old decrepit thing that I am."

She could arc an eyebrow just as well as he. "I'll not let you derail my thoughts to that particular...bend." Her eyes gainsaid her words.

The growing light hadn't yet reached through the canopy of leaves above them but a few dapples of it fell upon his face, warming his cheek. They exchanged a smile knowing there was no hurry here; other dalliances could wait until after tea. He leaned his head back, hopeful.

"We do enjoy our time together here, don't we?" he asked her.

"Oh yes, Val, I'll never disparage that." She went back to her tea, sipping at it.

Confident in her admission, he pressed on. "Things are in motion. Great change is coming. *She* will need both of us again very soon, I feel. This puzzle he presents will require *our* full facilities."

She stopped mid-sip, pulling the tea cup from her lips. "A puzzle indeed. But first some things need to be set aright."

Val tilted his head at Darcie, wondering what she was on about now with that wicked smart schoolmarm look on her face. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Leave it to you to forget that the foundations of scientific inquiry are based on fact. I'll put it down to your romantic sensibilities." He laughed at that. She set down her tea and began straightening the silverware. He admired how her hands had to absentmindedly fiddle as she worked out a problem.

When she continued, the jilted scientist was back. "In fundamental ways, *she* has constructed *her* own memories despite us. It's easy for you to say to wait patiently when I'm the one who has to dodge *her* constructed simulacra of me floating around the halls like forgetful ghosts, mute about the truth of things. You don't even appear to *her* at all here, just a shadow that falls in corners and down hallways that *she* avoids, a page in that book that terrifies *her*. It's all fine for us to try and ignore *her* altogether until I stumble into *her* direct thinking and have to stand by helplessly while you jump into the nearest

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cupboard to avoid being seen. What help can we provide *her* when *she* disremembers so much? No, we must air out these halls before *she* can access the library or all *her* theories will be based on error.”

Jilted was right. But adored as well. Protective to the last. Of him. He sat in awe of it, how this other self could be readying to wage a campaign of clarification on his behalf. He even saw her nostrils flare as she grabbed hold of a knife and struck at the heart of the scone as if to emphasize. It made him worry a little over what she might do, what ripples of recollection might break through to the surface.

“You have forgotten, dearest, she has come to believe you murdered me!” Darcie continued with zeal. “And that cannot stand!”

You are What You Eat

It had happened slowly, over time, over many, many nights. But finally, one night, seasons later, a grizzled black-grey wolf he’d later name Elba, one that had tormented him the most, eaten the most, gorged night after night in his blood, had raised its head over his prone body, pale yellow eyes glowing and had snapped viciously at the others. Not in a fight for food as other nights it had done, but something different.

There was a tussle then with the second most aggressive, a silver and cream coated female he’d later name Vega. Elba stood over his chest and after much growling and snapping of jaws, Elba had stepped away from what was now a corpse. It sat on its haunches and watched the rest of the pack devour the body until they couldn’t eat any more. Each night, they could eat less and less. It was as if their bellies were still full from prior feasts but still they chased him, fought over him. After the frenzy, the other wolves moved away, sated, their stomachs looking lean but feeling so full to bursting. But one wolf, the female, Vega, stayed behind and rolled in the carnage, flopping down and kicking her legs up in the air. She did it over and over again, until the fur over her back glinted dark red. Then she had run off after the others.

Elba panted for a few minutes, watching the earth soak up the rest of the blood. Then he lay down, licking his muzzle and then his foreleg in long, practiced strokes until not a drop of blood still stained his

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black coat. Then the other legs. Afterward, he laid his head down between his forelegs and watched the ground, waiting.

It was just dawn when he saw the miraculous. A beam of light somehow made it through the dark canopy and shone over the sandy ground. Then the ground pushed up softly, quietly, in the form of a man as if he was pushed up through the earth. Elba lifted his head in surprise, ears twitching at this sight. The form remained inert, like a sand statue made by loving, artistic hands, every detailed of the slain man reproduced from the ground, still colored brown and rust in places with dried blood.

Then as the sun finally broke over the horizon, earth turned flesh and with a gasp, the man breathed again. Elba jumped up, whined, paced nervously but watched alertly as the man began to move again, stretching out his limbs. The man turned his head covered now in golden brown hair toward the sound of Elba's discomfort.

Elba froze, his pale yellow, almost white eyes locked with the man's hazel ones. He wanted to leave, to find his pack, but something in this man's gaze calmed him, spoke to him from deep inside.

Then the man spoke.

"Stay."

The spell broken, Elba sprinted away, leaving the man to ponder more about his new acquaintance than about how he came to be in the forest in the first place.

The Animal of War

He was trying to wake but his head kept smacking against rose marbled stone and the intensity of his earlier emotions of fear, panic, loathing, and triumph shocked the present from his mind with each blow, leaving a void of clarity. In the absence, the past reared up and caught him in its fiery claws. It was the truth unseen, hidden underneath everything he'd known, everything he'd built on top of the ruins when his sparkling kingdom had crumbled. She'd been gnawing at the rebuilt parts and now she demanded full awareness. Just an inkling of affection for her and the briefest touch of the book holding the pages where he had bared his soul were forcing him to remember. Recollection all the way back to places she couldn't recall as of yet and he had fought so hard to forget. Back to the origin of their story and the beginning of his ruin.

Back to the forest where he was still wandering but this time not so alone. Two wolves trotted along his left side, one on his right, all converted to his cause. And this time, they were the hunters not the hunted. The old pack that had harried him for weeks had lost three of their own, two of which were the strongest, best hunters. They no longer craved his flesh; they protected it. Somewhere in it all, in their heightened senses, their increased endurance, their rapid healing, they had made a bargain with him, one forged in flesh and blood.

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And that had turned the odds. He'd wounded the wolves so many times fighting them off that when he'd noticed how quickly some of them healed, he had learned a new sense of dread. But instead of pushing their favor, it had seemed to make them more docile, inquisitive, almost ponderous. Who was this man whose flesh they feasted on nightly who grew back each day? As he had gained aggression and will, they reevaluated their prey. And for the two most ardent in his pursuit and consumption, the switch came easily. Almost with a mighty yawn, one by one, they had sought him out, followed him, allowed him to pet them, and then finally offered their furry backs to keep him warm at night.

When the pack would again take up pursuit, they would swing their fierce jaws at their old family, and snap and claw. *Stay away*, they warned. Elba had been the first, a bigger male who was littermate brother to the Alpha male. Then Vega, second only to her Alpha sister, followed. It was Volta who had a slightly different turning. He'd been injured protecting the Alpha female from a vicious counterassault by Vega. She'd latched her jaws deep into the fur about his neck and tore.

As much as Elba and Vega had fought off the pack, the man had still suffered critical wounds; a gash in his thigh, punctures to his throat. Volta's scream had been enough to convince the others that Vega and Elba were deadly serious in their new alliance and the pack had left the youngster behind to limp and pant and whimper to a protracted end.

But the man took pity, knowing that this young wolf had never led anything at all, had only sought to protect his Alpha so he weakly picked him up and carried him to a peaceful place under an old tree, alongside a brook. With Volta in his lap, he stroked the wolf fondly, such suffering causing his eyes to tear. He knew by now that his pain would flow through him and in the morning, he would be whole again but this poor wolf would pant and then gasp and then shudder to an untimely end with no such promise.

He leaned his head down over the wolf's muzzle and murmured penitent words to which Volta, with what strength he had left, raised his head and licked the man's streaming face as if offering absolution. Elba and Vega even sensed the pathos as they snuggled on either side of the man and licked Volta's fur clean. The more the man cried out for the life lost, the endless suffering, the sheer emptiness of meaning and purpose, the more Volta licked his face until they both bled out and their bodies stilled together against the ground.

In the morning, a heavy panting sound awoke the man. As he stirred, tongues lapped at his face until he rose up, his arms trying to guard against the canine bath. As he opened his eyes, he saw the younger wolf Volta, his ruddy-grey coat gleaming, laying just beside him. Elba and Vega then left him as they often did in the morning to go hunting or patrol but every morning since, Volta had stayed close by his side, having made his new pact with this man.

The wolf pack had followed him for miles, for what seemed like seasons, far away from where he had first encountered them in the snow, deep in the primeval forest of fir and oak. After the change in

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allegiance, the main pack, now down to seven, left him and his three wolves alone, understanding that the numbers had evened up and any damage done would be summarily repaired on only one side of the battle.

The man suspected the wolves were not far, a sense confirmed at night when Elba and Vega called to their brothers and sisters in the wild and he'd hear the calls back. He even believed that their morning jaunts were to join with the old pack to hunt and provide but always they returned and were never gone long. He felt relieved that they had all found some sort of peaceful coexistence in the wilds after so many, many tormented nights.

The détente enabled him time to reflect on the scrawny nature of his being. He hadn't eaten well for seasons, it seemed but the wolves were good about that. They led him to the bounty of their hunts which he only mildly appreciated. He found all the blood mildly revolting after all the pain and torture he'd endured. Sensing it, the wolves followed their noses and led him to where the fare would be more palatable to him.

At his first bites of human food attained out of a rucksack stolen from some unfortunate soul, he retched up what he'd tried and the wolves, misinterpreting his actions, thought him all the better for sharing. They didn't particular favor the crusty bread or the jerky, but the fruit or cheeses were quite a nice change. He himself continued to try, keeping some down after awhile, finding the bread helped a lot. Somehow he knew he'd need to get his body to learn to tolerate such sustenance, not just what they could hunt or he could forage. This led them closer to other humans and the wolves watched and wondered why their human seemed more wary of his own kind than they did. Perhaps it was the question of the why that he searched for, why he wandered.

As foraging, hunting, and stealing eased the burden of eating and the man grew strong again, his thin but capable frame well-fed and well-exercised as he sparred with his companions, the man's thoughts finally turned to the answers for his very being. And so he walked and found what else was rotten in these forests.

The wolves followed him as he wandered to the edge of towns where torches and arrows guarded the night. He seemed to know where to go, back along the banks of a river that followed the base of the mountains. He retraced steps that he'd taken many moons ago, searching for familiarity, searching for memories and ultimately the answers to his unmaking. Somewhere, he had been a part of this civilized world and he wanted to remember where. But the journey became more perilous as the forests and hills filled with another kind of violence.

Men had come into the forest, men with weapons and horses, guarding caravans of destruction and war. Normally, he stayed hidden from the sounds of people, made uneasy by the words they made. But he also felt drawn, mostly to their songs and chants, specifically of those covered in simple brown robes.

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Those places gave him peace and he would sometimes sit just within earshot and listen to their male voices on the wind, especially right at sundown.

As he traveled, he would often follow a lone friar or monk making their way with their humble donkey to some simple place, their talisman, a wooden cross, a sign of goodness and piety. But as the forest filled with more men carrying swords and spears, the simple robed folk seemed less and less. It didn't take long for him to see that talisman borne by men with swords, men who argued from up on horseback with wane men and women with little to give, stealing all their cattle, forcing the males from boy to graybeard to leave their villages, to take up arms, and then began poisoning the waters, burning down homes, farms, scorching the earth, forcing the simple folk to flee the destruction.

It made him angry. He knew what it was like to be powerless, to have your will stripped away, to have everything you were laid bare and defenseless. He couldn't fathom what faith would allow such reckless treatment of home, hearth, and land. But even his anger didn't lead him to action. He had his wolves to think about, to keep safe. He'd surreptitiously leave food for some of the survivors or steal a waterskin from a soldier's horse and secure it to a lowly donkey, some poor wretch's only property left.

It didn't settle the growing unease. His wolves seemed happy enough; there were plenty of fresh corpses about to make need for their hunting skills rare. But none of the devastation he saw urged him out of the complacency of the shadows. And the invaders that came were just more of the same. He couldn't tell what was worse, the lengths the armies would go to capture a foreign land or the breadth of devastation wrought in their efforts to spoil it if it couldn't be captured.

As the unrest in the valley with a strategic town grew unbearable, he and his wolves retreated further up into the mountains, to a place he'd been before, where the sounds of pious men scratching against thin paper filled the days and voices raised to heaven ended each night. It was a most tranquil of places, even though the site had been razed and rebuilt many times during conflicts. There were efforts underway to create a new place of worship, a larger place than the small space just beside a tower that had stood watch over the domed mountain and provide comfort to the souls who came.

But even this place was threatened, a place that humble folk only sought to strengthen as a symbol of their faith, random bandits smelling food and finding simple folk, stole and terrorized. And he could no longer let that pass.

One night after the band had grabbed their fill and headed back down the mountain, he pursued, anger shaking every fiber of his being. And where he went, his wolves followed. The sounds of struggle, gnashing of teeth, yips and growls of the hunt, the shouts and then screams that followed, and finally in the end, a lone just barely human howl of rage released caused the monks to huddle together and mumble their praise to their god that they had somehow served Him well and might continue to do so.

But in the morning, through the veil of low clouds, the monks found most of what had been stolen the night before, the tools, the few scrolls that had been left out, the few ornate objects, and even the food,

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left mostly untouched, minus a few choice morsels. And all around the moist ground, fresh tracks from the pack, paw prints over those of boots. The local people revered the wolves, although their holy book often spoke against the creatures, but here, the monks and the folks they served saw them in a different light.

When the winds swung providence in either direction, nights with bitter cold and no shelter to be found below the mountain or days of plenty where the smell of fresh bread and roasted meat drew the curious or the cunningly opportunistic, those were the times when the monks and townsfolk would hear the howls of the wolves and they would sometimes be surprised by a new horse, saddlebags full of coin, or rich objects from some ransacked home far away. The people spread the word that this place was sacred and safe to the penitent, under the protection of the wolves. The stories grew but with the tumult in the region, it didn't stem the flow of unsavory bands of every order, trying to take what was not theirs in order to fight some perceived grander fight to protect a way of life.

And while it tipped the scales into the favor of the poor, the undesirable, the humble, the bands that came through the pass, moving from one battle to the next, fueled their enterprises by stealing from those they claimed to rule, not of the villages they stole from but claiming it on behalf of this god or that in a seemingly endless supply of horror. And the rage heard on the wind grew ever more bitter for it.

That's when I, Marcus Tertius Regulus, known after an age simply as Imperius, decided my days of quiet piety and dedication to silence and works seeking absolution for my past sins had come to an end. Here was a pain I knew how to sooth and if I'd had any doubt of the role I had to play in this creature's life, the sign I had sought opened before me like a break in the morning fog in which I first spotted him.

He looked like nothing that could be saved, wild, worry upon his dirty brow, he wore nothing, carried nothing, but stood there staring as my fellow monks gathered what had been left for us after a troubling night of screams. We would pray for their souls but knew that God worked in mysterious ways. As the others turned and hurried inside, the morning chill companion to the underlying fear of this wild pack that provided our protection, I held back, smelling him in all his mystery and ancient blood older than even mine.

I was used to the older bloodlines, having served one for so many years after my purported death in Rome. My master had loved the sea and had needed me to travel with him, to keep him safe as his power waned into the day. He had been one of the oldest ever known, keeper of a bloodline that I had dated back into beginning of recorded time. With that blood flowed power that boiled to conquer, to claim, and to protect its own. And he had shared some of that power with me through the years, taking me down the dark path of damnation which kept me forever seeking salvation but never able to attain it.

I knew the special scent of immortality and this man, this creature who stood impervious to the elements and immutable to the ways of the world, reeked of old blood. Somewhere in his veins flowed

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some of the same power that flowed in me and that reawakened my troth. But something else bubbled and boiled above the surface of my master's old bloodline, something even older and glimmering. An aura was about him that no stain of retribution and vehemence could tarnish. He had my old master's rage but some other benefactor's gifts.

As his golden eyes met mine in a split second of human recognition, I turned my head slowly away, as one might a dog one wishes to greet. One does not stare into the eye of the newly met; one must let the frightened thing, with all its hopes and fears come to you.

I limped along back into the small shack I kept with the others next to the still forming new church, a smile crawling over me. Sometimes all it took was patience. And the right offering.

What You Can Buy for a Penny

At half past ten, Nick gave up on the idea of sleeping in his comfortable bed in his parents' house as reward for a night full of mare. He kept flipping over onto his side and scribbling notes on what needed to be done to fix the office up. As he'd left Bellevue, he'd seen the police cording off the construction site next to the Hyatt. Something about some pretty extensive vandalism, bordering on criminal.

The only thing criminal was the fact that he couldn't sleep for all the notes rolling around in his head. Sidekicks apparently don't get to rest easy; always more kicking to do. He let out a mighty groan and got up out of bed, bracing his elbows on his knees, head in his hands. He didn't need to count the twelve pages of notes he'd taken, the last of which read: "Find fire department rated architect to construct fireproof room."

Sophie couldn't expect all her clients to be as well behaved as Jesper, who no one was really saying what had happened to. He was in that wooden crate, probably in some gargoyle form like Lucy had been. As grotesque a form as it might be, Jesper had saved Sophie's life and that made him good peeps in Nick's book. It touched a nerve, the way he'd come to her aid, and while Nick was grateful his new boss with her substantial payroll wasn't out of commission, it gave Nick a pang.

He grabbed his notebook off the nightstand and wrote: *Flowers for Morena*. Then he promptly scribbled it out. What do you get for the perfect woman who dispatched a vampire with you? Flowers seemed trite or presumptuous. And either way, he'd either offend her by treating her like a girl or pick the wrong ones.

Flowers were a trap, anyways. It was never about the thought. It was always execution and Nick already knew his execution stunk. He was barely able to control his staring around her, he had not a single action star move in his whole body, his only redeeming qualities were his ability to duck on cue and to read and retain ancient books full of crazy. While Morena's martial expertise didn't exactly emasculate him, it did put him in a rough spot of how to get her attention in a good way. Food wasn't something

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that she took much notice of, his bike, well amateur hour there. Clothes weren't a strong motivator for her either judging by her own attire. The only thing he seemed to do to make her smile was crack jokes and make self-effacing statements.

He sighed. Girls always *liked* the guy that made them laugh but they never wanted to *be with* that guy. But there was no way he was going to ever be able to do more of that Frog Brothers, Death Dealer crap they'd done last night. Not without fainting halfway through.

No, the best he could hope for was the sidekick, but not Robin or Shadowcat or even Rick Jones. He didn't have the nerves for that. But he could make vichyssoise. Red and green was not his style but tails and a perfectly cooked beef wellington? He could aspire to that.

Look out, vampires, Sophie just got her Pennyworth.

Now, if he wasn't going to sleep all day, he might as well go see a man in a fatigues jacket about a fireproof room.



Somewhere along the line although he couldn't place it, Nick remembered mention of some comic book store in connection with Lucy. And that henchman of hers would likely be a daytime guardian of hers, wouldn't he?

Nick made Fremont by noon and had to knock on the door for ten minutes before he heard bolts snap, chains crackle, and a final latch pop and the corrugated metal door swing open revealing the disheveled mastermind of their deliverance blinking bloodshot eyes up at him.

Nick's smile withered under an acid glare.

"Whaddaya want? We're closed."

Nick realized that he must've woken the poor guy up but still, he didn't expect to be completely unrecognized. "Hi, I...well...I've been thinking of some mods...and after this morning...I thought maybe..."

The guy widened his stance. "Oh, right. This morning. Yeah that was, like..." he rubbed his eyes before crossing his arms, "Six hours ago. Not like anyone would want to reward himself with sleep after that perfectly executed campaign."

"Yeah I suppose not."

Nick got the glare loud and clear.

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“Look, kid, I’m sure you went home and cried on your huge pillow and then couldn’t sleep because you were too scared but trust me, it’s better to start with sleep in the daytime for this to pass over. My advice? A couple of shots of Nyquil and some chamomile tea and you’ll be in lala land.” The guy yawned and then began shutting the door, “Geez, civilians.”

Nick grabbed the edge and cut his hand. “Ouch! Just gimme a chance. I have a whole list. I want to be better prepared next time.”

That perked the guy up. “Next time? What makes you think there’ll be a next time?”

Nick had to stop and think. Because the book had a ton of other entries? But he wasn’t about to tell this guy about Sophie’s journal. So he settled for: “Things always come in three’s, right?”

The guy raised an eyebrow. “You already had three vampires last night.”

“Not three *bad* vampires.”

The guy took in a deep, thoughtful breath before exhaling it out of his mouth hard. “Alright. I suppose I could take a look at this list of yours. If you’re so intent on sticking your nose in it.”

“Great,” Nick said, and made a step forward only to meet the guy’s hand flat on his chest holding him back.

“Not so fast. Give me the list. I don’t have time for garlic necklaces or Super soakers filled with Holy Water.”

Nick handed his twelve page vampire preparedness manifesto over and watched the guy purse his lips, nod, and then laugh in something more of a cackle. He was even more stunned when Ritterreiter stretched out his hand and shook his, “Come on in. You can call me Greg. And this list is wicked.”

The Burnishing of a Heart

As my mind floated lazily up to the surface from my free dive into the depths of medically induced unconsciousness, there were creatures in the form of memories awaiting me, caught in glimpses like wisps of color in the filtered blue. Jellyfish or manta ray, puffer fish or electric eel, the nature of these creatures of reminiscing I wasn’t to know until much later.

But memories, like the things they are about, can be taken in various lights and with emotions held at bay by the pharmacological gods, can be witnessed like a short film festival in which the starring actress only reminded me a little of myself. So safe in the womb of numbness, I recalled lives not yet grasped in consciousness, threads of karma unraveling into single strands of truth.

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There was a girl, her short curly red hair stuffed into a boy's cap, staring in awe at the shelves of books and stands of manuscripts in a small scriptorium. Her puffy cheeks were red from exertion; she had run all the way up the hill to the church as her father bade her. There had been bad men in the forest and her father had worried and sent her ahead on his horse.

When the ruckus had started, the monks had run out of the church and the side building and she had slid off the horse's back, sprinting into the closest door, not knowing the bad men would soon follow her. She heard the boots scrap across the porch, snapping her out of her awed state.

She looked helplessly about the room, frozen and frightened, knowing that the room was too small in which to hide. After so many years of travel to dubious locations such as this, she had become an expert at being unseen. But her love and wonder at the trove had left her flat-footed. She turned toward the door as it creaked open and before the full form of her pursuer was revealed, there was a whoosh of light and she was suddenly up in the rafters, arms carefully about her and holding her, one hand over her mouth. After a few breaths in which she didn't struggle, barely breathed, the hand over her mouth eased and she could turn her head.

The face she stared into was lit by lamp glow and was the most wondrous she'd ever seen. He raised a single finger to quiet her and then stared intently down into the room as more bad men entered, his eyes near to glowing in amber.

And as the men ransacked the room, grabbing random books and stuffing them into knapsacks, kicking over the tables and benches, the precious inks and paint spreading across the floor, she felt no fear with this man or of this man. He simply waited for them to be gone but with a rumbling quiet. It was as if she knew his mind for if he hadn't been there, she too would've been angry and attacked them, kicked at their shins, berated them in as many languages as she knew for their wanton destruction.

But they found what they were looking for: the gold leaf used on the most precious of manuscripts, the illumination. That and destruction of some of the precious books seemed to be their aim as they cheered in a reckless way and stomped out of the room, crashing the door closed behind them.

The girl watched the man's eyes drop from the door and stare into space, as if coming to some decision or capturing his will. But when he turned his head to her, he smiled pleasantly and pointed down. She nodded dumbly and in another whoosh that she couldn't explain, she was back with her feet on the floor, standing amongst the ruin of the vellum, ink, and red. In any other place or time, she would've felt this sacrilege like a stab to her heart, her father's passion and learning had become her faith.

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But she was caught staring at the striking man, in his simple monk robe that looked sizes too big and hastily donned. His hair was wild and unkempt but shining bronze. He didn't seem to notice the room much but looked as if through the door, his head tilted slightly as if listening. She didn't need him to shush her again, her breath had been stolen. In the aura of the lamp glow, his rumpled robe cast a shadow upon the wall that made him look like one of the winged ones.

Her eyes darted from the shadow to him, convinced he was giving himself away to her. She had read all about the djinn from her father's people and the angels from the local ones and either way, his rescue of her spoke of the divine.

In the quiet of her breathtaking epiphany, he slowly turned to look at her. His face screwed up a moment as he considered her, then bungled over a few words in Latin as if words fell uncommonly strange from his lips.

"Boni Pueri."

The door then burst open and her father rushed in along with an old, bearded monk with a cane. How her father, who swept her up in his arms, had completely missed the man who'd just been standing there was a mystery and when her father asked how she'd escaped, she pointed to empty space where the man had been.

Only to see him standing up against the wall, now indistinguishable from his shadow. Her father's eyes darted around the space, looking everywhere and yet still not seeing the man against the wall who smiled at her again, slowly lifting his finger to his lips. She lowered her arm and hugged her father about the neck, proclaiming she'd hid behind the shelves.

Her father praised Allah as she did too, with a little prayer to Yahweh thrown in for good measure. When her gaze looked up at the elderly monk, he seemed to be staring behind her, right at the space where her very own savior had stood. She gasped, ready to explain but when she looked, the man was gone, just wafts of smoke taking up the space but the memory forever burned in her mind.

The damage done to the monastery in total was isolated to the scriptorium and when her father's fear for the daughter he hid in plain sight as a boy had passed, he mourned the very manuscripts he'd come to examine. Even if his patron, the Duke of Durazzo, had not settled a great sum of money upon him to travel afar for the potential of uncovering great works of astronomy and philosophy, he would've felt robbed of such fine works.

That night, the other monks kept their dubious distance from the newcomers as if harbingers of doom and it was much later when the last prayers had been said and a stillness of anticipation settled like darkness over the monastery, the old bearded monk, the rubricator, the one called Imperius, settled her father down with an ale of the monk's own brew in the ruins of the scriptorium.

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"So much destruction, so much knowledge lost," her father despaired, ignoring the cup beside him. "And yet your monks seem so calm, as if this is a passing storm."

"My friend, it is God's will that we be tested." Imperius folded his hands in his lap, easing back in his chair. He recognized the father's words were not just limited to this most recent episode.

"Is there no rest for the wicked, no peace even high in the forest?" Imperius remained silent, letting her father settle into troubled thoughts before admitting the turn of his concern. "We were to go back to Sofia and as far as Bucharest before returning home."

"Your daughter will be safe here if you remain until day after next."

Her father blanched at the monk. "Daughter?"

Imperius fought the tug of a chuckle but knew in the face of this father's despair over what was now deemed a horrible decision it would not be taken well. Instead he rubbed the grizzled beard over his chin to cover the smile. "Perhaps the other monks have been long divorced from the real world not to recognize, but it will soon become impossible to hide her in boy's clothes. She will be quite a beauty."

Her father glanced over to the pallet on the floor where she lay on her stomach, arms crossed under her head, by all appearances sleeping and to all thoughts to the contrary, much more able to translate the Greek they used for their discourse than even her father knew. She kept her eyes shut as her father sighed.

"I thought to teach her to use her mind, her intellect to survive. To be a master of languages and customs like myself. But her mother was a Circassian...I fear I will have to strike a terrible bargain someday to keep her safe."

Imperius understood well and hoped the girl would heed the words she overheard. There would not always be a golden demigod to save her. He listened to the wind in the woods. There would be no blood tonight, no terror in the forest whose sounds would echo up to the monastery.

"No bargain is needed this night," Imperius spoke, standing. He took up the cup left untouched by this scholastic pilgrim and drank some of it down. "This place was just a copy room; we've learned to store all our valuable work in a safe place nearby. Tomorrow I will show you and the following day, one of our...ur...order will travel with myself to escort you to Sofia where I'll take you to the library there."

Her eyes flew open and she saw her father's stunned face staring up at the monk. "These were...copies?"

"Yes, Idris, there are many secrets in this place." Imperius threw his eyes to the girl faking sleep on the floor. "Some more wondrous than manuscripts."

Heart beating in her chest, she hoped fervently that she would see the golden monk again and proceeded to succumb to the fatigue of a full day's travel and horrible consequence of the day, not even noticing the shadow of wings the firelight cast above her.

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"You'll not pursue them tonight."

It was a command, not a request. One he found odd coming from the monk. Still, he felt the weight of it even though it made little difference to him. He scratched the gray-brown wolf under his chin and watched the fire dying.

"The sounds in the forest would be too much, I think, for our gentile visitors," Imperius continued, throwing a short log onto the fire and taking a long draught from the cup he'd once offered the pilgrim.

His brows drew together. The boy. Maybe it had been a mistake to reveal himself to the lad but he couldn't let the intruders take a victim. He'd already felt pained that the scriptorium had been desecrated, even if it wasn't the valuable work. He'd wandered far afield with his wolves, appeasement that seemed to bring with it a price.

The boy had unsettled him and in truth, he had already planned to wait a day and then seek out the defilers to take his revenge. Such an innocent face looking up at him as if he were something...he couldn't place the thought.

"What is it, my son?"

He struggled with his words and when he was troubled, as much as it eased him to find the right words, his vocabulary was still limited and the effort to bring his thoughts to sound, an honorable fight against his mouth's own strangeness.

"The good boy sleeps?"

"The good boy?" Imperius didn't stop the smile filling his face. Well, apparently, his nature boy had been fooled as well as all the other monks. "Yes, dreams laden in gold, surely." His reply went without understanding or reply. "Thank you for seeing the youth spared."

This caused him to turn his head, trying to understand the look of expectation on the monk's face. When no words further passed between them, he returned his eyes to the fire, not seeing anything but light green eyes wide and awed staring up at him, painting him as something he was not.

Between a Rock and a Softer Place...and Another Rock

My mouth felt like the remnants of a dog toy, soggy and shredded. As I regained awareness, the banality was stunning against the memory of gilding from my dreams. I realized I clutched my left hand into a tight fist and drool wet my pillow. I groaned and a shape moved above me, dark hair framing its head.

"Hey, look who finally decided to rejoin the living."

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Lifting my head, I tried to wet my lips and found them puffy and foreign. The shape moved to press something cool against my mouth and I managed to drink a little water.

"Not too much," the voice warned.

The glass was removed and I tilted my shoulder back to look up more fully. Blinking and wetting my lips, I was contemplating my surroundings when all at once, everything, and I do mean *everything*, in my body came into full awareness with blunt, inescapable pain.

"Shit!" was the first articulate thing I managed to say after a few moments groaning.

Morena sat on the edge of the bed. "Yeah, I imagine it hurts like a mo-fo. Doc said I should have a conversation with you first before I give you your meds."

I lay flat back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. "Was there a particular topic of conversation or would swearing do?"

I could see her shrug but didn't really care as memory fled back. I fought not to bolt upright as I was certain it would either kill me or knock me unconscious. Instead, I took in a deep, shaky breath and tried to ready myself with the question first and foremost in my mind.

Morena was doing her part in the conversation. "Nick went home hours ago. Kid needed a break. He handled himself well but I think it's gonna hit him hard and he needs to be near his family then. That Ritterreiter sure can clean a scene. Never seen a more thorough clean up job, at least not outside government work."

I tossed her a look and she stopped talking, her mouth hanging open.

"Oh, shit, look, Sophie, it's not what you think."

I didn't even try to bluster through some falsehood that I didn't care. I did. I was furious, in fact.

"You have no idea what you've risked in taking blood." My voice was too high, too thin, too entirely transparent, spoken in too many gasps around the pain. The very fact I couldn't name the source of said blood all too telling.

She straightened her spine. "Actually, you couldn't be more wrong. It was an accident and it happened to save both my life and Nick's and two other innocent bystanders. Beyond the fact that I would've been left anemic if I hadn't accidentally bitten his shoulder because it fucking hurt so much, I know he had no idea there was another threat, otherwise he wouldn't have drained me."

"What the...what?"

She sighed. "This wasn't how I wanted to tell you. But I guess the how is less important than the why."

She seemed so serious, more than her normal self. But that was all that the gripping pain would allow to seep through. What little intellect I had realized any explanation presently given would be obscured by my own dark emotions: pain and powerlessness. So I opened my left hand and held it out to her palm up. When she raised a brow in question, I simply said, "Pill first, explanation second."

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The one pill was really three (I waved the Xanax away, not really remembering what had occurred to lead the doctors to prescribe that) and after a few more sips of water through teeth I could barely unclench, I was sweaty and exhausted. Morena let me lie back and close my eyes for a few moments while I waited for numbness to settle over me.



"Where the Hell am I?"

I hadn't realized I'd fallen back to sleep but I felt like I was running through the same gambit: Where was I? Why did I hurt? What time was it? Who the Hell was this Latina chick approaching me?

"Any better?" Morena asked.

"Yes, instead of shattering pain, it's only thundering."

She stood there, uneasy. But the drugs did their work; I hurt but found my empathy was intact and when I thought back to earlier, only patches of her words remained: accident, hurt, another threat, innocent bystanders. Some of the conversation from the hospital also joined in. Yes, the revenant.

"Seems like this might take a little while to tell. Want to sit down?" I offered.

She sat down gingerly, as if not trying to rock the bed too much. She rubbed at her thigh absentmindedly. She stopped when she saw I noticed.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"About midnight."

I nodded.

"So," she spoke.

"So...you said it was an accident."

That seemed to put her at ease. What she told me felt practiced but truthful. It was her idea, giving him blood. He had warned her it would be to power him up, help him fight the bad vampire, and she had asked him to not use his abilities to mask how it really felt. So it hurt her but she felt it had been worth it in the end.

"I hope you mean that," I said softly.

"It saved you, didn't it?"

I took a breath. A few weeks ago, she was his girlfriend and she had warned me to stay away from him, that she had been wrong to contact me. Now she had given him blood so he would be strong enough to save me.

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"I want to warn you, wish you'd known there was another way, but it would cheapen what you did. All I can say to you is thank you."

She shrugged, seemingly more uncomfortable with my acceptance than my anger.

"And thank you for saving Nick."

Her face perked up for a moment. And then the smile cracked her sullen face. "Jesper asked me to. I would've either way. That kid's something else." There was a bit of color in her cheeks I couldn't discern which male was the cause.

Hmm.

As if we recognized the subject had been broached, the 3000 pound crate in the room finally acknowledged, Morena and I both looked back to where the crate sat safe against the far wall. While she began to rub her leg again, my face flushed at the disjointed memories and bits of stories knitting together.

"Fool!" was my prevailing thought about that vampire currently frozen in rigor dormitis. Because only a fool would rush into a situation knowing he was so unmatched, put other innocents at risk by taking their blood for some sense of chivalry that showed utter and complete lack of faith in my abilities without consulting me first.

"Fool!" I said out loud.

Morena snapped around. "What?"

"He must've been out of his mind to have no better plan than to blood dope up and take on a deranged Carpathian vampire in a straight up fight."

My cheeks were burning, I felt such anger. I was alone in this quest of mine; I didn't want casualties on my conscience, let alone those pretending to be knights in shining armor. That never ends well. I know deep down how that doesn't end well. Nick needed a protector; I didn't. My fate, whatever it was, was mine and mine alone and my faith along with my memories showed me that this life was one of many I had had. Nothing had shown me how to escape that cycle.

Morena was staring at me startled, not sure what to say.

"Untrusting, unbelieving, ignorant moron!"

Morena stood and grabbed my arm, simultaneously causing me to wince and releasing her grip. "Look, I'm not sure what just set you off, but you should probably calm down. Maybe you need that other pill, for now. I'm sure when given some time, you'll feel a little differently about...last night."

I threw a glare up at her. "And how can you condone it? He was your best ally to fight off the revenant and he was hell-bent on a suicide mission. In fact, if it wasn't for your foresight of leaving me the Kukri, we both would've been dead. And not dead as in undead, dead as in eviscerated, decapitated, discombobulated dead."

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She let out a breath. A gasp, really. I hadn't told her, or anyone yet, what actually had taken place in the hotel room or at the construction site. And it was clear, she thought it had been pretty simple, really. He'd had the strength, he'd fought the bad guy, defeated him, everything was fine.

I crumpled my hands into fists and shoved them into my eyes, trying to fight the wave of overwhelming anger and panic that was flaring up pain all through my body. No, this was not what my life or my memories were for. Pain and violence and death, dragging them around with me as if my beliefs meant nothing. I was supposed to be helping vampires, not pitting them against each other. The images were flashing through my head, the horror of impaled flesh, skin rubbed raw by cabling, and the sound of his shoulder popping and tearing.

"It's...not...supposed to be...this way!"

Morena sank back onto the bed as my growls turned to tears, my breath heaving. I couldn't get the gore out of my head, it kept replaying, the wave of it that had flooded my consciousness as I was succumbing to Skovasja's wine rushing over me again, this time with no figment from my past to control it. And the screams...his voice in pain shouting...

Who, me? Naw, just a scratch or two.

And suddenly, it was ebbing away. I could breathe past the tightness in my chest just a little so I focused on that sound, that voice.

See? Already on the mend.

For a few seconds, there was a chin, stubbled with red gold whiskers covering it, just below lips formed in a smile...

"Sophie, you alright?"

I blinked the smile away from my vision and looked up at Morena. She leaned forward, showed more patience than I'd ever seen from her. Patience and something else.

"You kinda lost it there for a moment."

My gaze moved past her to the crate. I felt my heart thud heavily. It was after sunset.

She followed my gaze again.

"Uh, yeah, was gonna ask you...shouldn't he be up by now?"

I listened for it but the little hitch in her voice when she spoke of him was nearly gone, as if things between them had been resolved. For the closer, I was sure. They'd shared blood; what else could it mean? It was time to lock down these feelings, all of them, again. The rage, the fear, the desperate loneliness, the sense of iniquity, punishment for sins committed long ago for loving too much, for attempting to take too much joy from the world. Time to put all that selfishness away in the face of something I could hide behind: facts.

"Vampires sometimes use extended periods of rigor dormitus to repair damage, to let their cells recuperate. As it is, I don't know...well enough to know habits, waking schedules..."

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Somewhere down in the depths of the shuttered home where I had hidden what was left of my heart, the heart that had been made to endure the worst possible decision, to abandon her daughter, but had hoped to rise up again like the phoenix of old, there was a woman shaking her head at me, her gloved hands holding a small object.

She held it up for me to see, a token of some sort, it barely filled her palm. It was an oil painting, a miniature on ivory, surrounded by black pearls, on a golden chain but the details escaped me. As I focused in, I saw the dainty wrist above her hand bore a scar completely across it, too straight to be a natural occurrence. My eyes traveled up her forearm where there was another straight scar which ran up under her sleeve. It held my notice but her other hand slapped against the top of her palm, impatient with me. The vision of the miniature filled my mind and became distinct; I saw an eye, one I knew I should recognize, an inky eyebrow arced up above it, the iris a blue deep as the ocean.

I gasped, apparently in mid-sentence, repeating some mundane passage from my definitive theory on rigor dormitus.

"What is it?" Morena asked, startled. "What's wrong?"

I met her gaze which brought me back to the present, dread over the miniature forgotten, replaced by necessity. She was afraid, therefore I couldn't be. She needed me to be strong and my mind needed me to be vigilant.

"Nothing. I'm alright. Better than he'll be when he finally wakes up. If you won't be upset for the danger he put you in, than I will. Picking a fight with a Carpathian is one thing. Draining your confidant to temporarily give you strength for a fool's errand is another. That's no way to treat your friends. And considering he just fired me, I have plenty of words to say on the subject to Mr. Jesper, Vampire, when he awakens."

Favors in Fur

As the Lufthansa flight from Munich made its descent into LAX, the passenger in 41A pulled his scarf down from over his nose and was thankful the moon was only in first quarter. The smell from the dinner cart had set his innards quivering and it was only through sheer force of will and a rather tight weave of fabric that he hadn't bolted from his seat.

His second flight on an airplane followed his first one this morning when he'd booked a last minute flight from Sofia, Bulgaria to Los Angeles, following a rumor. It couldn't be true. He hoped to Hell it wasn't true. He straightened in his immovable seat, the worst on the plane, the ticket agent told him. He barely noticed, pulling the newspaper out of his jacket pocket. It was rumpled and turned to a back page of the Entertainment section. Amongst the theories of why a certain sitcom starlet hadn't been seen for weeks, believed to be hidden away in rehab, or some cosmetic procedure, or eloped to Mexico with her producer boyfriend was a picture of the starlet's home, accosted by the paparazzi and the police who had been called in due to a scuffle.

While the photog who'd snapped the shot probably never intended it, the camera found her walking along the wrought iron fence line bordering the house, the collar of her short mink coat pulled up

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around her face, hiding most every significant detail that would call her out. She was just another leggy blonde in sky high heels in LA, albeit with a horrible sense of fashion in the middle of summer. The lack of bling on her fingers as she clenched the collar around her face, trying to blend as an innocent bystander, only made the tattoo above her ring finger that more prominent against the white fur.

From the distance the shot was taken, it almost looked like a smudge on the lens from the print but he knew it. Knew it as well as the one on his own hand, hiding under his fingerless mitten. A tree, an oak to be exact, branches and roots forming a circle. His had the leaves intact, still in full green and rippling in some unforeseen breeze. The skin itched under the mitten and he rubbed at it.

It was part and parcel of the overall sense of unwell he'd come under the moment he stepped on the plane and the further from ground the plane had risen, the worse he'd felt. Still, nothing compared to the pit in his stomach as he thought of what it could mean to have her here, at the house of the famous starlet. Especially with that starlet missing, at least from the glare of the media's watchful eye.

He peered out into the lights of city in wonderment. How anyone slept with all this artificial light, he couldn't fathom. But he had always been a simpleton, not needing for much, not demanding much, not happy but content to stay in the mountains, show a few tourists around the forest surrounding the old monastery, continue to help the monks with the grounds.

The plane hit the tarmac hard and he yelped, the sound muffled by the scarf and the rush of the air helping to brake the steel bird. The bile rose in his throat, threatening to break loose, but he clenched his eyes shut and stuffed the fingers of his left hand under the mitten on his right, brushing across the oak tattoo. With that, a sense of calm came over him and he heard birds, smelled the musty forest, and could imagine the earth beneath his feet.

Only a little while longer and he would stretch his legs. He collapsed back into the seat back and looked down at the paper in his lap. He could still be wrong but with the calm of the tattoo came the sensation that she was close, closer than he'd felt for a while. He removed his left hand from the glove, mindful she might sense him too and he was not willing to announce his presence before he understood the rationale.

To the best of his knowledge, she had last been in Cairo, exploring the vast archeological heritage and seeking answers of her own for what they all had become. Before Cairo, it had been Vilnius, Warsaw, and Vienna. The last postcard after Vienna was her complaint that she could no longer stand the cold and she would be moving south through Venice. But she hated water. Well, the ocean. She feared large bodies of water after years living in the woods. She'd left a message for him that she had panicked and jumped a freighter for Egypt. There, she hoped to find answers.

So what was she doing in LA? It couldn't be good. After all, all of them knew the cause of their state and the reason for their abandonment. It was the same type of creature that the media now scrambled for

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photos of from just outside a starlet's palatial fortress in the Hollywood Hills. Vampire. And if he knew anything about his fur-enshrouded sister, she wasn't in the neighborhood for the view.

"Sir, you can disembark now."

The flight attendant brought him back to the present and he collected the small satchel from the overhead bin and a small leather book. It felt good to hold it again, especially when his thoughts were full of such dread. He would need it on his journey as he feared he would never make it back to the monastery again.

When his feet finally touched pavement, he breathed a sigh of relief. The city was hot, stuffy, loud, smoggy; everything he hated. But he was on the ground. He moved quickly through the endless parking lot, stuffing the book into the satchel and over-tightening the strap over his shoulder until the bag dug into his chest. When he reached the fence that marked the edge of the airport property, he took a look around and sniffed. At this edge of the parking lot, there were lots of shadows and few cars. And it was deserted.

He rolled his neck and sprinted toward the fence which he took in one easy leap as the man that had been sitting in 41A traded flesh for fur and sprinted out into the hot Los Angeles night, satchel bouncing along with him.



"Did you get them?"

The blonde woman in the fur coat stared past the hooded figure smoking at the railing, transfixed and simultaneously terrified by the view. She took an involuntary step back, clutching her coat closed, the branches of her own oak tattoo devoid of leaves.

Rolling her eyes, Bellecroix stubbed her cigarette out and approached. "Oh, for fuck's sake, it's just salt water." She stood in front of the blond and gave her a once over, her lips pursing in distaste. "I expected more from a born hunter."

"I got you what you wanted." The blonde handed over a CD.

"Good," a syrupy smile crossing her features, Bellecroix took the CD, turning it in her hand. "And you left no trace?"

"None that a human could tell."

"What about an inhuman?"

The blonde bristled. She still didn't like how little she knew of this creature's game but the promise had been given and so far, she had delivered. The Shining One lived and she knew where. For the

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prize of dispatching one of the undead and planting a few items, she would reveal just where he dwelled.

"By the time they get to the scene, it should be cleared."

Bellecroix raised her eyebrows but nodded wistfully.

"Seems such a great favor you've done me. Are you sure you don't want more? I could throw in a few more...treats you might like. Good for hunting."

The blonde growled low. "I only want one thing from you. And if you break your word, the only trace they'll find of you is a mess of blood on that white carpet."

"Tut tut tut, unlike others of my kind, I keep my promises." Bellecroix passed the blonde a packet. When she opened it, the blonde found a plane ticket for the next morning to someplace called Seattle. She raised her eyes to the vampiress to find her gloating. "I assume that this meets with your approval?"

"If he's there, yes. We're done."

The blonde turned on her heel and walked out, bypassing the two armed heavies at the door that she could've ripped to shreds in seconds flat. As she passed them, one opened the door for her and offered to call her a cab. She politely declined, noticing the thick Latin accent and skin tone much darker than his other brethren. She hadn't been aware they bred them south of the equator.

After the door had closed behind her, Bellecroix smiled widely, like the canary that had outsmarted the cat. But as quickly as the smile appeared, it faded. "Oh, no, sweetie, I'm not finished with you quite yet. But you'll know when I am."

She pulled her hood down and stared at the glass of the sliding door until her image materialized. The antlers were growing in nicely. She strummed her pearls and thought that a creamy silver wolf coat would make a lovely addition to her wardrobe.

And the little bottle said *Drink Me*

The café was buzzing in the late morning fog, cups clattering and patrons chattering on the quaint little terrace. It was humid but still cooler than other places that Emmerick had been of late. Like Spain. He sipped his espresso from the small white cup and glanced at the paper some previous patron had left behind. Sport scores. He couldn't remember the last time he cared about such trivial things. Maybe when he was twelve. Before the memories had flooded in. But that had been long ago.

He'd been up all night but that wasn't unusual for him. What was unusual was the arrangement that had him sitting here. Getting the call, who it had been from, and the fact that he had accepted the invite to meet, all things out of the ordinary for him. Strangers in a stranger land, they all were. Anyone and anything at this point could set it all ablaze. Again.

As if to accentuate the point, a police siren wailed in the distance and his head turned only to recognize the nattily dressed older gentleman walking toward the café, the crook of an umbrella over his arm. Though it was summer, he wore a full suit that looked like worsted brown wool. Ah, the wolf in sheep's clothing. Although the older man didn't hurry, he walked with an elegance and sense of

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purpose that made Emmerick sit more at attention as one who knows his prey. Then, he thought better about it and by the time the man approached, he had resumed his practiced apathetic slouch.

"Good of you to be punctual, Roland."

"Aubrey."

Emmerick waited while Aubrey settled himself in the little folding chair, picking up the sports page and setting it on a nearby table. The fellow there gave Aubrey a momentary look of disapproval but then thanked him for his thoughtfulness.

"I see you haven't lost any of *your* charm," Emmerick stated, suddenly on edge though he'd never show it. Best to get this over with and quickly. He'd already chanced fate breaking into Valerian's lair just a night ago; the Fates weren't known for their generosity.

His erect posture in complete contrast with his words, Aubrey spoke, "You can relax, Roland. You know very well I mean you no harm."

Emmerick folded his arms and sat back.

"Did you do as I asked?" Aubrey queried.

"I followed her," Emmerick shrugged. "She got on a plane shortly after I left her." He paused a moment, remembering their last conversation. "She was not happy with how things turned out."

"She's not a child to be coddled, Roland, and she never was. She came to us from a dubious connection that even Valerian does not recall that clearly." Aubrey pursed his lips. "She's up to something. Now more than ever."

Emmerick felt a pang somewhere where his heart should've been. He quickly squelched it. "Well, I could tell you where she was heading, if that---."

Aubrey became impatient. "Don't you think I already know that? She flew to Los Angeles, using the assumed name of Mercedes Blanco. She had two bodyguards with her and the arrangements had been made a week before."

Emmerick's mouth twitched. "That long?"

"Using a private jet requires reservations. She was cautious but not completely." Not something a Bruno Bonne couldn't uncover with his vast online network.

Emmerick grimaced, "Right. If he keeps her on such a tight lease, what's the worry?"

"Oh, he has nothing to do with this. He's as blind as he ever was to what she is."

Emmerick leaned forward, hackles raised. "And what is that?"

Aubrey shot him a disapproving eye. "Like I have to tell you. She's dangerous and unscrupulous and won't give up until she gets what she wants, like so many of the female kind."

"Which is what, exactly?"

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Aubrey went stock still and quietly spoke, "I'm not sure yet."

The corner of Emmerick's mouth tugged into a wry smile. "You know more about this than you're telling me. This all goes way back. She won't let go of the past. She wants him to pay for what he did. She didn't think I went far enough. But as it stands, I'm done."

Aubrey shook his head, fishing a small object out of his jacket pocket and setting it down like a gauntlet on the little table. It was an antique glass vanity bottle, perfume maybe, or some other tonic with a glass stopper and an etched silver label. "You can't sit there idly claiming not to know who was really responsible. After all this time."

Emmerick stared at the bottle. "Where did you get that?"

"From her room. The little bitch kept it. I had it tested years ago. What do you suppose I found?"

Emmerick forced himself to pick it up. He turned the label until he could read the engraving. *My Darling Darcie*. He didn't need to hear it; he'd suspected for years. Instead of the hurt mellowing with age, it had only increased, a sickness not borne of loneliness or loss, but of guilt. The guilt of having done such wrong the only due course was to wipe it out through revenge.

Aubrey gave Emmerick a moment. He knew it couldn't be easy on his old friend. They had all been thick as thieves, members of the Ghost Club, investigating their own strange natures when the true beast had walked into their midst. And she had been drawn to him like they all had been. And she had ultimately torn them apart, torn their entire world apart. And now, she was drawing them all back together, across centuries that even Emmerick couldn't understand. Perhaps it was time for him to get back into the game he'd thought he'd left.

Right before Aubrey could speak, Emmerick set the bottle down and asked, "What do you need me to do?"

"First, I need you to tell me why you'll help. It is too important to us all to risk...misunderstanding."

Emmerick pondered a moment before replying, simply, "I saw what a devastating impact on others the horror had when it destabilized. Valerian is the only thing holding that community together with some semblance of structure. Whatever she ultimately wants threatens that and the human world with it." He couldn't look away. *Darcie*. He supposed he knew what Aubrey had found in the bottle. Valerian's blood. Put there by an overeager adolescent desperate for a family. Desperate for a mother just like her.

"Good, we are on the same page then. I don't know her end game but I know she's started a hunt with ancient creatures she has no clue about."

Emmerick finally raised his eyes from the bottle. "What creatures? Weres?"

"No, not those simpering creatures that run our transport lines. No, the ancient breed. The original line." Aubrey paused, suddenly timid to share what he had never spoken of even in the heady early days in the Ghost Club. "The one I belong to."

When Mr. Baka "Roland" Emmerick had first met Mr. Aubrey Rochester working the docks one foggy October night in Portsmouth, Emmerick was doing what a poor, powerfully built African refugee could get paid to do in those days. He had been unloading crates. Crates earmarked for one Rochester

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Imports. He may have been formidably built, but manual labor had not been his forte where he'd been from and the memories that had compelled him to move about often gave him headaches causing him to bungle one of the crates. He was saved from dropping the heavy thing only because the proprietor himself had hoisted the box up singlehandedly, while still clutching his walking stick.

Expecting a lash or a swat with a stick for his clumsiness, Emmerick watched Aubrey set the crate down with inhuman ease and poked the end of his stick at a tattoo showing on his dark bicep. A symbol resembling two letter S's, one turned toward the other to form a heart. "Something tells me this isn't your usual form of work, old man."

While Aubrey had always been quick to assess others, he had given little of himself away over the years except what Emmerick could guess. That he had many years, unusual strength, and a fair number of languages to his credit. He also knew people and had convinced the African immigrant to put on airs, own up to his uniqueness and his magnetism, and display some of the special arts that had forced him to leave his home. It was the age of spiritualism and for the right price, a powerful lord or lady would pay anything to be spellbound by stories from kingdoms afar and things that go bump in the night. And so they had partnered up with some others Aubrey had found to form the Ghost Club.

Ghosts were something that Emmerick knew well, at least his own. He had suffered them for years, being branded "wicked" and worse "possessed" by his own tribe. With the Ghost Club, they met others who claimed special abilities. Most of them had been full of crap but a few hadn't been and through their work, Emmerick had brought his own demons to heel, even finding within them the strength to battle all sorts of malevolent monsters.

As for Aubrey, Emmerick always suspected werewolf, however he had never seen him turn. As the years rolled by and Emmerick learned just how diverse the world of the immortals was, he thought maybe a vampire of the South American persuasion. They were mostly impervious to the sun and often could take animal form.

Standing on the precipice of some revelation into Aubrey's existence only filled Emmerick with dread. Through all the good and evil times the two had seen, even times when Emmerick's life had made the human transition and he'd had to relearn himself all over again, with Aubrey's help, the mystery had been maintained. There would be no joy or ease in this telling. He scratched his arm where his tattoo had been, in a former life, a nervous habit he'd developed.

"What line would that be, Aubrey?"

Instead of looking like he was relieved to be telling the truth after all this time, Aubrey clenched in some barely controlled emotion. "The Wilklas. The original three and their immediate pack. The ones turned by the Shining One in the Białowieża."

Emmerick tried to contain his incredulity. The story of the Wilklas was more fable than legend, in some versions aligned with Russian folklore like Baba Yaga and the Firebird. Sometimes, a fairy tale was just fiction, no basis in fact, and in their studies, they had found nothing to substantiate the tales of the immortal wolf pack that ran through the Polish forest.

However, wolves had somehow cursed men or the other way around in Europe and given rise to the Weres. As difficult as it was to pinpoint the Vampire origins because of the breadth of their population, with the Weres amnesia during their turn that limited the discovery of their origin. But he knew little of them, having had so few dealings with them at the Club, leaving that mostly to...

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Aubrey.

"So...it's no myth."

"Not all of it."

"And what is this Shining One?"

Aubrey licked his lips anxiously. "He's not of concern. No, it's the original three. They do not follow any Were pack code and were never assimilated into modern society, even though the rest of their original pack came to take on major roles in forming up Were society and striking the accord that led to Were-Vamp peace. No, the original three would only have allegiance to each other, if prodded."

"And Belle has them hunting someone. Who?"

Aubrey was about to speak when a smell caught him and he turned his head sharply. As Emmerick followed his gaze, he saw a rather portly monk in Benedictine robes. The monk seemed to smile back at Aubrey but he was suddenly more at ease, as if a final decision made. Lord help us, Emmerick thought, if we get the Catholics into this.

"Belle met with the female several weeks ago and then again this night in Los Angeles. I have one of our South American brothers enlisted as her bodyguard to keep watch. The younger male has been out of the picture for a while, showing no interest in leaving the forest but the elder, Elba, he's the leader. He's the one you must find."

Emmerick took a long breath to try and wrap his mind around just what Aubrey was asking him to do.

"Yes, Roland, I'm asking you to hunt only this time, I want you to hunt a wolf. If you thought just because your silly penance with Valerian is over that you could walk away from this world, you were mistaken. Things have never been more perilous."

"And why is that, old man?"

"Because I've been searching for years for a way to end these wolves, and beyond some witchcraft that would likely end all lives, not just theirs, I haven't found anything. And the one thing uniting them is the abandonment they feel from their creator and the revenge they have wanted against the one they blame for it. If their leader is made to hunt again, they will all unite and they will not stop until they have killed what they have been set upon."

Emmerick shook his head, "How does this have anything to do with me?"

"You've finally chosen your side, Roland. For years, you tried to avenge Darcie and yet held out hope that Bellecroix was not responsible for her death. Even when you finally knew the truth. But now, you've turned against Bellecroix, seen what she really is and I can trust you again."

"Why? Because you think I'm on Valerian's side now?"

"No, because the side you've chosen is the one we should've all been on. Darcie's. I've done what I can for her in this lifetime, am doing what I can short of triggering another Were-Vamp war. Valerian would never allow that and so my hands are effectively tied."

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Emmerick nodded. Instead of sending his own horror to protect Darcie's current incarnation, Valerian had sent a bookish vampire scholar who had somehow managed the feat. It sounded very possible that this new threat would be much worse. The marrow in his bones felt frozen remembering his last conversation with Belle. She'd wanted him to kill Valerian and as much as he'd once wanted to do just that, he now realized she'd been playing him even then. And he understood her like never before.

"Quinn. She's going after Sophie Quinn."

"And she's trying to use these wolves to do her dirty work. But she doesn't understand them, doesn't know them and the danger they represent. If Bellecroix has convinced them that Sophie is the one that took their creator away, they will kill her and everyone around her in a storm of revenge that will turn the rain in Seattle red."

Emmerick felt the old rage building again, these creatures, all of them, just as manipulative and greedy as always. He and Aubrey had been friends once but after Darcie's death, they had chosen different roads. Emmerick had first saved Belle and then went after Valerian. Aubrey had helped Valerian clean his house out of London and escape to the continent. Could a reincarnation of the very human that had caused such evil to descend upon the world do anything less again?

The doubt showed on Emmerick's face as Aubrey leaned forward and took him by the arm, jostling the table. "It is the same kind woman we all fell for in our own way, who wanted nothing more than to save all of us from ourselves. Who mothered a strange, young girl with a wandering eye and sharp teeth and taught her how to be a lady. Who taught a black man that an English gentlewoman could see past the color of his skin and forge friendship of the heart. Who melted the hardened heart of an arrogant, angry nightwalker who had no care for his own kind."

"You chose your side and he doesn't sit outside for tea."

"But he does take tea, pine needle to be exact, with a little honey. Just like she used to make for him. You've seen him. You know. Being on his side *is* being on hers. And right now, she is being targeted by a lunatic orphan who couldn't care less about anything or anybody."

Emmerick looked down at the arm Aubrey held, the one that used to bear a symbol of faith, a symbol of continuity, of remembering the past to forge the future. Where was that sentiment more apt than now?

"She needs the hunter, Roland. She needs him to find the leader Elba before he can find her."

Emmerick picked up the bottle with his other hand, holding it there for a moment. He sighed. She'd called it once. He could find anyone. Anyone anywhere. It was his lot in this life and the one before and the one before that. And he would be the hunter again. And all over a little bottle she'd drank from.

Aubrey released his shoulder as Emmerick spoke, still looking at the bottle, "Tell me what I need to know. And I will do this thing."

Aubrey gave him a thumb drive and he pocketed it, standing abruptly, still looking at the bottle. He stuffed it into his bandoleer pouch and was just about to stride away when Aubrey stopped him with a hand again on his wrist. This time, he felt oddly overcome with patience and strength, like he'd found

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the new purpose he was hoping for and unlike his pursuit of penance, this was a loftier goal that would give him salvation.

When he recognized what Aubrey was doing, he felt suddenly sick to his stomach.

"Roland, be wary. Your renowned abilities may not work as well against...these immortals." Aubrey looked up at him with eyes almost yellow in color and his normally clean shaven face sudden sprouted with greyed whiskers. "Please accept this gift, to help you along your way."

Aubrey broke skin contact just as suddenly and Emmerick, nauseated and sweating, stumbled away. No one in the street noticed the exchange and none of the other patrons would remember the strange visitors nor their conversation.

As the monk approached, Aubrey was stroking a newly grown beard with his thumb and forefinger, musing. The monk sat down and ordered an espresso as he had been up all night as well, talking in Spanish to his friends in LA.

"You were right about him after all," the monk said into the lengthening silence. "And you gave him a boon?"

"He's not well, Imperius. His abilities are eating away at his life expectancy. This may be the last time he can hold it all together."

Imperius read the guilt and sadness in the old butler's face and felt truth would be kinder than comfort.

"So you've sent him to his death, very likely." Imperius shrugged. "An honorable one to be sure. We could all hope for nothing more than that."

Aubrey threw the old monk a nasty glare. "No more honorable man exists in this world or may ever have than that one. When he has found his ease, this world will be a poorer place."

Imperius scratched at his own beard while studying Valerian's long-time companion and once fully-fledged member of the Wilklas. He wasn't sure how much he trusted the Runt. When he'd left Wilklas land for the last time, he'd carried an awfully large chip on his shoulder. He'd been pushed around a lot in the years before the Three had remerged for good with the pack and with them, his litter mate brother Volta. But when Volta had retreated to the mountains while the others had chosen to modernize, the Runt had lost his place.

He had always wanted the power but never had it himself. He became the power behind the thrown, over the years enabling princes and kings to dabble in the darker arts. It had given him plenty over many a gentleman but when he'd met Valerian, he could see a higher power to inspire awe, much like that which had bullied him for years in the pack. Imperius wasn't sure exactly how much of the tale of the bottle was true but he sensed, like all stories, there were some final threads yet to be revealed in this one.

What mattered to him most was where Aubrey's current loyalty lay and to his word, it was with Lord Valerian. He would fight to keep him in power and in control of the Conclave as his own survival depended on it. Imperius knew why Aubrey never changed; he was taking Valerian's blood. Small

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amounts to be sure, but enough to hold some measure of the wolf at bay. It might've been where the girl had gotten the idea in the first place.

Imperius had other loyalties to fulfill and at this point, their purposes aligned. Vega was on the move, Elba was still missing, and treachery was in play in Valerian's house. Imperius wondered what Aubrey might do if he knew his brother Volta had also gone forth, tracking Vega. For now, he'd keep that bit to himself as he knew the modern day Volta better than anyone, having spent many long days at the monastery showing him the ropes.

"Good men are always hard to come by, my dear Aubrey, and always pass too soon from this world."

Aubrey's ire cooled. "How very metaphysical of you to say." He was scratching again at the beard. "I'll have to shave twice to rid myself of this."

"I think it makes you look rather scholarly, much like your faculty picture at Lucern."

Aubrey shook his head. "And your arrangements?"

"I've postponed for the time being."

"What? Why?"

Imperius smiled. "You seem to think you're the only chess player in this house, my dear Czeslaw," Imperius paused to enjoy the hackles he raised and the whiskers that further sprouted at his saying Aubrey's older name. "But for all you know I could have invented the game. No, you may have convinced yourself that this is about Sophie but I'd wager that fine ivory umbrella of yours that the real ringer in this story, one bookish vampire, will be coming back to Conclave within the fortnight."

Aubrey stared, mouth agape. "And why would he come back here when she's over there and he's worked so hard to save her?"

As the waitress dropped off his espresso, Imperius sat back and enjoyed the forced pause in their conversation. Aubrey felt he had the cards and rightly, Imperius had given him a lot. Telling him part of the story that explained why the Three never bonded with humans again, removed themselves from that world and how a woman had come between them and their master had been high cards from the deck for sure. But he'd never told Aubrey the whole story and who all had been there that terrible night when the wolves had brought about the end to one human's life and been separated forever from the Shining One. No, that spade remained in his hand.

He picked up his cup and drank deeply. And just when Aubrey had given up that he could get an answer, Imperius spoke.

"Because, my dear boy, sometimes what honor demands is more word than deed." He put the cup down. "And it's such a nice umbrella. I think I'll be needing it a lot where I'm headed next."

The Shellfish, the Bumbershoot, and the Prodigal Son

"You do *not* want to go up there."

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Nick turned his head as he entered the Wintergarden of the Bellevue Hyatt to see Morena at the front desk. Per usual, he had his moment of sheer awe caused by her now-proven deadly combination of beauty and brains. This evening it had been poured into a particularly tight pair of jeans just barely covered up with a low cut black silky tank. He stopped for a moment and blinked. Twice. Then with what he hoped was casual nonchalance, he strode over.

The delay was perceived but credited to their tiff. Morena attempted a meager smile but by the time he'd stopped in front of her, it had slide off. Instead of speaking, he just stood and looked at her, waiting for her to explain.

Her comment was so much easier to explain than her feelings so she stated, "She's in a real mood. Jesper hasn't roused yet."

Nick threw a look behind her at the man at desk she'd obviously been chatting with and tilted a nod. "Gabe."

"Nick," Gabe, a much broader shouldered fellow in a security uniform, gave him a curt nod back before letting his eyes float back to Morena. When Nick didn't return his attention to her, Morena tossed a look back, then with a dismissive glare, stepped forward to take Nick's arm and led him away, both of them stepping down into the atrium.

The moment they were out of earshot, Morena dropped his arm and he took several more steps away than was needed. It wasn't lost on her. In fact, all her senses were tuned on him, awash in relief he'd returned and concerned at the state he was in. Despite his casual appearance in just a T-shirt and relaxed fit black denim, he had a stillness that hinted he was still angry. His face looked haggard and blank with no trace of the easy grin she desperately wanted to see.

"You look tired. Did you get any sleep?"

"Morena, your text said we needed to talk."

Not at all the attitude she wanted. All business. She'd been determined to give him space to make the choice of whether to come back into crazy vamp land. But she'd been unable to let it be and when by half past midnight Jesper hadn't snapped out of *rigor dormitus* and Nick hadn't given a peep, she'd taken action. Sophie had been pelting her with questions ever since the emotional ire had taken the place of the physical pain and the more details Morena had related about fighting the revenant, the angrier Sophie had become.

"Yeah," was all Morena could think to start with. "We do." She shrugged her hands into her pockets. Then, she began to plunge headlong into it because she couldn't handle it if he walked out the door on her again and here, in the atrium, he hadn't quite walked back in yet. "When you didn't text back..."

"Look, I know I said I'd be back soon to check on Sophie, but there were so many things to do. When you texted me, I'd finally wrapped up what I could and was actually sleeping. I figured I could waste time texting you back or just get on my bike and get over here."

Morena couldn't hide the puzzlement on her face. This was not the conversation she'd practiced in her head for the last three hours. The one where she did all the talking and Nick stood there brooding over her with disapproval. "Things? What things?"

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Nick flashed a smile that was an attempt at the Cheshire cat which came off more like Snarf from Thundercats. "Well, the deli was a mess and the office trashed so I got my bro to get me the name of a contractor so then I had to whip up some specs for modifications like dark rooms, a decent kitchen, a bedroom, and a lot of plumbing rework to allow for a Fire Box. Greg and I figured out---"

Morena folded her arms to cover her surprise. This was the old Nick. Like nothing had even happened. Like they hadn't even argued. It was pissing her off. She wanted to explain. She needed to apologize. "Who's Greg?" she asked, sounding rather shrill.

"Oh. Reiteritter." When Morena still didn't acknowledge, Nick tried, "The guy that helped us out? Army jacket? Police uniform?"

Morena rolled her eyes. Nick took it as a sign to continue and as he walked her through the finer details of the fire box, the fireproof room that they'd be putting in the basement, she took his arm again and led him towards the elevator. Between Sophie rolling through all the scientific purposes for *rigor dormitus* and explaining her concern away with all the rationale for why Jesper wasn't up yet and Nick yammering about this essentially oversized BBQ box, she figured her apology was unwarranted and unnecessary. She stuffed Nick into the elevator and stepped back hard against the wall, her arms folded up to her chin.

He'd been over at the comic book store, which apparently was like the Bat Cave for the Gypsy Twin Irregulars, all day hatching through his fourteen point plan to reconstruct the deli building into their very own VP HQ (Vampire Psychologist Headquarters, he explained), until Lucy showed up and forced him to go home ASAP. But not before assuring him that she would check in on Sophie to make sure everything was OK.

"So have you seen her?"

Morena, stewing in her emotions, lifted her head, "Sophie? Of course I have."

The elevator dinged at their floor and they both stepped outside. "No, silly, Lucy," Nick replied.

It was all she could stand. "Silly? You know what's silly? Me feeling bad and worrying all evening, thinking I needed to apologize to you so you'd come back, that I might have pushed you away just like every other guy in my life. That's what's silly."

It took her a few breathes to notice she'd backed him up against the wall and now, at eye level and pressed up against him, she couldn't really remember what had made her lose her cool. The sheepish look on Nick's face didn't help and she was absolutely sure that wasn't a pencil in his pocket. Rather, more like a compact umbrella.

No, what was really silly was how she didn't step away immediately, how there was this wild jangle of sparks all the way through her as she stayed there, realizing the only one being intimidated by physical proximity was her. She eased away from him a little, but not enough to miss his ragged breathing.

"I mean..." She didn't want to retreat, didn't know how.

"You were worried I wouldn't come back?"

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It was his incredulous tone that lifted her gaze back to his. The corner of his mouth dimpled into a half smile and for a second it almost looked like he might...lean...forward.

She half-shrugged, taking a step back. One hand pulled the opposite elbow as her shoulders crept up and curled forward as if to hide her face and her embarrassment.

"Uni, I said I'd be back. I meant it."

She nodded once, because there was no way words could be forced through the clamped garble that passed for her throat. Not when he was still giving her that look, some mix between adoration and affirmation, like he knew he had something on her. That she cared. Fuck, she *did* care. She was waiting for him to throw that in her face like a well-placed stun grenade.

As if sensing the moment was becoming too much for her, he peeled himself off the wall, breaking enough of the spell so she stepped further back and turned away. When he didn't make more of the revelation, she relaxed. Even tossed her head back over her shoulder at him to ask a question.

"Uni?"

The sheepishness bleated into his cheeks. "Yeah," he nervously rubbed at his neck. "It was the best I could think up while you were, uh, right there."

She recognized it for what it was. He'd just given her a nickname. "What does it mean?"

Bashful, but brutally honest Nick was back. "Uni is a word; it means a sea urchin."

Her face showed her puzzlement, was creeping towards offense.

"I just meant you can be hard and prickly on the outside, but, uh, soft on the inside."

She absorbed the comment and considered that if it had given by anyone other than the slightly awkward guy who she'd just moments ago backed against a wall and been incidentally acquainted with his not-so-soft parts, she'd likely have been offended. The smile was a reflex, maybe from when she was fifteen, before the world had landed responsibility on her shoulders and let her just be a girl.

She pivoted on her heel. "Well, I guess I'm not the only one that can be hard on the outside." Before her courage left her, she began to walk away, her cheeks flaming at her own boldness.

She heard him swear to himself, "Shit, you noticed that."

She spun around, grinning now, "Oh yeah, I noticed." But had turned back around and was heading back down the hall before her teasing could catch up with her. By the time Nick met her at the open doorway, he'd wrestled with his own discomfiture and had thought up an appropriate comeback intended to pierce a little deeper into the soft spot he'd just uncovered. Something about Uni being quite tasty.

But when Morena turned her head back to him, hand on the handle of the open door and raised a finger to her lips for silence, the flirtatiousness was long gone, replaced by the warrior on high alert. He took hold of the door so she could step in and quickly survey the room. After the quick tour, she returned to the doorway to his questioning face.

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"What is it?" Nick asked, not noticing anything out of place in the quiet room.

"It's Sophie," Morena answered. "She's gone."



I'd been in the middle of rereading my inventory of Jesper's injuries for maybe the twentieth time, trying to cross-reference it against known lethal vampiric allergies when I realized something. The longer Jesper didn't break out of rigor dormitus, the more angry with him I got. In recollection, it was obvious that while he seemed to shrug off silver, something in the cabling that Skovajsa had used to tie him to the scaffolding had made him unable to tear through them. After a few dismal attempts to identify it, I felt fairly certain it was optical cabling and therefore likely filled with silica. Glass.

Could Jesper be allergic to something as pervasive as glass? It was terrifying. I'd heard on the news how someone had smashed through a window at the penthouse floor restaurant in the wee hours of the morning. A single shard of that stuff might kill him? Then why the hell was he fighting a Carpathian pretender!?

Without him here to rail against, it was exasperating. What if some of the slivers of glass had gotten embedded into his skin before he converted to *rigor dormitus*? Would that make him unable to transform back out? If I could remember exactly where he was cut by the cabling, perhaps we could drill the glass fragments out. So back to my inventory and I sketched out a body, drawing in the injuries I remembered.

Forcing away the memory of his chin, I stuffed my face in one of my older notebooks. Without the Memento which I'd given over to Nick, I couldn't complete much in the way of full identification. Although I tried hard not to question why Nick was still AWOL, especially since the moment I'd even prodded at her about it, Morena had stormed from the room. Too much drama there but I was trying to deal with my own shit. And having a 3000 pound marble-frozen vampire constituted a significant amount of shit.

"*Tante. Tante, come to me.*"

"Maurice?" My head perked up and when I looked around the room, I realized I was suddenly on my feet. The blood rushed to my head and I swooned against the desk.

"I need you to *come to me.*"

Before I could even wallow in the pain it caused, I was up again and walking toward the door. The pain meds were not strictly speaking meant to cover all that I had to do to follow his call but I did it and several minutes later, I was outside, limping across the roof towards his shadowy figure.

"Maurice?" I couldn't stop the panic in my voice. I hadn't had any contact from the twins, just their surrogate Mr. Reitterritter and he had also gone dark. If anything more had happened to the twins, I couldn't deal with it. I hobbled toward him only to stop up short as, in an inky burst, he appeared right in front of me.

I grabbed his arms, "Are you ok?"

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He smiled in a pained way. "Fine. It is you who are unwell."

I was gasping for air, whatever motivation had seen me to this point, adrenaline mixed with the last of my pain meds fled me completely and I doubled over to breath, clutching at him. "You said...you said you...needed me."

This sense of warmth and welcome emanated from him as he wrapped arms around me to support my weight. It lessened the pain a little but I could at least look up at him and open my eyes as he raised my chin to look up at him.

"I needed you to come to me. Of your own free will," he spoke distinctly, so I might understand.

But I didn't understand. "But why?"

He shook his head gently at my confusion. He brushed strands of hair that clung to my sweaty face away with his thumb and forefinger, tucking the hair behind my ears. "Because, Sophie, you have become a danger to yourself and I need to keep you safe."

As my ire was about to rise at his impertinence and I was about to ask him what he meant, his gentleness won me over, his fingers felt soft and cool against my fevered cheek, his arms reliable, strong, his whole frame contracting around me to hold me close. Somewhere deep in my brain, doubtless in a prim British accent, I shook my head, knowing that such influence on me was impossible. But not so. One other vampire had held me in sway...

"Maurice, I don't..." I suddenly exhaled from the sheer weight of doubting him.

"Relax and trust in me. I will do you no harm." His words lulled me, freed me from all the responsibilities throughout all of time and I blinked into sudden awareness, as he tilted my head back, his thumb gently brushing the corner of my mouth as he bent his head and kissed me.

I thankfully don't remember much after that, although for some reason, he felt it necessary to keep that moment, the one in which he'd bent me to his will, in my memory. And as much as I tried, as much as I heard the distinct snap of a rule against a desk and the rustle of skirts, I couldn't find anything distasteful in that memory. It wasn't the best kiss I'd ever had. But it wasn't the worst either.

Awareness came back as I realized I sat, my legs to my side, on the rooftop. Maurice sat there next to me, not touching me but not shrinking away either. I realized that he'd made this decision himself as I couldn't sense Lucy anywhere nearby. This was between him and me. And there was no regret in his shoulders nor did he seem pleased with himself. It had simply been his will. The force of his will.

"Please, do not be angry with me."

But he was still my Maurice.

When I found my throat was free of constriction to speak, I came into complete awareness that I no longer felt pain anywhere. I was certain all cuts, bruises, strains, sprains, all of it would be gone now. And while that made some sort of sense to me, I needed to know his reasoning, needed to understand what this new Maurice had done and why. This new, more powerful, more controlled Maurice.

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"No. I'm not. You made sure of that. I'm not sure how but you have. But it would help, for later, to know why you did it."

He turned his head to me and I saw him for the first time, not a boy clutching at the awkwardness of his manhood, but a man, firmly in control of his abilities and committed to his beliefs. Whatever gentle feelings he still held for me were there but he was no longer at the mercy of them. He decided where it all fit and it all fit rather nicely.

"Sophie, you were damaged beyond what your doctors knew. For your own safety, you needed to be healed. And after last time, I needed to insure you allowed me to help you."

I noted his new usage of this lifetime's name. I would never again be his Tante. I nodded my head in acceptance. He smiled and let me see for a brief moment that somewhere in him, my acceptance denoted approval, which he did still want. I wasn't sure how I felt about the idea that he would've done it whether I approved or not.

"Some lives are drawn together forever."

My brows drew down. Something in how he said it sent a flutter through my consciousness and I distinctly heard a tea pot clatter. A memory threatened but I slapped it away.

I felt his hand again on my arm. "Sophie?" I nodded and he helped me to my feet.

"I'm alright."

He nodded as he looked down at me. Then, he opened his mouth to ask something but paused. There was a question there but his eyes showed compassion, maybe pity, I'd never seen directed at me before. But then he closed his lips and gave me a meek smile. He reminded me so much of that whisper, a presence so recently felt, one that had saved me from the Taint, the kind of presence that was creeping from the shadows back into the light. But the recollection wouldn't come and he stood there apart from it, his own self, a man molded out of his uniqueness and his duality.

"What is it?" I asked him.

He looked out over the night. "A storm is coming."

"What kind of storm?"

He didn't look at me when he said, "The legendary kind."

We didn't talk more. I went back downstairs and dodged the inevitable questions from Morena and Nick and noticed as I swept by the desk, that Nick had returned the Memento and it flipped furiously to that page that I dreaded as if to warn me that yes, some lives are drawn together. Forever.

Not-So-Idle Hands

The strangest sensation of all for him was knowing that while he remained aware, knew he was in the hotel room, witnessed the comings and goings, wondered at them, it was unclear how he sensed these

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things. It was not a sound or smell and surely not sight; he simply felt these things, had been feeling them since the moment his body seized up and turned to stone.

He felt being moved, felt the small gang and all their debate on whether they should risk disobeying orders and jackhammering him into dust. The impression of a strong will with attributes much like his own taking over the debate, influence under it all, caught at him and he was at leisure to mull it over for what felt a few moments to him but realized had been hours. Interspersed were memories unfolding that dragged him away to different times and places like waves pulling him under.

When he'd surfaced again, he learned that Morena and Nick were safe, and *she* was there. If he'd had a beating heart, it would have thudded in relief that Sophie had survived as well. Instead, the stone warmed and glimmered within its box with no one to witness and wonder, least of all the object of its affections. Towards the beginning, he'd seen Sophie stumble in, injured. He'd struggled then, tried to force his body to change, only to be met with stinging sensations from all over. Then Morena and Nick had come in, voices had raised in discord and Nick had gone. Morena had fallen asleep and he'd spent time sensing her slowed heartbeat and the accelerated growth of her red blood cells.

Something was wrong with the transformation. As he inventoried his facts, he surmised it had now been several days and nights that his body refused to convert. Comfortable in the knowledge that Sophie was safe and that his incidental contact with Morena had ensured both her and Nick's survival as well, he resigned himself to listening, to filling in the gaps and waiting to transfigure back. He learned from Sophie's interrogation of Morena that there were some truths Morena would hold back. Nothing, however, had muted the anger Sophie felt from learning he'd shared blood with another human. Or his approach to confronting the tainted mistake.

It hurt him to not be able to explain. He worked out what he might say. And just as he found clarity, the story being told in the room expanded, revealing much about the other immortal hands at work in Bellevue that night. As he turned over all he knew, it made sense that if Sophie had a prior relationship with one vampire that still counted her as friend and mentor, there might be others. The sister and her brother.

There was nothing that Jesper could do when the brother came and called to her but still he'd fought again to transfigure, the stone heating in frustration. Sophie had said she was immune to vampire abilities and yet he witnessed her bidden by the power of Vox, causing even his stony form to vibrate. But his struggles had been in vain, for the better. She'd returned to Morena and Nick's shock completely healed but adverse to conversation. She'd crawled back into bed, devoid of sleep, and silently wept.

This marble had become his prison and he struggled again, wanting to be with her, to shield her from this world of death and violence she so hated. But his body was not pure; it was the only thing that made sense. Chips of wood, glass fibers, maybe a cut from that accursed kukri, some debris had seeped in deep and prevented his return to her. It frustrated him, made him want to scream. As Morena moved

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to the adjoining room and Nick slinked off to secretive chores redoing the office, he bristled under the stony silence and tried to reach out to her. When he couldn't sense anything but her presence, he tried to discern the impediment, walked through his injuries and tried to catalog what might have corrupted his slumber. With no way of removing it, he might be in here forever, like the true gargoyles of old myth, held fast to a silent penance. It made him burn from the inside, angry, afraid, desperate to get free and soar, to get to Conclave and tell them all she had risked and how she had saved them all.

Tension rippled through the stone. He couldn't help it; he was screaming. With no mouth, no throat, no belly for breath, he seethed and spewed his mind forth, clenching his awareness until the stress threatened to fracture the marble.

Then, a sound, a lightness within the black, a scratching and then the shrill complaint of nails being displaced. A soft thump, a freshness, and then a silence. He felt her. She was close. *Please, let me out.* His anxiousness almost caused the crate to move.

Then her hand, soft, unsure, reached through the small gap in the wood planks she'd created with a crowbar. Her hand cupped his shoulder and she sighed. Relief moved through him, her touch warming him.

"I don't know that you can hear me." Her voice was breathy, tired.

I can.

"But I'd rather like to think you can." Her voice tensing up with sobs. "I thought we'd have more time to talk. And I really really need to."

Then talk to me. I'm in here. And I'm not going anywhere.

She took in a shuddery breath. "I never meant any of this to happen. But as I look around, all I see are my faults and failures. I thought I'd saved Maurice from this burden, enabled him to escape the violence that had taken his life. But I didn't. I just kept it at bay. And now. Now he has become what he was meant to be. A vampire. Even though he no longer takes blood, he has the powers, all of them from whatever father spawned him."

She sniffed in a sob. "And maybe that's my fault too. I meddle where I shouldn't. I had this vain thought that I could, through my teachings, hold back the tide. That I could save him. But that's just it. He saved me. My injuries were...vast. And because we wanted to avoid too much scrutiny, I didn't let the doctors help me. But Maurice, with his abilities, sensed it from so far away and came to make it better. Not my poor little Mo anymore."

Her fingers moved across the stone, gently sliding down through the space where she'd removed the plank. He couldn't reach out to her, but his emotions warmed the surface.

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You need to sleep. You're exhausted.

She pulled the blanket with her to the floor, laying on her side, resting her head on the arm that still stretched to touch him through the gap, now at his ankle. He felt her eyelids slow their blinking and sag.

"I wish I knew how to help you. But my help doesn't seem to be worth anything."

Things come around, as they do for you. Things come back for you. Like me. Just sleep.

Her eyelids closed and he felt her breathing soften.

I will be here when you wake.

"I was right. Jasmine is better off without me."

Her touch, her breath, the sound of her heart, the name evoked a memory that his fear had pushed away. Maybe if he succumbed to the memory, she might remember too.



When he'd come out of the coma, he'd been wracked with pain, bandages oozing, septic. Wild for days, he'd shunned the light, growled at his captors from the darkest corner of the room, nearly killed a guard trying to bring him water. At the height of it were the blood curdling howls he let loose deep in the night, trying to call his wolves to him for help.

Confused, he knew such pain, like his bones were breaking in on themselves. But it was the rest of his senses that were on fire. He could smell everything, hear everything and the cacophony paralyzed his thinking. Once in a while, a voice spoke a familiar word or piece of a word and he found he could push all the rest away but then the remainder was unintelligible garble and the frustration pent up again until the rage took over.

He barricaded himself in the darkest corner, his breath ragged as he hadn't let anyone tend to him since he'd awoken. The only reason he'd remained in the room at all was the light beyond suddenly terrified him. When he'd first jumped out of his bed, startled by some commotion in the hallway, women's voices arguing, he'd stepped into a ray of light from the window which burnt his skin.

Ever since then, he shook with fear of the sun. The fear, coupled with the pain, drove his rage-filled panic. But nothing spurred the rage more than the awareness that below his waist where most of the pain emanated from, he felt much of what should have been there was missing. His gnarled hands with their jagged nails tried to rip at his bandages, only causing more cuts and his festering wounds to ooze dark fluids.

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He crouched in the corner, unable to process his surroundings, his humanity buckling under the weight of sensory onslaught without a ground. He felt paralyzed and an old helplessness threatened to consume him. He'd been imprisoned before, a feast for dark creatures, and it had only been the kindness of a fellow prisoner that had saved his sanity.

It was slipping again. His mind. The doubt was debilitating and the fear crippled anything he might do. He whimpered in the corner, panting like the wild wounded creature he'd become. He waited for someone to release him from this misery. He could not endure it again.

For a day and a night, he heard the scuffles of people, light-footed woman, guards with clinking weapons, others indiscernible. He didn't sleep. His body seemed to be destroying itself and he retched black mucus as he now shook with fever. And everywhere, he began to smell it. Thick, rich, metallic tinged, and pumping, all around, like the walls were filled with it. He knew it was what he needed now to survive. Against every care and caution, against gentle words spoken through rusty dungeon bars, he wanted it.

Blood. The thought of it became the only thing he could manage. It was helping him focus through the barrage of senses. He could hear a heart pounding as a terrified guard took over the night watch, smell his sweat and judged the guard's weight and height from the sound of it coursing through his veins. Thinking of it brought him a measure of peace, uneasy, ruthless, painful but peace. And he latched on to it as he would any other savior put before him.

As day broke and he shuddered watching the light grow in the room, he vowed, this next night, he would break through the door, he would get what he required, and he would leave, embracing whatever hellish existence this was. He would not whimper in the corner and beg for death as he once had.

But the morning brought its own promises. He sensed her before he smelled her, before he heard her voice, sharp, angry, rapid. She flowed into his consciousness, washing aside his thirst as if a flood of pristine water. The guards, two of them now, tensed at her recriminations only to graduate to abject panic as another female approached.

She'd been here before, older, heavier but taller, with a slow rolling gait of one that had given birth, or at least been with child often. The two females argued loudly, and it was if he felt the older woman grab the young one by the arm, he sensed her heart thud, blood vessels breaking in her fleshy arm as a bruise started.

Before he realized what he was doing, he flew across the room and slammed into the heavy wooden door, sending a shockwave through the entire wall. The wood was oak and he recognized the natural deterrent for what it was. He stopped only long enough to listen to the symphony of beating hearts out in the hallway and the continued pressure over the young woman's arm. He beat his body against the door again, drawing shouts and clattering of weapons in the hallway. Again and again and again until he

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sensed his shoulder joint cracking, skin shredded and splintered but felt the door giving way. A few more assaults and he'd be through.

In the meantime, the arm was suddenly flush with blood as if snatched away and he heard the young woman's voice, now plaintive. There was a longish pause before the older woman snapped orders and he sensed the guards move away from the door. He stepped back, unsure of himself. He was panting terribly and his natural inclination as the door slowly creaked open was to huddle backward into the corner.

Through the door she came, encased in yards of glittering green fabric but it was the jewels adorning her headdress refracting the light that he put his hand up to ward against, speeding his retreat to the far wall. He growled menacingly, turning his head away. But he heard the extra footfalls following behind her and he bellowed in rage as he launched himself at the door, slamming it back shut behind her. A warbled scream came from the hallway, bones crunched by the force.

In the flurry of action, he'd gotten too close to the light and it burned his skin again, his shoulder which he'd also torn against the wood of the door. He howled and leaped over the bed to his dank burrow in the corner, his labored breathing echoing off the tile walls. He wailed, bent over, the smell of burnt offal permeating the room.

She held her breath. Her heart pounded. Perhaps she would be merciful and slit his throat, an angel of mercy. He waited for it. He wanted it.

Her tiny feet made the softest sound as she approached him. It was the sound of blood pouring through her that he fixated on now. This was his chance to get out, wasn't it? She would offer little resistance really. He turned his head to her just as she kneeled down to him, her hand brushing at his shoulder. He bared his teeth and prepared to strike when she gasped.

Her voice came out in a wonder of familiar words, "The sun has healed you."

He paused as much from understanding her words as recognition that she was right. She drew his tattered sleeve away from this skin.

"See?"

As her fingers smoothed over the grimy skin, he saw that what had been gashed from his assault on the door had knitted and was perfectly smooth, unmarred with anything but the griminess of his existence. It took him only a moment for his fangs to ease away as she used a bit of her clothing to brush aside the filth. Then she ripped the sleeve completely apart and he yelped, jumping back, cowering, sniffing at his shoulder.

"Oh golden one, I would never hurt you. But what have you done to yourself?"

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He tossed her an angry glare. As if this were his fault.

“So you do understand me.” She stood. “Good. Now is not the time to feel sorry for yourself and cower in corners.” She walked to the shuttered window and called out loudly in another tongue he did not understand. There was a scuffling sound and then a creaking sound as light suddenly exploded into the room, dancing in colors refracted from the intricate stained glass.

He shuddered and raised his arm to shield himself. After a moment, he raised his head to see that she had turned and backed herself in front of the window, shadowing him from the light. He lowered his arm slowly, eyes stinging from the light still all around him.

She beckoned him forward with her dainty hands. “Come to me, golden one. You have nothing to fear.”

His instincts caused him to shuffle back on his heels. But he felt her allure, felt the promise of her words, felt bonded to her in ways he couldn’t comprehend. The light around her was blinding but it drew him. He looked at his shoulder which no longer hurt as well as looked perfectly healed.

“Please, golden one, you must trust me. You do not deserve to wallow in the dank shadows, a victim of fear. You belong in the sun, master of earth and light.”

If her words didn’t inspire him, the kaleidoscope around her intrigued him. And there was sense in her words; he was done cowering, tired of being the victim. He wanted his own release, whatever that may be.

He stretched out his arm and she spread her arms to her sides and approached, making sure no light reached him from around her. She took his hand in hers as he stayed crouched, his head even with her chest, his body protected by her broad shadow. It was then he recognized her kind green eyes, though the rest of her face was hidden behind a diaphanous veil. He scowled trying to look at her mouth. His hand reached out and pulled the fabric down along her cheek.

Her cheeks dimpled and tilted her head away from his pawing. “Ah yes, I forgot. You would not have seen me with my veil. Allow me.” Her hand pulled the fabric aside and suddenly her whole face, radiant in its own right, was there for him to see. And he did recognize her. And somewhere, something pulsed in his chest that had been dead.

It thudded hard and he put a hand to his chest, looking down. What was this now?

Her hand had followed him. When he looked back up at her with a questioning look, he was pressing her hand to his chest.

Her cheeks turned pink. “Why, yes, I feel it. It is your heart and it longs to feel the sun.”

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He stared at her, discerning that her words were at odds with her own emotions. He was certain it beat because she was near. But he was aware enough to know it was no lie she told him; just a truth that she did not know, one he had not shared. If she could end his pain, he promised silently he would share all he was with her.

She began to draw him forward and the panic reared again but while he shut his eyes against it, he let her pull his crouched form forward until they were just inside the window. He was panting by then, the effort to keep trusting her warring with instincts honed from necessity.

She used one hand under his arm to pull him up and as he stood, his head cleared her height and prismatic light covered his face. He gasped, teeth bared, kept his eyes clenched shut but couldn't help the reflex that brought his hands up to his face. She stared up in awe as the skin across his face, even his hair began to steam, even smoke. He clenched his fists, willing himself to stillness. If he was meant to burn, then he would burn. If this was the end she was to bring him to, then he was ready to accept it but there was no need for her to follow him to the end.

He opened his eyes to slits only and pushed her aside, toward the fountain in the corner. She stumbled and landed in a heap of green sparkling silk on the floor. He regretted having to be so brusque but he could feel the roar building and as soon as she was clear, he took a breath and his entire head caught fire. He heard her gasp but he gritted his teeth and tore at the remnants of his ruined clothing. If skin brought fire, then he would let it consume him all, every cursed morsel that had been food for wolves, revenge upon thieves, and a shield for the woman who lay frozen at his feet.

“No, it is too much, too soon!”

He barely heard her words through scorched ears as she scrambled away from him. He stepped back, stretched to full height, held his arms out, and embraced the light as his entire body went up in flame. So beyond caring and fear was he that he no longer felt tension of the pain, just the release of every nerve, every fiber, even bone, melting into liquid fuel, reshaping, reforming much like from the earth of the forest. He finally understood what he was and why he'd carried so much fear around with him and he would've released it all if not for her being so close.

He could not, would not cause her harm. But the strain of keeping the fire contained within was beginning to crackle and pop and ooze out of him. Fingers clenched in his fists became like cinders and he imagined them falling to the floor like ash, the rest of him soon to follow.

But suddenly there were shouts and a great deluge showered him, steam exploded around him, forcing him to the floor. His head ricocheted off the floor and through the fog that followed, he felt her cold, wet fingers as he was suddenly covered in an emerald sea, blotting out the light until it remained only as a dull ache behind his eyelids.

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In the deepest recesses of the house with the lemon tree in the garden, hands panted in elaborated henna designs slipped yet another key in the padlock hanging from the cell. When it didn't fit, she methodically moved to the next one on the huge iron ring with keys that ranged from elaborate ivory handled ones to ones that resembled handcuff keys.

A shudder rang through the house and the girl with henna painted hands dropped her veil looking down the hallway, frozen in place. The house creaked more now that the sun was creeping into darker, older spaces in the house causing rooms that had once been shut to come to life.

She looked back at the lock, picking the next key to try. As she did, a voice sang in a thick Parisian accent.

“ ,

L'aimable Lubin;
Frappe chez la brune,
Elle répond soudain :
–Qui frappe de la sorte ?
Il dit à son tour :
–Ouvrez votre porte,
Pour le Dieu d'Amour. »

*By the light of the moon
Likeable Lubin
Knocks on the brunette's door.
She suddenly responds:
– Who's knocking like that?
He then replies:
– Open your door
for the God of Love!*

Blood and Light and Magic and Truth

“You heard her crying all night?”

It was more statement than question, echoed in still of their dark hermetic chamber. It had been a very long time since they had both lain here, side by side, her hand in his.

“I did.” He admitted it. He knew she wanted him to.

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She didn't bother to turn her head towards him when she knew his face was impassive. She was still surprised that he had come here this day after he had seen Sophie. She could tell he had fed, in no way was physically diminished, had not spoken of anything, had simply done that they used to do: strip down to his underclothes and climbed onto the comfortable queen mattress, hand taking hers as he settled, as if it hadn't been decades since the last time. Outwardly, he was calm, days of his heightened anger and command completely given way to an impeccable peace.

He had kept the emotional link between them shut for as many years as he had avoided their shared resting space. But the subtle tension that told her of the effort was also absent, as if she could reach out and have access to the Maurice of old.

He had been with Sophie. He'd been perfumed with her scent, like he bathed in the essence. When he breathed, he exhaled the infinitesimal bouquet of her sweat, her saliva. He had been with Sophie and come back to her. Come back to her with resolve. With calm. Perhaps whatever battle he had convinced himself to wage had worked itself out with their success over the vampire.

Ba, not really a vampire after all. A dangerous pretender, yes. But her irregulars had had little effort taking him out. In fact, Ritterreiter declared them ready for the next phase of their training. That is, in between swearing about their lack of discipline and general complaints about the youth these days.

She blinked hard. She was distracting herself. He'd been with Sophie.

"I did not lay with her."

She turned her head towards him.

"I did kiss her. She needed healing." He paused, searching for words. "I had to know."

"And?" her concern was growing. She rolled to her side facing him.

The silence echoed. The words wouldn't tumble out of his mouth. He clenched his eyes. He wanted to spare her but knew she would discover the truth on her own. She just didn't know the question to ask.

She lay back flat again, frustrated.

He sighed. This was it. The last night like this. The last night it could just be the two of them, together, against the world. After years of rejecting it, fighting to find others, wanting someone for himself that could be more than a sister, all he wanted now was her. Her love, her trust, her eternal hand in his, together for all time.

But their paths diverged here. After he shared with his sister what he suspected when he first smelled this age's Sophie Quinn as she revealed herself at the comic book shop. A truth that they had never sought and yet, she carried it with her completely unaware of the enormity of it.

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He knew Lucy had always suspected he'd fancied Tante. Felt it was the reason for Caroline, an older companion to mirror the mother figure they'd both lost when their Tante had died. And maybe when he was a naïve youth, the comfort of her care, her love especially as he'd matured and etched into his youthful desires.

But no, that wasn't why he'd kissed Sophie. While it was easier to heal her that way, he could've chosen any other number of forms and fashions to seep his essence deep into her wounds. Some even without touching her at all. Some that took nothing more than a breath. He'd perfected them over the years with the Irregulars that his sister insisted on taking on and trying to support them.

There was no way to spare her the shock and she hadn't trusted his words for quite some time. And lately he'd been a brute to her and hadn't known why, hadn't been aware until his senses knitted together the puzzle that Sophie presented. But once he suspected, he had to disprove it. How could it possibly be so?

"Lucy, my heart, my beloved sister, I had to kiss this Sophie because....because she carries an essence with her, within her, one that, one that I had to understand."

Lucy frowned but felt the blocked bond between them burst wide open and her eyes shot open.

"I don't know how else for you to know that it is true." He paused as he dispelled the wall between them so she could feel all the emotions underneath his calm. It wasn't resolve at all. It was awareness. It was epiphany.

"The essence I first smelled on Sophie wasn't this *ange* of hers frozen in marble. I met him and he....he is something entirely unlike Vampire." He sighed, letting himself feel the incredulity of it all.

"Gods, you are horrible at confessions! What?" she demanded.

"*Blood and light and magic*. That's how you described it."

"That was Morena!"

"The light, yes. Her *ange*."

"You keep calling him that--."

"He is not the point! *Blood and magic*. That's what you said."

She felt a prick of foreboding. His emotions were so deep and unfamiliar to her after all this time; she could barely discern where they ended and her own began. It was as if all this time, he'd never really been separated from her. He'd kept her intact in his own being even as he blocked their active connection.

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“Yes?”

“Lucy, the essence Sophie carries. It’s what saved her from that evil liquid the pretender made her drink. That essence,” It was his turn to shift towards her, holder her hand up to his chest. “It’s our Father.”

Defiance...Ohio

Standing in Penn Station, Emmerick found himself relatively underwhelmed by the stocky figure that stood politely waiting his turn at the Amtrak ticket office. He knew he shouldn’t judge; near-immortals came in every color, creed, height, weight, and disposition. He’d once been waylaid in Tokyo by what could be best described as a nymph. 4’8” and barely weighing seventy pounds soaking wet, he’d finally dragged her out of the bay like the night’s catch many hours after he’d begun his endeavor, with many scars to mark the encounter.

But this guy, this Elba, purported to be the original of the Wilklas, was 5’8” with his work boots, and while he had the build of a laborer and could probably handle his own in a bar fight, Emmerick had envisioned more boogey man than everyman when Aubry had described his quarry.

Emmerick rubbed his arm where his tattoo should be, sighing to himself. He wasn’t up for this and he knew it. His thoughts kept tumbling over the years he’d wasted holding a flame for a petulant child, years killing vampire spawn whenever and wherever he found them for what amounted to an insane mommy-daddy issue, years tracking and hunting based on a lie that he’d too easily believed.

He was ashamed and tired, so very tired. Not physically; whatever Aubry had shared with him had supercharged him like a battery to the point where his fingertips felt like they would spark. But without the glory of righteous purpose, the years of homelessness, the pressure of unremembered lifetimes, and the very weight of this modern world felt like a vice of iron around his chest constricting him slowly. He wasn’t blind to struggles of modern humanity. He just didn’t give a shit. What did it matter when a tide of undead could rise up like the Black Death and swallow society whole. He’d stood in the middle of it several times and fought it back, most recently following a bottle of wine in Seville.

But it never ended, always there was a struggle, a battle, and around him these sleeping humans who knew nothing, wanted to know nothing. Why should he continue to fight for them, the very same that banished him from his village for speaking his truth? He could recall the dead, lives long lost, stories from old, past down from their fathers and when they still didn’t believe, he showed them what remained below the surface: the well, the horde, and the bodies. He had brought the shaman down, the holy man, for lying to his people, for trading their ancestral wealth for money in his pocket. And they had then turned on him, blaming his witchery for leading to the shaman’s downfall.

They had given him a choice at least: leave or they would stone his sisters and mother. He grimaced in memorial; there was never a choice at all. In a tribe that valued the spirits of the land, communicated

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with the spirits of the dead to know the way forward, he had still become a pariah. They didn't want to hear the true voice of their elders: they wanted to speak in their name.

He shook his head and refocused on the Wiklas, as he stepped up to the ticket window. From his current vantage, he had a clear line of sight to lipread what the agent said and this particular one always repeated the destination and the time on the ticket she was issuing.

But he doubted what he read as the destination and had to do a search on his cell phone. The first word made no sense so he expected the search to work phonetically but the location came right up. It was in the middle of nowhere. Well, a helluva a long way short of Seattle. He glanced up at one of the route maps mounted on the wall beside him and had to suppress an urge to shake his head.

The Wiklas thanked the agent and turned just as Emmerick dropped his head into his book. While *A Tale of Two Cities* was a good read, it was the sketched notes from the thumb drive that interested Emmerick. The abridged life and times of one Sophie Quinn. He let the Wiklas continue to his gate while he scanned, knowing he would catch up before the train departed in 20 minutes.

Something about "Ohio" caught his attention. What he read set him to his feet, clamoring after the wolf and nearly knocking over a young Namibian woman in her long voluminous dress and headdress. He had to use his considerable agility to keep both of them on their feet, his hand on her upper arm steadying them both.

She at first twisted away from him, a baby in her arms and two small children holding onto her dress. He was about to apologize when she looked up into his face. Her eyes widened and she reached out to him.

"Haiseb!"

Then she began to plead with him in a language he hadn't heard in a very very long time. Her bus had been delayed, she and her children had missed their connection, and the agent would not refund her money to buy new tickets. Worse, she had very little English and no way to contact her husband. All the forces that had conspired to move her family halfway across the world for the hope of a better future had seemed to desert her. They were causing quite the scene and even the Wiklas paused and turned an ear towards the drama.

Emmerick found himself answering her pleas, praising her strength and telling her all would be well. "*My name is Baka. I will help you.*"

He found himself leading her to the agent's window, her clutching his arm where the flesh throbbed as if his tattoo had been awakened. He saw out of a corner of his eye the Wiklas shrug and continue towards his gate.

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The black agent looked suspiciously from him to the traditionally dressed woman clutching his arm. He patted her hand, inquired about her destination, and told her it would all be alright before turning back to the ticket agent.

She let him talk for a minute before she called him out. “Sir, in English?”

He blinked. He hadn’t even realized he’d speaking another language. He cleared his throat. “Uh, sorry, yes.” Struggled to settle on an American accent, closer to this region. He proceeded to get the family tickets to Columbus where her husband had previously been studying before finding a way to get the whole family transplanted.

He waited with them, watching the time tick by on a large wall clock for an hour until it was time to board their train, even finding a traveling pastor that would keep an eye out for them once they got to Columbus. The mother didn’t repeat her title for him but he saw it in her face and it fired something in his long-dead heart. She had seen right through him, to the man he was and the place he had come from. He wished them well and watched with a pang as the youngest daughter waved goodbye.

The Wiklas was long gone, his train departing half an hour before, as Emmerick strode out of the station, hand over his arm feeling the long-gone tattoo pulsing just below the white of his skin. He would rent a car and get there twice as fast. The last hour of his life had given him a jolt of the past familiar, a taste of a home he’d lost, and a resolution for what he now knew he raced to protection.

According to Aubrey’s intel, Ohio was where Sophie Quinn had grown up, married the quarterback of her high school’s football team, and started a family. Sophie had apparently been attacked by unknown vampire assailants a year ago after miscarrying a child. Aubrey suspected at the time but now was certain that it had been Bellecroix taking her revenge. And now Bellecroix was sending the Wiklas to finish the job of ending Sophie’s human family, which consisted of an ex-husband and a little girl living on a farm, likely oblivious to the danger coming to end them.

As Emmerick finally cleared the city, setting his rental SUV at top legal speed, he tried to set aside the dread and focus on his quarry. But all he could manage to visualize was the face of the little African girl, waving goodbye, and her mother’s face as she gripped his arm and called to the ancient spirit within him. It was as if the mother feared in that moment not for herself or her family, but for another further away that needed his help even more.

A twelve-year-old daughter named Jasmine living in a town called Defiance. And Emmerick, with a resurgent sense of familial outrage and rediscovered purpose, couldn’t get there fast enough.



Catching an Empty Jar of Marmalade

The text told Aubrey all he needed to know to keep his dim sense of hope alight. Emmerick had made contact and the hunter was now engaged. He stuffed his cellphone into his inside vest pocket knowing how much his master hated all manner of electronics. With the other hand carrying a tray of pine needle tea, he pushed open the door to Valerian's chamber only to lean hard against the door and put a protective arm around the tray to avoid the intemperate figure in shiny black leather and silver chains blocking him on her way out.

"Galscythe, please, the histrionics do not suit you."

The taunting words caused the imposing figure to pause at the threshold and flick her mane of midnight hair crowned with a helmet of curved bullhorns to toss an enraged look back towards what Aubrey couldn't see.

To her unspoken response which only Valerian would've been able to sense, he replied, "I never lied to you. You just choose to ignore the truth."

Aubrey saw her black kohl rimmed eyes widen and her head flick to the very expansive velvet mahogany chair just beside the fireplace. With a single silent exhale, the chair shot to the rear of the room and exploded into shards. She rocked forward as if she would follow her blast but then pivoted on her toe and crashed through the door, leaving Aubrey to juggle his ceramic wares until the air in the room settled.

As he sighed and fully entered the room, letting the door click close behind him, he was surprised that Valerian stood tied to bedpost stark naked except for the steel chains that held him there and a barely contained smirk on his face. A cat o' nine tails lay on the stone floor, likely where Galscythe had dropped it from some offence.

In the hundreds of years that Aubrey had served Lord Valerian, this wasn't the most surprising scene he'd ever interrupted so he proceeded to set the tray on the side table which had served the now destroyed antique chair and turned back to the bed, producing a lockpick from somewhere within his vest pocket.

Just as he was stepping forward to free his master, Valerian flicked his wrists as easily as he blinked and the steel manacles popped open. Aubrey hadn't been completely surprised that Valerian was returning to full strength as his body healed from carrying the burden of one hundred and twenty-three silver disks as his negotiated peace with Emmerick, the man that Aubrey had now embroiled himself with. But the speed and vigor with which Valerian's powers returned as well as the, a-hum, appetite required to maintain the healing process was astounding.

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“Perhaps not the smartest idea to burn through all of your alliances in these uncertain times.” Just yesterday, Xi had yet again been seen storming out from the council room after inquiring after efforts to locate Bellecroix.

Valerian dismissed the advice with a hand as he bent to retrieve the whip. As he straightened, he tossed the whip like a baby rattle, “Bah, Galyscythe knows her place. But some things needed closure before company arrives.”

“And what company might that be?” Aubrey asked.

Valerian shot an astounded look at his faithful servant. “Darcie, of course.” He gave a single laugh to punctuate the absurdity of Aubrey’s question then strode over to the tray and poured himself a tall goblet of liquid from the carafe. The smell of spruce filled the room.

“You mean Sophie.” The comment was half question.

Aubrey watched with a new sense of unease as Valerian drank the goblet down seemingly in one gulp and then, after considering a refill, lifted the carafe itself to his mouth and drank the whole thing down greedily without spilling a drop.

The effect was immediate as tremors moved all over his body, percolating under his pale skin, leaving him to grip the table for a moment, arcing his back and bending his head back as he fangs fully extended and his blue eyes lit up like neon. He let out a low roar until the effect subsided, leaving him somewhat diminished in appearance and bearing.

Panting for a few moments, he lifted his gaze up to Aubrey, a much calmer and contemplative mood settling upon him. “Is there any more?”

Aubrey nodded, stirring himself to retrieve the tray. He began to head for the door without further comment but was halted by Valerian’s words.

“If you could find a way to produce more, a lot more,” his voice trailed off, suddenly contrite.

Aubrey turned back to him but said nothing, recognizing this Valerian as the one that would never mistake the woman that he had lost all those years ago with this new woman they had conspired to protect and gently introduce to her lifetimes of selves as she had wished.

“I must look my best, *be* my best when she arrives.”

He then busied himself with dressing for dinner without asking for any assistance.

“Is there some plan to bring her here that I can assist with?”

Valerian shrugged, a stillness overtaking him. “The scribe will bring her.”

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Aubrey felt fortunate that Valerian had his head bent, seeing to his pants so as not to see the shock on his own face. With all of the plans in motion, some of which he had carefully concealed from his lord, Aubrey had certainty in only one thing: Jesper would never bring his precious Sophie to this den of monsters. Whether this regenerated Valerian, who seemed to be teetering between euphoria and melancholy, was able to reconcile the last three years of meticulous planning to find her and save her with his sudden desire to bring her into the very heart of danger, Aubrey couldn't tell.

"Forgive me, my lord, but is that the wisest path, all things considered?"

For over a hundred years, Valerian had been the balance point of many different worlds, many different factions, equilibrium maintained through his own pain and toil. He had rebuilt his line and ensured they had a safe and effective home and hunting grounds. He'd toured the world to address blood toxins and diseases of all types to lessen the impact on their food source. He negotiated with Southern and Eastern horrors, establishing cardinal rules that effectively led to their Conclave, the first global government any immortals had ever had. And he'd sought to recover the ill-conceived efforts to expand vampire ranks by recapturing the Taint. Well, most of it. He held together an empire through intelligence, tact, and above all, patience.

His answer to why a simple human woman who continued to repeat her past would be a prize worth risking all that struck more fear into Aubrey than anything he'd seen yet.

"I need her Aubrey."

"My lord," Aubrey stated his understanding but in his own mind, he wondered at his master's sudden frailty and what it might mean for his own longevity if all things fell apart all over again. He'd come to finally accept that Sophie Quinn nee Darcie Sherbourne would always be an instrument of influence on his lord, had even learned to find the benefits in old recipes of her tinctures and skillfully manipulated his lord with a mere whisper of her memory. But this Valerian, he realized finally, was failing. The penance gone, the threat to her lessened, at least in his mind, had sucked him dry of purpose except his one last folly.

Aubrey whispered a silent pray.

You had better hold onto her with both hands this time, Scribe. Or I'm afraid none of us will survive this lord's fall.

Taxinomia Obscurus

The nails in the board screeched in complaint as they were pried from the crate. She'd had to chip into the board to get enough clearance for the crowbar's edge. Once she freed one end, she went to work on the other. It was slow work undertaken in the dark of her hotel room in her dubious mental state. With each board removed, she flung it aside and peeled back some of the protective canvas covering to reach

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the cloth underneath. A small flexible flashlight clipped to her shirt, she pushed up the cloth to reveal the surface underneath. A muscled calf.

“Not marble, “ she shook her head. Her fingers wandered up the lower part of leg only halting when she hit the limit of another board.

She picked up the crowbar again and worked on the next board, mumbling, “Not granite. Maybe if I can reach...”

Another fifteen minutes and a knee was visible. But she needed something to cut the pant leg away. She rummaged and found an utility knife in her trunk. She returned, carefully slashing at the fabric to free the leg.

She tilted the flashlight slightly away, the light indirectly shining off the deep red hued stone. Brick red. Some splotchiness in color with some grey, brown, and black hues. She took in a breath and tapped the metal blade against the leg. Nothing happened. She sighed, “Hardness, maybe a 7? So not howlite.” She stood and went back to her laptop, tapping furiously for a few minutes. She looked back to the crate and then returned, carrying the laptop. Kneeling again, she set the laptop aside, adjusted the flashlight again, and flicked the light over the leg. “Not translucent so not carnelian.”

She tapped a few more keystrokes into her search engine to broaden her results. *Red stone.*

She expelled a breath and sat back on her heels. She turned back to the crate. “It can’t be.” She took a few measured breaths. “Can it?”

As her eyes began to water, the resulting page seemed to mock her idiocy with a spectacular sense of the metaphysical:

Brecciated Jasper is known as a detoxifying stone because it can get rid of unhealthy energies or vibrations in your body, heart, mind, and spirit. It can support your body in recovering from a traumatic experience, and it can boost your sagging spirits so that you will feel optimistic again about life. And then: Brecciated Jasper is form of Jasper, which the multi-colored layers are enclosed together with a grey substance. It is a form of Jasper that consists of Haematite. Haematite is a grounding stone, which makes this stone an excellent gemstone for assisting you to make your feet on the ground and for endorsing feelings of stillness and wholeness, as well. Also, it has a stirring, revitalize energy that is said to support mental simplicity and profound happiness. It is also believed to take up off-putting energy, which allows you to expand a positive outlook on your life.

“Naw, just a scratch...or two. Oh, see. Already on the mend.” The memory crawled back into her head, as if she could reach out and brush her fingers against the stubbled chin.

She brushed the top of her hand against her eyes to expel the moisture and the vision. Tapped a few more keys to prove the hypothesis incorrect, met with immovable fact:

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Jasper is a variety of quartz that may contain up to 20 percent foreign materials or inclusions, including organic material and mineral oxides, which determine the color, pattern and appearance of the stone. Brecciated jasper contains hematite, an iron compound, which gives it both its red tones and the dark bands. It is primarily deep red--veined or patterned with brown, black and beige--and sometimes has clear crystal inclusions.

She put her head in her hands. A stone specifically formulated of impurities. She had thought if she might identify an injury, a place where a foreign material like the glass of the cabling used to tie him up had been embedded, she might find an answer to his continued Rigor Dormitus. And might have a chance to fix it, to free him. The form was meant to help heal when she'd been allowed to see it.

But as it was, she had no idea if this was normal for him; she doubted he'd ever shown it to anyone. She hadn't known he could fly; had even challenged him when he'd reacted to the assertion that it was a myth. The limits of her knowledge about his ability had multiplied tenfold last night and still left her stupefied as to who or what he was. It just showed in dry empiric relief that he was a stranger to her.

"Shit."

After a long stretch of time when all the logic of trying to puzzle a way for him to be freed had evaporated, she did the only thing that would give her any ease. She picked up the crowbar and worked another board free, fished under the canvas until she found it. His hand. She had piled up her pillows and a blanket and she laid back down, ignoring the odd angle of her shoulder and the splinters digging into her skin so she might squeeze his hand of brecciated jasper and hope against all hope that he'd find his own way back to her.

When sleep finally came, it was with the roar of a gaseous magnitude, a celestial glowing that set fire to all things and turned her hopes to ash and cinders that only a deluge of emerald fabric could salvage.