

The book cover features a central figure, a woman with dark, wavy hair, wearing an orange tank top and a black corset with silver buckles. She is standing against a dramatic, fiery background with a large, glowing orange and red sky, silhouettes of buildings, and flying creatures. The title 'RUSSIAN ROULETTE' is prominently displayed in large, white, serif font across the lower half. The author's name 'HELENA HAWTHORN' and the series title 'SERIES' are on the left. The number '1' is at the bottom, above a decorative flourish.

MAY FREIGHTER

HELENA  
HAWTHORN  
SERIES

# RUSSIAN ROULETTE

1



**RUSSIAN ROULETTE**  
Helena Hawthorn Series Vol. 1



**MAY FREIGHTER**



# Table of Contents

[HELENA HAWTHORN SERIES](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[1 THE JOURNAL](#)

[2 DOMAIN OF FATES](#)

[3 HUNTED](#)

[4 THE INTERVIEW](#)

[5 TAKEN](#)

[6 NIGHTMARES](#)

[7 AN UNDERSTANDING](#)

[8 NOT SO FRIENDLY BITES](#)

[9 THE INVITATION](#)

[10 SOUL-BOUND](#)

[11 UNITING ENERGIES](#)

[12 RUSSIAN ROULETTE](#)

[13 OUTBOUND](#)

[14 HIS CHILDE](#)

[15 THE DARKNESS BEYOND](#)

[16 ENDLESS NIGHTMARES](#)

[17 THE TRUTH](#)

[18 FATHER J. R.](#)

[19 NEW CAPTOR](#)

[20 ALL ALONE](#)

[21 NEW POWER](#)

[22 LIGHT AND DARK](#)

[23 THE COUNCIL](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[BONUS CHAPTER HAUNTED VALENTINES](#)

[LIKED THE BOOK?](#)

[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

Copyright © May Freighter, 2016.

The right of May Freighter to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her under the  
*Copyright Amendment (Moral Rights) Act 2000*.

This work is copyrighted. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, no part may be reproduced, copied, scanned, stored in a retrieval system, recorded or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written permission of the author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either a product of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously. All statements, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved.

**NOTE: This book is written in U.K. English.  
Some spelling may be different to U.S.**



# HELENA HAWTHORN SERIES

Alexander: Memoirs (Prequel/AVIL Series)

**Russian Roulette**

Demon Gates

Crumbling Control

Desired (Spin-Off Novella)

Monochrome Interview (AVIL Series)

Fated Origins

Cherished (Spin-Off Novella)

Dark Affiliations

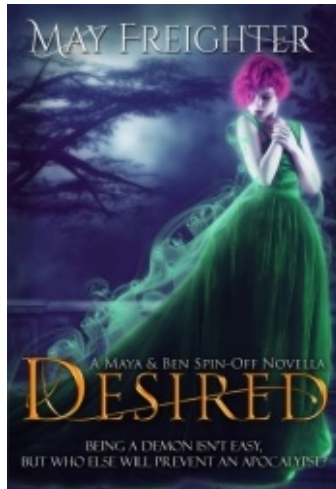
Blood Witch

Twisted Truths

## STAY UPDATED:

If you want to stay up to date with the author's book releases, follow her on social media.

**Want a free copy of *Desired*?**  
Sign up to May's Newsletter [here](#).



# READER INFORMATION

Throughout the story, you will encounter certain terminology that is relevant only to the Helena Hawthorn series. Here's a small glossary.

*Childe*: A human that had been turned into a vampire.

*Sire*: A title given to a vampire after he turned a human by sharing his energy with the person and then took their life.

*Council*: There are seven Councils that control the vampires. They prevent exposure to the world while trying to protect their people from the hunter attacks. A Council consists of 4-5 members, all of which are either respected or feared by the community.

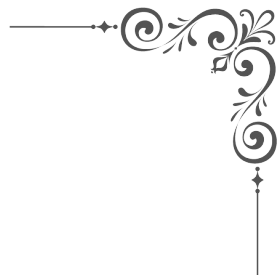
*Council's hounds* are vampires who voluntarily serve the Council or are hired for their abilities. The number per Council averages between 20-50 vampires, excluding ghouls who maintain the building and do dealings outside during daylight hours.

*Fleeting* is a term used for inhuman vampire speed. Usually, a vampire can cover a few miles before becoming tired. When they reach their limit, there is a danger of tearing their leg muscles, which can be both excruciating and slow to heal without ingestion of blood.

*Donors*: humans who donate to vampires after being affiliated in their circles and have accepted a vampire's protection. They tend to earn a good living and some even gain influential power in the human society through the vampire's connections.

*Humans* are kept out of the loop by the supernatural. The few who do possess the knowledge of their existence are too scared to reveal the details for fear of death or because no one would believe them.

*Ghouls* are humans who have ingested vampire blood right before death. The energy exchange never occurred with their sire as it would when creating a *childe*. Young vampires tend to mistake this as a process and bury the body in the ground without waiting, leaving the creature to awaken with an urge to eat the flesh of the dead.





A shiver induced by the stone wall ran through Helena. Her heart kicked into the next gear when she noted the restraints around her wrists. She struggled, tugging at the unforgiving shackles time and time again.

“Looks like she’s finally awake,” someone said in a gruff voice.

“Then get on with it,” another replied.

She whipped her head around in search of the voices. The sudden action blurred her vision, causing her to squint. A low-wattage bulb at the end of the room exposed crates and stacked boxes. A bald man sat at a table; his legs crossed at the heel whilst his beefy hands held the local newspaper.

The second man pushed away from the grimy wall, sauntering towards her. His unnerving grin revealed a set of elongated canines.

A breath caught in her throat.

“Aren’t you a tad bit young to be working for Alexander?” he asked.

A deep frown creased her face while her attention darted between her captors. She didn’t work for Alexander nor did she ever want to see him or Lucious again.

The stranger stopped a foot away from her. Dark, greasy hair clung to his scalp in thinning streaks. A few strands separated at the front, curtaining his heavy-lidded eyes. He reached out, grabbing her hair with a sharp twist and lifted her head to meet his narrowed eyes. “I asked you a question, human.”

Her nose wrinkled in disgust. His breath—a mixture of cheap tobacco, beer, and something else—caused her stomach to churn. *Panic will not solve anything*, she thought, yet her heart ignored her rationalisation.

“I don’t work for him,” she said, surprised her voice came out unshaken.

He waved at her thin shirt and smart trousers. “We saw you leaving his club looking like this.”

Helena fought the urge to roll her eyes. If he’d been inside, he would know Alexander’s staff didn’t wear uniforms. Well, the bouncers did... “This is what anyone would wear to an interview!”

His eyes flared with a light-grey glow, and she instantly regretted her snappy tone. She flinched under his menacing stare which made her think of a glowering two-year-old she used to babysit. The kid always shot daggers her way if she didn’t give him any candy.

“...you listening?” He let go of her hair with a sudden shove as he shouted at her.

Helena's head dunked, encouraging the faint ache to blaze into a full-blown headache.

"I think I hit her harder than I thought."

"Rick—" The companion set his newspaper on the table, "—if you can't get anything out of her..."

"I can!"

Helena figured the one who ran the operation was not 'Rick'. His literate friend held an authoritative confidence the man in front of her lacked. She imagined Rick struggling to read a novel by Tolstoy. The image alone made her lips twitch upwards.

"What're you smiling about? Don't you understand what's going on?" Rick snapped.

She glared at him. Arguing wouldn't help, but her mouth lost its filter. "Should I?"

Her left cheek exploded with a burning sting as he backhanded her across the face. Automatically, she moved to rub the pain away and realised with a sickening feeling what situation she was in—chained to a wall with two unknown men in a dingy room.

As a dull ache settled in her arms, she bit her lower lip to suppress her bitter tongue from bringing more trouble.

Rick leant in and peered into her face. His lips hovered next to her ear. "Let's see how much you know."

He grabbed the sides of her head, forcing her to look at him. When their eyes locked, he grinned.

Helena struggled, screaming, "Let go!"

"Calm down, human." His harsh tone switched to a soothing melody.

Right on cue, her body relaxed at his command. His glowing eyes became the centre of her universe. Anything he said would be a binding instruction.

Inside, she screamed, fighting his overpowering control, but nothing happened. *Why couldn't Lucious influence me and this idiot can?*

"Are you paying attention?"

"Yes."

"Will you obey my commands?"

Flat and emotionless, she answered him in an instant. "Yes."

Leaning in to the point their noses almost touched, Rick asked his golden question. "Do you work for Alexander?"

"No."

The grey glow in his eyes intensified, causing her to feel like she was floating. Her wrists throbbed. The metal cut deeper into her skin, and a groan

escaped her.

“Do you know Lucious?”

“Yes.”

The vampire’s fingers dug into her jaw, and she winced. “Where is he? What do you know about him?”

“Russian Roulette. He wanted to meet me to undo the link.”

The silent partner sprang from his chair, knocking it over as he rushed to his feet. “What kind of link?”

Words failed her as she fought through her jumbled mix of emotions.

Rick jerked her head backwards and hissed, “Answer his question.”

“I’m not sure. It was an accident.”

In his frustration, Rick shook her. “I’ll suck you dry if you don’t give me some proper answers!”

His partner pulled out his phone, typing something on the smooth glass screen. “She doesn’t have much information, but she can be useful in other ways.”

Rick trailed his fingers along her arms, inching his way closer to her jugular. “Can I play then?”

His influence on her dropped, and Helena glared at the side of his greasy head.

“You can feed but nothing else. We may be able to fetch a decent price for her later.”

Shivers ran through her when Rick faced her with a growing grin. There was little she could tell them about the link, so she couldn’t use that information as leverage. She didn’t know much about Lucious, Alexander, or their plans.

Helena groaned. Her headache transformed into a constant droning. Closing her eyes, her thoughts turned into a prayer for Michael to appear and tell her some good news. News, of any kind, was better than being with these monsters.

The leader glanced at them before his attention returned to his phone. “You have two minutes.” He strode out of the room without another word.

With Rick’s overseer gone, her smart remarks would lead her to an early grave. She eyed the closing door, willing the second man to return while her heart battered against her ribs.

Rick fished out a folding knife from his jeans’ pocket. Light bled back into his irises as he teased the blade open.

Helena squeezed her eyes shut. She wasn’t going to be his puppet again.

The cool metal tip touched her cheek. “If you don’t open your eyes, I will cut this pretty little face of yours until you do.”

She wavered. The stinging in her cheek hadn't gone away, and she wasn't keen on finding out what being chopped to pieces felt like. After all, he threatened with more than a paper cut. Clenching her teeth, she lifted her eyelids. One second of contact was enough to fall under his rule once more.

"Good. Don't move."

Her body refused any further movement, and she berated herself for being so weak.

One by one, the buttons of her blouse popped onto the concrete. With the last one gone; he pulled the material apart. His eyes twinkled as if he was a child, opening his Christmas present. He appraised her chest, and her heavy breathing filled the silence.

No matter how hard she fought his mental hold, she could do nothing. He grazed the knife across her pale skin. Blood rushed to the surface, trickling down her small breasts and staining her plain bra. He slid the dull side of the blade across her chest, entranced by the sweet perfume of her blood.

She was certain it couldn't be her lack of feminine curves that kept his attention.

His mental hold slipped, and she regained control of her limbs. When the knife touched her waist, her hips bucked. In one painful second, the sleek metal sank into her skin. An agonised scream escaped her, bouncing off the walls of the enclosed space.

The boss reappeared, shouting, "I thought I told you to feed and nothing else!"

Rick jerked the blade out. "This bitch is hard to control. Unless I'm looking right at her, she breaks the bloody hold."

"I don't give two shits about that," the man growled. "Leave her be until he comes for her. We must prepare."

Grumbling under his breath, Rick licked her blood off the blade and let out a satisfied groan. With a fleeting glance in her direction, he stashed his knife away and left with his partner.

Her mouth went dry. She studied the gash. Dark red tendrils descended her side. She rested her head against the wall, focusing on the chipped white ceiling to stop nausea from claiming her in its rising waves.

*What am I going to do? No one knows where I am,* she thought.

A silvery voice came from her right. "That's not true."

Her eyes darted to the side, and she grunted. A headache hit her like a hammer to the face. Her guardian angel stood three feet away with his angular features encased by his long, straight mane of golden hair.

She glared at him. "Where have you been?"

Michael bowed his head in apology. "I should have come sooner, I know. I wanted to find out who they contacted, so I followed—" He paused mid-sentence and rushed to her side. His hand hovered next her injuries. He gritted his teeth. "He hurt you."

"I'm alright, but can you—" She stopped short of asking him to untie her. This whole situation was too comical not to be in a TV drama. He was right there, but he couldn't save her. His ghostly presence forced him to become a mere observer in her realm. He couldn't help her in this predicament even if he wanted to. She knew it, he knew it, and the hurt on his face proved it.

Michael sighed. "He will come."

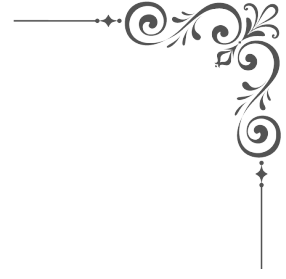
"And if I don't want to see him?"

"Helena, you know what will happen to you if you don't leave this place."

She arched a brow. "You called him names mere hours ago, what changed?"

"If he can get you out of here, I will adjust my terminology."

Helena snorted. *This day keeps on getting better and better.*



# 1

## THE JOURNAL

*Five days ago...*

**F** After sealing the final box, Helena stretched, relieving some of the dull pain in her lower back. She wiped the sweat off her forehead and surveyed her old bedroom. It was nothing more than an ocean of pale brown boxes and suitcases.

Double checking her things one last time, she closed her eyes. The sound of her beating heart enveloped her as happy memories merged with the familiar smell of rose scented candles on her windowsill. From downstairs, muffled voices of her mother and Richard floated up. This is where she grew up—a home she would miss.

Her fingers itched with anticipation and a smile tugged at her lips. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she reached under the pillow, retrieving a journal. She rested the two-inch-thick bulk on her lap. It had been on her mind ever since she rummaged through the dusty attic last night. Once she had laid eyes on the leather cover with carved fern leaves, she wanted to know the secrets held inside. Yet, priorities such as packing were paramount. If not done in time, she would be forced to listen to Laura's complaints until her ears bled.

She peeled back the jacket, revealing the first aged, yellow page. A list of names presented itself to her. They appeared handwritten by different people, possibly multiple owners of the journal. One name caught her attention. She skimmed through the strange diagrams and drawings of plants, recognising a few from her grandmother's garden when she was little. Faded, an archaic language filled the worn pages. She didn't even try pretending to comprehend it.

Beautiful curving letters sparked recognition and her hand froze. Her grandmother had been the last owner of this journal. Helena smiled at the bittersweet memory of them spending time together. The old woman read stories



to her of witches battling against the dark forces in the world—tales she would never forget.

Her grip tightened. The calm, happy memories decayed as the tragic episodes unfolded in her mind once more. Her mother's version was simply a story of a loving grandmother turning into a crazed woman as she ended her life by setting fire to their home. Yet, those fragments of her childhood remained a knot she couldn't unravel no matter how hard she tried.

Michael's words sprang into her mind, making her jump. "*Sasha is finishing the preparations. You should change.*"

"I'm busy," she replied.

"*This is your last night here. That thing cannot be more important than spending time with your parents.*"

She slammed the journal shut. "*Fine!*"

Standing, she cast a fleeting glance to its hiding place under the pillow and walked to her wardrobe. A set of clothes she had prepared for tonight's dinner awaited her on the top shelf. She changed out of her sweat-tinged tracksuit and into a baggy T-shirt with a pair of jeans.

As she opened the door, a delicious aroma greeted her. Her grumbling stomach led her downstairs where she found an excessive amount of food spread out on the round oak table. Her mother went overboard with preparations as per usual. Nonetheless, Helena refrained from pointing it out and took in an appreciative whiff of the roasted chicken.

Her step-father's salt-and-pepper hair bobbed as he battled with a bottle of wine. His two large brows scrunched, creating an impression of a dark unibrow.

"Don't just stand there." Her mother's underlying Russian accent never failed to show when she was anxious. With a huff, she piled plates and cutlery in Helena's hands and rushed back into the kitchen.

Helena set the table mumbling, "Well, hello to you too, Mum."

As Richard settled the bottle on the lacquered surface, his shoulders slumped. The small cork got stuck halfway in the bottle's neck, unwilling to move in either direction.

"We haven't had champagne in a while," Helena said.

"You're right. I think Sasha bought one for the occasion."

When he left the room, her mother reappeared, and two brown eyes zeroed in on Helena. Her fingers raked through her short, platinum hair, as she commenced the emotional bombardment. "Are you sure about moving out? You can stay with us until you finish studying or—"

Helena crossed her arms. "Mum, we had this discussion last week."

"Yes, we did."

She wanted to kick herself—upsetting her mother was not something she enjoyed. It would be easier for her to travel to and from college if she moved in with her friends. She glanced at the kitchen door. Richard was taking longer than he should have. So, she tapped her foot to try to melt the silence growing between them.

Her mother's transitory act of sadness disappeared, and she squared her shoulders, disapproval remained etched into the frown lines on her face.

"I know you're worried, Mum, but I'll be with Laura and Andrew."

Sasha relaxed her stance and hugged her daughter. "You are my only child. I can't help worrying."

Helena patted her back, unsure of what to say or do next. Thankfully, the heavens answered with a loud pop coming from the kitchen and a faint clinking of glasses.

Richard strolled into the room with a grin, revealing his pearly teeth as he held up an opened bottle of champagne and three champagne flutes. "I take it you two are doing well?"

"We're fine," her mother replied. She pulled away from Helena, folded her apron over the back of her chair, and took her seat.

Following Sasha's example, Helena sat next to her mother.

Richard poured each of them a drink and joined them at the table. The instant he took a sip from his glass, he cringed.

Helena glanced at her thighs to hide her snort. She loved her step-father. Even though he was busy as the Head of the Science Department, he remained a family man. He never complained and took care of her and her mother after her real father disappeared from their lives without so much as an explanation.

"Did you finish your registration?" Richard asked.

Helena raised her head. "Yeah, the second I got accepted."

"I'm concerned by your choice. Becoming a doctor or a lawyer would pay better than a—" Her mother waved her hand in the air, searching for the right word. "I don't even know what you can call your degree."

Helena looked away. Her mother's stony eyes held enough disappointment to drown an army. The silence continued to spread, and Helena clutched the cutlery. The metal warmed in her palms. "If I get bored, I will choose something else."

"*Bored?*" Sasha's voice rose.

Finished with the conversation, Helena switched her attention to her food.

Richard cleared his throat. "I heard there'll be quite a downpour tomorrow. Hope it won't hinder your move."

Her mother gave Helena a fleeting glare as if telling her their conversation wasn't over and faced her husband. "How bad will it be? I have to meet with the

girls.”

Helena took the distraction as a reprieve and mouthed a “thank you” to Richard who winked in return.



With dinner out of the way, Helena busied herself stacking the dishes into the dishwasher.

“Can I talk to you for a sec?” Richard’s deep baritone made her jump.

She nodded and straightened her back.

“First and foremost, you are always welcome here...” His eyes scanned the kitchen.

Helena looked around with him. When she didn’t notice anything out of the ordinary, she couldn’t help a smile creeping up. “Um, Richard?”

“Right, well, the second thing is that we love you. If there’s anything you need, we will be there to listen.” He faltered and spread his arms out, drawing her into an awkward bear hug. His lean body radiated warmth, and her heart swelled. “Call us if something happens or—”

“I think I got the point,” she mumbled into his shoulder.

He released her and rubbed the back of his neck. “You should rest. It’s an early start for everyone tomorrow.”

“I will.”

Once he left, she sped through putting the remaining dishes away while she analysed Richard’s behaviour. Was he worried about her moving out? He didn’t seem too concerned until now. So, why act like that all of a sudden? She shrugged and pressed the ‘on’ button on the dishwasher.

When she arrived at the top of the staircase, faint whispers from her mother’s room caused her to halt. She sneaked across the hallway and pressed her back against the wall.

“...you tell her?” Sasha’s agitated voice came first.

“I did. You shouldn’t worry so much. She’s doing great,” Richard replied.

Her mother’s voice rose. “What if something triggers her to remember?”

“Hush, Sasha. If she hears any of this, she will want to know more. All we can do is keep an eye on her. Restricting her will drive a wedge between you two, and I doubt that’s what you want.”

Helena clutched at her chest when the conversation ended. She staggered into her bedroom and dragged her feet until she collapsed on the bed. A sigh escaped her as she faced the ceiling. “What are they hiding from me?”

Michael materialised sitting next to her. He tracked her gaze to the phosphorescent stars that fascinated her in her childhood. “I remember the day

your step-father glued them on. He fell off this bed twice.”

Helena glanced at his broad back. “What are you implying?”

“Do you recall why he did that?”

“Richard said it was because I used to have nightmares when I was younger. Nightmares I don’t remember having...”

“You were a child. Think nothing of it.”

Helena sat bolt upright. “Are you serious? They’re hiding something from me, something important. I can feel it.”

Michael shifted, and their eyes met. She loved looking into the azure depths of his eyes. They were like two handpicked jewels. The longer you marvelled at their beauty, the less you wished to argue with the beholder. And, like real precious gems, they held many secrets.

He withheld a lot of information from her. Something was always missing out of the full picture—a forbidden piece of knowledge his angel bosses coveted. He wouldn’t tell her anything regarding them either.

“Memory is a fragile thing, especially at a young age.”

She glowered at him. “I have a good memory, Michael.”

“Do not look at me with such murderous intent. I have answered your question.”

Unable to help herself, she doubted his answer. Her childhood night terrors couldn’t be a plausible explanation why her parents were nervous. But the real answer eluded her.

“You’ll get wrinkles if you continue to brood over this.”

She fell back onto the bed and sighed. “Okay, I’ll let it go, for now.”

Michael lay next to her without indenting the mattress. His lack of a physical body confused her to this day. “Rest. You have a lot to do tomorrow.”

Not bothering to change into her pyjamas, she climbed under the covers and asked, “No matter what I choose, will you always support me?”

“Good night, Helena.”



She ran a hairbrush through her hair for the second time that morning, and their eyes met in the mirror. At least, Michael refrained from popping in when she was in the shower or on the loo.

Her eyes narrowed. “What?”

“It’s nothing.”

“You’ve been staring at me since I woke up. Tell me what the problem is! Is it the hair?”

The corner of his lips upturned. “You are nervous.”

Helena whipped around. “Any normal human being would be. It’s a life-changing decision.”

“What happened to the calm, collected, and analytical persona you like to portray?”

She folded her arms over her chest. “Anything you want to tell me?”

“If I had to say something, it would be that Andrew is at the front door.”

She glared at her guardian angel and rushed downstairs. Tweeting birds filled her ears, and she grunted. The tacky doorbell was her mother’s idea.

On the last step, she managed to avoid tripping over her feet by a mere millimetre. Between ragged breaths, she swung the door open and grinned at her soon-to-be roommate. “So, how do you want to do this?”

Andrew’s smile faltered. He tapped his chin with his index finger. “Hum, getting indoors should be my primary task.” He didn’t wait for her response and stepped inside with a single long stride. “And now we move stuff.”

Helena rolled her eyes. “Very funny. I meant is there any *particular* way we get my things over to the new place?”

“Don’t worry, Thorn, all will be revealed in time.”

She ignored the annoying nickname her friends gave her in school and peered around him. In her driveway, an unfamiliar chalk-white minivan broke the view of the park beyond.

“Is that yours?” she asked.

“Dad lent me one of his company cars for a day. He specifically told me not to crash it, so I hope your things won’t weigh down the vehicle.”

Helena hid her irritation behind a false smile. She signalled for him to accompany her. “Let’s get on with it.”

“Let’s get on with it, *please*.”

Less than amused, she stared at him.

“Spoilsport.” He ascended the stairs.

They paused at the bedroom door, and he said, “I bet everything in there is pink and frilly.”

“The more you talk, the more rubbish comes out of the big hole you call a mouth.”

He clasped his hand over his chest in a dramatic manner. “You wound me dearly, Thorn.”

With a shake of her head, Helena pushed past him, opening the door.

Andrew assessed the room, his expression betraying a touch of disappointment.

She smirked. “No pinks and no frills.”

“Baggy clothes, purple hair, and a dull bedroom... How are you still a girl?”

“Uh-uh.”



Until now, Andrew and Laura had kept the details of their new home a secret. They wanted to surprise her, and that she was. Her eyes widened at the sight of the red-brick apartment block that towered over them. To her, it appeared like a fortress. Perhaps having a castle wasn't a bad thing, especially when they could look out those oversized windows at the cityscape.

“This is the place?” she asked.

Andrew watched her with a hint of amusement. “Do you like it?”

She held back an urge to bounce on the spot, so she schooled her face into slight disinterest. “Until I see the inside, it's hard to judge.”

“Don't worry, your highness, we chose it with you in mind.”

She shot him a piercing glare, and he stuck out his tongue. In that moment, she questioned her decision to move in with her two best friends.

Andrew opened the glass door for her and ushered her inside. This allowed her to assess the simple white lobby. A chubby guard who manned the desk near the lift ignored them as they approached. In case something happened, she didn't expect him to be of any help.

“Earth to Thorn.” Andrew's face appeared a few inches away from hers. The smell of his fresh aftershave filled her nostrils while his forest-green eyes focused on her. “Do you want to check the place out or not?”

Her cheeks warmed. Desperate to avoid further embarrassment, she marched to the lifts where she mashed the button until the doors slid open, and they entered the metal confinement.

With a light laugh, he pressed the button on the panel, and they moved.

On the fifth floor, moss-green carpet and white-walled interior surrounded them. The morning sun spilt into the corridor in the shades of blue. Upon arrival at their apartment, Andrew swiped a key card above the handle.

Helena set foot in the hallway. Her running shoes squeaked along the polished hardwood flooring. With each step, her eyes widened as she advanced into a spacious living room. Two leather loveseat sofas greeted them with a large LED television on the wall. Photographs of the city landmarks and famous streets littered the walls. She even liked the look of the small ceramic ballerina on top of the coffee table.

“Just how much is the rent for this place?” Helena asked, eyeing the grand interior. It was impossible to get a spacious apartment in Dublin without forking out a tonne of money.



“Laura’s dad owns the whole building, and since he loves his daughter dearly...let’s say he gave us the place at an affordable rate.”

Helena raised a brow, doubting his answer.

With stealthy steps, Laura emerged behind them and slapped Helena on the shoulders. “Glad you made it. Where’s your stuff?”

While Helena calmed her pounding heart, Andrew patted Laura on the head, messing with her strawberry-blonde curls.

Laura Quinn wasn’t tall at five-foot-four, but what she lacked in height she made up for in personality. An argument with her was like fighting naked and alone against a horde of savages. Helena recalled a time when they debated who would win a local singing contest. Her loss turned into an escapade to bleach and dye her hair purple during a sleepover.

“I thought it would be best to get you in on the action,” Andrew said.

Laura pouted. “My arms ache from bringing my stuff here since you”—she poked his chest with her index finger—“didn’t bother to help me.”

Andrew raised his hands in defence. “Hey, I went to collect Thorn. She doesn’t have a car, unlike you. I bet if you wanted help, you’d make the security guard your man-slave.”

“Very funny, and he’s not my type.”

Helena rubbed her eyes. These two had too much energy, and it wasn’t even ten in the morning. “I’ll need the key card and the car keys.”

“Don’t worry, Thorn, I’m not going to abandon you and make you carry your *extremely* heavy boxes alone,” Andrew said.

Laura crossed her arms. “*Fine*, jeez, I’ll help.”

“Brilliant. The more the merrier.” Helena started for the door, and Laura stepped in her way.

“Forgot to ask you, how’s job hunting going? Do you want any help?”

“I’ll manage.”

“Alright, come to me when you’re stuck. Oh, and I’ll show you upstairs while Andrew goes to get your stuff.” Laura didn’t wait for the reply and half-dragged Helena up the metal staircase.

“Hey, who’s going to lend me a hand?” Andrew shouted after them.

Laura bent over the bannister. “We will join you soon enough. First, I’m going to show Helena her room.”

“Right and this has nothing to do with you being too lazy to help. So, you’re making her slack off, too?”

“We’ll be there in a few,” Laura yelled back. She dragged Helena away, pushing her into a room on the left. “What do you think?”

Helena's heart almost melted from happiness. Burgundy walls encompassed them in a well-lit bedroom. Pale-blue sheets covered the double bed that sat between two Butternut bedside tables. The furniture wasn't what she found to be the best feature of the room. From the window, she caught a glimpse of the Irish Sea and let out a soft sigh.

"I knew you'd appreciate it. I had to fight my inner instinct to give this room to you."

"This scenery is amazing, but why?"

Laura winked. "You can view this as a bribe."

Helena knew what was coming next. Laura was scheming something, and this was an intricate attempt to butter her up with a pretend grand gesture of selflessness. She waited until her friend drew in a breath.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Hel, but what do you think of Andrew?"

Helena quirked a brow. She expected something regarding household chores or helping Laura with her college assignments. This was unexpected.

"He's a friend?"

Laura tapped her foot on the soft black carpet. "I mean as a guy. Do you see him as a member of the opposite sex at least?"

Helena's brows drew into a slight frown. "What are you getting at?"

"Okay." Laura rolled her shoulders as if preparing for a fight. "It surprised me when he said this. Like, who would have thought, right? And I, as the best pal to both of you, think this might be a good thing. At first, I had some apprehensions on the subject. Do you know what I'm trying to say?"

Helena's frown deepened. "Can you speak in concise sentences and a bit slower?"

"Jesus, Hel, you're fast when it comes to anything other than romance. Basically, Andrew asked me if you liked him."

"Oh..." She hadn't considered such an option. Andrew couldn't be interested in her. Sure, he teased her a lot, and called her by her nickname she fought to ignore every time it reached her ears. The idea of dating him seemed as alien to her as enjoying sports. Was there an upside? She heard enough stories about friends falling out after starting a relationship. This bothered her.

"Alright, I can see you've gone into your own little world," Laura said.

"I don't know how to answer you. I mean, I—"

"Never thought about it."

Helena nodded.

"Well, give it a think. There's still time. As for us, we best go and help him out with your stuff or he will go into a complainathon."

Helena snorted. "I thought that's what you do."

“I will remember that, *Thorn*. Now, let’s do this.”



Around eight, instead of waiting for the Chinese takeaway to arrive, Helena went to her room. The splendid evening view from her window went unnoticed as she switched on the bedside table lamp.

*Finally, some peace and quiet*, she thought and reached into her suitcase for the journal.

Helena flicked through its pages, fascinated by the detail of the drawings, until she found the familiar handwriting and launched into reading the Russian text. Engrossed in the material, she missed the loud knocking on her door. When it opened, she slammed the journal shut and swept it under her pillow.

“What’s wrong?” she asked Laura.

“The food has arrived. I called and knocked but—” Laura pushed her way into the room and closed the door behind her. “What were you reading?”

Helena thought of a response, something that wouldn’t make Laura think she was insane for leafing through strange notebooks. “Just something I found in the attic the other day.”

Laura’s lips formed into a sly smile. “I bet your mum’s romantic escapades are written in it.”

Laura was a good friend, but sometimes, her curiosity could lead her to do things that invaded the privacy of others. Helena knew Laura wouldn’t be able to read it. That alone wouldn’t stop her. With the internet and online software, anything could be translated. So, Helena played along. “It’s embarrassing.”

“I knew it!” Laura strode over, her hand outstretched towards where the journal lay.

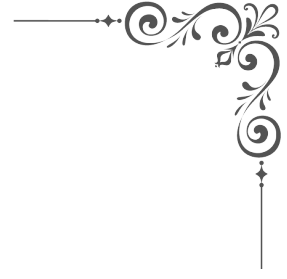
Helena shot up; her hands clamped on Laura’s shoulders. “The food will get cold.”

“Fine, but you’re going to tell me the dirty details later.”

“Sure.” She pushed her friend out of the room and called out to Michael with her mind.

He replied in an instant. “*Has something happened? You sound upset.*”

“*We’re going to have to talk about what’s inside that journal, and soon.*”



## 2

# DOMAIN OF FATES

Night came. To her knowledge, everyone else was asleep. She paced around the bed with her arms crossed and her mind working overtime.

“What are you trying to say?” she asked Michael.

He didn’t reply and looked at her as if he was in pain.

“Is this another secret you can’t tell me about? He’s my real Dad! If he’s been taken by the monster mentioned in grandmother’s journal, I have to know —” She blinked away the tears. “—there’s a chance he didn’t abandon us...”

“Helena,” Michael began in a soothing tone.

She threw her hands up in the air. “Don’t try to calm me and tell me how to find him!” Biting back a curse, she reminded herself to be quiet, which was becoming difficult with each passing second. She took a few calming breaths. “Please, tell me something. Anything!”

“Lie down.”

She shook her head. “I’m not in the mood for relaxation.”

“If you wish to know where he is that badly, I can’t stop you. I will help you, but you must pay attention.”

Helena’s eyes narrowed. She studied his poker face. As usual, he left no indicators to tell whether this was some kind of ploy to get her to relax and fall asleep or if he meant what he said. After mulling things over, she decided to listen to him and flopped on the soft linen sheets.

“Close your eyes,” Michael said.

“What will that accomplish?”

He vanished and spoke in her mind. “*You must heed my guidance without question.*”

Helena bit her lower lip and did as she was told.

“*Now concentrate on my voice and visualise your whole body inside of a bubble, or anything that makes you feel safe.*”

Within seconds, she imagined a steel sphere. An air bubble didn't give her any security. She hovered in its confining bounds while unnerving darkness encircled her. Being suspended in mid-air made her uneasy, so she used the same principles and conjured a chequered floor beneath her feet.

Michael appeared next to her. His body emitted a faint glow that soothed her nerves.

"What is this for?" she asked.

"This is a mental shield. It will protect you."

"Protect me from what?"

"It's dark in here," he said, "try creating some light."

Helena glared at him but didn't press him further, afraid he would change his mind and stop helping her. If doing this could be considered as help. She took a deep breath and concentrated once again. This time, luminosity flooded in from above.

Michael moved closer to the wall and, not wanting to stay behind, she did the same. He touched the smooth surface, speaking each syllable with care. "It seems you prefer metal as your guard. Many others use elements or towering fortresses to protect themselves. Some even erect multiple layers, which we should work on later."

She tried wrapping her brain around his explanation. More questions arose. "Who would create such things?"

Michael's big, warm hand landed on her head, and he showed a ghost of a smile.

Her eyes bulged out of their sockets. "You can touch me?"

"Your body is tied to your physical plane, and there I can do nothing. Here, your mind is crossing into one of the planes where I can reach you," he replied. His expression grew serious. "I'm not the only one who can get to you out here, which is why I asked you to design your own layer of protection. It will use some of your energy to maintain, so don't be surprised if you grow tired."

"Okay, so what's next?"

"Take my hand, and we will travel to my realm. You must stay close to me. Otherwise, I cannot mask your presence."

She placed her hand in his, and he closed his slender fingers. The air sizzled with energy as it cloaked around them.

In one swift gesture, Michael drew her into an embrace. A second later, the shields melted away, and they arrived in an enormous chamber with tall ivory pillars climbing upwards. A giant messy web of intertwined, multi-coloured threads formed the "ceiling". On the ground, they were arranged into neat,

endless rows held in place by golden weaving racks. The shiny ebony floor gave a resemblance of an inverted mirror by reflecting the entirety of the chamber.

She drew away from him and gaped at their surroundings. “Where are we?”

“Angel Realm, the Domain of Fates.”

Helena tore her eyes away from the colourful web. “What if someone finds us here? Won’t you get in trouble?”

“This place is no longer used by the Gods.”

“Gods? There’s more than one? I guess knowing that would make a lot of religions sad.”

Michael admired the ceiling with a hidden emotion she couldn’t place. “There was once one creator. He existed for so long even he forgot his origins. He split into many lesser deities to experience more things at the same time. To him sex, age, skin colour, even what he was, didn’t seem to matter.” His words lost their warmth. “It is the final outcome that’s important—a lesson to be learned.”

To her left, a grey strand vibrated. She reached out to touch it, but Michael moved to stand in her way, shaking his head.

“No touching.”

She frowned. “Why not? It’s just a string.”

“Those are not strings. They are links to different beings on the planet.”

Taken aback, Helena lost her ability to speak. He couldn’t be serious. She twirled around, taking a better look at the threads on the other side. White was the most common colour. A few grey, black, and red peeked out between them. In the distance, a golden string stood out amidst its monochrome neighbours like a beacon. She squinted to try to make out anything past that, but they dissolved into a white fog, too thick for her to see through.

“What do the colours mean?”

Michael studied her eager expression and sighed. “White is a normal human. A shade of grey stands for a person influenced by or used by darkness, or it could be a form of a supernatural being. Black colour belongs to dark creatures such as soul eaters, certain demons, monsters that should never be encountered in your realm.”

She pointed to a string and made her way towards it. “What about the golden one over there?”

“Saints,” he said as if the word explained itself.

“What are they? Holy people?”

“I will speak no further on the matter.”

Helena wanted to know more. This whole experience was different to anything she had ever done, yet, at the back of her mind, something bothered



her. It was as if she was forgetting something.

A blood-red thread stuck out in the row of white and grey. “What about the red?”

“Vampires,” Michael spat out the term as if it was something disgusting.

The scarlet cord held her attention. The strange energy pulsed through it. Helena read a lot of stories about folklore and mythical creatures, none of which fascinated her as much as the blood-drinking beings. At last, she had a chance to learn more about Michael’s world.

As she drew closer, she realised it wasn’t plain red. Rich, crimson liquid coursed the string’s length without losing a single drop to gravity.

“Remember, Helena, no touching.”

She didn’t seem to care for his words. In that moment, nothing else mattered. The string called to her, urged for her to take it, to have her fingers test its texture. Her skin started tingling, and she reached out.

Michael’s heavy hand landed on her shoulder, bringing her out of a dream-like state. “Perhaps we should return.”

“No!” she shouted.

Surprised by her outburst, Helena ducked her head in shame. *What’s wrong with me?* The whole room buzzed with life. Thinking became a chore and once her eyes focused, she saw her string sticking out of her gut. It seemed paler against the other whites and didn’t shoot upwards like the rest. She stroked it, revelling in the silky feel.

“What happens when two strings touch?”

Michael eyed the ceiling. “It adds an encounter.”

“And who decides that?”

“Fates.”

“But you said no one used this place anymore. How—”

Michael’s expression grew dark as if remembering something painful. “They were banished to the Human Realm a long time ago. Since then, things remain as the Gods wish for them to happen.”

Helena glanced back at the thread connected to a vampire somewhere on the planet. *Would we meet if our strings touched?* She shook her head. That wasn’t important right now. The reason they came here was to try to find her father.

Her mother insisted he left them, but Helena never believed it. What if something bad had happened to him because of the darkness described in grandmother’s journal? If vampires and other supernatural beings were real, there was a chance her grandmother wasn’t insane like her mother wanted her to believe. There was a possibility he was taken from them. She needed to know the truth.

“What about my dad? How do we find him?”

Michael seemed to think about it. “I will begin the search for his soul. Wait here and do not touch anything.”

He made his way back to the entrance. As the distance between them grew, a feminine voice whispered something like a chant at the back of her head.

Her body stiffened, and as if possessed, she grabbed the blood-red string. A chill rushed through her, raising the fine hairs on her arms and neck. The energy bordering the link was nothing compared to what surged through its core. It invaded her against her will.

“Helena, no!” Michael yelled.

But it was too late.

The chamber became a background noise, leaving behind an urge to unite the strings. When she understood what she had done, her white link had already wrapped itself around the vampire’s.

Her heartbeat thudded in her ribcage and her vision dissipated. A powerful wave of alien energy fought its way through the bond which appeared like a red-and-white bow. She clasped her hand over her burning chest. Every part of her body hurt but didn’t at the same time.

An eternal minute later, her knees give way, and the last thing she remembered was a sturdy pair of arms catching her fall.



The clock on her nightstand told her that it was two in the morning. She sat up, switched on the lamp, and rubbed her face with her hands. Michael had played her. The Angel Realm and her mental shields had to be a dream. He must have used some kind of trick to get her to relax long enough to drift off.

She winced as a pounding headache kept knocking on her skull with a hammering force.

“Michael?” she called out, needing answers.

Helena drew in a breath and prepared to call out again when he materialised. His expression forced her to shut her mouth. Outrage glistened in his eyes. And, if whatever happened was real, he had the right to be mad. She had ignored his request to not touch anything. It wasn’t like she had a choice. Her body moved by itself.

“Michael, I—”

“I don’t have much time to sit here discussing things with you, Helena. It was a mistake bringing you along. I should have gone by myself. What you—” He paused as if searching for the right word. “—*did*, should have never happened.”

Helena massaged her temples, hoping to soothe the ache inside. It was similar to the first hangover she got on her sixteenth birthday when Laura bet, she could drink more. Even then, her friend emerged victorious.

“I’m sorry I did that. I wasn’t myself. It was as if—”

“No need for excuses. I must go. We will deal with the mess you’ve caused later.” He vanished.

Helena crawled out of bed. His stinging words unsettled her heart. She knew it was her fault for what happened, yet she didn’t do it on purpose.

Leaving her room in search of some aspirin, she edged down the hall. The living room’s lamplight misted in from below, causing her to pause. Everyone had to go to college in the morning. It didn’t make sense for someone to stay up.

Her headache forgotten, she tiptoed to the staircase and peered over the bannister. She entertained the thought it could be a vampire waiting for her. Rationalisation banished the idiotic idea of a possible intruder who by no means could locate her. The strings created an encounter. It wasn’t a tracking device. Or, so she hoped.

The soles of her bare feet stung from the icy metal steps. Halfway down, she made a mental note to buy some slippers for the apartment when she got the chance. With her attention on the gleam, she cursed for thinking it could be a blood-sucking monster when Andrew came into view. He sat on the sofa with an opened book on his lap.

“You’re still up?” she asked.

Andrew’s head jerked in her direction. “God, don’t creep up on me, Thorn. You know I have a weak heart.”

Helena rolled her eyes. He was a sports freak and played on multiple teams in school. She never understood the fascination with running around a field after a ball in sweaty uniforms. As a contrast to him and Laura, she hated exercise and anything associated with it.

Andrew shut the book and deposited it on the coffee table. It wasn’t what she expected. She assumed he was reading comics or something even less mentally stimulating, not a volume on finance.

He ambled over and lifted her head with a gentle touch. “You look pale, you should go back to sleep.”

The earlier conversation with Laura came flooding back, and her cheeks flushed red. Without realising it, she took a step back.

Andrew scratched the back of his head and shifted his weight from one leg to the other. “I see Laura has already talked to you about...um...*that*.”

Helena’s mind raced as she struggled to find the right words. Did she need to give him her reply now or was there a certain amount of time she had to think

about the issue? Could she answer him?

“Helena, I didn’t ask you myself because I didn’t want to put you on the spot, or maybe it’s because I’m a coward. I don’t know. What I do know is I like you and have liked you for quite some time.”

He wasn’t wearing his cheesy smile. He seemed sincere, and it made her feel something—her heart constricted as if wishing to pause in anticipation of what was to come.

“Andrew, I don’t know.”

His hair danced on his forehead as he closed the gap between them. “Take your time.”

Her breath caught when she became aware of how green his eyes were and how smooth his clean-shaven face appeared. She fought the urge to touch his cheek to test her theory for herself.

“Promise me you will think about it,” he said.

Her mouth went dry so, instead of saying anything, she gave him a quick nod.

With a boyish grin, Andrew patted her on her head as he often did with Laura. “Don’t stay up too late, Thorn.”

She frowned when he left. He returned to his normal self in a split second whereas she stayed lost in her thoughts.

Helena placed her hand over her excited heart and imagined what it would be like to date him. Although he seemed laid back about his studies, seeing him reading his coursework prior to the term’s beginning told her that he was anything but incompetent. He also seemed to have a serious side which never surfaced until now. And, the way he watched her tonight was not the same way he regarded other girls. He wasn’t kidding, and it scared her.



For lunch, she met with Laura in an on-campus coffee shop. It was full of cheerful banter and loud conversations Helena tried her best to ignore. She closed her eyes to enjoy the scent of a freshly brewed macchiato in her hands. Ever since she woke up, a chill clung to her.

Laura sighed. “Are you even listening to me?”

Helena glanced up as her friend bit into her ham and cheese sandwich. Breadcrumbs scattered on Laura’s navy voile shirt, and she brushed them away with a flick of her hand.

“I can see that talking about my day has bored you senseless, so tell me about yours.”

“Nothing happened. Lectures, new lecturers, and an excess of people, that’s the best way I can describe my day.”

Tilting her head to one side, Laura said, “With me and Andrew as your best friends, I thought you’d have learned how to make a friend or two. What are you waiting for?”

Helena tried thinking of a good enough excuse to get Laura off her back. The arguments she could use seemed either insignificant or something her friend would immediately counter.

“See, even you can’t think of a reason for not making new friends!”

Helena lifted her hands in defeat. “Alright, I will try to talk to people tomorrow.”

Laura put her sandwich on her plate and stared at her. “Tomorrow?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing much other than you sound like a nicotine addict who might quit smoking after her last cigarette runs out.”

With a drawn-out sigh, Helena scanned the crowd. College students were scattered around in their groups, sharing their first day experiences with one another. She was ready to drop her search when she spotted a girl from her class, waiting to place an order at the till. She nodded in the direction of the short-haired brunette in antique-looking clothing. “She’s in two of my modules.”

Laura turned in her seat to take a quick peek. An unsettling grin stretched her rosy lips. “I think we’ve found your target.”

“Now? You want me to talk to her now?”

“No better time than the present, Thorn. Go get her.” She made a shooing motion with her hands.

With much reluctance, Helena rose and checked her sweater for stains. It was clean. She straightened her posture and mentally grunted. *It’s going to be fine.*

Chocolate-brown eyes spied her approach with weariness. Her palms started sweating, so she wiped them on her jeans. The distance was covered too quickly for her liking. Stopping two feet away, she cleared her throat. “Hey, I’m Helena Hawthorn, and we are—”

“—in the same Mythology class. I am Nadine Smidt.”

They shook hands, and Helena blanked.

“Is there anything else you wanted to tell me?”

“Oh, right, yes!” Helena pointed to Laura. “Would you like to have lunch with us? I mean, we are almost finished, but it’d be great if you could join us, anyway.”

Nadine’s face lit up. “Let me get something to drink, and I will come over.”

Making a beeline for the table, Helena knew what to expect. Laura already had her 'I told you so!' look plastered on her face. Things turned out better than she had anticipated. Maybe Laura was right and introducing herself to someone was enough. That thought made Helena draw back on giddiness. There remained many secrets she hid from her family and friends. This was just another person to add to the list of people who wouldn't know the real her.

"What's wrong? I thought you'd be happy to make a new friend." Laura's concerned voice brought Helena back.

"I am. I'm sorry. I was thinking about an assignment I was given."

Laura raised a brow, saying nothing.

When Nadine reached them, Laura shot out of her seat. The sudden movement nearly knocked her chair back.

"I completely forgot!" Laura started clearing her things. "I've got work to do. We'll talk at home." She winked at Helena and turned to Nadine. "It was nice meeting you."

As if her curled strawberry-blond hair caught fire, Laura fled the room, abandoning Helena to her quest.

Nadine didn't seem to react to the situation at all. She pulled up a chair and sipped her green tea.

When Helena thought of something to say, it seemed irrelevant, so she remained silent.

After a few minutes, Nadine said, "Why did you choose to talk to me?"

"What do you mean?"

The girl settled the cup on her platter with the elegance of a lady, something Helena hadn't seen before. "There are a couple of other people here from our course. Why pick me?"

She thought about it and shrugged. "You were the first person I recognised, and I thought we could chat, maybe become friends."

Nadine's eyes grew wary. "You wish to be friends with me?"

"I would like to, yeah."

Hiding her face behind her cup, Nadine didn't respond. In two quick gulps, she consumed her drink, gathered her things, and smiled that same pleasant smile that unnerved Helena. "I believe I have class now. I am sorry I couldn't stay longer..."

Left to stare at the space where her classmate sat mere seconds ago, Helena assumed that the chair possessed some kind of mystical power that repelled people, or she was terrible at making new friends. She was leaning towards the latter.





Once her lectures ended, Helena headed into the City Centre to hand out her resume. She didn't care where she found work as long as something came up. Even though Laura and Andrew assured her it was alright for her to take her time finding a job, she didn't want to rely on them. She didn't want to depend on anyone for that matter. Not even Michael.

Now that she thought about it, she hadn't seen him since they fought. Was he getting an earful from his angelic higher-ups about her mistake?

She came to a stop at the traffic lights on Dame Street, and her shoulders dropped. The sun had already set. How long did she have before the old buildings were claimed by the night?

Across the road, out of a cluster of people, a man clothed in all black stood out. He couldn't be older than thirty, she guessed. He was tall and wore a leather jacket and a pair of fitted jeans. The wind toyed with his raven hair. His tantalising full lips formed into a half-smile, and she registered that his piercing blue eyes returned her stare.

Heat crept to her cheeks, and she diverted her attention to the ground. She hadn't expected him to notice her.

The crowd shifted. She marched with the rest of the group, avoiding further eye contact with people until she bumped into someone.

Two large hands wrapped around her arms, steadying her. That wasn't what made her raise her head. Where the person touched her, a prickling sensation spread through her skin. Apologies fled her mouth. Looking up, she realised it was the same handsome guy. She had made a mistake in her initial judgement. His eyes were a mixture of blue-brown that had a hypnotic effect on her.

A painful sting reverberated through her chest and strange energy tickled her gut.

Surprise registered on the man's face.

She tore herself away from him and rushed to create as much distance between them as possible. Whatever she felt was not normal and anything abnormal she learned to separate herself from, except Michael who swore his mission was to watch over her.

She glanced over her shoulder multiple times, making sure he wasn't there. When she rounded a corner, Helena smacked her forehead with her palm. Who would pursue a weirdo that ran off like a frightened animal?

With a heavy sigh, she moved on to drop off her remaining resumes near her bus stop before taking the first bus home. It was high time she got answers about her father and the strange link she had created.



Beyond her protective barrier, things seemed different. Something lurked in the shadows. It's slithering energy circled her shields like a shark, waiting for a crack—an opening of some kind. The hairs on the back of her neck rose, and Michael's words replayed in her mind, 'Things would try to get in.'

Whatever was attempting to find its way inside did not seem friendly. The creature's energy chilled her to the bone, causing her to shiver. So, she did the only thing she could think of and reinforced her shields with another layer of steel. Although she didn't know whether it worked or not, she somehow felt a lot safer. That sensation didn't last long.

The darkness coiled around her, forcing her barrier to creak like a submarine being crushed by the pressure of the water. A rivulet of sweat rolled down her forehead as she deepened her concentration.

*What is that thing?*

Fighting back, she fortified the structure with as many layers as she could create. Her energy depleted, and she crumbled to her knees. She gasped for air to fill her heaving chest.

In the distance, a bright light flashed.

*Michael, she thought. He has returned.*

His soothing glow cloaked her shields and forced the shadow back, bringing relief and warmth to her chilled body. At last, she could decrease her barriers to a single layer.

Amidst it all, someone's voice called out to her, telling her to wake up. There was an undertone of panic as the words bombarded her with sudden urgency.

Someone tugged on her shoulders until her concentration broke, and she was staring into a pair of green orbs. The panicked mumbling came from Andrew. His face hovered above hers.

"Thank God you woke up!" He pulled her into a bone-crushing hug.

Unsure of what was going on, she awkwardly hugged him back. Her skin got covered with gooseflesh as she shivered within the confines of his hold. She felt as if she had been dunked in a pool of ice-cold water. Her pyjamas proved it.

Through chattering teeth, she managed to say, "I'm cold."

Andrew hurried to her wardrobe, flinging it open. He selected whatever clothes he could find and returned to her side. Without warning, he started lifting her T-shirt.

She slapped his hands away. "Whoa, I can change by myself!"

He seemed to realise what he was doing and turned away. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

"Why are you here?"

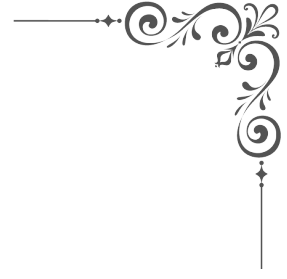
“Laura took a call for you downstairs. Since she left a note and went out, I came in to give you the good news. But, when I found you, you were groaning in pain. I rushed over to make sure you were alright... You were freezing to the touch, and I tried to wake you.” He shoved his hands into his pockets. “The rest you know yourself.”

Helena hugged him again. “Thanks for waking me up.”

Wrapping his arms around her, he brought her closer to his chest. The warmth he radiated made her skin tingle. Not wanting to part, she buried her face in the soft material of his shirt.

Once her shivering subsided, she awkwardly peeled away. “So, what was the call about?”

Andrew’s lips stretched into a smile. “Looks like you got an interview tomorrow.”



### 3

## HUNTED

Three heavy knocks echoed throughout one of London's backstreets. While waiting, Lucious shoved his hands in his pockets. A quick glance over his shoulder told him that no one else was nearby. He wrinkled his nose. The stench of rotting meat invaded his acute sense of smell from a large half-opened bin a couple of feet away. He didn't care what or who laid inside.

Lucious glared at the metal door. He jerked his hand out of his pocket, ready to knock again when he heard heavy bolts being shifted on the other side.

*About time*, he thought and straightened his posture.

The door opened a fraction. "Why did you come here?"

Lucious scowled at the cramped space. Half a face of a short, dark-skinned vampire was the only thing visible. "You were the one who called me here." He forced the door open. "Tell me what's going on."

The scrawny, hunched over man studied him with eyes as dark as the unlit alley he stood in. "You know exactly what's going on!" Phil said, moving out of the way.

Lucious strode inside the dull, grey-walled office and collapsed into a chair. The soles of his boots stuck to the linoleum. Next to his foot, he noted a bloodstain and wondered who had pissed off the old man enough to bleed here.

"You are the informant, Phil, so get on with it."

When five bolts locked in place, Phil ambled to his desk and eased into his leather seat. He entwined his fingers on the stack of newspapers and stared at Lucious as if searching for something.

Undaunted, Lucious returned the gesture. He didn't care how old Phil was or how influential. What mattered was the information he had stumbled upon.

Phil ran a shaky hand over his balding head. "You don't know the Council is looking for you, do you?"

If his heart could beat, it would stop once more. "Why me?"

“I don’t know. No explanations were given. If you are discovered, you must be brought to them.”

Lucious pinched the bridge of his nose. What did the all-powerful Council want with him? As far as he knew, he abided by the common laws. There were no plausible reasons for their summons. “You said you found a new trail.”

With a shake of his head, Phil replied, “You are a fool for not running when you heard the words ‘Council’ and ‘looking for you’ in the same sentence. But I will entertain the need to find your sire’s murderers. After all, you’ve helped me clean up a few of my messes.”

The old vampire rummaged through a pile of coffee-stained paperwork on his messy desk. Not an inch of the surface could be seen under the mounds of papers, materials, and manila folders.

*Does he even remember the original colour of his furniture?*

Phil smirked and pulled out a note from the stack. He offered it to Lucious who reached into his leather jacket’s pocket and retrieved a small velvet case.

“Hope she likes it,” Lucious said.

Phil traded for the box and hid it in his desk drawer. “She always does.”

Rising to his full height, Lucious stashed the info away. He didn’t dare dream this was the last time he had to chase the hunters responsible for Anna’s death. “Are you certain the information is correct this time?”

“It has been over a century, Lucious. No one saw it happen, and we have exhausted every avenue. I’m as good as the information given.”

“You’re right.”

He turned to leave when Phil added, “Be watchful of the Council’s hounds. They never fail in their hunt.”

With an incline of his head, Lucious left. He had little time to find whoever the named person on the note was.

While listening out for footsteps, he made his way to the closest phone store. One of the halogen bulbs blinked on and off, but no human inside took notice of it.

The girl serving the customers couldn’t be older than twenty-five. A bright smile graced her lips when he walked in. Her dead, bleached hair swayed from side to side as she bounced over, smelling of cheap cigarettes and overpowering perfume. “How can I help you?”

Her high-pitched tone summoned forth a headache he didn’t have time for. “I need the cheapest phone you have.”

The sales assistant pursed her lips. Seconds ticked by. She eventually ran over to the wall decorated with different mobiles. She pointed to four bulky models. “They range from ten to fifty pounds. Which one would you like?”

Lucious yearned for the end of their conversation, so he wouldn't have to take her outside and silence her harpy-like screeches. He wasn't hungry from his recent feeding, but her voice drilled away at his sanity.

He took out two fifty-pound notes from his pocket. "I have informed you of what I need, child."

She scowled. "No need to be a dick, mate."

Lucious scanned the orange interior. The browsing customers had left, and he was alone with this impudent human. He lifted her face, gaining her attention. Her body relaxed once their gazes locked. Being undead had its perks. One of them was an ability to influence weak-willed humans to do his bidding.

A blue glow escaped through his irises, intensifying the effect of his hold on her mental state. With minute force, her will to fight shattered. Once he was certain of his control, he drew away from her.

"Give me the cheapest one, human. The rest you can put on it as credit."

He handed her the money, and she scurried off, eager to please him. When she returned, he left the store and copied the minimal number of contacts to his new phone. He took out the battery from his old device and discarded it into the nearest bin. The elders had countless ways of tracking. He wasn't about to give in without a fight.

He dialled the one person he could trust, and his friend answered after the first ring.

"Alexander, it's me."

There was a heavy sigh on the other end. "Where are you?"

He scanned the dark alleys he walked past. "Still in London. I got a new lead."

"Are you insane? The Council wants you captured, and you are strolling through the streets without a care?"

Lucious smirked at his friend's concern. "Don't worry. If this intel is correct, I can finally relax. Anna will have her peace."

"And if it's not and you're caught, what then?" Rapid typing accompanied Alexander's words. "Look, I can get you on a private jet, and you can lie low at my club for a while."

"I can't go. Not yet. What if—"

"Come here, and I will track down your new lead myself."

"I have to do this alone. I will meet with you once it is done." Lucious ended the call when he heard the beginning of a furious retort.

Tucking the phone in his back pocket, he headed for his hideout. Over the century, he learned that staying in the same place for long brought nothing but

trouble. The elders weren't the only people who wanted him found. He wouldn't be surprised if whoever put him on their radar was someone he had pissed off.

With his vampiric speed, he *fleeted* through the dark alleys and into a few buildings in case he was followed. Having arrived at his apartment, time continued chipping away at the night's sky.

*This is it.* He took out the piece of paper that burned a hole in his pocket since he left Phil's office and read the name. His shoulders slumped. It didn't ring a bell. Once everyone close to Anna was scratched off the list, the names became a generic label. What did he expect?

Lucious strode to the fridge, pulled the heavy door open, and took out a beer. He popped the cap off. Taking a swig of the chilled contents, he collapsed on his torn divan to mull things over.

A strange flowery scent encompassed him, invading his mental shields with foreign energy. His right hand tensed around the bottle and the other shot to his aching stomach. He doubled over in pain and slid to the ground. The bottle burst in his firm hold, and he grunted as the glass sliced his hand. Beer mixed with his blood, staining an already dirty rug beneath him.

The stranger's energy retreated, leaving behind a unique connection.

He clambered into a sitting position and rubbed his gut. The pain subsided as fast as it came. He didn't like it. Many vampires swore the Council had witches working for them. The two races didn't see eye to eye at times, but there were a few rogues willing to bend the rules of their community to benefit themselves.

He took out his burner phone and dialled Alexander. Once again, his friend picked up without delay.

"Do you know any witches in my vicinity?" Lucious asked.

"What happened?"

"Something I didn't expect."

Alexander sighed. "Did you get cursed by a witch, too?"

Lucious burst into laughter. With the way things were turning out today, it wouldn't surprise him if that was their next goal. "No, I am merely being tracked by one."

"I'm glad you have retained your sense of humour, old friend, but it's not the right time for it."

Lucious stood. Eyeing the ruined bottle of beer on the floor, he contemplated whether it was worth uncorking another one. "So, can you help me or not?"

Alexander grumbled something in Russian, and the sound of laptop keys came through the speaker. "Sorry, the only witch who would aid us is here."

"You're not saying that to get me to come over, are you?" A shuffling noise beyond the door made him halt. This building wasn't well-populated, and he

made certain no one lived on the same floor as him. He turned the phone off and slid it into his back pocket. Light on his feet, Lucious edged closer to the door, listening for movement outside.

Upon reaching the door, it burst off its hinges. A split second passed, and he was pinned to the ground by a vampire who was worthy of being a professional wrestler.

A cold, hard object pressed against his side, and he stopped struggling. The hounds carried weaponry with silver ammunition which, in the wrong place, was a death sentence to anyone of their kind.

*Today is not a good day.*

“Lucious Ellwood, you are hereby ordered to attend your trial tomorrow, and I am here to escort you.” The vampire grasped Lucious’ throat. “Any attempt to fight me will result in your immediate execution.”

Lucious kept most of his body as still as possible. Meanwhile, he used his free hand to search nearby. His fingers found the broken bottle and gripped around the neck.

“Did I make myself clear?”

“Perfectly.” Lucious lifted himself and mid-roll plunged the jagged edge straight into the hound’s chest. The sound of cracking bone overpowered the loud explosion from the intruder’s gun.

A scream tore out of the man’s mouth as he scrambled away. His back hit the wall and, with trembling hands, he reached for the glass bottle protruding from his ribcage whilst trying to aim his pistol.

Lucious didn’t bother to stick around and wait. Where there was one hound, there could be another.

A curse left his lips, and he fled the building. He ran until fatigue swept over him, and his calves burned. There wouldn’t be a single place where he would be welcome now that even Alexander heard the news. He was dead meat to the rest of the vampire community.

Lucious leant against the side of an office building and contemplated his next move. He had two choices: abandon his lead and figure out why the elders were after him or stay and try dodging the Council as he continued his search. Neither option appealed to him.

He slammed his fist into the wall, causing uneven red chips of brick to fall. The cut from the bottle had already healed and was replaced by a fresh layer of skin. No other choice remained. For the last time, he drew his phone out of his pocket and sent Alexander a message: *I’m taking you up on your offer. L*





Lucious boarded Alexander's private jet as the sun rose above the horizon. At least, the weather was on his side, hiding the heinous rays behind the stormy, grey clouds.

A beautiful flight attendant swayed her hips in her skin-tight skirt while she led him to his seat. She handed him a smartphone and an envelope with his name on it.

He took the offered items and fell into the leather armchair where he tore off the envelope's side.

"Would you like to feed, Mr Ellwood?" she asked, pulling her ebony locks away from her neck.

His throat went dry, and the ache in his stomach informed him it was empty. *I should have finished my beer.*

The woman slid onto his lap, extending her neck as an offering. Her spicy perfume invaded his senses. Placing her palms on his shoulders, she drew close until she was a few inches away from his lips.

Using the pad of his thumb to stroke her jugular, he brought the pulsating vein near the surface, causing her to moan and dig her nails into his jacket. Uncomfortable in his seat, he shifted. A silver gleam next to his neck alerted him.

He pushed the girl off, sending her to the ground with a loud thud.

"You should have behaved, Mr Ellwood!" She lunged at him with a syringe in her left hand.

He grasped her wrists, pulling them both above her head.

"Bastard!" she shouted, not stopping her struggle as he jerked the sharp object out of her hand and tossed it away.

The pilot rushed out of the cockpit. "Is something wrong back here?"

Lucious barely contained his bark of laughter when he glanced at the panicked human peering from behind the separation curtain with his mouth agape.

The flight attendant seized Lucious' distraction as an opportunity and kicked him in the crown jewels.

Electrifying agony spread through his lower half as he folded in on himself. Black spots marred his vision while he struggled to retain his standing position. His nostrils flared. Past the pain between his legs, he concentrated on his spiking anger.

The girl scrambled on all fours towards the syringe.

"I guess"—Lucious took a handful of her dark hair and lifted her head to meet his eyes—"I will have that dinner you so kindly offered." He bit into her neck, not caring if he was hurting her.

She screamed and flailed in his arms as he sucked her life blood into him. A rumble escaped his throat. This human tasted of cigarette ash and dirt, ruining her sweetness.

Once he drained her, he tossed her lifeless husk to one side.

“Sir, ar-are you alright?” the pilot asked as he wiped his palms on his black trousers.

Lucious raised a brow at the question. Alexander had a knack for hiring odd employees, some more murderous than the others. “As well as I can be.”

The pilot returned to the cockpit with quivering legs, providing Lucious with the peace and quiet he craved.

In the envelope, he found a card with Alexander’s cursive handwriting. One sentence in black ink contrasted against the white paper: *Look out for the flight attendant.*

Lucious pinched the bridge of his nose. His friend sure had a bizarre sense of humour. Exhausted after the ordeal, he closed his eyes. He felt the connection that tugged at his gut. But, for some reason, the further he got from England, the more excited it grew.



Lucious awoke from the loud ringing next to him. The time on the bright screen of his phone told him it was ten minutes past 6 p.m.

He grumbled a greeting and studied his whereabouts. He was in a hotel room, lying on the bed near a set of drawn pink polka dot curtains. It was dark enough for him to have to squint to make out where the door was. The pilot must have brought him here after he drifted off. With the hounds on his trail and the exhausting search for his sire’s killer, he had become open for an attack.

“I take it you’re still alive,” Alexander said.

“Next time you send me a present like that, call me beforehand. There was no time to read your beautiful handwriting during her attempt to kill me.”

Alexander laughed. “I didn’t send her, but I had my suspicions.” His amusement faded. “It’s time for you to get up. I have arranged for you to meet the witch.”

Lucious slipped into his black leather jacket. “Tell me where and when.”



Much of Dublin remained the same. Humans hated change as much as vampires. The more the world morphed into something new, the harder the adjustment came to either race or such was his interpretation.

He stopped at the traffic lights. The ache in his gut resumed, so he attempted to rub it better, but it made no difference. He ignored it by looking ahead. A handful of people across the street were staring at him, most of which were women of different ages, but one stood out. Her hazel eyes dissected his soul, and when he forced a smile, she looked away like a guilty thief.

The light changed to green, and he moved closer to where the girl would pass. With her head down, she bumped into him, and he caught her. The moment his hands landed on her shoulders, the pain stopped, and his fingers tingled with alien energy.

*What is she?*

She assessed him with large eyes. They didn't belong to a well-trained witch he expected to find. This was a girl no older than twenty. There was no way she could possess the power to track him from another country. Then again, she could be part of the local Circle.

The wind blew past, filling his nostrils with her flowery scent, and he knew he was not mistaken.

She tore away from him and hurried past.

The car on his left honked, telling him the lights had changed.

Without further delay, Lucious shadowed her. Innocent or not, she had created a connection he did not need. If the Council reached her first, she could locate him with ease. He couldn't allow that.

The girl glanced over her shoulder occasionally. Her caution didn't bother him. Hiding in the dark was something he grew accustomed to when hunting his prey.

Once she reached a bus stop, she placed her hand on her chest as if trying to calm her heart. There was nothing noteworthy to her. She wore simple clothes: jeans and an anorak. Rushing into a store, she bumped into a burly man. A flurry of apologies stumbled out of her mouth, and she kept her head low. She manoeuvred around the shop to meet with the clerk, handed something over, and ran outside to catch her bus.

Lucious waited for the bus to pass. He entered the busy store, closing in on the clerk with long strides.

A teenager behind the counter asked, "Do you need any help?"

He concentrated on the kid's eyes, and the teen's expression slackened.

"Hand over what the purple-head gave you."

The teen produced a few sheets of stapled paper titled 'CV'.

Sitting on the bench in the nearby park, he skimmed through her resume. She was nineteen—a child. She had given her contact details, but no address—smart girl. He scanned the pages for anything else that could give him an idea of what

she was. To his dismay, there was no more useful information, so he saved her phone number.



Lucious arrived at the private estate belonging to one of his oldest friends. He paused at the three-storey Victorian mansion Alexander had converted into a nightclub sometime in the mid-nineteenth century. A red neon sign above the entrance had curving letters moulded into the words 'Russian Roulette' irradiating the place like a Christmas tree in this dark hour.

He approached the beginning of the queue where a bouncer guarded the main door to the club. "I'm here to see Alexander."

The man whose nametag read 'Dean' sized him up with one look. "And, you are?"

"Expected. Be a good fellow and step aside."

With his patience wearing thin, Lucious released the hold on his mental shields. He let his energy leak out and tightened it around the bouncer. An extra century of being alive gave a vampire more power over the young.

Dean sensed the intrusion and took an uncertain step back. He beckoned for Lucious to pass. "I hope you're not here to cause trouble."

Lucious ignored him and ambled inside. Things hadn't changed much since the last visit. The plum-coloured reception room seemed darker with sparsely spaced low-wattage bulbs embedded in the ceiling. The loud boom of rock music guided him to where Tanya, Alexander's sole *childe*, sat with a fashion magazine on her lap.

Without looking up, she pointed at the price list on the wall.

"Tanya, where is he?"

She dropped her copy of *Vogue* at the sound of his voice and bounced out of her seat. Without warning, she launched herself at him, trapping him in a tight embrace.

"I have missed you. You have not called in forever," she whispered into his ear.

Lucious peeled her arms off and moved out of her reach. "I'm sorry, I've been busy."

Flicking her blonde hair back, she pouted. "That is what they all say."

When he didn't offer anything, she sighed and gestured to the hallway on her left. "He should be in his office. You know the way."

He started for the door, and she grasped his arm. The palm of her hand pressed onto his chest and her long nails dug in through the leather of his jacket.

Yet, he felt nothing when she flirted with him. No matter how many years had passed, he had accumulated no romantic feelings for her.

“Come see me after you’re done or if you need anything.” She winked.

Lucious wanted to shake her off and head over to Alexander. Fighting that urge, he gave her a light peck on a cheek.

“Will do, luv,” he whispered back.

“You’re such a tease,” she said, retreating to her desk.

Lucious took this chance to find Alexander’s office. He followed a long dimly lit corridor cluttered with posters of bands he had no interest in. Once he reached the steel door at the end of the windowless path, he stopped.

Raising his hand, he knocked once. The sound reverberated through the thick metal. Upon hearing an invitation, he entered the room and groaned in annoyance at Alexander’s intimate scene playing out.

Alexander was notorious for having multiple partners in bed. Today was no different. A lean, pale man rested between two just as naked women on a king-sized bed.

Lucious diverted his attention to the interior of the office. The ebony desk was overflowing with paperwork, more posters, and balance sheets. Black marble tiles gleamed beneath his booted feet. They contrasted against the ivory furniture in the room. Those were the only two shades Alexander approved of—something that existed outside the standard colour range, like vampires among humans.

“Don’t be shy,” Alexander said. “You can come and join us if you like.”

Lucious shook his head and plopped into an armchair across from the desk.

Alexander whispered something to the girls, and they climbed off the bed. He found a pair of white suit trousers on the floor and tugged them on. Once half-dressed, he nudged a short-haired brunette’s side. “Allow me to offer you some dinner then.”

The young woman glanced over her shoulder at Alexander as if asking for permission.

With a semi-interested expression, Lucious watched her gliding towards him. She looked too young to be here. On her slender body, he counted a dozen bite marks and grimaced.

Lucious lifted his hand in protest. “No, thank you. I already ate.”

The brunette ran her hands over her small breasts. “Are you sure, honey?”

“Quite.” He dismissed the human by diverting his attention to Alexander. “We need to talk.”

His friend raked his fingers through his short platinum hair. Pale-grey eyes assessed Lucious from underneath his dark brows. He barked something in

Italian, and the girls scattered to gather their clothes. It did not take long until they ran out of the office, muttering their displeasure under their breath.

As Alexander strode over, Lucious tried recalling their last meeting. Although he visited Ireland a decade ago, he didn't drop by the club. His interest lay with the lead he was chasing which, in the end, led him nowhere. The last time they spoke face to face had been close to fifty years ago when things went south with Zafira—a time best forgotten.

Lucious rose from his seat and extended his hand in the form of a handshake. "It has been too long."

"It sure has." Alexander ignored his hand and drew Lucious into a tight hug. "As always, all manners and awkwardness. You Brits need to learn to relax more."

Immobile from the embrace, Lucious patted Alexander on the back.

Alexander chuckled and released him without another word. He opened his drinks cabinet in his desk. "Shall I bother offering you another drink?"

"I think I need it after everything that's going on."

"And, what is going on?" Alexander found two crystal glasses from his second drawer, filled them mid-way with amber alcohol from a decanter and handed one over.

"It would seem you already know."

"If I knew, I would not risk my immunity to hide a fugitive from Eliza and the rest of the Council. Come with me."

They passed through a set of double doors into a spacious living room. Its walls were hidden by bookcases and antique daggers resting in their glass cases.

Alexander sat on the white leather Chesterfield sofa. "I'm listening."

Lucious took the invitation and relaxed into an armchair across from him. He placed his drink on the glass coffee table and clasped his hands together over his stomach. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Why not begin with why you didn't go to the witch you wanted to see? I got an earful of how I wasted her time and that she's on the verge of cursing us both."

"It's because I found her."

Alexander's dark brows drew together. "Found who?"

"The witch, or whatever she is, that created the connection between us." He recalled the way she looked—almost too innocent for her own good.

"And what? You let her go?"

Lucious grinned. "I got her name and phone number."

Alexander downed his poison of choice. "To be honest, I don't know why you didn't take her with you. I would have influenced and fucked her until she

told me who she was working for.”

“I am not into kids, Alexander.”

Alexander’s brows shot up. “Hum, a young witch with tracking spell capabilities? This I have got to see.”

“It’s not a tracking spell. It’s something else.”

“Alright, I’ll bite.” Alexander lifted his laptop from the seat next to him and nestled it on his lap. “Tell me her details, and I’ll see what I can find out about her.”

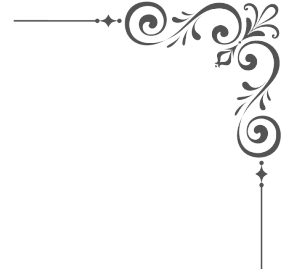
Lucious did as instructed. While his friend worked away on his computer, he finished his scotch.

Ten minutes passed, and Alexander blew out a hefty sigh. “She doesn’t belong to any Wiccan Circles in the databases I possess. She is a...student and is almost normal.”

“*Almost* normal?”

“Looks like our little witch got a lot of therapy as a kid, but her records are sealed. I can’t gain access to that information from here. Want me to send someone to retrieve the data?”

Lucious rubbed his chin with interest. “Why don’t we ask her in person? I have an idea.”



## 4

# THE INTERVIEW

The loud bang of the front door told her Andrew had left the apartment. Since last night, she wasn't sure how to look him in the eye. She was cold after her nightmare and needed warmth. That's all.

But was that a lie? There was no reason for it to be.

Helena packed her new notebooks and college materials into her bag. In her wardrobe, she found a pair of black slacks and a white blouse. She hated wearing white. It wasn't practical for everyday use. Whoever decided to wrap the brides in it had no qualms about the cleaning bill, and the whole talk about the bride being pure was overrated by today's standards.

After tying her hair into a ponytail, she grabbed her backpack and went downstairs.

Laura was busying herself around the kitchen. Her hair was pulled back into a bun and held together by colourful Chinese hair sticks.

Helena dropped her bag on the sofa before converging on the kettle.

A stern expression settled on her friend's face as she rested her hip against the counter with a butchered strawberry in one hand and a knife in the other. "So, why are you avoiding Andrew?"

"What are you making?"

Laura's lips formed into a devilish grin. "You're deflecting."

Helena checked if the kettle had enough water and flicked the switch. There was nothing to say, so she went with the truth. "We...hugged last night."

Laura squealed, and Helena rolled her eyes.

Raising her hands in defence, Helena said, "I was having a bad dream, and he woke me up. We hugged on impulse. There's nothing special about it."

"Keep telling yourself that and you'll die alone."

Helena drummed her fingernails on the counter. *Why can't the kettle boil any faster?* She didn't want to discuss romantic relationships this early in the



morning, not when she had to question Michael about her dad. Ever since they came back from the Angel Realm, she couldn't get a hold of him. It was as if he avoided her on purpose. *Which is exactly what you're doing to Andrew...*

"Since I won't be getting any cheesy details out of you, I will have to use my baking charms on him later."

Helena grabbed her arm. "You can't!"

"Sure, I can. He will sing like a fat canary once I'm done."

"The last time you baked, we had to go on a diet for a week!"

"I believe it's a fair trade." Laura set the knife down, her smile never leaving her lips. "Either you tell me the whole lot this instant or ready the scales."

Helena snorted. The whole situation was ridiculous, but this was what she loved about Laura. She always wanted to help or cheer people up even if, at first, she tortured the information out of them.

"Okay, I'll talk."

The kettle gave a satisfied whistle, and Helena poured her coffee while she told Laura an edited version of last night's events, taking out bits that could be interpreted as mental asylum worthy.

Her friend listened intently with an occasional nod. Once finished, Laura ate the last of her cereal with an amused look on her face.

"What?" Helena asked.

"Want to know what I think?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Laura shook her head. "When you come home tonight, walk up to the guy and give him a big smooch."

She raised a brow. "A smooch?"

"Exactly!" Laura slung her pink-and-yellow-striped bag over her shoulder. "That's what the two of you need. Now, I best go or I'll be late for class."

Helena glanced at the clock. It was getting close to nine, which meant she had over an hour to spare.

Her friend gave her a reassuring pat on the back. "Remember, a nice, long smooch. If I come back and you aren't dating, I will bake for a month."

"Warning acknowledged," Helena replied, and Laura left with a slight skip in her step. *At least someone is happy.*

Taking her time, she finished her luke-warm coffee. She headed over to the sofa where she stretched across the seats and closed her eyes, concentrating on her shields. The more times she practised, the quicker she slipped out of her conscious state.

Inside her mental barriers, she stood on the chequered floor. The familiar steel bubble contained her. This time, it was peaceful. Whatever was fighting its

way in was gone, and the encounter became another unanswered question.

She called out to Michael, and he responded by materialising in front of her. His golden complexion had lost some of its colour.

“We need to talk,” she said.

Michael remained in place, immobile. She wasn’t sure if he was breathing.

“Okay...let’s start with the thing last night. What was it?”

“It’s none of your concern.”

Dissatisfied with the abrupt response, she tried formulating another approach since he hated being pressed for answers. When she got close to asking him about his life as an angel, he would vanish without another word.

She balled her hands and stopped herself from throwing needless accusations his way. The creature from last night was trying to get inside of *her* mental shields. Of course, it concerned her!

“Michael, please tell me.”

“If that is all, I have to go.”

She caught the cream-coloured sleeve of his shirt, most of which was hidden by a brown leather vest held closed by a column of silver buckles on his chest. The rough cotton irritated her skin, but she clung to it, nonetheless.

He scowled at her.

“You can’t go. What about—” She cast her eyes downwards, trying to think of what else she could throw at him. From her gut protruded the same pale string she remembered in the fate’s domain. Absentmindedly, she stroked it.

“What about the string? Why is it still here?”

Michael’s warm hand touched hers, and she lifted her eyes to meet his. For a brief wisp of a second, she thought he would say something, but he pushed her hand away. “You must trust me, Helena. I am here to watch over you. What I am not here to do is answer your endless barrage of questions.”

His prickling words hurt. She wasn’t sure if that was what he wanted, but that was what she got. Her fingers tugged on the string, and it gave a light hum in response. Ever since he took her to the Angel Realm, she thought he would help her with her search. She didn’t even know if he got into trouble for helping her.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Michael’s expression softened. “All I ask is that you trust me. I will always be by your side, no matter what.” His fingers gently caressed her cheek as if she was made of fragile glass. “The link you have created with the vampire must be broken as soon as I find a way. It is dangerous. So, tonight, when you return home and profess your feelings for your human friend, I will do my best to shatter the connection. Are we in agreement?”

Helena didn't want any more problems with the supernatural. She had to worry about finding her father—wherever he was—instead of exposing herself to needless danger.

“Alright.”



Her backpack did an erratic dance on her back as she ran towards the Arts Block. She didn't expect her bus to breakdown in the middle of an already congested street. Luck truly had abandoned her today.

She peeled back her jacket sleeve, checking the time. Her class started in three minutes. Panting, she burst into the building full of energetic students and loud nattering. Dodging the people around her as she pushed her body to its limits, she covered the distance she had left to get to her lecture hall. At the door, she spied her classmate.

“Nadine, wait!” she called out.

The girl halted. “Good morning.”

Helena couldn't push away the unease growing inside of her. Nadine acted almost displeased with her presence. She had taken Laura's encouragement of making friends to heart and wanted to be sure she had done her best.

Slipping her hands into her jeans' pockets, Helena said, “I'm sorry if I offended you the last time we spoke.”

Nadine's brown eyes focused on Helena. For someone so young, they held a hardened concoction of hardships and knowledge. And, once the dreaded tell-tale sign of a pleasant smile appeared, Helena mentally prepared for the final blow to her inability to make friends.

“You haven't offended me. I had to leave early to get to my appointment.”

Helena fought not to gape. *Is she serious?* She pursed her lips. She hadn't thought their conversation would get further than a greeting.

“The class is about to start. Would you like to sit together?” Nadine asked.

Grinning like a fool, Helena pranced after her into the lecture hall while giving herself a mental pat on the back for a job well done. Laura would be proud.



Helena waited in her seat, next to Nadine, for the crowd of students to leave. She turned her head, checking on her new friend. For some reason, Nadine moved like a lost kitten and a strange surge of protectiveness surfaced in Helena.

“Would you be free for lunch?” Helena asked.

Nadine checked her journal. There were a lot of things written for the evening, none of which Helena could make out from the tiny scribbles.

"I have time."

They left the lecture hall. The corridor was almost empty except for a few students who were sitting on the floor, chatting.

Helena decided to go back to the cafe where they formally introduced themselves. Her fingers played with the metal catch on her bag while the silence between them was filled with an occasional conversation of the passers-by. She couldn't figure out if Nadine preferred the quiet or was waiting for Helena to start talking.

"The essay we were given on ancient Egypt, have you decided what to write about?"

The girl tilted her head to one side. "I think I will enjoy this assignment. It is about the history of how far we, humans, have come."

They turned the corner. The walls were covered in posters for an upcoming party. Helena eyed them with distaste. Parties, nightclubs, and concerts were not her usual gigs. She preferred to keep away from crowded places.

"I never found Egyptians to be interesting," Helena admitted. "Slavery is not my cup of tea."

"I don't believe any pure soul would side with cruelty against others."

Helena studied Nadine's face. She smiled that same, mysterious smile that confused Helena. "Why do you do that?"

Nadine frowned. It was the first natural emotion she displayed that morning. "What do you mean?"

"You smile, but it doesn't feel genuine."

Nadine stopped on the stairs; her face tilted downwards.

"Look, I didn't mean to upset you..."

Nadine shook her head. She brushed her fringe out of her eyes and smiled. The first real, bright smile Helena had seen that made her heart flutter.

"No one has said that to me before. Many stay away once they find out more about me... About the *real* me." Nadine resumed her descent.

A million questions pushed against one another for priority in her head. Anyone normal would feign disinterest and change the topic. Helena couldn't do it. She wanted to know why this girl erected a barrier around her to keep others away.

Helena caught the girl's arm at the bottom of the stairs. "Do you torture puppies or drive the wrong way down a one-way street or something?"

Nadine looked away and nibbled on her dry lower lip. What Helena saw in her eyes when she lifted them was deep, heart-wrenching sorrow.

“I cannot have friends or people close to me because they will be hunted by the same darkness that follows me.” Nadine’s fringe fell over her eyes like armour. “I nearly forgot. I have somewhere I need to be.”

Helena grasped her by the shoulders, forcing the girl to remain in place. For once, she didn’t say what was on her mind. While she thought about her next words, Nadine pushed her hands away.

“Helena, people like you shine brightly. I don’t wish for you to come to harm because of me.”

“Don’t you think I should be given a chance to decide for myself?”

“You do not understand the dangers of being involved with me!”

“Then explain them to me.”

Nadine’s warm hand touched Helena’s cheek. “I’m sorry for this, but I will show you instead.”

Helena’s body relaxed and her vision darkened. Amidst the void, blurry images swam before her eyes. She focused on them. The more they flicked through, the clearer they became.

At first, she saw a fog-like darkness blanketing the dirt at her feet. She lifted her eyes and was met with glowing red orbs. They popped open everywhere, their full attention fastened on her. The darkness shifted, and she realised that it wasn’t fog but a mass of bodies; hundreds of smooth, scaled, furry, starved ebony bodies intertwined together like a nest. It was impossible to know where one began and another ended. Their clawed hands reached out for her as if trying to draw her into the tangled mess.

Cold air enveloped her, seeping through her skin with ease. She shivered. She didn’t want those creatures to touch her or be anywhere near her.

*This isn’t real, she assured herself. It’s nothing more than a crazy dream.*

Long, bony hands wrapped around her ankle. They squeezed, hard.

A cry of discomfort left her as she staggered backwards, severing her connection with Nadine’s hold. Helena was about to give her a piece of her mind but froze when she saw tears marring Nadine’s heart-shaped face.

Nadine bowed her head. “I’m sorry, I must leave. Please forget about me.”

Helena reached out but dropped her hand a second later. The cold in the dream stayed with her. It chilled her to the very core of her soul even though her ankle no longer hurt.

Whatever Nadine was, she wasn’t normal, and normal was what Helena needed these days.



The day at college was over, and the sun started its descent over the dull city, bathing the sky in multi-coloured hues. Helena changed into her interview clothes in the toilets and caught a taxi outside her college. When she gave the address to the driver, he looked her over with a smirk as if he knew more than she did.

Ignoring his rude behaviour, she kept her mouth shut and focused on the interview—anything that kept her from Nadine and her visions.

The last time she went to an interview was two years ago, which she had failed miserably. She hadn't prepared for the bombardment of questions about current fashion trends or how much she knew about the company. To her, clothes were a means to keep her from exposing herself to all. People in the district where her taxi stopped had a different idea since they displayed more flesh than was necessary in their hip-hugging miniskirts and low-cut tops.

"Is this the right address?" she asked, undoing her seatbelt.

He nodded and looked at her bag expectantly.

She eyed the women queuing outside of the Victorian manor. A bright red neon sign above the door told her that she was, after all, at the Russian Roulette.

Helena paid the driver and stepped out of the taxi with reluctance. She had no opportunity to change her mind. The car drove off, kicking up the gravel with its tires. One of the stones hit her thigh, and she shot a glare at the retreating vehicle.

*Why am I even here?*

She reminded herself about independence and that she needed a job to support that goal. Yet, imagining herself working in a night club provided her with little comfort.

*Maybe they have a desk job?*

Helena wrapped her jacket tighter around her shivering form. She felt awkward and out of place with a bulky backpack slung over her shoulder when the other females held sparkly clutch purses. She took in a steadying breath. It helped settle the strange sensation that tickled her stomach as she strode over to a six-foot-tall imposing bouncer manning the entrance.

He glared at her, and she mentally crossed him off the checklist of people she would get along with.

"I'm here for an interview." At least, her words weren't trembling as much as her insides from the death stare he was giving her.

The bouncer crossed his arms over his wide chest. The movement stretched the material of his black T-shirt enough to show an intimidating mass of muscle beneath. "Name?"

Somehow, he made a simple word sound threatening, too. Helena recited her name, and he opened the door behind him. As she passed the threshold, she was met with a flood of complaints from other customers who were awaiting their turn.

Helena raised her head high and trudged onward. The dark corridor led to a reception where a single woman sat behind a bare desk, holding a fashion magazine in her manicured hands. Her expensive, bright-red heels rested on the table. Helena glanced at her feet because the receptionist's position made the black skirt roll up her thighs, displaying her lacy lingerie to the world.

"Welcome to the Russian Roulette." The blonde eyed Helena's clothes with a grimace. "You must be the interviewee."

Managing a nod, Helena waited for further instructions.

The blonde pointed to the corridor next to the one she came from. "That way. Second last door on your right."

Helena's throat ran dry. She swallowed what little saliva pooled in her mouth. With her own fabricated reassurances, she headed in the indicated direction. Her gut tingled more. She couldn't understand what was happening. It was as if her soul string was trying to tell her something.

Helena paused at the door, making sure she was in the right place. She knocked, but nothing happened, so she opted for entering. After all, this was most likely a waiting room.

She pushed on the cool metal handle and, with an almost silent click, the door opened. Peeking inside, she studied the monochromatic décor. A Blackwood minibar with half-empty bottles of whisky on its smooth surface stood to her right. Two white leather sofas were in the middle of the expansive room. Her eyes settled on the two men sitting on them—opposite from one another as day and night.

A man with pale, platinum hair studied her. His unsettling silver eyes reflected something close to disgust and irritation than the warm welcome she was hoping for. She looked at her clothes. They were perfectly fine for an interview.

At the back of her mind, alarm bells rang. She dismissed them as pre-interview jitters.

He rose, showing off his crisp, white suit, and motioned for her to take a seat opposite him. Neither of her interviewers spoke. Perhaps it was a test of some kind. And, if it was, she hoped the end was near.

"*Helena, run!*" Michael's words rang in her head loud enough for her to cringe.

She stopped in her tracks, willing him to explain what he meant by his outburst.

*“They are not what you think they are. Excuse yourself. Say you need to use the bathroom. Anything will do. Hurry!”*

Helena’s heartbeat voiced its panic while she struggled to put an excuse together. “Is there a bathroom here?”

The pale man broke his intense study of her and glanced at the second stranger. She saw his short raven hair and a set of shoulders hugged by a black leather jacket. He seemed familiar.

*“Leave. Now!”* Michael shouted.

Helena didn’t bother waiting any longer for an answer. Whirling on her heels, she rushed for the door. She didn’t get a chance to reach it. Something solid slammed her into the wall, and she grunted in pain.

“I believe we have some unfinished business to discuss, my dear,” a deep husky voice whispered into her ear.

She tuned in on his English accent the instant the first few words left his full lips.

“I need to go!” She pushed away from the wall.

“If you attempt to run, you will perish.” His cold words filled her with paralysing dread. The tall stranger grasped her by the upper arms and turned her around, pressing her back against his solid chest. Her backpack slid from her shoulder, and he took it away. He discarded it next to the minibar, and she noted there was now one man sitting on the sofa.

Helena tilted her head to one side, attempting to piece together how a person could get up in time to block her way without her seeing or hearing him.

They walked to the sofa, and he pushed her into a seat. The stranger collapsed next to her with little grace while keeping his blue-brown eyes honed on her face.

Helena’s mind rang with recollection. “You!” She wanted to curse herself for not figuring this out right away. She felt the same strange tingling in her gut the first time she met him on the street.

The handsome stranger flashed a set of white teeth, showing her what she had feared to see—two elongated canines.

“Vampire,” she voiced her thought.

“Lucious, are you sure this child is Wiccan?” his companion asked.

Without ceasing eye contact with her, Lucious replied, “I don’t know what she is, Alexander. She isn’t falling for my influence.”

Helena couldn’t fathom a thing they said and scooted to one side.



Lightning fast, his hand caught her shoulder and drew her close enough to have their thighs touching.

She scowled. "What do you think you're doing?"

Lucious chuckled. "I like her. She has spirit."

"Stop talking as if I'm not here!"

She bit her lip, sensing their eyes on her after her outburst. *Why isn't Michael saying anything? Is he waiting for something I don't know about?* She cried out inside her mind for her guardian. *How could he abandon me at a crucial time like this?*

Alexander rose from his seat and grasped her jaw between his thumb and index finger. "Speak out of turn or lie to us, *witch*, and I will rip your heart out of your ribcage."

Helena shuddered, not sure whether the chill consuming her body came from his cold words or his touch.

Alexander's hand retreated, and he resumed sitting across from them. He rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands. "Now then, tell us what you are."

Paralysed by her raging nerves, she gathered her fragmented courage. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I'm human."

Lucious lifted her face, forcing her to look at him. His unusual eyes glowed blue. She couldn't help wondering what that meant.

Seconds ticked by. The glow in his eyes intensified until he frowned and dropped his hand. "Unless you have extraordinary self-discipline, my dear, you are more than you're letting on, even when your words ring true."

Alexander's gaze unnerved her. He wasn't saying anything, and she couldn't figure out why she believed that fact was more frightening. Piercing grey eyes changed to glowing molten silver.

*Did all vampires have an ability to make their eyes look like tiny flashlights?* For the life of her, she couldn't piece together why they did it.

"You're right. I can't influence her either," Alexander finally said.

Helena couldn't contain her anger any longer. "And since both of you can't do whatever you wanted to do to me, why don't you tell me what I'm doing here?"

"You have yet to answer my question," Lucious said.

"I already—"

Lucious' eye twitched. "I do not care for repetition."

Helena bit back a curse. She fisted her hands to reign in her urge to scream at him and his friend. She tried for a levelled tone. "Nor do I, but here we are."

"You do understand—" Alexander began.

“That you can kill me here and now? Yes, I got the message.” She glared at Lucious. “So, do it or let me go already.”

She had no idea where she got the courage to say those things. Inside, she was shaking. Every shift of their bodies kept her on her toes. Her false bravado remained as the last barrier, keeping her sane.

Both vampires seemed taken aback by her outburst. They exchanged glances, and Alexander left the room.

All of a sudden, the spacious room seemed to close in on her. Lucious’ closeness became the main reason for her rising panic. The expression he wore with which he could snap a neck or two told her he had no good intentions.

“What are you going to do?” she asked with a trembling voice. Her body betrayed her lack of cool, causing her hand to quiver.

Lucious caught her wrist and studied it. His eyes searched both sides a while longer. Scowling, he raised the sleeve of her blouse to her elbow. Still appearing dissatisfied, he lifted her other hand, repeating the process.

He let go of her and created a bit of space between them. “If you are human, how did you create a bond between us—a bond I feel more the closer we are to one another?”

His words sank in. When she concentrated, the link between them hummed, unsettling her already knotted stomach. She hadn’t paid much attention to their connection until he pointed it out. It was something she had yet to demand an explanation about from Michael. On one hand, she entertained the idea of telling Lucious the link was an accident that happened in the Angel Realm but squashed the thought as soon as it surfaced because, on the other hand, what could she tell him? If these vampires could tell whether she told the truth, she had little wiggle room in her answer.

“*Helena*,” Michael’s faint voice sounded in her mind.

She covered her mouth with her hand. “You’re back.”

He materialised by her side, and the vampire tensed.

Lucious scrutinised Michael with a stare as if trying to figure out what he was. He reclined in his seat, appearing completely at ease. “What brings an angel here?”

“If you know what I am, you must also realise that I am her guardian,” Michael said with evident disgust written on his face.

The two of them sized each other up. The intensity in the room grew, and she thought better than adding another comment to the testosterone-charged air.

Michael broke the silence first. “Release my charge if you understand what you have gotten yourself into. An abomination like you should not go near her soul or exist in this realm, clinging to life like the leech that you are.”

“That’s where you are wrong, mate. She was the one who created this bond in the first place. She was also the one who came to me.”

“Hey, I was invited here for an interview! If I had any idea I was going to be threatened by vampires, I would have avoided this place like the plague.”

Michael moved to stand next to her, making sure he avoided the coffee table as he walked. Helena guessed he was doing it to make the vampire think he was present in his physical form. At first, she couldn’t believe Michael was anything more than an apparition in their realm. Years later, she came to terms with his ghost-like presence. And, right now, she prayed he had a physical body in case this whole scenario came to blows.

“I guess the elders aren’t stupid enough to try to get a saint on their side. They would exterminate her rather than risk the slightest doubt of her betraying them,” Lucious said.

Helena wanted to bang her head against the wall. Michael was playing a game with this man, and she had no clue about the rules. One thing she was certain of. She was not a ‘saint’. Their string was a bright golden beacon amidst the sea of colours in the Domain of Fates.

Michael inclined his head. “Then you must understand she is not involved in your world’s politics and, to keep it that way, I will help you shatter the link.”

Lucious glanced at her, and she fought not to squirm. She squared her shoulders to project confidence she didn’t feel in a single cell of her body.

His attention lingered on her neck before he diverted it back to Michael. “I will let her leave here if you can break the bond. I do not have the time to play around with angels and their saints.”

“If you don’t keep your word and harm her in any way, I will make certain you are torn apart and put back together by the demon hordes for the rest of your meaningless existence.” Michael’s words were laced with the promise of malice.

Helena’s eyes widened. Michael acted like a different person, portraying the perfect image of a cold and ruthless being. How much did she know about her guardian angel? He revealed nothing while he watched over her. For all she knew, he had taken a life, and the look in his eyes did little to remove the growing sense of worry that had her clutching at her chest.

Lucious must have seen it, too, because his expression shifted from relaxed to guarded. His tense body language spoke of his readiness to spring up and fight at a moment’s notice. “You have my word.”

Michael glared at the vampire. “Your word means nothing to me. It is your actions that will speak for you.”

“Fair enough.”

Her guardian didn't wait. He outstretched his hands in the gap between her and Lucious. Her skin prickled as the level of power in the room spiked and their link appeared to the naked eye.

Lucious stared at it with interest, and she noted him refraining from touching the string shooting out of his gut.

In the middle of the link, two strings were wrapped around one another in a messy bow. Michael placed his palms over the small knot. His hands emitted blinding light, forcing her to squint. The string vibrated, and her gut clenched as if trying to hold on to something. The brighter Michael's hands shone, the less she saw of what was happening, but the sensation of something being peeled away from her didn't stop.

Helena gritted her teeth.

With a satisfied look on his face, Michael lifted his hands. Her string retreated inside of her, and Michael's palm hovered over the spot for longer than she thought was needed.

She glanced over at Lucious. His crimson string had also dispersed without a trace.

"It is done," Michael said. "The link will bother you no longer, vampire."

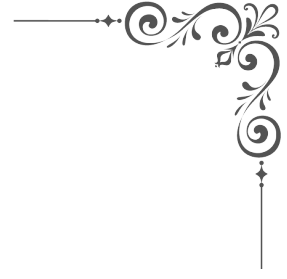
Lucious rubbed his abdomen. Seemingly satisfied that he was intact, he stood and indicated towards the door. "You and your charge are free to go."

Helena didn't wait to be instructed a second time. She scampered out of the room, doing her best not to look back. The nightmare was over, and she got out of it unscathed.

She dashed down the corridor, bumping into a few people on the way out, not caring for the glare the club goers gave her. She needed to feel the cold wind on her face, to suck in some fresh air, and remind herself she was alive.

She arrived a safe distance away from the nightclub. Out of breath, she panted, drawing in air. Her muscles ached, and she rested her hand over an erratic heartbeat. *Thank God that's over.*

Something moved in behind her, startling her. Dull pain exploded in the back of her head. She swayed on her feet and reached for her scalp. Her fingers came away wet with blood.



## 5

# TAKEN

Lucious stared at the door after the girl left the club. Never in his second life did he believe he would see a real, live saint. Finding one among humans was the same as discovering a unicorn. They were closer to legend, beings that could wipe away his kind with a flick of their hand, or so the myths warned.

The door opened with a loud click.

“Sorry, I had to take a call.” Alexander scanned the room. “Where’s our little witch?”

Lucious raked his fingers through his short hair. “She wasn’t a witch.”

“Then how do you explain—”

“She’s a *saint*. A God damned saint with her personal guardian angel.”

Alexander selected a bottle of scotch from the mini bar and poured the golden liquid into a glass. He downed the drink in one mouthful. “I doubt anyone would believe me if I told them a saint came to my club.”

Lucious shook his head. “I am processing that fact myself.”

His friend lifted her backpack off the floor. He opened it and peered inside.

“She left her stuff behind,” Alexander said and tossed it back on the ground.

Rubbing his chin, Lucious studied the bag. He could bring it to her. Doing so would mean exposing her existence to the Council. Perhaps they would concentrate on her location instead of his. A smile tugged at his lips. *It isn’t such a bad idea*. “What do you think Eliza would do if I traded this information in exchange for my freedom?”

Alexander scratched his jaw. “I don’t know. She hates people getting off the hook, information or no. She will most likely capture you and torture it out of you instead.”

“You’re right.” His smile faltered. “But the other members of the Council may listen to reason.”

“And if they don’t? You are risking pissing off a saint who can locate you no matter where you are. Getting her on our side is easier than running from one. I mean, who knows what powers are inside of that little girl.”

“You could be onto something there.”

Alexander stared at him, incredulous. “You aren’t serious about trying to convince her to help you. We can’t influence her, and I doubt her guardian would let her join our mariachi band.”

Lucious rolled his eyes. When he watched her, he saw so much innocence, fear of what he was, but much determination, too. Did she know how to harm them? *Even if she didn’t, her guardian certainly did.* The way his eyes flared with intent to kill was not something Lucious expected from an angel. Then again, it wasn’t like he had experience with those beings before.

A knock on the door startled him out of his thoughts. Alexander opened it to reveal Tanya.

“There is someone here who wants to speak with you.” With her hand resting on her hip, she stepped aside. “This kid wouldn’t leave until I let him see she isn’t here.”

A young man with penetrating green eyes stood behind Tanya when she moved. He eyed everyone in the confines of the room with suspicion.

Lucious stretched his legs out under the coffee table and crossed them at the ankles. He had no time to play around with more humans. Not when he had other things to worry about.

“Where is she?” the kid demanded.

Alexander folded his arms over his chest. “It’s rude to enter a home and not introduce yourself.”

The kid glared at him. “My name is Andrew. Andrew Keane.”

“And who are you, Andrew Keane, talking about?” Alexander asked, amusement lacing his words.

*At least, someone was getting entertained by this interruption,* Lucious thought.

The human pushed past Alexander and pointed at the backpack. “That’s Helena’s, where is she?”

Lucious’ ears perked up at the mention of her name. This human knew the saint on what seemed to be a romantic level. The closer they were, the easier it would be to manipulate her.

Alexander shrugged. “She left a short while ago.”

“I don’t believe you!”

Lucious rose and closed the distance in a few short strides. They were almost the same height. He dropped his shields. Letting his energy cage the kid, he

grasped Andrew's square jaw. Light stubble irritated his skin as he held on.

"What're you doing, freak?" Andrew shouted.

Lucious ground his teeth. He knew his irises changed colour when the human's eyes bulged out of their sockets. What he couldn't understand was why this boy didn't fall under his influence. To add further insult to injury, he punched Lucious in the gut.

Cursing, Lucious faltered. "Another one."

"A saint?" Alexander asked with interest.

"I don't think so. I heard they roam the world one at a time."

Andrew threaded backwards. His back came in contact with Alexander's dagger display case, causing him to jump. When Andrew lifted the glass and withdrew a silver dagger, Lucious raised a brow.

"Don't come near me, whatever you are!" the human threatened.

"Definitely not a saint." Alexander stifled a laugh. His office phone rang, and he glanced at Lucious with resignation. "Regrettably, I must leave the fun to you."

Tanya spared a fleeting glance over her shoulder, and they left.

Lucious needed to extract as much information as possible from the kid. Slowly, he selected a clean glass from the table. There was no need to check on the human when he heard Andrew's thudding heartbeat as if he pressed a stethoscope to his chest. With measured grace, he poured himself a drink and faced the panicked human.

He didn't even have enough time to think of the first question when Alexander burst into the room, making the kid stumble. "We've got a problem!"

Everyone's eyes focused on Alexander. He took the drink out of Lucious' hand and set it down. "Looks like the hounds have gotten to her first."

Lucious should have gone after her despite his promise to let her go. "Where is she?"

Alexander opened his mouth to speak when Andrew strode over with a dagger, pointing it at them. "Are you talking about Helena?"

"Yes, young man, we are," Alexander replied.

Lucious scowled at his friend. There was no need to inform the human. They needed to contain him until they dealt with the hounds.

"If you are going to find her, take me with you," Andrew said.

With newfound interest, Lucious studied the boy. The human was afraid of them—of what they were. His elevated heart rate confirmed it, yet he was prepared to go into the unknown for her.

"And what are you willing to do to help your woman?" Lucious asked.

Andrew's cheeks flushed the shade of a ripe apple, and Lucious instantly knew this human's reaction meant one thing: their relationship had not reached an intimate level. His usefulness equated to an empty kettle on the Moon.

"I will do anything I can."

Lucious exchanged glances with Alexander. They both must have thought the same thing because Alexander smirked. This kid was going to be their distraction while they eliminated the hounds in their own trap.

"Welcome aboard," Lucious said with an outstretched hand.



They sat in Alexander's car, a mile away from 'The Rift' bar, waiting for the right time to strike. Unable to help himself, Lucious glanced at his watch for the umpteenth time. He checked on Andrew who clenched the dagger in his shaking hands. The only noise in the car was the kid's irregular breathing as if his body couldn't decide whether he was relaxing or running a marathon.

"We need to move." Alexander opened the door. "We have an hour till the sun rises."

Andrew shifted in the back seat. "Are you really vampires?"

"Young man, I believe it is not the right time to be having such a dull conversation." Lucious dismissed further questions by climbing out of the car.

The air outside began its daily transformation from cold and humid to light and fresh—the first indication that the sun wasn't far from rising over the horizon and knocking him unconscious. If they didn't make it in time, best-case scenario, they would arrive as dead bodies at a morgue where Alexander had a few friends. Worst case, death would claim them again and, this time, there was no return. They were banking on the hounds not expecting a human to be the one knocking on their door. Pitiful, yet it was the best plan they could produce on such short notice.

Andrew joined them. His knuckles paled from clutching the dagger to his chest.

"You could lose a hand if you are not careful with that," Alexander joked.

Andrew lowered the weapon. "I'm not scared of doing something so stupid. I'm more concerned for Helena."

"Admirable," Alexander said, "but women exist to be used. Remember that."

"We could spend the hour discussing our views on women or we could get on with it," Lucious said.

They repeated the plan, pausing to look at the brick-and-stone, single-storey bar. The stained windows of the property were boarded up, making it hard for them to assess what sort of welcome they would receive.



Lucious separated from the others and stalked across the paved car park. They didn't know where they were keeping her, so the best course of action was to cover as much ground as possible by Alexander searching the ground floor and Lucious checking the cellar.

He knelt next to the chained metal doors levelled with the concrete and lifted the chain. He hissed as a burning sensation shot through his fingertips and singed his skin. *Bloody silver!*

Lucious shrugged out of his jacket, wrapped the leather around his hands, and pulled at the chain. The rings sluggishly separated, and he nudged them apart one last time. Careful not to make any noise, he encased the chains with his jacket, leaving it on the side.

One at a time, he lifted the doors. He assessed the dark space below. His ears strained, listening for any movement. Satisfied with the silence, he jumped down, causing dust to rise.

A simple door with a few beams of lamplight seeping through the cracks in the worn wood blocked his way. Lucious drew out a knife he had borrowed from Alexander and pressed his back against the wall. He pushed the handle down, forcing the door open with a strained creak. He struggled not to laugh at the irony of the situation.

No longer caring for stealth, he entered the room. The whimpering of the hinges would have alerted any vampire in the district of his presence. So, he waited. Ready. When nothing happened, he frowned and scrutinised the room with a dozen unopened boxes stacked against the far wall.

He checked the staircase. No one was coming. He heard muffled grunts from above but refrained from going there to check on the situation. Alexander could handle himself in a fight. His mission was to find the saint.

Lucious drew closer to the final door on his left. He listened for any movement. Beyond the obstruction, a nervous thumping of a human heart filled his ears. His fingers tightened on the hilt.

On the other side, the first thing he saw was the saint. Her hands were chained above her head. Her face was pale from what he guessed was exhaustion. Lucious sucked in a breath, discerning a faint aroma of her sweet blood hanging thick in the air.

Something cold and hard pressed against the back of his skull.

"Don't move," a harsh masculine voice warned.

Lucious smirked. *Amateur.* He turned on the spot, caught the barrel of the gun and pushed it down. An ear-piercing explosion made his eardrums pulsate. He gritted his teeth as a burning sensation spread through his thigh. Annoyed, he seized the vampire by the throat. The other hand he used to yank the vampire's

gun away. After tossing it to one side, he raised the man off the ground, pressing him against the wall.

“Who are you?” No matter how Lucious looked at the ineptitude of this lowlife, he was no hound.

The man released his energy, ready to fight back. To combat him, Lucious continued to wring his throat, ceasing the vampire’s struggle.

The vampire spat at him and wrapped his hands around Lucious’ wrist.

When Lucious realised the man was planning to break his bones, he plunged his fist into the vampire’s gut. He moved his fingers past the diaphragm and found the heart. “Answer my question before I end your miserable existence.”

The vampire glared at him. “We were hired to keep you alive until the Council arrived.”

Lucious schooled his exterior to appear indifferent although the news of their imminent arrival sent chills to his bones. He didn’t want to be in their reach when the enraged elders—who advocated his death—arrived. Since he chose to run from their summons, he was partially responsible for their murderous intent.

“When are they coming here?” Lucious asked with a hint of desperation seeping into his voice.

The vampire grinned but didn’t give him an answer. Lucious’ jaw ached from clenching it as he fought to keep his anger under wraps. His hand compressed the slippery heart.

“Answer me!” he yelled.

The vampire’s eyes flashed blue, and Lucious knew he wasn’t going to get anything else out of him. He grasped the immobile organ and jerked it out of the bounty hunter’s body.

Lucious tossed the useless heart onto the stone floor. He wiped his hand on the vampire’s shirt while the bounty hunter’s skin sagged and collapsed in on itself. Large bulging eyes stared at him throughout the whole process until they dried up, and the vampire lay on the ground in a mummified heap.

This wasn’t the time to admire his work. Lucious knelt and searched the man’s pockets. His thigh muscles screamed from the silver bullet lodged in them, but he dismissed the pain. He found a packet of cigarettes and a cheap plastic lighter—nothing he could use. He threw them at the wall.

The saint’s gasp resonated behind him. A second later, Helena asked, “Things didn’t go your way?”

Lucious froze. He had forgotten about her. Taking a deep breath, he stood and turned to face her. He steeled his expression, allowing no emotion to escape. The pain from the bullet was clawing at the back of his skull, but he would be damned if he let her see any weakness.

He licked his lower lip. "Someone in your position shouldn't be talking so much, my dear."



Helena couldn't help a blush colouring her cheeks. She had witnessed him murder someone and felt no pity for Rick. He was a creep that would have been more than happy torturing her for hours had his partner not ordered him to leave her alone.

"If I didn't interrupt you, I'm afraid you would turn the room upside down," she replied.

Lucious took a step closer. His mesmerising eyes focused on hers, and Helena forced herself to look away. Rick was able to control her and since her link with this man was what had changed, she didn't want to risk him finding out he could manipulate her, too.

He stopped a few inches away from her. His wide chest was covered by a black tank top that hugged his taut muscles.

"Aren't you going to beg me to let you go?" he asked, his breath tickling her ear.

Helena balled her hands. She didn't want to beg or lower herself. Doing so would be wrong somehow. "I won't."

"I could leave you here, chained up and helpless for any other vampire to find."

She lifted her gaze and shot him a knowing smile. "But you won't, will you? Otherwise, you wouldn't have come here in the first place."

"Smart girl." Lucious' cool hand brushed her wounded side, and she winced. He lifted his blood-stained fingers and licked the blood off, one finger at a time which made her blush deepen.

"I am disappointed you don't taste different from others."

"I already told you, I'm human."

"You have, and you are on the surface. But the energy that went away when our link broke did not belong to a mere mortal."

Helena wasn't sure what his words meant. She was normal to an extent. So, why did he say she was a saint when he saw Michael? What else did he know that she didn't?

She forced herself to concentrate on her predicament. She was chained to a stone wall and the cold from it had chilled her enough to populate her skin with gooseflesh.

He gave her enough room to see that he continued to bleed from his thigh.

"You're badly hurt," she mumbled.

He chuckled—a light melodious tone she had come to like. It soothed her nerves and allowed her to think past the pain in her side.

“So are you, my dear,” he said, going down on one knee. Lucious studied her cut, and she tried her best not to find his features, which were deep in concentration, attractive. “I can fix your cuts with ease but mine will have to wait until later.”

“Wait, what’re you planning to do?”

He beamed at her with a predatory smile. “Not something you are expecting, I bet.”

He bit into his thumb and smeared his blood over her cut.

Helena attempted to pull away, but he grasped her hip with his blood-stained hand. His hurtful grip kept her in place while he continued the unorthodox procedure.

“Why are you doing that?”

“It will heal your cut.” He bit into his wrist next. Standing, he grabbed the back of her neck. He pressed the dripping wrist to her lips. “Drink.”

She sealed her mouth shut.

“This will heal your head trauma.” The bite-mark healed, and he bit into his skin again. “Hurry up, we don’t have all night.”

Helena wrinkled her nose, her stomach growing more unsettled with each passing second as she watched blood rolling down his arm in tiny rivers.

“For goodness’ sake,” Lucious muttered under his breath. Taking away his hand, he pressed her resisting body into him and kissed her. His forceful, cold lips met hers. He grasped her chin and dug his fingers into her skin until she opened her mouth for him.

The metallic taste of coppery blood filled her mouth, and the kiss deepened. There was no emotion in this action other than frustration. She figured out what he was doing. He was making her drink his blood to heal her.

The cool liquid soothed her throat on its descent. The sensation didn’t seem as bad as she believed it would be. As the seconds ticked by, she couldn’t help her body’s reaction once she relaxed into the kiss.

Lucious withdrew to give her space to catch her breath.

“Why...kiss?” she managed between gasps.

“Thought it would take that disgusted look off your face.”

Helena pressed her lips together to stop herself from saying anything else. She could live with a certain level of embarrassment for one night, and she had already surpassed hers. Taking this chance, she studied the cut in her side. It had scabbed over.

“I didn’t feel anything,” her voice came out full of wonder.

Lucious raised his hands to grab the shackles above her head. “Only with larger injuries would you feel anything, yours were minor.”

“But why didn’t your bullet wound heal?”

Lucious yanked open her restraints.

She rubbed her wrists and waited for an answer.

“I must remove the silver bullet in my thigh first. I will heal once it’s out. Let us,”—he grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze—“leave this place.”

She stumbled after him, her stiff legs struggling to keep up.

“Allow me.” He wrapped his arm around her waist.

Her cheeks heated for the dozenth time that day from his touch. She wasn’t comfortable being this close to a guy, and it made her think of Andrew. She hadn’t told him how she felt. Not like she was even sure of what she felt. Too many things had happened since her talk with Laura.

She hung her head. How was she going to explain being missing for the whole night?

Lucious led her up the creaky stairs, supporting her weight with ease. He was maintaining her pace while saying no word of complaint. Were vampires as bad as Michael wanted her to believe?

They reached the final step, and Lucious took her by the hand, sending a faint shiver through her. Helena eyed their joined hands and shook him off, which he didn’t seem to mind. Instead, he continued ahead past two navy doors marked as toilets.

He turned the corner, and she heard him curse. Wanting to know what happened, she rushed after him. The action made her head spin, so she steadied herself by the wall until the sensation dissipated. Taking smaller steps, she turned the corner where Lucious had disappeared.

She was faced with a spacious dance floor of a rock bar. The tables and chairs were tossed around the room in an obvious struggle. Signed guitars hung from the walls in their half-shattered glass cases. The dull lights from the ceiling illuminated the dance floor and the bar. That was when she saw Alexander and Lucious standing together, both looking down at something.

Helena pushed past them. No matter how long she stared, her brain wouldn’t accept the naked truth of what she saw. There had to be some kind of mistake.

On the worn wooden flooring, next to a table with a matching set of overturned chairs, lay Andrew in a pool of his own blood. He wasn’t moving. *Why isn’t he moving?* There was blood. So much blood rushing from his head that it wasn’t normal. Helena’s heart nearly stopped, and her words vanished from the tip of her tongue. Her knees threatened to cave.

“Is he...” The word ‘dead’ remained stuck in her throat.

“He’s alive,” Lucious said, “although, his heartbeat is slowing down.”

Helena banged her fists on Lucious’ chest. “How could you let this happen?”

He said nothing, and she continued her feeble assault. Her body betrayed her, taking away what little strength she had. She slid to the ground. Past the dull pain shooting through her kneecaps upon impact, she crawled over to her best friend.

“Andrew,” she whispered his name like a prayer.

Her fingers brushed a lock of bloodied hair away from his ashen face, and Andrew’s eyelids gradually lifted. He had trouble focusing at first. Once he met her gaze, there was so much love in those green eyes that her heart was ready to burst from loss.

She traced the contours of his face, careful not to move his head. She couldn’t understand where so much blood was coming from.

“Helena...you’re...safe,” he spoke each word between faint breaths.

She couldn’t look at him like this. Andrew was always full of energy and life. Her cheeks burned as hot tears streamed down. She should be the one laying on this floor, not him.

*Lucious could help him like he helped me.* Wide-eyed, she turned to look at the man who healed her. He and Alexander were standing to one side, watching her torment with interest.

“Help him!” she pleaded.

“No,” Lucious replied.

She gasped at him. *I can’t let him die.* “You have to help him, he’s dying.”

Alexander shook his head. “He’s too far gone. No amount of our blood could heal such damage.”

“Then what—” In order for Andrew to live, she knew what needed doing, and he may never forgive her for taking the choice away from him. *I’m so sorry, Andrew.* She shot Lucious a desperate look. “Turn him.”

He didn’t say anything, but she knew her demand had surprised him.

“Please...I beg you. Save him.”

An outburst of Lucious’ mocking laughter filled the room. “You think living such a life is saving him?”

She held back a sob. “I don’t care as long as he’s alive!”

Lucious cocked his head to one side, his judging eyes fixed on hers. Whatever he saw there made him satisfied because he knelt next to them. “Brave words, but what will you do for me in return?”

Helena clenched her jaw. To save Andrew, she would have to forfeit something. Lucious didn’t come to her rescue out of the goodwill of his heart.

“What do you want from me?”

He placed his palm against her cheek, and she felt her skin tingle from his cold touch. "You, my dear. I want you."

The answer took her by surprise. Why would a vampire want her? Helena looked at her best friend. His eyes were closed. His sun-kissed complexion was reduced to a shade of pasty grey. She clutched Andrew's hand and drew it into her lap.

"He will die if you do not make your decision soon," Alexander urged.

*Andrew will live.* He came here to help her and it was her turn to reciprocate his bravery. She straightened up, drawing on her remaining strength to answer him. "Fine, whatever you want as long as he lives."

"Good," Lucious said.

Not waiting anymore, Lucious bit into his wrist, making it bleed more than before. He opened Andrew's mouth and let the scarlet liquid drip inside. Meanwhile, he measured her reaction, his irises aglow with a blue light.

Helena didn't care. She wanted Andrew to be alive and well. Even if he came to hate her for this, she wasn't willing to let him die.

Lucious' wrist healed four times during the process. He lifted Andrew's head and snapped his neck with a loud crack.

"Why did you do that?" Helena screamed. Her hands shook as she reached for Andrew.

"It had to be done. After feeding him blood, I needed to take his life to give him a new one." Lucious tried standing. His body rocked, and he crashed to his knees.

Alexander moved to help him, but Lucious stopped him.

"Are you alright?" Alexander asked.

"I'll live." Lucious attempted the feat again and wasn't able to raise his head.

"You don't seem okay," Helena said.

"No shit," Alexander snapped. "He has lost too much blood."

Helena knew that if anyone was going to get them out of this place, it was Lucious. She didn't trust Alexander to help with Andrew. With Lucious being in such a horrible state, the odds were against them leaving anytime soon. She outstretched her wrist in front of his mouth. "Drink."

Lucious' fingers wrapped around her exposed flesh. They were colder and sent a shiver through her.

"In this state, I won't be able to take the pain away..."

At the thought of being bitten, images of Rick's switch-blade came to her. She stuffed her fear back into its box. "I don't care."

His lips parted, and his fangs pierced her skin.

She winced. The sharp pain didn't stop there. It travelled up her arm. Her body told her something was wrong and that she needed to get away from him. Her heart beat faster, restless to be away from this creature. The sensation was nothing less than being bitten by a large dog, except this one was drinking her life away. With her mind screaming its protests, she forced herself to remain in place, trying to imagine Andrew's smile or Laura's myriad of questions.

Time went by at a sluggish pace. Numbness settled where the pain was before. She grew more lightheaded the longer he sucked her blood. She tried to yank her hand out of his grasp. It didn't work.

"Lucious, let go," she begged.

He glanced up with two glowing neon-blue orbs but didn't release her.

Alexander nudged his shoulder. "We must go. The sun will be rising soon."

Suddenly, Lucious let her go, catching her in an embrace. She couldn't stop shivering. It was as if she had been submerged in ice water.

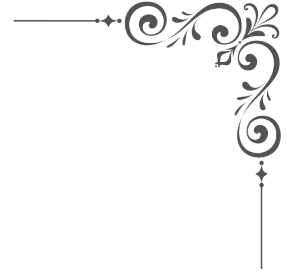
He mumbled something to Alexander who shrugged out of his jacket and handed it over. Lucious wrapped it around her shoulders, giving her some warmth.

"Get some sleep, Helena," Lucious ordered.

She looked into the depths of his eyes. The glow in them departed, returning his eye colour to normal. It was the first time he had called her by her name and, for some reason, she smiled.

She wrapped the jacket tighter around her, yet her shivering body disagreed with her efforts to do anything. Her eyelids grew heavier the more she struggled to keep them open. The last thing she recalled was being lifted and pressed against something that radiated soothing power and strength.





## 6

# NIGHTMARES

The sky was angry and grey. A storm would soon be upon them. People around her scattered in different directions. Fear glistened in their eyes. Some left their belongings behind in an attempt to reach the nearest dwelling.

Helena's gut became laden with worry. The muddy path ahead was nearly empty when a woman in ragged clothing brushed past her without stopping to apologise. She scurried off in the direction of the nearest wooden house, slamming the door shut behind her.

Like the others, she needed to get away from what was coming.

*What is coming?* The answer didn't come to her. Her body and thoughts were not her own as there was another person controlling her.

*Am I dreaming?* Without any warning, her body jerked into motion. She gained speed. The words "I must find her!" were chanted in Russian on repeat in her head like a mantra. Having spent her childhood in Russia, she knew the meaning of those words, but they didn't help her find the answer she was seeking.

She paused at the nearest building in the village. It was a small home with an intricately carved wooden door that represented different flowers in the forest nearby. She shouldn't have known that. She had never seen this place before.

Helena listened for movement, anyone who could help her. With one glance, she saw some windows had been barricaded with furniture, others were nailed shut.

*"The glass must have been smashed from the previous raid,"* the voice in her mind said.

Her fists banged against the hard wood, and she begged for someone to open the door.

Low whispers from the other side informed her of the presence of others—people who chose to ignore her pleas for help.

A hand appeared and grabbed her by the shoulder, startling her.

“You must hide, Eva! They’re coming,” someone warned.

She turned around. On the empty street, a short woman stood with her braided blonde hair pulled to one side. She knew her. She could trust her.

No, Helena didn’t know her, Eva did. *Who is Eva?*

Helena chose to let it play out. Whoever was in control, it wasn’t her. The whole thing was like watching a strange movie through someone’s eyes. No matter how hard she fought to take back control, nothing happened.

Her hands trembled when she grabbed hold of the woman’s shoulders. “We must find her, Marina, we must!” Eva’s fingers dug into Marina’s frail body. “I do not know where she is. Dominika is small and could not have gone far. Help me! I do not know what to do!”

Tears fought their way out, but Eva stomped on her fear and dread which claimed more of her with each hastened breath. She had to keep it together, for her daughter.

Marina tugged at her hands, peeling them off. “We can look for her later. Right now, we must hurry and hide.”

Eva signed. She was deeply affected by the disappearance of her daughter. *Where could she have gone? If they get their hands on her, she is as good as dead.*

Eva sensed a dark presence in the air, hovering near her mental shields. It fed on her fear. In that instant, she knew who it was. *He* was back—a creature who wanted nothing more than to pitch that outrageous bargain. She wouldn’t risk it. The coven depended on her choices, and this was not one she was willing to make. Not yet.

She closed her eyes and took in a steadying breath. It didn’t relieve the heaviness inside her. She pressed on. Her lips moved as she cast a protection spell. Once done, a barrier was fashioned around them, and the darkness retreated. This was a small victory, but he would be back.

Helena’s vision grew cloudy, and the dream faded altogether, allowing her to regain consciousness. She peeled open her heavy eyelids to find a pair of blue-brown eyes studying her.

“Bad dream?” Lucious asked.

Helena screamed. She was always proud of being in control of her emotions. But, with him around, logic and control went for a prolonged walk somewhere on the other side of the planet.

He covered her mouth with his hand, muffling her voice. “I would rather you did not deafen me, my dear.”

When his hand retreated, she tugged her bedsheets to her chin in a poor attempt to cover herself even when she knew he had already seen what he wanted to. She peered under the sheets, taking note that she was wearing her interview clothes. *Thank God, he didn't take them off.*

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Lucious sat on the edge of her bed, oblivious or choosing to ignore her discomfort with his presence in her room. "Alexander looked up your address and thought this would be the best place where we could spend the day. Taking you both to his club would raise questions."

Helena waited for him to finish. She expected him to leave when she didn't offer anything to their conversation and nearly jumped out of bed when his words finished processing in her head. She was at *home*. "Laura!"

"Your friend was untouched by us, do not fret. She was informed that both you and Andrew were too ill to return alone and we, as your friends, helped bring you here."

"You mean you brainwashed her to think that."

Lucious shrugged. "Call it whatever you will. It is in your interest to keep her out of our business."

Helena studied his blank expression. "What business? I want you to leave."

Lucious bent down, causing her to retreat until her back was touching the headboard. He reached for her; his gaze unwavering with a hidden challenge. A challenge she met head-on by staring back at him, defiant.

His hand fell away short of her skin. "There is no need to look so unhappy. You are going to fulfil your end of the deal. You are mine after all." Lucious rose and inclined his head. "You should take a shower. Last night's events continue to be quite visible on you."

Helena's face heated. She opened her mouth to call him names, but he chose this time to stroll out of her room as if he owned the place. With jerky movements, she grasped the pillow and threw the inanimate object at the closing door.

"Stuck up prick!" She climbed out of bed, kicking away the quilt. Her hands roamed her body, seeking flaws. Even the bite on her wrist was gone.

Helena stripped to her underwear and studied the rest of her body. The gash was gone, too. A few brown flecks of dried blood remained on her skin. She wasn't certain whether it belonged to her or Lucious.

She marched to her wardrobe, opened it, and cringed. The mirror confirmed what he said and more. Lucious was understating her appearance. Large dark half-moons emphasised her bulging hazel eyes against her pasty skin. Her bedhead wasn't what kept her hair from looking normal. Dark brown patches

kept parts of it glued together. It had to be from the head injury she got while she was kidnapped.

“How do you feel?” Michael’s voice came from behind her.

Helena jumped. “Jeez, Michael, don’t pop in like that!”

“I will keep that in mind. For now, how are you doing?”

“I feel better than I look.” She rummaged through her wardrobe.

“You should leave here as soon as possible.”

Helena tossed a black and white T-shirt on the bed along with a pair of faded blue jeans. “You know I can’t do that. I gave my word.”

She couldn’t understand where her calm was coming from. Anyone in her position would be running for the door or reaching for the first weapon. Too bad she wasn’t a fan of Dungeons and Dragons and didn’t keep a spare sword in her closet. She frowned at her calmness. Maybe she was in shock. Either that or she was crazy. Yes, a crazy woman who had two vampires residing in her home. *Oh, happy days.*

Michael’s sombre expression made her pause what she was doing.

“I can’t leave Andrew. Where is he, anyway?”

“His body is in his room,” Michael said with distaste.

Helena shot him a withering look. “Don’t say it like that. He tried to save me.”

“Your saviour will awaken as one of them—a horrid creature—or remain dead. We will know soon enough.”

His words stung and, her knees grew weak. The reality was closer to home—a reality she didn’t want to face.

She ran a shaky hand through her knotted hair, hissing as her fingers pulled on the tangled mess. “He’ll wake up, right? I don’t think I can take it if his death is on me.” She didn’t want to lose him. He had to be there for her, alive, well, and most of all, happy. Any other outcome was out of the question.

Michael gave her a sympathetic look. “Those creatures are not to be trusted, Helena, you must understand that by now.”

“But they did help me and saved Andrew.”

“They did not save him. It was their choice that caused the death of your friend.”

Michael was right. She had seen first-hand what these vampires were capable of. Lucious killed members of his kind without a second thought, and it made her skin crawl at the sordid image engraved in her memory.

“For the time being, I must go. Take care of yourself.” Michael vanished.

Helena collected her spare clothes and left her room. She shuffled into the bathroom where her fingers found the small switch protruding from the wall, and

she flicked it on. The bright fluorescent light made her blink a few times to adjust to its intensity.

She avoided the mirror as there was no need for her to be reminded of how awful she looked.

*A shower will help*, she assured herself and slid inside the cubicle.

Cold running water numbed her heart. Seconds later, heat joined the cold, warming her body while the steam clouded around her. Red water ran the length of her legs, and she watched it until the water grew too hot for her skin. She changed the setting and scrubbed hard at the places where the kidnapper had touched her. The joy Rick took in her torment haunted her even after the blood on her body was rinsed away along with the suds.

She dried off and changed into her clothes. Outside the bathroom, the truth hit her like an emotional tsunami. Andrew was dead. Lucious fed him his blood and snapped his neck like a twig. She suspected Lucious had come to her rescue because he believed she was a saint. Not only did she have no idea what that was, she also had to pretend she was one while she sought a way out.

Helena steeled herself for the inevitable meeting with the vampires. She left the bathroom, planting one foot in front of the other, causing her movements to be robotic at first. Without realising it, she came to a halt at Andrew's door. A single wooden barrier felt like a million miles to her. She reached for the handle and stopped, putting her hand on her aching chest instead. Going in would make it real. Could she handle seeing his body without a single hint of life in it?

On her way downstairs, Helena heard voices in her living room. She strained her ears to make out what they were saying. Her foot slid off the metal step, and she caught herself on the railing in an awkward half-balanced position.

The talking came to an end, and she found both Lucious and Alexander eyeing her from the sofas. Somehow, Lucious fit in her apartment with his relaxed demeanour. She hadn't noticed it before, but he was wearing a white linen shirt. That was the first time she had seen him wearing anything other than black.

"Changed your favourite colour?" she asked him, trying for a casual tone.

Lucious shrugged. "These were borrowed from your friend."

She descended the rest of the way. Her hand clung to the metal railing, so she wouldn't repeat her embarrassing balancing act. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the fridge. Her stomach growled—a sound she hoped to cover up with her hands. Hiding her red face behind her wet hair, she hurried to the kitchen counter.

"I'll be upstairs," Alexander blurted out.

He didn't use the vampire speed to leave like she had anticipated. Instead, Alexander climbed the stairs, two at a time, until he was out of sight.

Helena prayed he would not spend his free time rummaging through her things and took an unconscious step towards the stairs.

"I am leaving for a while—a few days to be precise," Lucious said.

She brushed away the damp strands of her hair and tucked them behind her ear. Lucious hadn't moved from the sofa. He was like a perfect predator, lying in wait. She avoided meeting his eyes. The time Rick had forced answers out of her using his strange mind-controlling powers kept her from diminishing their distance.

She hid her newfound relief by draining her face of emotion. They were leaving her alone. Her life could go back to normal. Well, almost normal. She shrugged, feigning disinterest, and reached for the fridge handle.

"You will stay here with Alexander until I return."

Helena whirled on the spot, forgetting her hunger and her attempt to be civil. "Hold on a second, I won't let him stay here with Laura and me. I want you guys to leave."

Lucious' perfect smile was framed by a set of full lips. For some reason, even after his cunning machinations, she continued to find him to be unbearably handsome.

"Is that including your dead boyfriend?"

She mentally shook herself. Michael was right. Trusting these vampires was her first mistake. Helena swallowed a long list of obscene words she wanted to voice.

"Fine, he can stay," she grumbled under her breath.

Lucious straightened his shirt and, in a blink of an eye, towered over her.

She grasped her chest. Her heart jolted into action at the sudden closeness. He reached out to touch her face, but she slapped his hand away.

"Don't touch me!"

His eyes twinkled with amusement. "You are back to being lively. Good to know."

She glared at him. To her surprise, Lucious smiled and was gone with a loud bang of the front door. The energy she got from her sleep had dissipated without warning, leaving her clinging to the kitchen counter for support. *What the hell was that?*



An hour later, Helena sat motionless on her bed. Her fingers were knotted together and her clasped hands hung between her thighs. She watched the sun

setting over the horizon through her window, taking the light and safety away from people without them knowing it. She would give anything to undo the past twenty-four hours. That way, Andrew would be alive and not a corpse in the room across the hallway.

She sighed, burying her face in her hands. “What should I tell him when he wakes up?”

“You can’t see him for at least a year after the change,” Alexander interrupted.

Helena shot him an accusatory glare. “How long have you been here for? And, what did you mean by that?”

“So many questions, I don’t know whether I want to answer them.” He closed the door behind him with an audible thud. “Didn’t Lucious tell you? Once he wakes up, your friend will be a savage beast. He will attack anything with a heartbeat within his reach.”

“No.” Her hands covered her mouth. “I didn’t think—”

“Such common words,” Alexander chided. He dismissed her with a wave of his hand and pushed away from the door. “Well, I’ve got work to do. Stay put and try not to get in trouble.”

Alexander left.

She fell backwards onto the soft mattress, drained from their conversation. Hugging her sides, Helena rolled over, sniffing. Not long after, the tears she didn’t want to shed had surfaced and spilt onto the sheets. There was nothing she could do for Andrew now.

*Will he blame me for this? Will he hate me?*

She couldn’t picture him as a vampire. Andrew—a guy who never did anything bad to anyone, not to mention hurt someone—was turned into a monster.

*“Don’t blame yourself for this,”* Michael’s soothing voice filled her mind.

She didn’t feel his presence, so she knew he wasn’t in the room with her.

*“How can I not take the blame for what I did to him?”*

Michael paused briefly. *“You did what you thought was right.”*

*“What will happen to him? Is Alexander telling the truth? Will he become a beast for God knows how long?”*

*“You shouldn’t think about that right now.”*

*“Answer me, Michael!”* Her hands trembled as she clung to her sanity. She needed to keep a clear head, yet nothing worked. Her mind ran in circles of what Andrew could become.

*“The vampire spoke the truth. It takes time for them to regain humanity. Until then, he should remain with them. Right now, you—”*

She sat up, full of newfound determination. *“What? You want me to run away and leave him behind?”*

*“To keep you safe and away from this trouble, yes. You must escape before it is too late.”*

Helena scrambled off the bed. “Enough. Leave me alone!”

“And here I thought I’d come to nurse my sick best friend,” Laura’s annoyed voice came from the doorway.

Helena’s shoulders fell, and she pushed away her raging emotions. Her life had become cluttered and overcrowded. She couldn’t even be in her room without someone checking in on her every couple of minutes.

“You’re home...” Helena muttered.

Laura pouted. “I wasn’t expecting a grand welcome, but you need to get a grip. Oh, and how are you feeling?”

“Fine.”

Laura quirked her eyebrow. “Do you want to tell me what happened last night?” She sat on the side of the bed. “Ever since I told Andrew the name of the club you had your interview at, he ran out of here as if his tail was on fire. Then, you both came home with those two guys... I won’t judge, so tell me what happened.”

Helena joined her on the bed. There were many things she couldn’t tell Laura. Anything related to the vampires or Andrew was off the table, leaving nothing else to discuss. She feigned a cough. “You know this...cold is contagious. You should spend a few days with your parents.”

Laura crossed her arms over her ample chest. “Don’t you dare try to avoid answering my questions, Thorn. I may not have all the facts, but I can smell secrets a mile away. So, what’s going on?”

Helena opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She touched her throat, wondering if something was wrong. At the back of her mind, she heard the familiar murmuring of a woman from before. The room grew darker, and she glanced at Laura who wasn’t reacting to the phenomenon. Pain exploded in her chest and she crashed to the ground with a loud thud, gasping for air like a fish that got washed ashore.

She overheard Laura’s worried exclamations somewhere in the distance. No matter how hard Helena clung to her conscience, she felt it slip away.



Helena stood in the shadows of a candle-lit cave. The air was scented with herbs her grandmother would burn on special occasions in her home: sage, jasmine, and calendula. The smell calmed her.



People in black, green, and grey cloaks rushed around, lighting more candles around the cave. Some of them were spread out, marking the ground with chalk instead.

*Are those pentagrams?* She looked down. There she stood, wearing a deep burgundy cloak, similar to those the others wore. Strange runes were sown into the material along the sleeves with a golden string. Above the cloaked figures was a natural circular opening in the rock. The stars were a dull representation of the large full moon filling the sky next to them.

“The moon will soon be at its apex. We must hurry with the protection spell.” Her authoritative voice echoed in the enclosed space. The words that had come out of Helena’s mouth weren’t hers. They belonged to Eva.

Tremors of anxiety shook her hands. To everyone here, she knew she portrayed calmness and composure. On the inside, her heart was fluttering like that of a bird trapped in a metal cage.

Marina, the woman she recognised from her last dream, had her long blonde hair tied into a thick braid. The woman’s robe covered her legs and created an illusion of her floating as she glided from one person to the next. When she finished checking on them, stress lines were carved into her aged face.

“We have almost completed the preparations,” Marina chirped. She lowered her voice. “This month has been painful for everyone. Hunters have been coming, trying to weed us out. We hope that this will protect us from losing another soul.”

“It is a tragedy that three of our members were discovered last week. They were warned not to carry charms with them. In times like these, we must hide who we are.”

Eva’s concerns were fighting Helena’s thoughts. They were growing louder and more prominent. Since she had no control of what was happening, Helena relaxed, allowing things to unfold.

A man in a hood placed the last rune to complete the circle. “We have finished.”

There was lightness in Eva’s chest. Her fingertips tingled with anticipation. Magic was in the air and every living being around her. Tonight, nature was on their side.

People in the room gathered at the chalk markings and the arranged runes on the ground. The group left a space for her to slip into—her rightful place.

Under the hoods were familiar faces. People Eva knew and trusted. Those she loved with her whole heart. She had to protect them.

Each and every person of her Circle stopped to make eye contact, showing their respect.

At last, she raised her hands, letting the words, which she was so anxious to share, flow. “Brothers and sisters, I welcome you here. We are a coven. We are a family. With the recent loss we have felt, we must protect ourselves and our loved ones. Let us join our hands and begin the spell. Let Mother guide us.”

“Let Mother guide us...” they echoed.

Marina took her right hand and gently squeezed. She was urging her on, as always, providing the reassurance Eva needed. Her other hand was grasped by a much older, wrinkled hand. She smiled at the elderly woman who met her gaze with intelligent pale-blue eyes.

Eva closed her eyes. The magic in the air tickled her skin. It flowed from everywhere tonight, from the movements of the tiny crickets outside to the gentle flickering of the candle-fire.

*There is no doubt that this is the right thing to do.*

The crowd mimicked Eva and joined their hands. With each new set, more energy flowed through her. It was as if a melody danced through their connection and removed any discomfort or worry. She bowed her head. Taking a deep breath, she began chanting, and the rest joined her in perfect unison.

This was what happiness felt like—an ideal connection between human beings that she craved every time their Circle was broken. Her fears disintegrated into a euphoric trance.

The chanting continued. The voices got louder when more people felt certain of their words.

Eva sculpted the magic with her mind into a small ball of energy at the centre. That ball grew larger as they fed more power to it through their words. When it was large enough, it touched her fingers, sending a jolt of power through her. She heard the others gasp in surprise as well.

*I can feel them. We are connected—a true family.*

The chanting got faster and the power in the centre grew, jumping through every one of them. Once it reached her again, she knew something was wrong. Her body rejected the power with a violent shake.

*He’s here.* The thought erased her smile. The creature would return to haunt her no matter how many times she banished it.

*That demon knows no bounds.* Outrage budded in her heart, blocking her connection to everyone there.

“You cannot escape me, Eva. I will get what I want. I always do,” he hissed in her mind.

His daunting voice slithered around her. The darkness filled her from within, dispersing her concentration and taking away the safety net she wanted to cling to.

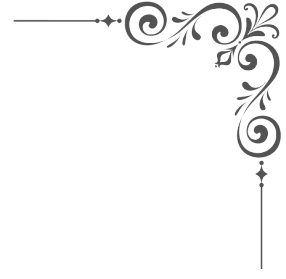
*I must not let the coven get affected by his evil.*

Eva gathered what energy she could muster and wrapped it around herself as a shield. There was no other way she knew of to protect them from this creature. Reluctant, she cut the connection she had with everyone's hearts by sliding her hands out of their grasps to bring the surrounding hands together.

Two shocked faces stared back at her.

The rest of the coven looked up. Their confusion showed in their eyes that lingered on her as she left the cave.

The end was near. She could feel it as a single hot tear escaped her, and the voices of her Circle grew quieter.



## 7

# AN UNDERSTANDING

Lucious lounged on one of the couches in the Russian Roulette, spying for his next meal. Today, the DJ played a mix of pop music which wasn't to his taste. He tuned out the obnoxious noise. He had to find someone to feed on soon. Creating his first *childe* expelled a lot of energy from him. Although the saint's blood was charged with an undercurrent of power, it was nowhere near enough to get him back to his full strength. Not after he was shot with a silver bullet.

A lean brunette strolled by, swaying her half-exposed hips in a suggestive manner. Would she taste as good as the saint? He gritted his teeth. He didn't mean to lie when he told Helena she tasted no different than others. She had the sweetest blood he had ever tasted, and it took every ounce of his self-control to stop from draining her.

Instead, he was interested in her dreams. They had rattled her more than a vampire in her bedroom, which could be something he could use against her if he knew more. A smirk graced his lips. She was in the palm of his hand. He could take his time getting to know her and her powers.

Lucious' phone buzzed. He reached into his pocket to retrieve it and slid his thumb across the glass screen to unlock the device Alexander had given him. A single message from his friend flagged up on the screen, and he read the text again, making certain he understood the contents right.

Shoving the phone back into his pocket, he pushed past the thickening crowd of humans. More of them had arrived on the dance floor since the club's opening. Taking long strides, he reached the other end of the room in no time and exited the club, ignoring Tanya's playful calls. Since Alexander contacted him directly, Tanya's conversation had to be irrelevant.

He stepped outside the club. The night's air was filled with an unpleasant stench he identified as sex and rubbish from the bins. He scanned the

surrounding area. Nothing out of the ordinary caught his attention.

The emergency exit door clicked shut and, not waiting another moment, he withdrew his phone and called Alexander.

“What do you mean she collapsed?” Lucious hissed.

“It’s as I have said in the message. She was fine when I left her, then her human came into her room to talk and the saint collapsed. I would have called you earlier, but I was busy trying to revive her with my blood.”

Lucious contemplated his next move. “If the human was the cause of this, get rid of her.”

He heard Alexander closing a door, and his friend’s voice came in a hushed tone. “I’m not sure I heard you right and, if I have, I believe it would be a bad idea to kill her.”

“Then send her away. She is a distraction we do not need.”

“Alright, I will make her go away. I think your saint will erupt over the matter though.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’ll deal with her later. For now, I should visit Marcus and find out about those hunters. He wasn’t very forthcoming the last time we were at his place.”

Alexander must have pulled out a cigarette because Lucious heard a faint clicking of a lighter. He took a puff and exhaled. “No one would be ecstatic if you came in and killed two bounty hunters in their establishment.”

“Wasn’t my fault he let them take what’s mine.”

Alexander tsked. “Don’t get attached to her, Lucious. She may come in handy or she may not. At the end of the day, she could be more trouble than she is worth.”

Lucious knew Alexander was right. If she wasn’t useful, she had to go. He would miss her sweet blood. No. Even that did not matter. The days when the thirst controlled him ended when he lost his sire.

“Fine, keep her safe while I’m getting my ass handed to me by Marcus.”

Alexander’s tone grew serious. “It’s no joking matter. He’s much older and a dozen times stronger than you.”

“If I didn’t know you better, I’d think you were worried about me.”

Alexander sighed. “Sometimes, I question my judgement, old friend. You better go. I’ll deal with the girls.”

He said his goodbye and disconnected the call. His senses told him that he was no longer alone. Slipping his phone into his back pocket, he faced the unwelcome guest.

A man in a long trench coat stood under the trees. His sanguine crocodile boots reflected the low street light. Even though Lucious’ sight was better than

that of a normal human, he could not see the face of the stranger hidden in the shadows.

“Lucious Ellwood, I presume?” The carefree tone the man used unsettled Lucious.

He reached for the knife in his back pocket. “Depends on who is looking for him.”

The man raised his hands.

Lucious couldn’t see any weapons, but he didn’t rule out the possibility this man was a threat.

“No need for the fireworks to start, mate. I am but a humble dog of the lovely Eliza,” the stranger said with an unsettling smirk.

Lucious created some distance between them. The hound wasn’t close enough to land a punch, but the Council’s dogs were resourceful. They were either vampires who were given a second chance by Eliza or they chose to serve of their own free will. By the way this man behaved, Lucious pegged him for the latter.

“What do you want?”

The hound lowered his hands to his sides. “I am not here for a fight. I am here to request that you answer the next time you receive a summons from the Council.”

Lucious frowned. “I have missed my chance. Why would they ask for me again?”

The hound scratched the stubble coating his jaw. “Ask them yourself when they arrive.”

“They are coming here?” Lucious hoped he had heard him wrong.

A sly smile spread across the hound’s face. “It was a...pleasure meeting you, mate.” The hound bowed his head and strolled past Lucious at a human pace. He paused a few feet away and added, “Oh, I almost forgot. Bring your pretty little friend. They are eager to meet her.”

Lucious ground his teeth. He wasn’t surprised the elders found out about Helena. The bounty hunters must have informed them of her existence, but he wasn’t keen on showing her to them. Not when he hadn’t gotten her to cooperate. If they figured out what she was, they would eliminate her or worse, make her work for them. Either way, he had to think of a way to keep her loyalty.

He returned to the club with his good mood shattered. This time, he didn’t bother being picky. He chose the first human female he came in contact with, led her to the darkest corner of the nightclub, and drank his fill of her tasteless blood. When he was done, he abandoned her sleeping form on one of the

couches and left to locate a couple of information brokers. He was going to need any information he could get if he had to go against the Council and their games.



A loud crash jolted Helena out of her dream. Seeing that it was dark outside, she flicked on the lights. For some reason, there was a coppery aftertaste in her mouth.

*Blood?* Her fingertips brushed her lips. To her relief, her hand came away clean. *What's going on?*

Something ceramic smashed downstairs. Her heart leapt into overdrive. Pulling the quilt off her, she climbed out of bed and inched towards the door. With wavering determination, she opened it and shuffled her feet until she peeked over the bannister.

Her eyes focused on the debris scattered on the floor. The potted orchid her mother had given her as a moving present was laid next to the destroyed ceramic pot. Its roots clung to what little soil remained available. Even the tiny ballerina figurine she had adored since the move was in pieces.

Helena descended and froze in her stead.

Alexander held a snarling vampire by the throat. If he knew she was there, he didn't acknowledge it. His hand closed the gap between his fingers until she heard a loud bone-crushing sound. Alexander didn't stop there. He grabbed the stranger by his loose mahogany hair. A crunching sound followed by tearing of flesh came from the vampire a second prior to his head coming off. Blood sprayed the overturned sofas and the floorboards.

Alexander dropped the body on the ground, and a scream escaped her. He glared in her direction, silencing her in an instant.

"Looks like we had an uninvited guest." He waved the dead man's head at her. "Lucious was right about keeping an eye on you."

She grabbed hold of the railing and lowered herself onto the step. "Why are vampires after me?"

"They took more interest in you once Lucious risked his life for you. The Council must think you're important to him."

Helena's eyes narrowed. "Why did he save me?"

Alexander shrugged. "Ask him yourself."

"And why do I taste blood?"

Alexander sighed. He flipped over one of the sofas and collapsed into the least torn seat. "I fed you some of my blood. I didn't want Lucious getting upset with me for not attempting to keep you alive."

The vein on her forehead popped out. Who knew what else he had done to her while she was asleep. She furrowed her brow. She didn't remember falling asleep. The last thing she recalled was...

Alexander drew her out of her reverie by saying, "Because this is your house, I suggest you tidy the mess or the blood will soak through the flooring."

Her fingers gripped the metal railing until they felt numb. Cursing under her breath, she stomped her way to the kitchen.

Helena spent the next two hours cleaning. Alexander managed to smash the balcony window or maybe the vampire burst through it. Not like he bothered to fill her in on the details. To avoid having a further confrontation with him, she returned to her bedroom. There were over twenty missed calls from different numbers when she picked up her phone. Helena didn't think of calling anyone. *Who would believe me?* Her parents would be in danger if she contacted them, and she couldn't rule out Alexander having friends in the police force.

She scrolled through her call history, noting the number that had contacted her most was Andrew's father. He had called on the hour, every hour that day.

Boulders nestled in her stomach. *What can I say to him? I got his son killed and turned into a vampire.* She hugged the phone to her chest. *His father will be worried. I have to say something.*

Helena glanced at the clock. It was nearly midnight, but she knew Mr Keane was a worrywart. He wouldn't sleep unless he knew where his son was. After taking a deep breath, Helena pressed the 'redial' button.

He answered immediately.

Stuck for words, she listened to Andrew's father ranting on the other end. "Helena, dear, are you alright? Where's Andrew? He hasn't come here or attended his classes. I'm getting worried."

Gathering some courage, which she had little left of, she went with the lie the vampires created. "Mr Keane, I was meaning to call you sooner. Andrew got the flu. We are taking care of him. Don't worry," she said, surprised at how calm she sounded. Nonetheless, she felt a twinge in her heart.

He let out a prolonged sigh. "I was worried for nothing then. That's a relief."

She forced a smile on her face, hoping it would make her sound cheerful. "Yeah, nothing to worry about. He'll be up and running in no time."

"Tell him he can rest until he gets better. Try not to miss your classes because of this, dear."

"I won't, Mr Keane. Thanks."

"No need to thank me. I should be thanking you for taking such good care of him."



Helena struggled not to burst into tears. If he knew the truth, he would never say something as nice as that to her. She threw the phone on the bed. Talking to anyone else would not make her feel any better.



Three days had passed since Lucious left. Alexander occupied her bedroom with his women who had arrived without her knowledge or permission. The vampire treated her place as if it was a brothel, but she held her tongue. Laura's whereabouts bothered her more. He told her Laura was going to stay at her parents' house. Somehow, it made her feel better knowing at least one of her friends was out of danger.

She hugged the cup of hot cocoa to her chest and grumbled, "He must be some kind of vampire celebrity to be this popular."

The smell of chocolate soothed her. It was hard clinging to reality when her norm became infested with the undead. Being stuck in her apartment for five days with one proved it was real. Whether she liked it or not, she had no choice but to accept it.

Helena finished her cooling drink, rinsed out the cup in the sink, and left it to dry. Clapping her hands, she thought of what to do next. The TV was broken, and Alexander had taken her laptop and phone after she called Andrew's dad. The only board games she owned were in her bedroom where something close to an orgy was happening, and she had no idea where Michael was. She grinned. Andrew had a big collection of comics in his room.

A pang of guilt zipped through her. Yes, the room she had avoided as if plague victims were locked in on the other side of it. She steeled herself. *What if Lucious lied and Andrew wasn't there?* They could have left him in that bar or buried him somewhere she wouldn't know.

Helena crept up the stairs, careful not to make any noise. She didn't have to try hard since the hallway was flooded with moans of pleasure coming from her bedroom. A shudder ran through her at the thought of sleeping in it again.

Once she stood next to Andrew's room, she chanted that she had to do it. It was her fault this had happened to him and it was up to her to make sure they weren't lying to her.

She grasped the door handle with a shaking hand. The cold metal sent a shiver through her. Pushing her doubts aside, she pressed on the handle.

The door glided open, and her eyes focused on something that made her heart freeze mid-beat. Andrew's body lay there illuminated by the moonlight seeping in through the window. He was a pale and lifeless representation of what

used to be the friend she once knew. Threading forwards, her eyes focused solely on him.

From up close, she saw dried blood on his head. His silky hair was a glued mess, plastered to his emotionless face.

She couldn't speak, couldn't think. Nothing seemed worse than seeing someone important to her lying still like that. Hot tears blurred the sight of him. She didn't care. No matter how she looked right now, Andrew couldn't see her.

She reached out to him. Perhaps this was some kind of vampire deception created to keep her in this apartment. Yet, her body remained stagnant.

A pair of hands locked around her shoulders. Her eyes travelled up to a naked chest, and she faced the man in question.

"You shouldn't be here," Alexander warned with his grey eyes aglow.

"Nor should you!"

"I'm the one who's keeping an eye on him."

Helena yanked her hands out of his loosening grip to wrap her arms around her waist.

He dipped his head towards the door. "Leave."

Arguing with him was pointless. She knew that, so she staggered out of the room. Moments later, she sat on the sofa with a blank stare as she looked on at the broken TV. Andrew remained dead. What was she going to do if he wasn't coming back?



Bright rays of sunshine shone through the thin veil that covered the window, prompting Helena to blink. It was already morning, and she hadn't moved a muscle since she settled on the sofa last night. She couldn't sleep. Her head was a complete blank.

A loud knock on the front door brought her out of her immobile state. She glanced up at the staircase, wondering if Alexander was going to do something about it. She waited until another set of knocks sounded.

Helena sluggishly moved off the sofa, and her muscles screamed. Ignoring the pins and needles in her legs, she peered through the peephole to find Laura standing on the other side of the door, dressed in jeans and a baby blue linen jacket. Helena couldn't fathom how she wasn't cold. Unlike her best friend, she hadn't looked in the mirror since yesterday or was it the day before that? She couldn't remember. She couldn't even begin imagining her current appearance.

Laura banged on the door harder. "Helena, open up. I know you're at home."

"What is she doing back here?" Alexander's grumble startled her.

She clung to the handle, uncertain whether to open the door or not.

“Come on, Helena, I forgot my key. Open the door,” Laura begged.

Alexander rolled his eyes. “Let her in before she attracts unwanted attention.”

Helena waited for him to return upstairs and unlocked the door. “Hey.”

Laura gaped with her unhinged mouth.

Brushing her hand through her hair, Helena pushed it away from her face. “Laura, are you alright?”

Laura gave a slow nod. She blinked rapidly and scowled. “You look like someone took you, stuffed you into a washing machine, and then forgot to hang you up to dry. What kind of cold do you have? Have you lost weight?” Laura’s fingers prodded Helena’s sides.

“I’ll be fine after some rest.”

Her friend scoffed. “You need a hospital, not sleep. Have you seen yourself in the mirror?” She waved the comment away. “Probably not,” she nattered on without letting Helena add anything to her defence as she entered the apartment.

Helena didn’t mind. It was good to have a conversation with someone.

There was a hint of laughter in Laura’s eyes as she spoke. “Just how contagious are you?”

For the first time in the past few days, Helena smiled. “I don’t think I am.”

Laura grinned. Clutching her bag, she hurried into the living room. Helena watched her friend scan the apartment with a pair of hawk-like eyes. Laura’s smile faded, and she sat on one of the stools around the kitchen island. Her attention remained on the smashed television.

“How did you manage to break the TV and the coffee table? And is that your mum’s orchid in the bin?”

Helena reached for the cupboard with tea and coffee. “I was cleaning and managed to knock it over. The TV... Well, it’s a long story. I’ll buy a new one once I get a job.”

“It looks more like someone’s head went through the screen,” Laura commented.

Facing away from Laura, she prepared the drinks. “I was drowsy for a while, so...” She avoided looking at her friend. Keeping Laura out of the vampire business was in her best interest, even if that meant telling a few lies.

Helena fished out some coffee from the cupboard and grabbed a pair of white cups from another. She shuffled around the kitchen, desperate to keep up her ‘nothing’s wrong’ appearance.

“Helena, what truly happened?”

“I told you already, I was drowsy.”

“I am not talking about the TV. I meant with you. You seem drained. You’ve lost weight. Why won’t you tell me anything?”

“It’s fine!” Helena shouted.

Laura sat back, stunned.

“I didn’t mean to—”

Laura waved her apology away. “Don’t worry about it.”

She finished making their coffee and served Laura hers with one spoon of sugar and cream—just as she liked it—then sat on the stool across from her.

“I’ll be right back. I want to use the loo,” Laura said.

“I’ll be here.”

Laura slid off her seat. She tucked away her loose strands of hair and glided towards the staircase.

Once Laura was out of her view, she sighed. She didn’t expect having a conversation with Laura would be this difficult. While she waited, she glanced at the clock on the wall. It was eight in the morning. Monday was an early start for them at college. Laura wouldn’t be able to stay any longer than an hour. This took away some of the tension in her shoulders.

From upstairs, a high-pitched scream sounded. The fine hairs on her body rose.

*Laura!*

The coffee cup slid out of her hands. Hot liquid spilt on the counter. A second later, the cup rolled off the smooth surface and crashed to the ground. Helena was on her feet in no time, running up the staircase. She disregarded the burning she felt in her thighs from the sudden change in position.

The main bathroom door was open, but no one was in there. That was when Helena noticed Andrew’s bedroom door was wide open.

“Laura!” she screamed, praying that nothing had happened to her.

She burst inside, her eyes trying to make sense of what was happening.

Alexander held onto Laura’s shoulders.

Helena approached them. Her eyes darted between Andrew, who lay on the bed, and Laura.

“You should keep an eye on your friends,” Alexander spoke in a low, gruff voice. His words filled with prickling energy while his eyes were fixed on Laura who stood there with a blank expression.

Helena didn’t need to look at him to know that his eyes were glowing with an angry grey colour.

She glared at him. “What are you doing to her?”

“She’s under my influence. It’s best we get rid of her memory of ever coming here.”

Helena grabbed his wrist. "You're going to mess with her mind again? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Would you prefer if I keep her for lunch?"

She let go of his wrist as if he burned her. Laura's life was more important right now. This method was unfair to her. She knew it. Yet, there was no other option.

"Instead of removing a memory can't you modify it?"

Alexander chuckled. "Now who is advocating messing with someone's head?"

"Well?"

He gave a nod. "Certainly. What should I tell your little friend?"

"Tell her she came here and saw I was still sick. Say that Andrew is recovering, and she agreed not to come here for a while because we are contagious."

Alexander smiled. He spoke in a slow yet melodic manner. "Laura, listen to me."

Laura remained silent. The slight dip of her friend's head told Helena she was conscious.

"You came here to see your friend. She was worried you will catch her flu, so she told you that you should stay with your parents a while longer. You saw Andrew drinking coffee past her shoulder. He seemed to be getting better, too." Alexander released her shoulders. "Now then, be on your way, kitten."

Laura's expression hadn't changed even when Alexander broke their eye contact. He led her downstairs with his hand firmly planted on her lower back.

Helena was conflicted as she debated whether to speak up or not. She chose against it in case it would affect the unnatural hold he had on Laura and watched her friend leave.

"Come, we need to talk." Alexander strolled into the kitchen.

She joined him. The coffee spill from the counter dripped down, forming a brown puddle with ceramic clusters next to her feet.

Alexander picked up the kitchen roll and handed it to her.

She eyed him with suspicion.

"What? Can't I be nice once in a while?" he asked with a tilt of his head.

This was the first time she saw him so tousled. His shirt was half-buttoned. His platinum hair was a wavy mess atop of his head, compared to its usual well-styled appearance.

"It's weird. You don't seem like the type to do anything nice."

A faint smile curved his lips. He tore a few sheets from the roll in her hands and knelt next to the mess.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked him, confused.

He glanced up at her. “Are you going to help or not?”

Helena narrowed her eyes, annoyed that he had ignored her question. She joined him and started soaking up the coffee stain on the counter. Together they got the cleaning done in no time.

Alexander stretched and eyed her. “Let us have a proper conversation over a cup of coffee. I’ll prepare it, you go and sit down.”

Helena scurried off to sit on the sofa, choosing a seat where she could oversee what he was doing as Alexander moved around her kitchen.

He brought two steaming cups of coffee over. When she accepted one, he flashed a brilliant smile and collapsed into the seat across from her. “So, tell me, Ms Hawthorn, what do you know about magic?”

Helena inhaled sharply. “Why do you ask?”

He sipped his coffee and those grey eyes focused on her as if trying to figure out a puzzle. “It’s not nice to answer a question with a question. Alright then, tell me about the link you created with Lucious. How did you do it?”

Helena didn’t know where he was going with this conversation and the intensity he watched her with made her uncomfortable in her own skin. “I don’t want to discuss it.”

He placed his cup on the floor and rested his elbow on the armrest. “Since we’re stuck together, we may as well get to know one another.”

The coffee cup conducted warmth where it touched her legs. Lucious must have disclosed everything about the link. Somehow, she had believed that he had the decency to keep the bond matter solely between them.

Her eyes narrowed. “Get to the point.”

“If you are a saint and can neutralise a vampire with a flick of your wrist, why haven’t you done so?”

She swallowed. He was onto her. “I promised Lucious not to harm you.”

“You’re lying to me. Why would that be?”

She put her cup on the ground and rose. “There’s no reason why I should explain myself to you.”

Alexander also stood. He was half a head taller than her, but it felt like he was a mountain with the energy swirling around him. She grew lightheaded but did her best to pretend she was unaffected.

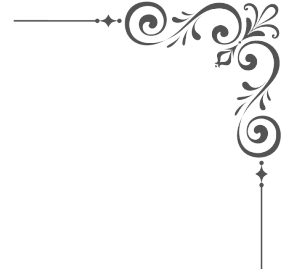
He grasped her by the throat, his fingers digging into her skin until she winced. “I hope that you will come in handy, *saint*, for if you do not, I will tear your heart out without a second thought.”

He let go of her, and she clasped her hands around her throat, massaging the sore flesh with her fingers. She was in a lot more trouble than she initially

thought.

She flinched when Alexander reached out to pat her on the head. “I hope we understood one another.”

“Perfectly,” she croaked.



## 8

# NOT SO FRIENDLY BITES

Throughout the day, Helena called out to Michael. He never showed. He hadn't said a single word. Restless, she drummed her fingers on the kitchen counter.

Alexander glanced up from his laptop, a look of irritation evident on his face. "Do you have to do that?"

She shrugged. "Not like I have anything else to do. You took away anything that could keep me entertained."

He studied the seat next to him. Her laptop and phone lay stacked on top of one another. He pushed the phone aside, picked up her laptop, and offered it to her. "If I catch you contacting someone, I'll take it back."

Helena slid off her stool. She took her laptop from him, clutching it close to her chest. "You are full of sweet words and smiles, aren't you?"

Alexander glowered and returned to his work, or whatever he was doing on his laptop.

She retreated to her seat and faced her screen away from him. Once her machine booted up, she started her search for anything that involved 'saints' or 'guardian angels'. It didn't take long to realise the information on the internet was useless. A lot of people were making things up. Some even changed the definition of things without realising it. Next, she logged into her college's mail server and e-mailed her lecturers, informing them that she had caught the flu. With that out of the way, she couldn't think of anything else to do.

"Do you have to make so much noise? I'm working," Alexander called from the sofa.

She blinked, noting she had continued tapping her fingers on the counter without thinking. Helena grinned; glad she could disturb him. Her mirth didn't last long. She closed her laptop, putting it to sleep, and stood up. "I'm going to bed."



He raised a brow. "It's only nine."

"Are you keeping track of my bedtime, too?"

"No." He pointed at the entrance with his long index finger. "Be a dear and get the door for my dinner."

Helena rolled her eyes. She trudged over to the front door, knowing there would be yet another one or two waxed, pampered, beautiful women standing there. Compared to them, she looked like a dirty housekeeper. Not like there was anyone she needed to impress.

She swung the door open to find exactly what she expected: two overdressed women in glitter and designer clothes. Both were brunettes this time.

They pushed past her and called out to Alexander who greeted them accordingly. It was a miracle he remembered their names with their endless comings and goings.

Helena rubbed her eyes with her thumb and index finger, trying to stay calm. This ridiculous prison-like arrangement was driving her insane. Soon, she would be the one killing people.

"I'm heading to my room. Keep the trash in the bin," Helena muttered and stomped up the metal steps.

She overheard Alexander commenting on their clothes and hair. Helena touched her thinning purple ponytail, noting her split-ends. *Those women probably never have them.* She shook her head. There was no reason for comparison. They were food, and she was a less appetising lamb, stuck here until Lucious returned.

She halted. For some reason, Andrew's door was left ajar. The scene from this morning flooded back and, no matter how hard she tried shrugging it off, Laura's emotionless face left a permanent scar on her heart. She wished her friend didn't have to go through vampiric brainwashing.

Her hand hovered over the door handle. She took in a deep breath and inched into the dark room. Her fingers felt for a switch on the wall. When she found it, she flicked the lights on.

She allowed her eyes to adjust to the sudden change in brightness and snuck over to Andrew's bed.

Her shoulders sagged. He hadn't moved since she had last seen him. *How long is he going to remain dead?* She traced the outline of his bluish cheek. The cold from it invaded through her fingers, causing goosebumps to form on her arm. She bit her quivering lip to detain her whimper.

*Andrew, I've missed you. I've missed your smile, your laugh, even your teasing.*

She reached out to stroke the part of his hair that was unmarred by blood. It was soft, softer than she remembered. She held back the tears. There was no need to cry. He wouldn't want her to be sad.

Looking at his hand, she entwined their fingers together. *I wish you hadn't come looking for me. I want you to...*

"...come back to me," she whispered, massaging his stiff fingers. *Why won't you warm up? Aren't you cold?*

His hand twitched.

She inhaled sharply and scanned for any movement.

Andrew's eyelids peeled opened, revealing the forest-green eyes she had missed. Warmth spread through her body as she beamed at him. He was alive, and he was looking at her again.

"Hey." He spoke in a hoarse voice.

Her heart fluttered in her chest. "Hey."

Andrew grabbed hold of her wrist. From his strong grip, his small nails dug into her.

"Andrew, that hurts," she hissed, trying to tug her hand away.

He wouldn't let go. His irises that were normal a moment ago were engulfed with a green flame, and he wet his lips. "I'm so thirsty."

"I'll get you something to drink." Helena tried getting up, but he caught her side and forced to down. "Let go!"

He ignored her struggles and sat up, smelling the air. "You smell good."

"Please, I have to leave!" She tugged at her hand again. The excitement in her replaced with dread of what would happen if she didn't leave the room.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I can control this..."

One moment she was half-sitting on the bed, the next she was slammed hard against the wall. The force of it had knocked the air out of her lungs. She gasped, eager to pump some oxygen back into her frazzled body.

Andrew pinned her hands above her head.

She was trapped. Her heart pumped faster as if trying to escape. From that angle, she couldn't even see his face anymore.

He lowered his head, burying it in her neck, and she flinched. His heavy, cool breaths fanned against her fragile neck, close to her jugular.

Somewhere inside, he had to be fighting his instincts. She needed to do something, or he would regret his actions later.

"Andrew, you don't want to do this. Please, let me go..."

Andrew's breathing levelled. A sudden stillness fenced them like the moment in a song prior to the chorus. *Have I gotten through to him?* As the thought

finished in her mind, Andrew covered her mouth with his hand and, instead of moving away, bit into her neck.

Through muffled screams, she felt her blood flowing out of her body. This was different than the time Lucious drank from her. Andrew didn't seem to care about moving his teeth around, cutting deeper into the sore tissue.

Her feeble attempts to free herself proved useless versus his vice-like hold.

The pain didn't last long. After the tingling in her left side stopped, the numbness set in. Her brain was undecided between confusion and panic. Helena closed her eyes, her heart straining to pump what little resources it had left. And then, his weight disappeared which was when her legs caved.

Some time ago, her limbs stopped supporting her. She fell to the ground like a puppet whose strings were cut. She forced her eyes open to see why he had stopped. The blurry scene of Alexander struggling with Andrew had her stumped.

"What were you thinking, idiot? Get out of here!" Alexander shouted. He secured his arm around her friend's neck.

The snarling creature glaring back at her was no longer the Andrew she once knew. It was a starved predator who saw her as nothing more than food.

Helena's vision doubled while she gathered the last remnants of her strength. She climbed to her feet but fell back down. Her heavy limbs weighed a tonne as if they had cement blocks attached to them. She pressed her back against the wall, using it for support, and staggered out of the room.

In the hallway, she reached for the railing, or so she thought. She missed it and stumbled. Animalistic snarls came from Andrew's bedroom, and she urged her body to move. Her limbs struggled with such a simple task.

Her fingers grasped the railing, and she clung to it. She counted the steps as she descended to keep her mind occupied and, once she reached the final step, she staggered, slamming into something solid.

A familiar musky scent filled her nostrils, relaxing her body further. She looked up when two strong hands grasped her by the shoulders to steady her.



Lucious didn't get a chance to visit Marcus. Alexander demanded that he return as soon as possible without giving him any information as to what to expect. Panicked that the elders had sent their hounds after his friend, Lucious *fleeted* across the city, counting off possible worst-case scenarios, some of which involved the Council capturing Alexander and the saint.

He arrived at the apartment door and took out the key card he had lifted from Andrew's pocket. Different logos of sports teams adorned the metal key rings

that hung from the chain attached to it. His *childe* sure loved his sports.

Lucious unlocked the door and scanned the immediate area for intruders, but he stopped dead in his tracks once he saw an anaemic saint with a glassy look in her eyes. Her purple hair was tied into a messy ponytail which he guessed wasn't supposed to be on the right side of her head.

He moved to see her face better. Her hazel eyes were vacant when she stumbled on the last step. His body reacted, catching her mid-fall. His hands slid down her back to her waist, and he pressed her into his body. She was thinner than when he last held her.

Lucious scanned the living room for any signs of an intrusion. He then proceeded to listen out for Alexander who struggled with something upstairs.

Her body started slipping, and he grasped her by the shoulders, steadying her fragile form. This time, he was drawn in by the smell of her sweet blood. He noticed multiple bite marks on her neck. For some reason, seeing some other vampire's mark summoned forth his anger.

"What happened?" he growled. If Alexander bit her, he would be more than happy to punch his friend. She was his to control, not anyone else's.

The saint struggled with whatever she was going to say. He gently wiped her tears away. Whatever happened here had turned his feisty saint into a living doll.

He studied her face as she fought with an array of emotions and settled on confusion. Her dark brows drew together.

"You should stay here," he spoke through gritted teeth.

Helena clung to his jacket. Her faint pleas were enough to tether him to the spot where they stood. He couldn't leave her there even if he wanted to. No matter how great his desire was to check if things were alright upstairs, he had to make certain she was fine first.

"I'll stay then." He drew her closer to his chest with one arm. In the meantime, he scanned the apartment. Some of the things were smashed unlike the last time he had been here, and Lucious took note of it to question Alexander later. Without further delay, he bit into his thumb and rubbed his blood on her damaged skin.

Pain showed on her face when he touched the raw flesh of her neck. The fact she didn't make a peep when it obviously hurt made him respect her a bit more.

When his blood coated her whole wound, Lucious removed his hand. He didn't want to leave her scarred.

He bit the inside of his lip. *Why must I care if she gets scarred? The reason I'm taking care of her is to gain her trust.*

He lifted her up and carried her over to one of the sofas. He was now certain her weight had decreased since their last encounter. With ease, he settled her on

his lap, turning her head and making sure she wasn't bitten anywhere else. Her skin was almost as cold as his to the touch.

Lucious mumbled a curse and shrugged out of his jacket. He draped it around her shoulders, hoping it would warm her.

She didn't struggle as he pressed her into his chest. Instead, she began to sob and, for reasons unknown to him, he wanted to hear her fighting with him again. This was not the saint he needed. This was a human on the brink, and he had to do whatever it took to return her to normal.

In his one hundred and fifty-six undead years, Lucious never had to console anyone. He dealt with women for pleasure and nothing else. Emotions were out of the question. So, when it came to having this young woman sitting on his lap, weeping her heart out into his shirt, all he could do was remain immobile.

After thirty or so minutes, her tears stopped, and she sat there in a daze. Her complexion was pallid when he raked his intense gaze over her.

Lucious bit into his wrist and placed it in front of her.

"What are you doing?"

"I don't have time to put up with a sick saint. Drink," he ordered.

When she didn't react, Lucious grasped the back of her head, keeping it in place, and pressed his bleeding wrist to her mouth.

She wrapped her shaking hands around the back of his arm in an attempt to pull it away. Since that didn't work, she bit the offered piece of flesh.

Lucious clenched his jaw but didn't stop what he was doing and, once the colour slowly painted her cheeks, he yielded.

With a hateful look on her face, she slid off his lap and scrambled into a seat next to him. "What's wrong with you?"

Lucious' lips twitched. "Many things, my dear."

Helena backed away as far as she could. Her back hit the armrest, and she tucked her knees into her chest. She glanced down, seeing she was still draped in his jacket. Sliding it off her shoulders, she said, "I don't need it anymore."

The horripilation on her skin made him chuckle. This was the real her—his feisty saint. Nonetheless, he took the jacket from her and shrugged it on as he climbed to his full height. "I'm going to check on Alexander. Stay here."

Lucious turned on his heel and marched up the stairs, taking two at a time with renewed concern for his friend's wellbeing. There was no need for the extended search. The only sounds resonated from the opened room where they had left his *childe*.

He strode inside, finding Andrew on the bed, folded into a ball with his back to them. The young vampire clutched his head with his hands and mumbled endless apologies.

“Alexander,” Lucious began.

Alexander’s eyes flashed stormy-grey. “Where the hell have you been? If you got here earlier, you could have ordered him to remain docile, so I wouldn’t have to put up with this shit.”

Lucious took in the trashed bedroom. Debris of smashed furniture was scattered around the place. A trail of blood marred the white wall—blood he recognised. A growl rumbled through his chest. That was where the saint had been hurt. His control slipped, and his shields opened, setting his energy and rage free.

“I’m going to kill him.” Lucious’ nostrils flared, and he advanced towards the bed.

Alexander pushed at his chest. “A bit late for that, my friend. He has broken through his bloodlust and realised what he’s done, hence the crying newborn on the bed.”

Lucious rolled his shoulders, willing his body to relax. “Bloodlust or no that does not excuse him from harming her.”

Alexander rubbed his eyes. “I warned her not to come in here, and she did it anyway. It’s her fault she got bitten.”

Being by her side had affected his judgement. If that was another one of her powers, Lucious had to know. “Do you feel protective of her, too?”

Alexander lowered his hands but didn’t stop blocking Lucious’ way. “Look, I’m here because I owe you a personal debt.”

Lucious accepted his answer. He closed the door behind him and forced his mental shields shut once more. “I’m sorry, Alexander. I had a run in with a hound.”

“Is he dead?”

“He was here to deliver a message. The Council will arrive soon, and they wish to see me.”

Alexander raked his fingers through his dishevelled hair. “Did he say when?”

“No.”

“We need to move the girl and your *childe* to different locations. I’ll get my people to take care of his family while we take her elsewhere.”

“Are you certain it is alright to leave him here alone?” Lucious asked.

Alexander raised a brow. “You’re his sire, Lucious. Use your energy and bond to tell him to stay put. Since he already fed, he won’t need to eat for two or three days.”

Lucious nodded. He had never sired anyone. These nuances were old news to Alexander, but to him, it was like learning to walk. He brushed past Alexander and touched the mumbling newborn vampire on the shoulder.

His *childe* flinched.

“Andrew, listen to me,” Lucious said, undoing his shields.

Andrew’s body shook when his sire’s energy touched him. He stopped mumbling and observed Lucious with blood smeared on his face.

Lucious breathed in a steady breath. He willed his energy to wrap around his impudent *childe*. “You will remain here until someone comes to get you. If it’s not Alexander’s subordinate or a human, kill them.”

Through their bond, he sensed the newborn’s energy fighting against his until Andrew nodded and rolled away.

“We should get going,” Lucious told Alexander and straightened up.

Alexander’s lips stretched into a full-blown grin.

“What?”

“I may have found a reason for the Council to meet us on neutral terms,” Alexander said, pleased with himself.

Lucious raised a brow. “And that would be?”

“One of the few laws we have: Preservation of Sires. Because you sired your first *childe*, the Council can’t treat you as a normal vampire anymore. They are bound by their laws to provide you with enough time to prepare for your trial.” Alexander planted his hand on Lucious’ shoulder. “Congratulations, old friend, we may have found a way to give you more time in this world.”



Every time any noise reached her ears, Helena glanced at the staircase. She wanted to go up there and see what was happening but knew it was not a good idea.

She sighed, rubbing her hands on her knees. There was nothing she could do for Andrew. He was a beast controlled by instinct. She eyed the front door. This was her chance. She could run and get away from them.

Her parents wouldn’t understand if she told them vampires were after her. They would think she was losing it and send her off somewhere to get treated. She could try staying away from the people she knew. They wouldn’t find her then. Nadine was the first person who came to mind. Although she was strange, the vampires didn’t know anything about her.

Helena pursed her lips. She didn’t know anything about Nadine either. Climbing to her feet, her decision was made. There was no time to brood over the possibilities. She needed to get away from them before they found out she wasn’t a real saint. Picking up the pace, she rushed for the door. On her way out, she grabbed her jacket off the coat hanger and went to find her classmate.



Lucious and Alexander descended the stairs after getting the fine details sorted out between them.

Alexander withdrew his phone out of his trousers' pocket while Lucious headed for the living area. Lucious' eyes found fault with the empty space. The saint was nowhere to be found. He was a fool to leave her alone. "The saint is gone."

Alexander barked a few orders down the line and hung up. "She couldn't get far in the state she was in."

"I gave her my blood."

When Alexander's phone was in his hand again, he stopped. "Maybe this isn't such a bad thing. This way she's out of the picture, and we don't have to worry about her."

Lucious wanted to agree, yet something in him desired for her to remain by his side. "The hound spoke of the Council wishing to see her upon their arrival here."

Alexander's eyes lit up, and Lucious knew his friend was holding in a lot of unhelpful things he wished to convey.

"I'll go search for her."

"And I'll get my staff to do the same," Alexander said. "But, unless it's overcast tomorrow, for a more thorough search, we will have to wait until tomorrow evening."

Lucious ran out the door, his thoughts once again were filled with the girl who seemed so fragile a short while ago.



Helena ran to the one place she knew they wouldn't look for her—her college. At night, an eerie aura clung to the grey historic walls wrapped up in ivy. It brought little comfort as she walked across the grounds. Once she reached the library, she tested the handle. It was closed. She bit her lip and tugged on it a second time with more strength. It didn't budge.

She wrapped her arms around herself and scouted for a place where she could hide until morning classes began. A few dozen feet away from her was a tall tree. The security guard most likely would not pass by it, so she made her way over and huddled closer to the rough bark.

As her eyelids grew heavy, Helena felt a familiar presence around her shields. It was the same darkness that haunted her dreams. Whatever it was, it was getting closer.

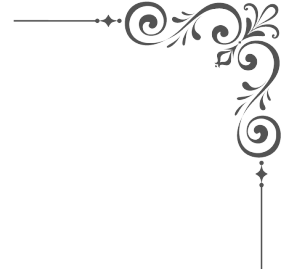




She faced the wall of her steel shields. *How did I get here?* Helena willed the metal surface around her to turn see-through. When steel became glass, the world around her shields was enveloped in oily darkness. Where there used to be a white void was a black cloud charged with something sinister. The creature that waited on the other side of her shields, she knew she didn't want to meet since she had more than enough on her plate.

For a moment, she thought she heard Michael saying something. His words were too muffled for her brain to decipher. Helena touched the wall of her shields. Surprisingly, the steel was warm.

She gathered her fingers together to form a fist. "If you can hear me, Michael, I want you to know that I'm not going to let those vampires rule my life. No one takes my freedom from me."



## 9

# THE INVITATION

A light shake on Helena's shoulder drew her out of her restless sleep. Somehow, she managed to fall asleep under the tree. When she lifted her heavy eyelids, she found an older man with greying hair and a bushy ginger beard, hovering over her with an annoyed expression.

He extended his hand to help her up. "Miss, you aren't supposed to sleep here. If you aren't a student, you shouldn't—"

Helena stood by herself. "I am. I'm a student here."

The man looked her over with disapproval. He must have thought she was partying hard last night and fell asleep here instead of finding her way to her dorm. She would have thought the same if she had come across someone young lying under a tree on a Friday morning.

"May I see some ID, Miss..."

Helena left her possessions at the apartment. Not like there was time to go home and search for her wallet. "I don't have any on me. I should go."

The guard let out a drawn-out sigh. "Don't go doing this again. You don't know what could happen to you if you sleep outside."

Helena pretended to listen while she attempted to guess the time. Two joggers ran by. Their curious gazes fixed on her and the security guard, so she cast her eyes downwards in embarrassment.

"This won't happen again, sir," she assured him.

"Good. I should get back to work." He walked away.

Helena tugged her jacket closer to her. The thin layer of cotton wasn't meant for the cold autumn mornings. She should have kept Lucious' leather jacket. At least, it was warmer. With a stifled yawn, she ran up to the nearest window and took in her reflection in the glass. Her hair was a mess and her eyes were red. It was nothing a quick wash of her face and a hairbrush couldn't fix, along with a tonne of make-up.

She combed her fingers through the tangled mess, smoothing her hair out. A droplet of water landed on her hand. Puffy grey clouds huddled together above her, forming a blanket that hid the morning sun. More raindrops fell on her skin, making her scowl at her reflection in the window. The weather was against her, too.

Helena shrugged out of her jacket and covered her head with it. She ran to the nearest building for shelter as the rain fell with an audible hiss around her. Luckily, she managed to run up the steps to get under the roof of the Arts Block. The faint warmth from her jacket enveloped her, and she leant against a tall pillar, waiting for either a sight of Nadine or for the sky to clear.

She didn't have to wait long. Nadine made her way over to the Arts building under an oversized navy umbrella with white dots scattered on it.

Helena pushed away from the pillar and called out to the girl. "Na—"

Her words died in her throat when a heavy hand landed on her shoulder. The grip on it made her wince.

"Make a sound, and I'll kill everyone you love," a familiar voice whispered into her ear.

Helena clasped her mouth shut. She watched Nadine turning her head. Their eyes locked, and Helena prayed her classmate wasn't going to come over. She didn't want to drag her into this mess, even if she could show strange visions to people.

She turned, facing Lucious.

"You swore to be mine, Helena. There is no going back."

She slapped his hand away from her shoulder. "Don't touch me."

Lucious gave her a cocky wink. "And yet you gladly fell into my arms last night."

She stared at him, indignant. Nothing came to mind that could justify her actions the night before. Instead, she hung her head, letting her hair hide her reddening face from the prying eyes of the curious bystanders.

"Helena, are you alright?" Nadine's light voice came from behind.

She spun on her heels, raising her hands in the air and spoke with haste. "Fine. I'm fine."

Nadine glanced behind Helena, and her pleasant smile faded, morphing into a dark look. "Are you certain?"

Lucious wrapped his arm around Helena's waist, drawing her closer to him. She wanted to push him away but refrained for the fear of what he might do to Nadine.

"I don't believe I've heard of you from my girlfriend," he said with ease.

Helena glared at him but didn't offer anything to the conversation.

Nadine raised a brow at his statement as if she found it hard to believe. “Your *girlfriend* does not appear to be pleased to see you.”

Lucious brushed her comment off with a shrug. “All couples fight and we are no different.”

Helena felt his fingers digging into her side. She took the hint. “Sorry, Nadine, we...were leaving.”

She manoeuvred out of his hold and took his cool hand into hers. Helena waved to Nadine who seemed conflicted about something.

They headed into the pouring rain when Nadine said, “If you go with him, I fear for your future.”

Her words unsettled Helena. She kept on walking, pretending she didn’t hear the warning. A sudden weight settled in her stomach. There was no certainty in her life anymore, and she didn’t know what was going to come from associating with Lucious. Her gut told her it would be anything but good.



Helena struggled to keep up with his strides. The bones in her fingers rubbed together from the amount of force he used, and she gritted her teeth to prevent a pained cry from escaping. She ran her free hand over her face to clear away the rain water which was making it hard for her to keep her eyes open.

Cold wind tormented her, summoning forth a shiver under her drenched clothes. When Helena sneezed, Lucious stopped in his tracks and scanned the area they were in. She recognised some store names but had never been to this part of the city which was why she waited for him to make a move.

“Let’s get you something to wear.” He picked up the pace and crossed the street.

Helena stumbled after him. The thought of clean, dry clothes kept her from falling apart again.

He opened a door and shoved her into a cosy boutique where a blast of heat from the air conditioner was equivalent to a slap in the face. He placed his hand on the small of her back, leading her to one of the clothing racks.

Helena kept her eyes on the ground. She didn’t want to attract any unwanted attention to them. It didn’t last long. When she glanced up, an elderly store clerk waddled over in her blue moccasins.

“Hello, how may I help you?” she asked, eyeing them with interest.

“Could you find some dry clothes to wear for my sister? We got caught in the rain,” he said.

Helena raised a brow. She went from a girlfriend to a sister in a matter of minutes and neither title brought her any pleasure. Nevertheless, she remained

quiet.

“We might have something for her.” The elderly woman smiled warmly and waved. “This way, please.”

The clerk went on and on like a broken record about different types of jeans. With a grumble of acknowledgement, Helena accepted the clothes that were piled in her hands. Once she had more than a dozen items stacked, the clerk directed her to the changing room.

“Wait here,” Helena told Lucious.

He raised a brow. “And trust you to be alone? I think not.”

Lucious pushed her into the cubicle when the clerk caught his elbow. “Young man,” she began in a stern, motherly voice, “it’s not right to be in the same changing room as your sister. Wait outside, please.”

He folded his arms, and Helena waited for him to use his powers on the clerk. When he didn’t, she blew out a breath and dragged the curtain across.

She picked through the pile of clothes she had dumped on the chair. Inwardly, she complained about the old woman’s taste. The majority of the pile consisted of pinks and baby blues. She plucked a pair of grey jeans from the bottom along with a purple tank top.

After changing into her new clothes, she found him leaning his back against the wall. The clerk had scurried away to attend to another customer, and Helena knotted her fingers together. “I’m done.”

He appraised her with a single look. “You look almost human, but you will be cold without a jacket.”

Helena found it strange that a vampire was thinking about her wellbeing. She started picking up her wet clothes.

Lucious grasped her hand. “Leave them. Grab a jacket and let’s go.”

She wanted to protest and stopped herself. There was no point in arguing with someone who had already made up his mind. She pulled out a hoodie from under the pinks and tugged it on.

Outstretching her arms, she grumbled, “Happy now?”

“Exceptionally.” His reply was laced with sarcasm, and it made her lips curl into a smile.

He selected a cheap umbrella by the counter and paid for the shopping in cash. At the door, he handed her the umbrella. “Don’t expect me to carry it for you.”

Helena took it from him. Although he spouted a lot of hurtful and domineering things, it was becoming harder to see him as a cruel and heartless man. And, once she opened the umbrella outside, she let him lead her by the arm. His hold was unrelenting, but it no longer hurt like before.

He stopped near a small café on the corner. Without a word, he gestured for her to go in.

“What are we doing here?” she asked.

Lucious sighed. “Your stomach continues to rumble even if you no longer notice it.”

She folded her umbrella while trying to hide her blush. He paid more attention to her than she did. His kindness conflicted with the way he acted up to now.

He selected a table away from the windows at the back of the café and collapsed into the cushioned seat. “Get whatever you want.”

The waiter promptly showed up at their table with a notepad and pen in hand. “Hi there, have you been with us before?”

“No, but I’d like some coffee. No milk,” Helena said with a brief smile.

Lucious ran a hand through his dripping locks, pushing them away from his handsome face. “I will have an espresso. Please bring your soup of the day as well.”

The waiter smiled and orbited the tables until he reached the till where he started typing in their order.

Helena rested her elbows on the table. She lowered her voice so the other patrons wouldn’t overhear her. “How come you are walking around during the day?”

“We don’t burn in the sun, contrary to the popular belief.”

“So, the sun doesn’t affect you?”

Lucious leant in, shrinking the distance between them. “Why are you so interested?”

“Since, apparently, I belong to you, I want to know more about your kind.”

“I don’t believe you’d so easily give up on running away on me, my dear. There is too much defiance in you.”

She peered over her shoulder to check on their drinks and hide her blush. They’d known each other for a short while, and he already knew more about her than she knew about him.

When their order arrived, he pushed the soup her way. “Eat.”

She scowled at him. “I didn’t order it. You did.”

“Don’t argue and eat. I assume Alexander forgot you were mortal and dismissed the fact that you have skipped your meals.”

“How do you know that?”

He was ready to say something but stopped. Instead, Lucious started sipping his coffee.

“Fine, don’t say anything,” she mumbled.

The hot tomato soup was the best thing she had in days. She swallowed each mouthful, and her eyes closed with pleasure. Finishing her meal, she stole a peek to find him watching her with interest. She refrained from starting another conversation and quickly reached for her coffee. What surprised her was that he never once told her to hurry or gave her another command during their stay there.

Was he really a bad guy?



Lucious came to an abrupt stop, and Helena bumped into his broad back. She rubbed her aching nose and tried to figure out whether what she was seeing was real or not. They had arrived at an enormous six-storey red-brick building which towered over them. A metal plate attached to one of the entrance columns read “The Seasons Hotel”.

It was unexpected that Lucious would bring her to a place brimming with other humans. She thought he would drag her back to the apartment or hide her in some kind of basement. This hotel had more white-frame windows than she could count. Many times, she had passed by this place on her way to college and not once had she set foot in it.

Lucious took her umbrella and folded it outside the lobby. “After you.”

She went through the automatic doors that slid open on her approach. The place was even grander on the inside. She stood in the foyer, gaping at the expensive marble interior. A round, antique table stood at the centre of the reception atop of which a vase was filled with different white and red flowers.

Peeling her eyes away from the sight, she focused on him. “Why are we here?”

“This is where Alexander lives. Your things are already on his floor.”

Helena’s feet forgot how to move. She had seen the monstrous exterior of this place. To be able to afford an entire floor here, he would have had to pay a fortune.

Lucious pressed his hand to her lower back. “Come along. He’s waiting, and Alexander hates that the most.”

Another mention of Alexander’s name was enough to help her regain the motor function of her legs. No matter how grand the place was, she would still be required to put up with that vampire.

They picked up the pace and arrived at their destination five minutes later.

Alexander’s floor was devoid of life. No maids, servants, or anyone for that matter was seen. If anything happened to her here, no one would notice. That thought alone was enough to make her shudder.

Diverting her attention away from such dreadful ideas, she got to know her new environment. Oak floor spanned the reception of his 'apartment'. A faint smell of paint hung in the air. Her attention was drawn to the modern artwork hanging on the walls. This place was closer to an art gallery than a home.

They walked through a pair of double doors and into a large sitting room. At the first glance, Helena counted over a dozen monochrome couches, armchairs, and love seats scattered around the place. A dash of colour in this home came from the glossy coffee-coloured hardwood flooring.

She spotted Alexander sitting cross-legged in one of the armchairs, reading through some paperwork.

"The bedrooms are through those doors." He pointed to two large white doors near a grand piano without looking.

Helena glanced at Lucious. His expression told her nothing as he led her in the direction Alexander mentioned. They proceeded through another set of doors which led to a long plum coloured hallway filled with what appeared to be an endless number of doors.

"To make things easier, Alexander suggested you stay in this room." Lucious waved to the first door from the wall. "The room next to yours is his office. If he's not at work, you'll find him in there."

She withdrew her hand from his loose hold. "And where will you be staying?"

"I haven't decided yet. But, do not fret. If I sleep in your room, I won't touch you. Your childish body is not to my taste."

Helena huffed and crossed her arms. "You are not staying in the same room as me, full stop."

A deep chuckle escaped him, and he opened a door for her.

She didn't move. To her, the previous conversation was being pushed to the back of her mind. She felt that going in would change her life forever.

Lucious nudged her backside. "There are some things we need to discuss later. Until then, you should try settling in."

Helena swallowed the lump in her throat. She set her foot inside, planting it firmly into the soft maroon carpet. The colour scheme of this room was gloomy. Even with the lights on, it felt dark and uninviting. This was not a place where she felt even remotely at home.

Sitting on the bed, she brushed her fingers against the smooth, silky material and let out a laboured sigh. *What am I doing here?*

She called out to Michael again, needing to know what to do or how to function. Unsurprisingly, he didn't respond to her calls. Left with nothing else to do in her new prison, she stood and headed for the door.



Helena found Lucious sitting alone on one of the white couches in the living room, drinking an amber-coloured drink with ice. He seemed relaxed and quite at home—a skill he seemed to possess no matter where he was.

“Where’s Alexander?”

Lucious placed his drink on the end table. “He was called away by the staff. He should be back shortly. How are you finding your new lodgings?”

Helena shrugged. “The room is amazing. It must be a few times larger than my old room, but...”

“But?”

“It doesn’t feel like home to me.”

“And what does feel like home to you?”

She felt his eyes on her. His stare made her uneasy as she stood in the centre of the room, fragile and exposed. Her body itched to move, so she drew closer to an armchair across from where he sat.

“Somewhere where there are people I love and care about, I guess,” she replied, sinking into the seat.

“I don’t believe Alexander would be interested in hitting it off with you.”

“That’s not what I meant!”

He smiled. “I was joking. I myself have not found a home in a long time.”

That piqued Helena’s interest. She scooted closer, hoping for him to continue.

Lucious’ lips tugged into a sad smile and, with a distant look, he proceeded to stare out the window.

Helena didn’t want to press for information. He was not the type of person who talked about himself a lot. Now that she was trapped in a different place, there were things she needed to know like how was Andrew coping? Since he couldn’t go outside, how would he eat? A chill from earlier resurfaced. Images of her neighbours drained of blood flashed in front of her eyes. Not that she had the time to meet any of them.

“What are you going to do about Andrew? Where will he be staying?”

“Alexander sent him to another place for the time being. He’ll be taken care of, don’t worry.” His reassurances didn’t make her feel any better. In the end, she had to take his word for it.

Loud, hurried footsteps made her turn her head to see who was approaching.

As if his Armani suit was on fire, Alexander burst into the room, muttering curses in Russian. He waved a piece of paper in his hand. “You’ve got mail.”

Lucious immediately was on his feet. His wary eyes fixated on the small piece of paper in Alexander’s hand.

“For me I take it?” Lucious outstretched a hand to accept the letter that was offered to him.

“It is for both of you,” Alexander corrected him.

Puzzled by this development, Helena rose from her seat. She didn’t tell anyone where she was going.

Lucious’ deft fingers dug inside an already opened envelope which held a faded piece of grey paper. She took note of a strange circular emblem of a cloaked man holding a sword, facing the sharp end of it downwards.

“What the hound told me was the truth,” Lucious said after he finished reading. He handed her the piece of paper. “It would seem you are also invited.”

Helena read the contents of the letter aloud, “By the order of the Council,

You, Lucious Ellwood, and the human female are invited to attend a summoning two dawns from this day at your host’s local business establishment. The Councilmen shall arrive no later than the witching hour. Failure to appear will be seen as a rebellion against the elders and, therefore, imminent action will be taken to remove the threat.” She frowned. “Remove the threat?”

“Means we are as good as dead,” Lucious explained.

She handed the letter back to him with a shaking hand. “Why do they want me to come with you?”

“Who knows? Maybe they figured out what you are, or they wish to know why Lucious went out of his way to rescue a human,” Alexander said.

All of this was impossible for her to handle. Not only did she belong to a vampire, she had to face vampires that her captors seemed to be afraid of. “What will happen at the meeting?”

Lucious signalled for her to sit back down, and she complied. Being seated seemed like a good idea, especially since her legs were close to jelly in consistency after reading that letter.

He sat on the edge of the sofa, and Alexander paced with his hands gripping his elbows. “I’m glad they chose the neutral grounds for the meet, but the fact they are coming here in person is just—”

“Unsettling,” Lucious finished for him.

Alexander stopped pacing and faced Lucious. “Are you certain you haven’t done anything to warrant such treatment?”

He shook his head. “No matter how hard I think, nothing comes to mind.”

Alexander sank into a seat next to him. Both vampires seemed paler than before, which made Helena’s stomach knot with dread.

“Is there anything we can do to get out of the meeting?” she asked.

“Not if you want to stay alive to see the year’s end,” Lucious said.

Alexander rested his elbows on his knees. "I will try to keep the peace during the meeting but even I have my limits."

Lucious tapped Alexander's shoulder. "Don't worry about it. You have already put your neck on the line for me. I do not wish to lose you in a meaningless fight."

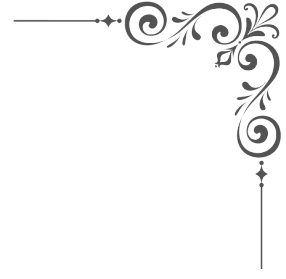
"Are they that strong?" she asked.

Alexander eyed her. "Would vampires all across Europe listen to anyone who's incapable of making them kneel with a single command? We do not have democracy in our world. We are kept in order by the strongest, most powerful elders who rule different territories. Those vampires preserve the few laws dictated by the first Council."

Ants crawled along her skin. "And we are going to meet them in two days?"

Alexander clapped in intermittent succession. "Now the human grasps the situation!" He gave Lucious a quick glance. "I best get back to work. I have a lot to attend to."

Their stiff movements had the bad feeling in her chest growing exponentially. The restless nights filled with strange dreams and the stress from her predicament had made it hard for her to think straight. Exhausted as she was, she figured if Alexander and Lucious feared the Council, she should, too.



## 10

# SOUL-BOUND

In Alexander's office, Lucious rested his back against the ashen wallpaper. His fingers toyed with a pound coin he had found in his pocket. Behind his large desk, Alexander flicked through a pile of paperwork held in his hands with disinterest. He always said work relaxed him. The current circumstances had made it so that nothing could take away the lines of stress etched into his youthful face.

Lucious gave up waiting for his friend to finish whatever he was doing. "Alexander, you have nothing to do with this. You should inform the Council you were misled by me to save your reputation."

Alexander groaned, tossed the papers onto the desk, and folded his arms across his broad chest. "And then what? Abandon a friend who saved my life? Out of the question!" He brought his piercing grey eyes to level with Lucious' in an open challenge. "I am more concerned about the saint we're keeping around."

"What about her?"

"The Council is interested in her. This may bite us in the ass later."

Lucious shook his head. "They cannot find out what she is."

Alexander stood, slamming his flattened palms against the table which caused the wood to creak under the sudden influx of pressure. "I doubt even she knows what she is!"

Lucious was thankful that Alexander's office was soundproof. Scaring the saint any more could drive her further away, and he did not have enough patience to chase her around the city again.

"Calm down, Alexander. You said so yourself, she holds powers we do not know of yet. We have to get her to trust us."

Alexander's eyes lit with mischief. "Then make her fall in love with you."

The coin slid between two of Lucious' fingers and fell onto the white carpet between his booted feet. He was stunned by his friend's suggestion. Love was

not something he considered or had the time for.

“You look distraught. I am trying to say that the most loyal woman is the one in love. Right now, it is the perfect time for you to intervene.” Alexander made his way around the desk and sat on its edge. “She has lost a friend she cared about, so console her. Make her think you will be there for her.”

Lucious saw merit in Alexander’s solution, but there was little appeal in it. “Alexander, that’s—”

“Something you should consider if you wish to manipulate her.”

Lucious fixated on the small pound coin in thought. As much as it displeased him to admit it, Alexander had a point. There wasn’t a better time to gain her trust. His lips twitched into a smile. “Alright, you win. I’ll take care of the girl.” He picked up the coin. “There is a different matter I wanted to discuss with you.”

“This must be about Anna.”

The name Lucious used to love hearing had become a haunting memory that ravaged his mind for over a century. He could have sworn his dead heart had squeezed at the mention of it, and his lips pursed like he’d been chewing on a lemon rind. “I have to return to England. The name Phil gave me could be my final clue.”

“All these years you’ve spent looking for her killers. The leads Phil and I found got you nowhere. Don’t you think it is time to let her rest in peace?”

“Would you let Max’s death go unanswered?”

Alexander cringed. “You have a point.” He paused and added, “I have thought of another possibility.”

Lucious kneaded the coin in his hand. “What’s that?”

“I have mentioned this before and stand by it. The whole incident was too clean. It points to professionals doing it. But, the more I thought about it, the more I questioned that fact. I mean, they waited for you to leave the country to attack her. And to kill Anna would not have been an easy feat. With the job done, they vanished without a trace, leaving ashes of your sire for you to find.”

Lucious had thought it to be strange, too, yet no matter what he couldn’t seem to find any evidence that would point him in the right direction. “What are you suggesting?”

Alexander spread his arms out. “I wouldn’t be surprised to find Eliza involved in her death.”

He closed his eyes. The hold on his shields was slipping, and he struggled to maintain his cool. The elders had connections greater than any vampire or a bounty hunter group. As much as he didn’t want to believe it, having spent so many years looking into Anna’s death, he had dismissed their involvement as an

improbability. If he were to look closely at the suspicious development in his standing with the Council, he could overlook it no further.

“Lucious, it’s just a thought. Right now, I suggest you try controlling your saint if that’s what she is.”

“Are you implying she’s not?”

“I don’t know what she is. I can’t figure out if she didn’t kill me because it suited her plans or if she was incapable of harming me.” Alexander reached for his tie and tugged it down, loosening the knot. “I don’t question the fact that you saw something. We simply should consider the idea that it may be something other than a guardian angel.”

“If she could create something that believable without casting a spell aloud, she will have her use, Alexander.”

“I’m sorry. I tend to overthink things.” Alexander rounded his desk and parked himself in his office chair. “I believe it is time for you to try your hand at courting a woman.”

Lucious rolled his eyes from lack of enthusiasm. He never had to court a woman. They came to him of their own volition. Both parties got what they wanted out of their short relationship without emotional involvement. To make a young woman fall in love with him was not something he ever thought he’d have to do with the Council’s due date creeping up on him.



Helena lay on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. She was exhausted yet unable to sleep with her unsettled mind. Even counting sheep and the fences they hopped over didn’t help. After a thousand, she gave up and let the thoughts flow as she rolled over to one side. In two days, she was due to meet this dreaded Council. Perhaps, when she explained to them that she had nothing to do with Lucious or Alexander, they would let her go. To her, that sounded more like a prayer than a possibility.

She heard a soft knock on her door, so she scrambled off the bed and opened it. One of the people she didn’t want anything to do with smiled at her.

“May I come in?” Lucious requested.

“No.”

She didn’t get a chance to slam the door shut. He pushed it open with what seemed to be little effort and rested his hand on the frame. “Then I’m coming in.”

“I told you, no.”

His playfulness disappeared. “I have something I need to talk to you about.”

Knowing she didn't have a choice but to listen, she let him pass. For him to come to her, at such an ungodly hour, meant it was important. Her stomach churned. Did something bad happen to Andrew or Laura? "What's wrong?"

Lucious closed the door behind him.

To mimic him, she took a few steps back, creating some distance between them. The way he watched her was different like she was some kind of animal to be tamed.

He closed the gap in one long stride.

Her heart beat faster. This closeness reminded her of how gentle he was when he held her the night before. She turned to keep him from seeing her reddening face. "Well, don't stay silent. What is it?"

"I want you to recreate the link between us."

She couldn't help her reaction. She whirled on the spot and stared at him, dumbfounded. "You were the one who wanted to cut the link, why would you want to recreate it?"

He shrugged. "That was then. Our circumstances have changed."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Michael materialise. She glanced in his direction. He wore a worried expression on his face. At the same time, he appeared to be worn out. The glow surrounding him had dulled. What was happening to him to keep him away from her?

"Don't listen to him. He is trying to use you," Michael said, interrupting her thoughts.

Helena wanted to take another step back, but Lucious grasped her arms to keep her in place. His cool touch against her bare skin sent an involuntary shiver down her spine.

Gathering her courage, she found the words she sought. "I can't."

Lucious didn't release her. Instead, he watched her with those strange blue-brown eyes as if trying to decipher whether she was speaking the truth. "Why not?"

"It was because Michael brought me to a certain place last time."

"Helena, if you're lying to me..."

She balled her hands into fists. "And if I am?"

Lucious' expression turned grim. He traced his index finger along her cheek and lifted her chin, drawing her face close enough that if either one of them moved their lips would collide.

When she didn't give him a reaction, he gave her a brilliant smile. "Consider my words, my dear."

*"There is nothing to consider,"* Michael said in her mind.

As Lucious moved to leave, she grabbed his arm. The words that had been on her mind for days came out. "Why did you save me?"

She felt him tense under her hold and couldn't see him as he spoke. "It was my fault you got involved."

*Is that the truth?* She couldn't tell. She wanted to see his face but didn't dare ask him to confirm his statement.

Lucious shrugged her hand off. "Get some rest. We can continue this conversation another time." He softly closed the door behind him.

Her immediate attention was needed elsewhere. She shot Michael a piercing glare. "Where were you?"

"I was busy."

She marched over to where he stood and hissed, "Busy doing what?"

"That matter doesn't concern you, Helena."

He never spoke to her in such short and irritated manner or left her side for longer than an hour or two. So, why wouldn't he tell her where he went? There couldn't be that many things he was hiding from her.

"Michael, please..."

"I don't have time to repeat myself." He softened his speech. "I am using a lot of energy to stay visible to you right now. Is there anything you wanted to ask? I must leave soon."

"You're leaving again?" she asked in a high-pitched voice.

Michael nodded. "I must."

"Then why are you my guardian if you go missing for days at a time?"

He reached out to touch her and stopped an inch short of her shoulder. A frown marred his facial features as he seemingly remembered something. "I'm sorry, Helena. This conversation will have to wait."

A nagging voice chipped away at her resolve to keep from questioning him further. *Why did Lucious assume that I am a saint the moment he saw Michael? Do only saints have guardians?* She met his gaze, full of determination. "I want the truth, Michael. Why guard me?"

Michael glanced at the ceiling as if asking permission. When he locked gazes with her again, his expression became distant. "It is not the right time for this conversation."

Blood drained from her face. He wasn't going to tell her anything. She was so desperate to speak to him, to get some answers or support from him and, instead, he avoided her questions. Her heart shattered into a million pieces from this betrayal, and she shook with frustration. "Get out!"

Her nails dug into her palms. Her hands hurt although such minor pain could not compare to the barbed wire coiling around her bleeding heart. The world she



was used to was crumbling around her and there was nothing she could do to return to normal.

Michael bowed his head and vanished without as much as an apology.

Sometimes, she wished for him to have a physical body in this world so she could kick him, even if she were to regret her actions later. Was there no one left whom she could trust? The walls around her were beginning to close in from every direction. She needed to get away, needed some time and space to think things through.

Helena put on the hoodie Lucious bought for her and grasped the handle of her bag with her belongings. She swung it over her shoulder and stormed over to the door. When she flung it open, she froze in her stead. Lucious stood on the other side. His fist was raised mid-air, ready to knock.

"I heard you shouting. Are you alright?" He seemed concerned.

This was the same curious face he showed her when she broke down because of Andrew. She couldn't take another interrogation by him. "I'm leaving."

Lucious trapped her with his body, blocking the doorway. He wrapped his arms around her waist and drew her against him.

Helena forgot how to breathe. The bag she was holding slipped out and fell on the ground with a soft thump. He was too close. His face hovered inches above hers, making her already thudding heart pump faster. She took in a large gulp of air, soothing her burning lungs. Her hands grasped his flexed biceps. They were much larger than she had anticipated.

She pushed at him and when he didn't move, she glared. "Let me go! I want to leave."

"And where will you go?"

She slapped him across the face which caused Lucious to lick his bleeding lower lip.

Helena stilled. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do that."

She waited for an outburst of rage from him, anything that showed her what went on behind his indifferent mask. To her dismay, Lucious remained a mystery.

He shifted their bodies, trapping her between him and the wall. Because of his closeness, her coherent thoughts went out the window. She held on to the rage from her fight with Michael. Her eyes watered and, to stop the tears, she fought her way out of his arms once more.

"Let me go, Lucious. You have no right to touch me!" In her useless struggle, she kept her face hidden from him to conceal her tears.

"Look at me, Helena."

"No! Let go!"

“Look at me!” he shouted.

She lifted her face with defiance blazing in her hazel eyes.

His eyes weren’t glowing as she thought they would be. *Wasn’t he angry with me?* Although she had promised not to cry anymore, she couldn’t stop the tears once they commenced their descent. And, when he brushed his fingers against her cheek to wipe them away, a blush dyed her face red.

“I can’t keep doing this. There’s no one I can trust. I feel...I feel alone.” She sniffled and rubbed her sleeves over her face, wiping away the streams. “There are a lot of things I don’t understand. I’ve never asked for the Council to be after me. I can’t even sleep at night because of those strange dreams. I’m scared...”

His cool hand pressed against her wet cheek, and he drew her in. He was close enough for their foreheads to touch. Two blue-brown spheres burned into hers, and she held her breath when her muscles tensed in anticipation.

Shocked at her reaction, she jerked her face away from him.

He breathed the words into her ear. “Recreate the link with me, Helena. You are mine, and I will protect you. The link will help me find you if we’re separated. Let me be someone you can *trust*.”

Could she trust a vampire to keep her safe? Michael had repeatedly warned her against it. She thought of her guardian, reminding herself of their fight which made her nails dig deeper into Lucious’ upper arms. Once she realised what she’d done, her hands fell to her sides. In the end, it didn’t matter whether she trusted Lucious or not. She had no idea how to connect them together without Michael’s help.

“I don’t know how,” she said, defeated.

He moved away to see her properly. “You were able to do it before, you can do it again.”

“It’s different this time.”

Lucious’ grip on her loosened, and he cupped her face. “There is no harm in trying. You have to believe in yourself.”

No matter how long she observed his blank expression, she couldn’t read him. So, instead, she questioned the peculiar sensation that caused her heart to thump like a wild rabbit in his vicinity.

Reluctant, she gave a curt nod. “Okay, I’ll try. I can’t guarantee it will work.”

His arms fell away, giving her room to breathe. “I am here for you. Tell me what you need.”

Her blushing was wrong. She shouldn’t feel anything for this stranger. He brought pain and misery into her life, yet she closed her eyes and concentrated on being inside of her shields. Helena thought of the place where Michael had taken her. She knew how it looked to the fine detail, but in that moment nothing

came to mind. So, she thought harder about the link, the way it felt, how it looked.

Her fingers tingled with anticipation. They reached out to him, wanting to be close to his blood-red string. She couldn't comprehend why. The yearning spread warmth through her body and, soon, fear of what this could mean shook her concentration, making her withdraw.

With laboured breaths, she opened her eyes to look at him. "I can't seem to do it."

Lucious eyed her and her trembling hands. "Give me your hand."

She lifted her left hand, placing it in his offered palm. The touch was almost electric. Strange energy buzzed between them. There was no need to think of what she had to do because the instructions became instinctual to her.

"Hold me. Not too tightly," she commanded, placing her palms flat against his chest.

Lucious seemed taken aback by her boldness. The smile he wore with such confidence vanished. His eyes twinkled with excitement and curiosity.

He enveloped her in his arms. The alien energy engulfed them, burning her a little as if she stood next to a bonfire.

She hesitated but rested her forehead against his chest. Her breathing calmed as did her heart. Lack of a heartbeat from Lucious was odd. She ignored it. Closing her eyes, she let go of her physical body and focused on the task at hand.

A barrier erected before her. It twisted itself around Lucious. *His shields*, she thought.

"Drop your shields."

His body tensed. "Why?"

"Trust me."

He didn't relax.

She repeated the order again, thinking he may not have heard her the first time.

Lucious remained tense but let go of his resistance and let her in.

A moment later, Helena stood in a dark chamber. Lucious was no longer where she could see or feel him. She knew he was there, holding on to her physical body. A single light shone from above, illuminating a couple of feet ahead.

She frowned. She wasn't inside of her shields. Hers were always well-lit and had steel walls encapsulating her. Nor could this be the darkness that wanted to force its way in. The place where she stood appeared lonesome and cold.

*Where am I?* She searched the darkness, finding nothing she could focus on.

"The heart of a vampire," a woman's melodic voice sounded behind her.

Helena faced the direction of the voice. An exact copy of her stood under the same stream of light, except this girl wore a long white dress with web-like golden embroidery decorating the silky material.

The stranger circled her. Each graceful step was close to a dance movement, or so Helena imagined as the doppelganger glided along. “Do you truly wish for this link?”

“I’m not sure.”

The stranger stopped behind her. Her fingers combed through Helena’s hair with a delicate touch. “Then why are you here?”

It was a simple enough question. Helena wanted to answer it, yet no words came out. She frowned. *Why am I here?* Was it to please a vampire she didn’t know well or because she was angry with her guardian angel?

It was hard to think, so she moved away from the peculiar comfort her doppelganger gave her. This helped clear her mind. The answer was there again. “I want to trust him.”

The stranger tilted her head to one side. “You would trust him with your life?”

“He had saved me before.”

“That is not an answer.” The doppelganger spoke quicker as she picked up her dizzying movements once more. “Would you entrust your life to this creature, a being without a beating heart? He preys on the blood of the innocents and is consumed by darkness on the inside and out. He is an abomination and should not exist in this world.”

Her words rang true. Those things scared her: the blood, the pain, and the deaths Helena witnessed in such a short period of time. What would happen to her if she stayed with the vampires? And, if she left, would Andrew forgive her for what she had done to him?

That meant they could never be together again. She couldn’t accept this. She had to be strong and willing to accept a vampire for what he was. “I trust him with my life.”

The doppelganger stopped. Her shocked expression told Helena she didn’t expect such a reply. Pain and anger fuelled the fire in the girl’s eyes as she outstretched her pale arm in which she held Lucious’ red string. “Then, by all means, it is *your* choice.”

Helena took the string from her. The same energy from the Angel Realm coursed through it, sending tingles through her fingers. She looked at her gut. There was nothing there. Michael did something to her. He sealed her soul string away somehow.

Running her hand over her chest and stomach, she couldn’t find it.

“This is the last thing I will tell you,” the doppelganger began begrudgingly. “The soul-link is a part of you. You cannot remove it as it is attached to your soul. The path you chose will bring you much pain, so all I can do is wish you luck.”

The stranger waved her goodbye and faded into the darkness, leaving Helena to stare at where she stood. Her fingers played with the red string in her hand. The warmth of his string soothed her nerves as if it sought to be a part of her.

Wanting to find her link, she felt it there. The girl was right. It was a part of her. She tugged on the white cord and extended it. Nothing happened until the two strings touched. They wove around one another. This time, there was no knot she needed to tie. The two strings became one harmonious ensemble of white and scarlet.

Lightheaded, her concentration deteriorated. The more she thought about anything, the less she understood what she was thinking. She clung to her consciousness and opened her eyes to find Lucious’ worried gaze studying her.

She gave him a weak smile. “It worked.”



Helena awoke to a foreign ceiling staring back at her. She scrambled to sit up and made herself dizzy in the process. Her panic subsided once she recalled where she was and let herself adjust to the dim light in the room.

She rolled her head to one side to find a dark shape sitting on the bed next to her. In an attempt to move away from him, she tried sitting up again, but two cool hands grasped her shoulders and held her down.

“Don’t move. Your IV will come out if you do,” Lucious said.

Her hoarse voice scratched at her dry throat. “What happened?”

“We’re in your room. You collapsed in the hallway and wouldn’t wake up no matter what we did. The doctor said your collapse was due to exhaustion.”

She coughed. “May I have some water?”

He slid off the bed.

Her eyes followed his silhouette to a dresser next to a deep-purple armchair she hadn’t noticed before. She heard him pour a glass of water which he placed in her trembling hand upon his return.

Helena lifted her head. Taking a sip helped soothed the ache and rid her of the scratchy dryness in her throat. Until she was satisfied, she drank the water with loud gulps.

Lucious took the empty glass away without a single word.

“Why is it so dark in here?” she asked.

“The doctor said we shouldn’t shock your system with bright light when you wake up. So far, you have been asleep for over twenty-seven hours. It is early morning outside, so I suggest you keep the curtains drawn a while longer.” He sat next to her. His presence gave her a strange sense of calm and serenity which wasn’t there before.

“I always wondered what happens to vampires when the sun comes up.”

Lucious didn’t look at her when he spoke, but he seemed as relaxed as she was. “The light itself does nothing to us. The main problem is the UV radiation. Prolonged exposure to it drains our energy, paralysing us.”

“So, the vampire legends were false? Who knew?” She giggled.

A quiet thudding sounded in her ears. A headache wasn’t far behind.

“I don’t feel well,” she admitted and felt agitation rise inside of her—a feeling that did not belong to her. She studied his face, realising the emotion came from him.

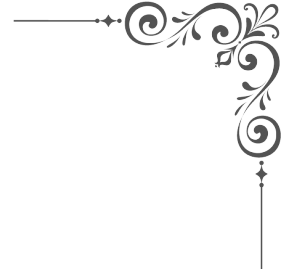
“Tonight, the elders will arrive. You must get better by then,” he told her.

She smiled. “Is that your way of saying you want for me to get better quickly?”

*Irritation? A flash of anger?* Both emotions emanated from him. *How? No, I must be imagining things.*

His calm dissipated and strangling agitation overpowered the other emotions. “It would be inconvenient if you are in bad form for the meeting.”

“It’s always about convenience with you vampires,” she snapped and rolled away from him. There was nothing else to add to their conversation. She closed her eyes and let the sleep take away her reality.



## 11

# UNITING ENERGIES

Stuck in bed, Helena was forced to watch a maid rushing around her room with a dust brush. The willowy, short woman gave Helena a once-over. She hurried to the nearest window and jerked the curtains apart.

Bright afternoon light filled the bedroom. Helena's migraine from last night returned tenfold, forcing her to hiss in pain. Her hands shot out from under the quilt to massage her temples. She grunted when the throbbing in her skull wouldn't subside.

The maid, saying nothing, lifted Helena's bag and took the liberty of rummaging through it.

Unable to believe what she was seeing, Helena groaned inwardly. The maid's behaviour made her wonder if she was part of the hotel's staff or hired by Alexander to make her day miserable.

The stranger took out a pair of faded jeans, a red T-shirt Helena didn't know she owned, some socks, matching underwear and arranged them on the edge of the bed into a neat pile. Satisfied with her choices, she stood in place, smiling at Helena.

Gathering enough strength to sit up, Helena smiled back. She thanked the woman after reading her golden name badge clipped to the left breast pocket.

Magda—or so her name tag read—beamed with a bright, toothy smile any photographer would kill to capture, and pointed at the dresser.

Helena's brows squished together, and she gave a slow nod which the maid seemed to take this as an affirmation of some sort.

With much effort, Helena clambered out of bed. The IV was gone, allowing her to move around without restraint. A small band-aid was left in its place to remind her of the previous night. She swayed the second she was upright. There were a few metres distance between where she stood and the bathroom.

*I can make it.*

She took the first step and stumbled. Her hands and knees hit the ground first.

Magda dropped the duster and ran to her aid. Her eyes were large with concern, and she wrapped a supporting arm around Helena's waist. The maid pointed at the bathroom with a questioning look.

If Helena's head didn't feel as if it would crack open at any given moment, she would have laughed at her predicament.

"Yes, I need to go there," Helena replied to the maid's unspoken question.

Why was she in such a condition to begin with? She touched her forehead—no fever. Her body was fine a day or so ago. Moving it now felt like shifting a mountain.

Magda draped Helena's arm over her shoulders, helping her back into a standing position. The thin woman struggled to remain upright while supporting Helena's weight. To remedy it, Helena straightened her posture, determined not to make Magda suffer any more than she already was.

"Do you know where Lucious is?" Magda didn't seem to hear her the first time, so she repeated the question louder.

The maid smiled at Helena with another perfect smile, shaking her head.

Not knowing whether she couldn't understand the question or if she didn't know where he was, Helena stopped talking. She peered through the gaps in her fingers which obscured her vision. They were almost there.

She grabbed hold of the golden doorknob for support. As she careened inside, her bare feet absorbed the chill from the slippery marble floor. She slid along the smooth tiles towards the large mirror hanging over an oval sink which was encrusted with golden flower patterns. Close up, her reflection didn't give her any comfort. She appeared worse than after her return home with Andrew. Crater-like dark circles highlighted her bulging eyes. Her skin had paled a few shades, if not more. Her mother would kill her for not taking care of her health.

"You look like shit," she told the girl in the mirror who returned a half-smile.

The energy she had recovered from her sleep was rapidly draining away. She held on to the sink with one hand and used the other to splash some cold water on her face.

*What is wrong with me?*

Helena thought hard on what may be the cause of her sudden illness. She felt fine until the strings were connected.

*There must be something wrong with the link.* She closed her eyes to concentrate on the new connection. It was a lot harder to do than she had anticipated. A migraine from before was chipping away at her sanity.



At a sudden surge of pain in her skull, her hands shot up. Her support disappeared and her knees gave way. Hitting the floor with a loud thud, she screamed her agony aloud. To add to her suffering, the headache built up, thudding in what seemed to be timed intervals.

*“Helena what have you done to yourself?”* Michael asked.

His words were nothing more than background noise amidst the pulsating hammering in her head.

She gritted her teeth. *“I...don’t know. It hurts!”*

Her nails dug into her scalp. Through closed eyes, she could tell Michael’s hand hovered next to her face. Forcing them open a tad, she regretted her decision instantly. The light from his palm was unbearable to her sensitive retinas. Without delay, her eyelids fluttered shut.

The pain slowly faded. Whatever Michael was doing helped her regain control of her thoughts. And, once her migraine receded enough to become a minor buzzing, he stopped whatever he was doing.

She was glad he returned to her side. Mouthing a ‘thank you’, she observed him.

Michael’s condition hadn’t improved. He appeared spent. The glow around him had dimmed, and he almost looked human. His sunken red eyes indicated restless nights.

She snorted. Somehow, she knew exactly how he felt. Whatever he was undergoing took a toll on him.

Guilt gnawed at her. She shouldn’t have overreacted the way she did when he avoided her questions. Michael had always been there to help her. He should be allowed to have some secrets of his own.

The cold from the floor seeped through her clothes, making her shiver. That didn’t stop her from giving him the best smile she could muster as she rested her head against the tiled wall.

*“What was that?”* she asked him, hugging herself.

*“Why have you created another link with the vampire? I warned you about this. Am I so untrustworthy that your first choice became an undead?”*

*“I’m sorry. I want to trust someone...”*

Michael sighed, bowing his head. His long golden hair slid from his shoulders, hiding his face from her. *“I should not have left you alone. This link... It shouldn’t exist between a mortal and a vampire.”*

*“Why not?”*

*“I do not have enough time to explain the semantics. The reason your new connection is so laborious on you is because you are not of the same energy level.”*

Helena couldn't help staring at him. Her brain was trying to catch up to what he was saying and failing miserably at digesting the influx of data.

He raised his fisted left hand, facing it downwards. "This is your energy," he said and lifted his second hand with his fingers spread out. "And this is his." He placed both hands next to one another, touching his thumbs to represent the link between them. "Your energy level is much smaller than his. So, the leftover energy from the bond is trying to find a host by roaming the link."

"This headache is energy hitting against our shields?"

"Yes."

"How can we fix this?"

"Call out to the vampire," Michael instructed.

If she had a megaphone available, sure, but there was nothing in her vicinity. She raised a brow. "Just like that? Do vampires have such good hearing?"

"Not using your voice. Use the bond. The connection is strong enough for you to communicate mind-to-mind from any distance. The last time I checked on him, he was somewhere on the premises."

Helena didn't bother asking why Michael was spying on Lucious. In a way, she was thankful he kept an eye on the vampires while she relearned to walk.

She focused and thought of Lucious. From the confines of her shields, her string was no longer plain. It was replaced by a new, merged string of white-red. The blood from the red string seeped through the cotton-like material of her pale string without leaving a single stain behind. She didn't dare try to understand how any of it worked and hoped that one day, when he was not running away, Michael would tell her what she needed to know.

The link hummed with energy when she sent Lucious a message. "*Help me.*"

Without delay, she heard his strained voice in her mind. "*What is this? How can I hear you in my head?*"

"*I can't explain it. I need you to come to me. I don't feel too good.*" Sending the last message took a lot more out of her than she had anticipated. It was growing harder to stay conscious.

"*I'll be right there,*" he replied, and the connection went dead.

She found Michael staring at her. "He'll be here soon."

"As unhappy as I am with this arrangement, this is the only way to make you feel better."

"Look, Michael, I'm—"

Before she could give a proper apology, Lucious arrived in the doorway. After a quick look at her, he knelt at her side. Her brain didn't even register the movement. *Cursed vampire speed.*

Helena noticed he wasn't in a much better shape than her. This problem was making the two of them suffer. They needed to fix it before any more damage was done.

"Why did you call me and not the maid?"

"I didn't call her because she can't help me. There's a problem with our link."

"What's wrong with it? It feels a lot stronger than before..." He paused and assessed her. "You're shivering. Let's get you off the floor."

He reached for her, but she shook her head. "No time. We have to get this fixed before it gets worse."

Her headache picked up where it left off, gaining more strength than ever since Lucious entered the room. Their proximity was affecting the length of the bond, causing the collisions to happen faster.

She turned to face Michael who observed Lucious in silence.

"What do you want us to do?" she asked.

Lucious glanced to where Michael was. "Is your guardian here?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

"No, continue."

Michael glared at the vampire.

Trying to ignore his childish behaviour, she urged him to say something with her mind.

Her guardian diverted his attention back to her, his eyes softening. "First, place your hands on him."

Lifting her arms was a lot tougher than she had imagined. They moved sluggishly as if she was wading through water. She struggled and, with much effort, managed to do what she was told.

Lucious said nothing and kept stealing glances to where Michael would have been if he could see him. The moment her hands made contact with his shirt, she felt faint. The strength in her arms waned the longer she held on to him. They slid down, breaking the touch.

He caught her hands and pressed them against his chest.

Helena did her best not to think about what was under the thin material. She hadn't realised how aware of him she had become once their new bond was formed.

Her heart sped up, revealing her nerves to him. She saw a hint of a smile hiding in the corner of his mouth. To stop the oncoming wave of embarrassment, she directed her attention to Michael.

"Concentrate on the link, Helena. You don't have the time to be distracted," Michael grumbled.

She closed her eyes, thinking of their connection. Speechless, she stood inside of her shields. The string started pulsating faster. Outside of her bubble, she heard something slamming against her mental protection. Michael was right. The battering noise created by the trapped energy was in sync with her headache.

“What now?” she asked out loud, waiting for another set of instructions.

None followed. Helena searched the bathroom a second time. She and Lucious were alone. Michael left them without as much as a warning. To make sure, she scanned the bathroom again. He was nowhere to be found.

She turned to Lucious. “Michael is gone! I don’t know what to do next.”

With his absence, her headache climbed in intensity. She couldn’t stop it. Helpless, she tore her hands away from him to fend off the pain.

Lucious grabbed hold of her face. “Calm down. We can figure it out. What did he tell you?”

She nodded—too fast—and took one long, strained breath. Her eyes widened when her panic retreated slightly. “There is energy trapped between our shields. He said it’s trying to find a host.”

He absentmindedly stroked her cheek with his thumb. “Did he say anything else?”

Helena raked her memory for further details. Her thought pattern kept swaying between Michael, the pressing pain, and the soft feel of Lucious’ thumb brushing her skin.

“H-he said something about our energy being different.”

Lucious took hold of her hands and placed them on his chest where they were before. “Close your eyes and try to concentrate.”

Having her eyes closed didn’t seem to help her focus in the least. She clung to her resolve, desperate to relieve her headache. A few seconds ticked by and she, once more, stood inside her shields, sensing his presence on the other side.

She opened them for him, at the same time, taking away the barrier between them. With nothing in the way of the wild energy, it slammed into her, setting her nerve endings on fire. The intensity of her body’s torment tore a scream out of her.

Lucious appeared by her side. For some reason, the closer he got, the greater her suffering became as if he was pushing the energy into her body by force.

“Don’t...move,” she begged through grinding teeth.

He, too, collapsed on the ground, clutching at his chest. His eyes burned with a blue flame.

Helena couldn’t keep her eyes open anymore. She squeezed them shut, desperate to fight the sizzling energy as it scorched her insides. It ran through her almost like a trapped snake, seeking a way out.

*I can't accept this energy. I'm not the host.*

"Drop... your shields," she wheezed.

Without delay, his barriers crumbled. Not caring for what may happen next, Helena forced the energy back out through the string. A moan of agony escaped him, and his presence vanished.

With the excess energy gone, she regained some strength and broke the concentration to find Lucious lying on the floor next to her. She searched for a pulse and remembered he had none.

"Lucious, wake up!" She grasped him by the shoulders.

He didn't respond.

"How do you know if a vampire is alive?" she asked herself. An image of Alexander tearing off a head from the intruder came to mind. He shrivelled and became a mummy-like carcass. She waited a long moment for anything to happen. When nothing did, she let her head fall back and thanked the heavens. Carefully, she lifted his head onto her lap.

"Please, wake up," she whispered, running her fingers through his hair. It was softer than she had expected.

*What if he doesn't wake up?* She blinked away the tears. Even trapped with two vampires was better than being alone.

"What the hell did you do to him?" a shout came from the doorway.

Helena turned her head to find Alexander glaring at her. There was no room left for fear. She was filled to the brim with worry for Lucious which kept her stomach in knots.

"We were trying to fix the link and..."

Alexander bent over Lucious and lifted him off the cold ground. His eyes burned with the hatred she was certain she deserved.

"If anything happens to him, I will personally snap your neck. You are lucky he wants to keep you around," he said and carried Lucious out of the bathroom.

The increased distance between them didn't bring the peace of mind she sought. With no friends to talk to, no guardian angel to guide her, and no family to help her through this mess, she was alone.



When Helena came out of her trance-like state, she found Magda sitting next to her. She couldn't remember how long she had been in the bathroom or how she got there to begin with.

Magda offered her a pink handkerchief, but Helena ignored it and kept staring at her blurred reflection in the tiles. She felt numb. Nothing mattered

now. Whatever she touched and anyone involved with her ended up dead or close to it.

In a soft voice, the maid said, "Don't cry. It be good."

Somehow those simple words made Helena smile. She assumed Magda meant that things would be alright, but who was she to correct her? She couldn't even get her life in order.

Helena noticed the room was full of steam drifting through the air. The maid managed to get the bath ready without her taking notice of it. She needed to get a grip on reality.

Magda helped Helena to her feet. She assisted in undressing her and left the room once Helena sank into the hot bath.

Alexander's angry words replayed in her mind as she swirled the water with her finger. Why did Lucious want her there? She was nothing but trouble.

She lowered her body underwater, welcoming the serene warmth. It couldn't fix the torment in her heart, but it soothed the stiffness in her back.



If it was attached to Lucious' body, it hurt. He had never felt so drained in his entire life. Even creating a *childe* didn't require so much energy from him.

Lucious rocked into a sitting position and discovered Alexander sitting across from him with his elbows resting on his thighs and his clasped hands hanging between his legs.

"Such a serious expression doesn't suit you," Lucious joked.

Alexander raised his tired eyes. "You truly have a knack for scaring people. I asked you to get her to fall in love with you, and you go off and create some kind of link that had almost killed you!"

"I wanted to keep her close. This connection it's...something else."

"I don't care. The Council is due to arrive in a couple of hours, and I would prefer if you didn't do their job for them."

"Just listen to me. The link, it's different—stronger. I can feel her in the other room as if she is right here with me."

Alexander shook his head. "I don't know about this. Being this entangled with whatever she is on such an intimate level could be a mistake of major proportions."

"Or it could be a way to control her."

"As long as you are not thinking of anything else, I'm fine with it." He stood. "Let's get ready. They should be arriving soon enough. We need to prepare. Although, I don't believe there is anything that can spare us from Eliza's wrath."

Lucious joined him. He pretended he was unaffected by the stress his body suffered, but Alexander saw through him.

"I'll call one of my girls. You need to feed," Alexander added.

"No. I'm fine."

"We cannot allow the elders to see you like this. The fact that you're a new sire, and their curiosity about the girl, is keeping them from pulling your head off your shoulders. So, let us hide our weaknesses so far down our throats that even modern technology cannot find it."

Lucious gave a reluctant nod. "Alright, I will feed before we leave." He didn't want Alexander to know the saint's blood was incomparable in taste to another human's. The pleasure he took from drinking her blood was immense, and he was unable to find a replacement.

Alexander studied him attentively. "As curious as I am about your thoughts right now, I will refrain from asking."



After the bath, Helena sat on the bed, wrapped up in a fluffy white towel. She stared out the window at the thin treeline and the houses beyond.

The door slammed shut, and she whipped her head around to see if it was Lucious. To her dismay, it wasn't him. Instead, the receptionist from 'Russian Roulette' glared at her with her piercing aquamarine eyes. "What the hell do I have to babysit you for?"

Helena clutched her towel closer to her body. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I have to sit here with you instead of helping my darling recover from whatever you did to him."

"You're with Lucious?"

The blonde flicked her hair over her right shoulder with her expertly manicured fingers. "I wish I was," she said, drawing closer to Helena. "I have a lot of work to do to make you look good in front of the Council. A *lot* of work."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't feel like elaborating, kid. Take that thing off and let's get started."

Helena's brows shot up. She wasn't about to strip naked for a stranger. "I don't think so."

The blonde moved faster than she could fathom and grabbed a large chunk of Helena's damp hair.

"Let go, you—"

"I'm not *you*, I'm Tanya. The first human Alexander sired."

Helena glared at her. "You sound almost proud."

Tanya tilted her head to one side. “Why wouldn’t I be? He gave me a new life, a better one.”

A dark emotion flashed behind the woman’s eyes. Was there more to the story than she was telling?

The second Tanya let go of her hair, Helena fell backwards on the bed.

“I was ordered not to harm you in any way and I shall abide by the order, for now. I suggest you take a seat on that chair over there unless you want me to carry you.”

Helena scrambled to her feet and retreated towards the chair. If Tanya was anything like her sire, she would follow through with her threat.

“Oh, do not look at me like that, human. I will do what any great stylist would.”

A sigh escaped her when Tanya glided over to the door and retrieved a metal suitcase. She plopped it on the bed and undid the metal clips, revealing a motherlode of make-up and accessories. Tanya selected a pair of tweezers and smiled with a mischievous glint in her eye. “But first, a little torture won’t hurt.”



The clock on the wall struck nine. Helena struggled to suppress the urge to run from this overbearing vampire while Tanya made the finishing touches to her look.

When she was done, Tanya put her hand on her hip. “I guess after dying your hair and getting rid of the bags under your eyes, you look kind of attractive for a kid. I look better though.”

Helena fought not to roll her eyes. No matter what she said, Tanya would deflect it or turn it against her in one way or another.

Tanya grabbed Helena by the arm and half-dragged her to a full-length mirror the hotel staff struggled to bring in a while ago.

Upon seeing her reflection, she was stunned. The person staring back couldn’t possibly be her. Helena’s hair was its natural, chocolate-brown and cut by Tanya into a bob. The straightened locks reached just below her jawline. The make-up wasn’t as flashy as she had expected. It was almost unnoticeable, hiding her dark circles well. Most of all, she couldn’t tear her eyes away from the dress. The green satin had wrapped around her curves, caressing her body like a lover’s touch.

She found a large slit on the side. It exposed most of her leg up to her upper thigh. “This is...revealing.”

Tanya released her.



Without support, Helena was left to balance in her high heels. The metal heels sunk into the carpet, and she wobbled on the spot.

“What Alexander asks for, Alexander gets. He wanted you to look like an expensive toy and, voila, you do.”

Helena looked at the ground in shame. She shouldn’t have expected any kind words from Tanya, but to be compared to a human toy was a first.

Tanya prodded her shoulder, causing Helena to wobble. “Can’t you walk in heels?”

“I never had to wear these things before.” Helena snapped.

“It will be easier once you get onto solid ground.”

Helena was escorted to the hallway where she teetered along the corridor until she found balance in her stride.

Tanya lifted her phone from her jeans back pocket. “We have finished here,” she said, sounding bored. “Yes...yes...all done. On a scale of one to ten? I’d say four, but, if you ignore her walking, it could be a six.” She hung up and waved Helena over. “They’ll be up shortly. Alexander said you should wait by the lift.”

“Thank you for your help.”

“Don’t misunderstand. I did this because Alexander asked me to.” Tanya didn’t wait for her reply and sauntered off.

Helena was unable to keep up with her strides. At the back of her mind, her worry about Lucious resurfaced. *What if he hasn’t recovered?* She hugged her sides and turned the corner. Her eyes were focused on the floor when the lift doors slid open, exposing Alexander and Lucious as they took turns stepping out.

Even with her heels on, she was shorter than Lucious by an inch or two when they stood next to each other. Alexander’s snow-white tuxedo highlighted his platinum hair. She was no longer surprised with his monochromatic fascination and didn’t care. To contrast him, Lucious wore nothing but black. Not a sliver of colour tainted their choice of clothes tonight.

She was relieved to see him walking around and had to suppress her urge to question him on his wellbeing. So, she forced her lips into a reserved smile.

Lucious inclined his head. “You cannot possibly be happy we’re going to meet the Council.”

The distant way in which he spoke made her uncomfortable. He had shut his shields too securely for her to get an idea of what he was feeling.

“Lucious told me the details of what happened in the bathroom. He insisted the matter wasn’t your fault. I feel I should apologise for how I reacted.” Alexander bowed his head in what appeared to be a sincere apology.

She shook her head. “No. I shouldn’t have recreated the link. It brought nothing but trouble with it.”

Lucious grabbed her hand. “We’ll be right back,” he said and marched her back into the hallway where he pressed her back against the wall.

The coolness of his hands made her shiver, yet her discomfort didn’t faze him as he forced her to look at him. “Listen to me, my dear. I asked you to create the link. You are not to blame for anything from this morning.” His expression darkened. “The elders will look for any weaknesses, anything they can use against us. I suggest you put on your best game face because if we take one wrong step tonight, we are as good as dead.”

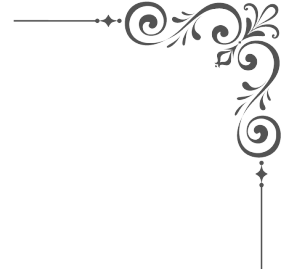
Helena blinked and felt it then, his agitation and fear. Unable to say anything, she forced out a slow nod.

They made their way back to the lift, and Alexander glanced at his watch. “We should have some time to spare when we get there. Let us enjoy the evening and hope that by the end of the night we will still have our limbs attached.”

No one laughed at Alexander’s obvious attempt to lighten the heavy atmosphere. They bundled together into the lift, one at a time, without any further conversation.

Helena’s fidgeting fingers played with the small beads embroidered on her dress as the numbers above the metal doors decreased.

*What have I gotten myself into?*



## 12

# RUSSIAN ROULETTE

The moment Helena laid eyes on Russian Roulette, she paled under her make-up. The club remained as an obelisk of bad luck to her.

Alexander parked his Mercedes in the VIP parking area out front, and Helena observed the people outside, swarming the place like a bee hive.

They climbed out of the car and, before she could grasp the situation, a group of reporters rushed them, screaming their questions at Alexander.

Helena wanted to hide her face away from the flashing lights, but her new haircut didn't provide her with much protection. She was grateful Lucious took note of her distress. He drew her closer to him and planted her hand on his biceps. His muscles flexed under her palm, and she fought to keep her attention on anything other than the strong body she was pressed against.

Alexander reverted to his pleasant business-self and answered the onslaught of questions.

A young, busty brunette, whose face was caked in make-up to the extent that her natural skin tone vanished, elbowed her way through the group of other reporters and pushed her microphone into his face. "Alexander, why did you call it 'the night of a century'? What is so special about tonight?"

He shot her his practised million-dollar smile and, in response to his outrageous flirtation, the reporter licked her lips.

"Every night holds a mystery." He winked at her. "Tonight is simply more special than the other nights."

"Has it got anything to do with the people you're with?" another reporter added.

"My friends may or may not be a part of it." He left the riddle hanging in the air and shot the reporters a cheeky wink.

Helena relaxed when he omitted their names. She didn't want crazed paparazzi chasing after her when this was over.

Lucious whispered something into Alexander's ear, and he nodded without losing his smile. "I apologise, but I must get inside. There is much to take care of."

The reporters' faces fell, yet curiosity never left their shining eyes. With obvious reluctance, they cleared a path for her and the others to pass.

At the entrance of the club, Helena overheard people whispering to one another. Some women chose to be brazen and shouted Alexander's name, begging him to take them with him.

The vampires ignored their pleas as if they didn't hear them.

Not wanting to stand out any more than she already did, Helena pretended to do the same.

Two bouncers opened the doors upon Alexander's approach. He exchanged some words with one of them, which she couldn't make out over the background noise, and the man eagerly trooped away.

"Is there always this much media here?" she asked Lucious over the cacophony of chatter.

He whispered in her ear. "Not really. Alexander called in a favour to get as many as he could. The Council should be more careful with this many eyes watching us."

His closeness provided an odd sense of security to her. Although she did her best to hide it, she couldn't tell if he could feel her emotions.

"Makes sense," she replied, averting her eyes. These feelings she was having couldn't be real. Her racing heart certainly had nothing to do with the handsome vampire at her side and everything to do with meeting the dreaded Vampire Council, or so she hoped. Getting a crush on someone like Lucious would be a mistake she couldn't afford to make.

Helena studied the modified interior of the club. Glistening chandeliers irradiated the reception area, bringing colour to the once dull-looking space. She almost tripped over her dress while gaping in awe at the myriad of colours reflected off the tiny crystals.

Forcing herself to pay attention to the room, Helena recognised a few faces she had seen on television, crowding around the main desk.

*What kind of favour did Alexander call in if there were more than enough celebrities around?*

Tanya approached them in a short, silver, hip-hugging cocktail dress. She held a digital tablet in her hands. Her slender fingers skimmed the glass surface with light taps here and there. Once she finished what she was doing, her eyes landed on Lucious. The woman lit up with a bright charming smile, and Helena groaned inwardly.

“Looks like you made it.” She gave Alexander a quick hug then gave Lucious a longer one. Tanya proceeded to wrap her arms around Lucious’ neck, drawing him in for a kiss.

He didn’t seem to mind and kissed her back.

Helena jerked her hand away from him, creating some distance between them. She didn’t want to intrude on their intimate moment that made her stomach churn.

“Are the preparations ready for tonight?” Alexander asked, fighting a smile.

Tanya peeled away from Lucious with much reluctance. “The room has been cleared and the entertainment for humans was organised to perfection, sire.”

Alexander checked his watch. “They should arrive in about half an hour. I guess now would be the best time to enjoy yourselves.”

“Then I best get back to work, as much as I hate conversing with these...people.” Tanya separated from their group.

Lucious placed a hand on Alexander’s shoulder in the same reassuring way he had done at the hotel. “You have done your best until now. Let us hope they arrive here in a good mood.”

“I wish I could do more about it.” Alexander hesitated for a moment and added, “I will be here if you need me. This is my business after all, and my guests need to be formally greeted. You will be notified by the staff when the time comes.” With that, he brushed Lucious’ hand off and strode to where Tanya was animatedly chatting with someone.

Helena was unsure of what to do or say. What could she say when she didn’t know whether she would live through the night?

Lucious studied her. On the outside, he seemed composed, but she knew better than to trust his appearance. The string between them quivered with his anxiety, taking away the usual peace she felt around him.

He offered her his hand and bowed at the middle. “Would you like to dance, my dear?”

“Dance? Now?” She shot a glance at the entrance. “What if they arrive early?”

“You’ve heard Alexander. We have time to spare, and I want to enjoy it.”

The unnatural pull of the string made her want his closeness and the cool touch his hand offered. Her rational mind knew better. It screamed Michael’s warnings at her—words she had dismissed so many times without a second thought.

“It is only a dance,” he assured her.

Helena diverted her gaze. It was silly to worry over something so unimportant. She accepted his hand. “Just one.”

The string in her gut calmed, soothing her nervousness and warming her from within.

He led the way past a flock of people accumulated around them, through a set of doors, and into a long purple hallway. It took her eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dimmer lighting. In the middle of the hallway, another set of doors blocked their way. A loud boom of dance music came from the other side.

The doors were opened by a woman with short, blonde curls that bobbed from side to side as she led them to the dance floor. She didn't bother speaking since the huge space spoke for itself. After pointing her manicured index finger at the large mass of dancing bodies, she went back to her post.

Helena stayed tethered to the spot. It was hard to see anything in the semi-dark. When the neon lights shone at the overdressed crowd, she cringed. She shouldn't have accepted his offer to dance. There was no way she could keep up, nor did she want to. She realised that she was clinging to Lucious' arm and mouthed an apology.

A mixture of strong perfume and sweat hung in the air. People in here weren't worried about ruining their designer clothes.

The lighting changed without warning, illuminating more of the dance floor. Bodies of dancers were pressed so close together, she imagined they would eventually merge into one large mass of flesh and material. Couples, or so she assumed, were devouring each other with their mouths against the dark walls. Some people were more adventurous when they thought no one noticed.

She tugged on Lucious' jacket, and he bent down.

"What kind of club is this exactly?" she shouted so he could hear her over the music.

He gave her a sly smile and moved his lips closer to her ear. "What kind of club does it look like?"

Helena couldn't see her own face, but she knew it turned tomato-red. This was not her usual venue for a party. To be more specific, she never went out clubbing, even when Laura offered.

A second later, she was pulled into a stream of dancing people, and his jacket became her anchor to safety.

"Come closer," he said.

Balancing on her heels became harder as more people joined in. Someone bumped into her, trapping her against Lucious and the crowd. She quietened in an attempt to calm her quickening heartbeat.

His large hands touched her bare back. She had forgotten about the exposed back of her dress until now. This whole scenario was making her misunderstand

his intentions. She repeated in her mind that this was something to cheer them both up. Yet, her heart kept on galloping like a horse.

They began moving with the crowd, dancing to their own rhythm. She saw little of what was around her, so she buried her face in his shoulder.

Lucious' breath brushed her ear. "I forgot to tell you how beautiful you look tonight."

Those words made her blush. Trying to act unaffected, she lifted her head. "Thanks for the compliment. You look dashing yourself. Tanya is a lucky vampire."

He tilted her chin up with his index finger. "What has she got to do with this?"

Helena cursed the link between them. It was making his touch feel as something much more magical than what it was. She slapped his hand away. "Don't touch me. You have Tanya, and I have Andrew."

She tried pushing away from him, but he held on.

"Let me go!" she ordered through gritted teeth.

"As you wish," he said and released her.

She lost her balance, and he caught her, bringing her back to where she first started—in his arms.

"You did that on purpose!"

He chuckled at her outburst. "Relax. I am not planning on doing anything to you."

The music changed to a slow-paced melody. The crowd dispersed, leaving them amidst a dozen other couples on the dance floor.

She glared at him. He was toying with her. Wasn't he supposed to be scared of the Council's arrival?

The thought of the Council returned the heaviness she had forgotten since they had arrived at the club. Closing her eyes, she let her head rest against his hard chest. His familiar scent of sandalwood surrounded her, taking away the overpowering stench of everyone else. She snaked her arms around his waist and let him take the lead.

The link between them burned with energy at this proximity, shooting tingles through her.

"Do you feel that?" she asked.

When she glanced at him, his eyes were closed. He looked like he was enjoying the same feeling. Once he lifted his heavy lids, his eyes were glowing with a mesmerising blue flame.

"Indeed. The link is much more stable when we are not fighting."

Helena concentrated on their bond, examining the energy coursing between them. It was warm and calming.

The tranquillity didn't last long. Not far from them, something powerful approached, leaking prickling energy around the building.

He must have sensed it as well because they both stopped dancing. The hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention, and her hands slid away from him.

When she looked up at him, he was already alert and had reverted to his serious self. The music picked up the pace once again, bringing more people to the dance floor.

Lucious took her hand and brought her closer to the door.

Another blonde in a black business dress approached them. Helena couldn't pinpoint if Alexander only hired blondes or made them dye their hair as part of the job description. *Thank God my interview failed.*

The employee studied Lucious and Helena before tugging on his sleeve.

He lowered himself to her level, and the girl whispered something in his ear.

"Thank you. Just one moment," he muttered and took Helena to one side, blocking her view of the room with his body.

She already knew what he was going to say as the tension had set into his broad shoulders.

"They are here. We must go. And, Helena..." He seemed to search for the right words while his fingers dug into her arms. "Do not reveal anything about the link to them. The less they know about your involvement the better."

Her words were stuck in her throat, so she bobbed her head in agreement.



The blonde led the way out of the main hall and into a different part of the building which she proudly explained to them was for VIPs. Helena questioned her about what kind of VIPs they were and got an annoyed look from the woman in return.

The itchy energy in the air curled around them. Her instincts screamed at her to run, to get as far away from this place as possible. Whatever awaited them upstairs had sent an army of ants marching down her spine.

The blonde scaled the red-carpeted staircase and stopped outside a set of carved oak doors. "Here we are. Alexander is waiting inside with the other gentlemen."

Lucious let go of Helena's hand. With his touch missing, her heartbeat launched into another race until it pounded in her head like a drum.

Helena took in a deep breath, and he pushed the doors open.



Powerful energy flooded out of the room. As heavy as a wave, it swallowed her up.

Lucious turned, offering her his hand, but she looked past him in an attempt to locate the source of this immense power. It didn't take long. Two men sat across from Alexander. One studied them with curiosity while another seemed disinterested as he sunk into the white leather sofa.

Helena's trembling hand reached for Lucious. He grasped it and pulled her further into the suffocating room. She wanted to match his stride, but her shaky legs wouldn't listen. The surrounding air was as thick as butter, and she had to think of each limb separately to be able to walk in her heels.

Upon getting closer, the source of this power became obvious. It was an older man, close to his fifties, in a cream suit. His long, ghost-white hair was tied into a rigid ponytail and his neatly trimmed beard and a curving moustache reminded her of a Western Sheriff. His ice-blue eyes settled on her, making her feel uncomfortable in her own skin.

When they were close enough to Alexander, the man ran his finger over his moustache and studied her.

Her attention was drawn to the gentleman sitting next to him. Although not as powerful as the older man, his cheerful demeanour was reflected in his unnaturally white smile which contrasted his dark skin tone. A thick mane of wavy ebony hair reached past his shoulders. His brown eyes focused on Lucious long enough to tell her he didn't like the man she held on to.

"Lucious, this is Master Vincent and Master Andreaz from the European Council," Alexander said, pronouncing each name with great care. His body language was somewhat robotic and concealed his usual fluid movements. He must have thought she wasn't important enough to be included in the introductions.

She pushed the thought aside. This wasn't the time to feel irritated.

"It's hard to get to you, Lucious. Hiding must be your forte," Andreaz said, emphasising his d's and t's. A wry smile spread across the Councilman's features.

Lucious didn't move or say anything.

Helena's brow creased. She couldn't think straight with the heavy energy in the room. A dizzy spell made her sway on her heels. She pressed her palm to her forehead. If they didn't sit down soon, she would be testing out the softness of the sapphire-blue rug under her feet.

As if reading her mind, Andreaz gestured to a seat next to Alexander. "Do take a seat, everyone."

Lucious edged closer and sat next to Alexander. Given little choice, she sunk into the leather seat beside him.

Sitting didn't make her feel any better as the proximity of these vampires forced battery acid to climb her throat. Helena swallowed her nausea, catching Vincent's continuous glances in her direction. The longer he looked, the more thoughtful his expression became.

She swallowed again. *Does he think I'm a threat?*

Helena caught him staring and her muscles tensed. Her heart nearly stopped beating from the intensity in his eyes. This vampire didn't need to flaunt so much power. He could impale humans with his gaze alone.

"You don't feel powerful, but you could be hiding it," Andreaz said.

She had forgotten to listen to the conversation until now. Her attention remained on Vincent.

"This little girl, on the other hand, seems to have some power up her sleeve." Andreaz's words surprised her.

*How could I possibly have enough power for them to notice me?*

"Ah, she's confused. Does she not know this?" Andreaz studied Lucious who hadn't moved since they entered the room. His smile grew into a full-blown grin. "I want to play with her, too."

Andreaz stood and reached for her.

She squirmed, wanting to vanish from their sight. The prickling energy he possessed was different to Vincent's. A stinging sensation spread over her wrist. Before Andreaz could grasp it, Vincent grabbed him by the elbow and forced him back down.

"We are not here to play with humans. We are here on Council business." Vincent's voice came out as a deep rumble from a cave.

Andreaz shot him a glare and wrestled his arm out of the other Councilman's grip.

"Why have you not come to our summons?" Vincent directed the question at Lucious. He continued to glance in her direction, but not as often.

She knotted her shaking fingers in her lap in a poor attempt to steady them.

Lucious bowed his head in respect. "You must accept my apologies, Master Vincent, but those who have been summoned to the Council chambers have not been heard from since. I have hidden out of fear that I was going to disappear like the rest."

"So, you sired a human to get out of the summons?" Vincent asked.

Helena's head snapped to look at Lucious. *Was Andrew turned to keep him safe from these men?*

Andreaz's brown eyes rowed over her as if she was an artefact on display, and she shuddered.

"It was a matter of life and death, and I chose to give him a new life," Lucious stated.

"You are lying," Andreaz jeered.

Vincent shook his head. "And, what about her? Who is this human to you?"

Lucious looked at her for the first time since they sat down. "She is a donor."

Andreaz sniffed the air. "She does smell delicious. Could I have a sample?"

The link between them gave a violent jump, and Helena clutched her gut.

"We have many other women available," Alexander interjected. "They would be more suited to your taste, Master Andreaz."

Andreaz stood. His energy crackled around him. "Do not presume you know my preferences, Alexander. Your sire's position won't keep you safe forever."

"I didn't mean to—"

"Eliza wants him to come with us," Vincent said in a levelled tone.

Alexander started to rise.

Lucious clamped his hand on Alexander's shoulder, keeping him in place, which earned him a puzzled look from his friend. "For what crime?"

"You are wanted for plans to overthrow the Council," Andreaz said.

Helena felt a burst of energy from Andreaz, shooting towards them. The wave brushed against her shoulder, and she grasped the stinging flesh with her hand.

Next to her, Lucious doubled over in pain, and Alexander shot off the couch, blocking them with his body before she had any idea of what was going on.

"Master Andreaz, please stop this! This is a neutral ground. I do not wish for a fight to start in my club."

"Do not get involved, Alexander. Your sire will not be able to pull you out if you join your friend on the execution list," Andreaz snarled, no longer sounding human. His eyes glistened with a dark orange light.

"This is a mere misunderstanding," Alexander said.

The energy around Andreaz began collecting again. She sensed a stronger burst of it rushing in Alexander's direction.

He was lifted off his feet and propelled backwards until his body slammed hard against the wall with a loud thud. The force from his body had created a crack in the concrete on the other side of the room.

Alexander slid to the ground.

Her eyes bulged in horror as Andreaz grabbed recovering Lucious by the throat, pulled him to his feet, and punched an arm through his gut. His bloodied fist emerged on the other side, tearing a hiss out of Lucious.

Cool blood sprayed her face, conjuring a muted scream out of her throat. Even covering her eyes couldn't wipe the image from her mind. It remained burned into her memory, replaying over and over again.

Lucious cried out in pain, louder this time, and she forced her eyes open to look at what was happening around her.

Andreaz bent his arm and made the gap larger.

With bloodied hands, Lucious grabbed Andreaz by the throat.

She couldn't keep looking at them, so she glanced down. Her hands were covered with the red liquid. Nauseated, she scooted off the sofa and fell onto the carpet. She needed to get out of here, but her body seemed to forget how to move. She wasn't certain if she wanted to panic, hide, or help Lucious. Could she help in a fight between vampires? No matter what conclusion she reached, her body wouldn't budge. She was trapped in the middle of this, forced to watch by her useless limbs.

Andreaz's smile withered. He pulled his hand out of Lucious' gut, and they started exchanging blows. Thereafter, they became a blur. Her eyes couldn't register the flurry of their actions. An occasional slamming against the walls and smashing of furniture told her where they were.

She registered a sound of bones snapping, and a sudden pain shot through her right leg. *Am I hurt? Did they hit me by accident?*

When she examined her leg, there was no visible problem. It remained intact and she could move it. No, this wasn't her pain. It was Lucious'. She bit back a scream. Another wave of sharp pain coursed across her back. Her gut burned as if it was set on fire. She ran her clenched hands across her stomach. Again, there was nothing there.

Vincent knelt beside her. He studied her with the same cold and calculating gaze. "You are in pain. Why?"

She couldn't speak. His proximity forced her to fight for breath. The longer he hovered next to her, the less air her lungs could take in. She moaned in agony, and her hands shot to her throat. There was no way of fighting the suffering roaring through her.

One last flip of her stomach forced her to roll over and throw up what little food she had consumed that day. *What's happening to me?*

Vincent's presence vanished from her side, giving her a chance to gasp for a breath.

Her body refused to support itself any longer, and her arms caved. She fell on her side, forced to watch the events unfold.

Andreaz had been forced against the wall, held up by the throat by Vincent. A hunched figure sat on the ground at their feet. There was no mistaking it. The

link told her it was Lucious. The floor underneath him darkened with blood oozing out of his wounds, soaking his suit. He was losing a lot of blood.

Helena strove to get closer to him to make sure he was alright. Nothing happened. Her nerve endings felt like they were set on fire. Limbs refused to cooperate. She was left to watch the two Councilmen glaring at one another in an unnerving silence.

*Please, let this pain end!*

Vincent spoke first. “Your childish behaviour is beginning to irritate me. We are supposed to be on neutral grounds here. You condone our laws yet you do not consider following them yourself, Andreaz.”

“You didn’t seem to want to stop me either, old man,” Andreaz mused. He didn’t appear concerned with the situation.

“*Sit down!*” Vincent’s order echoed throughout the room.

When Vincent let go of Andreaz’s throat, the vampire obeyed. Something dripped onto the ground between their feet. Vincent moved closer to Lucious, revealing a large cut on Andreaz’s chest.

With a horrified expression, the Councilman stared at the increasing bloodstain on his torn shirt.

Vincent sighed and knelt next to Lucious. He spoke in the same commanding tone he used on Andreaz. “*Wake up.*”

Lucious moaned in pain, and Helena pressed her palm to her heart.

“We have come to assess the situation, and I have made my conclusion. You will be given a month to collect any evidence of your innocence prior to your trial. The woman”—Vincent pointed to Helena—“will come with me.”

“No! She is not leaving,” Lucious growled.

Vincent ignored him and approached her, leaving enough distance for her to not choke on his presence. “If you come with me, they shall live through tonight. If not, these vampires will be executed. What are you going to do?”

Helena stared at Vincent. She was given a chance to walk away, to go back to her normal life. *Such offers don’t come often*, she guessed. Knowing Michael, he would urge her to accept.

Her attention travelled to where Lucious was. Their eyes locked. Could she sacrifice him and Alexander for her freedom? They may not be the best of friends, but they had saved her and let Andrew live. No. She couldn’t run.

Helena cleared her dry throat, hoping her voice would be enough to reach Vincent. “I will go.”

“An interesting choice, one I did not expect for someone uninvolved.” Vincent took out a violet handkerchief and proceeded to wipe his bloodstained

hands with it. He stashed the dirtied material into his inner jacket's pocket and sat on the sofa.

Lucious glared at her. He opened his mouth, but no words left his pale lips. Swaying to one side, he vomited more blood.

The pain began subsiding, and she rolled onto her back. She had seen enough gore for one night. In a way, it was her escape from his anger. The link between them shook, and she felt her energy seeping away. Unaware of his actions, Lucious must have started draining it from her.

With the first link, she was often tired and cold, but right now, she wasn't certain of the final outcome. She seemed to be reflecting minor amounts of pain compared to what Lucious felt. She couldn't let him take any more from her.

Through the mind-numbing pain ricocheting throughout her whole being, she concentrated on strengthening her shields. She visualised the second layer of steel. This was something Michael suggested first, and it helped. The link stopped its trembling, and she sucked in a lungful of air.

Vincent must have released Andreaz from his influence because the vampire got up, shouting, "Where is she going to stay?"

"She will stay with me."

"Eliza will hear of this, you old prick," Andreaz hissed, adjusting his shirt.

Helena didn't know who she feared most, a vampire who could burst at any moment into a murderous rampage or a powerful vampire who could choke her with his presence alone.

"You may tell her if you're so inclined," Vincent replied in a calm manner.

Something stirred on the far side of the room. She rolled her head and saw Alexander. He was beginning to regain consciousness. The front of his white tuxedo was sliced open, revealing a large purple bruise the size of a basketball on his chest. It faded with each passing second.

The pressure around her changed as the Councilmen approached her.

Vincent's leaked energy kept her pinned to the ground. "You will have until midnight tomorrow to prepare. I suggest you do not waste time on running away." After he gave Andreaz a nod, they vanished from her sight and out of the room.

For once, she was glad vampires could leave as fast as they arrived.

As more time passed, the energy levels around her receded. Helena swallowed air to alleviate the burning in her lungs she had noticed amidst her jumble of aches. Using her weak arms, she propped herself up and pushed off the ground to stand on her wobbling feet. The heels made it difficult to balance, so she kicked them off.

Helena staggered to where Lucious lay. She collapsed in the pool of his blood, not caring if her dress got ruined. His face had become a bloody mess of cuts and bruises which were healing right before her eyes. Her lips parted. She reached out a trembling hand and had it slapped away.

“Do not touch me!”

Her fingers stung where he hit her. “I’m sorry if I did something wrong. Are you alright?”

He looked at her with eyes as cold as the Arctic. They lit up with a dark blue flame, informing her of his suppressed rage. “I’ll be fine after I feed.”

There was no way she could donate any of her blood tonight. It was hard enough for her to stay awake.

He answered her unspoken question as if he read her mind. “I’m not asking for your blood. Alexander has plenty of that here.”

They both turned their attention to Alexander.

He was already upright, brushing the specks of concrete dust off his tuxedo. Alexander waved at them and pulled out a phone from his trousers’ pocket. When he finished the call, he staggered over. “Well, that went better than I expected.”

Helena scowled. “What do you mean? We nearly died.”

“Yes, kiddo, near death is better than the alternative. Wouldn’t you agree?” Alexander didn’t care for her reply and squatted next to Lucious. “Andreaz did a number on you, didn’t he?”

“I have underestimated him.”

Lucious winced when Alexander poked him in the gut. With a mixed expression, Alexander retrieved his hand and wiped the blood on his jacket. He eyed them with curiosity. “So, what did I miss?”

“Must we speak of this now?”

Alexander stood, shaking his head. “I guess it can wait until later.”

Two women and staff rushed into the room. The girls took one look at Alexander and ran to him, muttering things faster than Helena could make out. They poked him everywhere as if to make sure he was alright, which seemed to amuse him for some reason.

Alexander took the blonde around the waist and touched the brunette’s cheek. “Darling, would you be so kind and help out my friend who’s on the floor.”

She smiled a brilliant smile and knelt next to Lucious. The brunette brushed her hair aside with one hand and extended her neck towards him.

Helena couldn’t understand why these women offered themselves up for such pain. It was unbearable, yet they continued to be cattle for these creatures.

Lucious' eyes glowed brighter. He pulled her closer to him, wrapping his trembling arms around her waist and moved in. His gaze fixed on Helena as he bit into the young woman's neck.

A moan of pleasure escaped the girl which was a different reaction to what Helena experienced the first time he bit her. *Could a vampire bite feel good, too?* Her expression turned sullen. *Why am I even considering being bitten by a vampire again?*

She couldn't look at them anymore. Tearing her gaze away from the scene, she turned her attention to the room. The staff appeared to be vampires. They moved around with lightning speed, collecting destroyed furniture and assessing the damage. Tanya was giving out orders while she roamed the room, typing away on the glass screen of her tablet as if her fingers were on fire.

After they finished feeding, Alexander gave both girls a big smooch, and they were escorted out by one of the bouncers.

Helena finally found enough strength to stand up. There was a noticeable improvement in the way her body felt. She saw that Lucious had mostly healed on the surface. There wasn't a single mark left on his face. She couldn't help but wonder why his pain was affecting her. Michael mentioned they could communicate over a distance, but he said nothing about feeling each other's physical pain.

Without a word of warning, she was hanging off Lucious' shoulder and looking at his backside.

"Hey! Put me down!" she screamed in a hoarse voice.

Alexander burst into laughter. "I guess she came in handy after all."

Lucious shook her, making her grumble. "We'll take our leave if that's alright with you."

Helena repeatedly hit his back and, in turn, became dizzy. "Put me down, jerk."

"Not staying for fireworks?" Alexander sounded almost disappointed when he tossed his friend his car keys.

"I think I will pass." Lucious turned and carried her out through the back entrance.

To the loud boom of fireworks colouring the sky, he forced her into Alexander's car without any explanation.



Lucious draped his jacket over her shoulders and dragged her through the lobby of the hotel. Not one person batted an eye at their entrance. *Bloody vampires and their money.*



He forced her into the lift and pushed the button for the top floor.

“You can’t treat me like this!” Helena crossed her arms the moment he let her go.

“I can, and I will. You are mine to do with as I please or have you forgotten?”

Her lips morphed into a pout. Being told she belonged to someone like some piece of furniture made her see red. She wanted to kick him where it hurt and go home, but there was no home to return to. Her balled hands fell to her sides as the sharp ding announced their arrival on the correct floor and the metal cage opened. Barefoot, she stormed past him to her room and slammed the door shut behind her. Her body shook with fury at the way he treated her, especially when she hadn’t done anything wrong.

*I should have let Andreaz kill him then and there*, she thought, bursting into the bathroom. She brushed her teeth and washed the blood off her face since she looked like an extra in a horror movie. Doing such mundane tasks soothed the fire fuelling her rage. Vincent was coming tomorrow to pick her up. She hoped he wouldn’t treat her as a criminal and stash her away in some torture chamber.

Lucious entered her room. He threw his ruined jacket on the ground.

*Great! I have another pissed off vampire to deal with tonight.*

She glared at him as she closed the bathroom door. “It’s rude to enter a girl’s room without knocking. Didn’t your mother teach you that?”

He didn’t react to her words and closed the distance between them. His hands waved around in the air as if trying to accommodate his unspoken angry words. He stopped and sighed. “I don’t understand. What were you thinking? Why?”

“Why what?”

“Why did you agree to go with them? You could have returned to your way of living. Why did you sacrifice yourself for us?”

He stepped in front of her. His eyes flared and, determined to hold her ground, she glared back. *Two can play that game.*

“You saved my life and risked yourself, remember? I owed you one.”

“Are you an idiot? I did that because I thought I could use you. And now, you did something like this.”

Her heart ached as if his words were a dagger lodged in her chest. She should have known better. Humans were nothing to vampires. They were a disposable source of food.

“I guess you won’t be able to use me since I’ll be out of your reach.” She prodded his chest with her index finger. “And, you know what, if you didn’t save me back then, Andrew would be here—alive. I wouldn’t have to go through his

death or any of this...this—” She waved her hands in the air as she searched for the right term.

He brushed her hands away and grabbed her by the shoulders. His iron grip hurt enough to bruise.

Helena tried creating some distance, but he held her in place.

“Lucious, let me go! You’re not allowed to touch me whenever you feel like it,” she yelled.

“You are my human, mine to do with as I please,” he shouted back.

Her jaw dropped. *Who does he think he is?*

Her body shook with anger. Since he had captured her arms, she kicked him. Her knee collided with his crotch.

His hands fell away, and he dropped to the ground, hissing in pain.

She didn’t stick around to find out if he was alright and ran for the door.

With her back turned, something heavy collided with her, and she was thrown on the bed, face first into the dark silk.

Lucious flipped her over as she fought against him, kicking and punching until he pinned her arms with his and trapped her legs with the weight of his body.

“I don’t belong to anyone, especially to an egotistical vampire like you.” She filled each word with venom.

“Foolish woman, you make me want to throttle you every time you open your mouth. If you didn’t have a purpose, I would not waste so much of my time on you.”

“Your true colours finally show. Michael was right.”

His jaw clenched, and she heard his teeth grinding against one another. Helena shut her eyes, praying he was not going to do as he promised.

His lips collided with hers in a forceful kiss.

Dumbfounded, her eyes flew open to see if she was imagining it. What she saw was a blue glow, blinding her, so she closed them again. The string between them grew excited, tickling her gut and, an eternal second later, the same peace she felt on the dance floor soothed her anger, taking away her determination to fight.

His tongue brushed her lower lip, and she opened up for him. Without realising it, she returned the heated kiss. It felt so good, so right.

The energy between them grew with a low hum, forming a shell around their bodies that separated them from the outside world. Inside, nothing but her heartbeat could be heard, fluttering like an excited canary.

His grip relaxed around her arms, and he cupped her face. The coolness of his touch sent a pleasant shiver through her. She wanted more...

Her hands brushed through his silky hair, holding him there, in their kiss. Over the past few days, his scent and touch had become so familiar that she wanted to be his. Yet, tiny uncertainties nagged at her.

*This isn't right. He lied to me. He wanted to use me.*

The build-up of energy shattered like a glass dome. The string stilled, leaving no trace of what they had a second ago.

Lucious propped himself up. Whatever he saw on her face, made him get up in an instant.

"This was a mistake." His words were almost a blur as a gust of wind sent a shiver through her when he disappeared.

She touched her face and found tears there. *When did I start crying?*

Helena rolled over to one side and let her frustration flow out.



The next day, Lucious was nowhere to be found, and it may have been for the best. Her fingers fiddled with the letter she had written to Andrew the night before. She breathed out. Gathering her courage, she knocked on Alexander's half-opened office door.

"Come in," came a muffled reply.

Helena peered inside, not knowing what to expect. There weren't any naked women throwing themselves at him, and she let out a shaky laugh. She edged closer to his desk. "I want you to give something to Andrew for me."

He eyed the letter in her hand and took the offered item. "Fine, I'll do it. I take it you are done packing?"

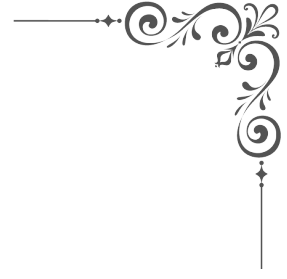
"Yes. Will you take care of the rest as promised?"

"I have already sent someone to influence your parents. They'll think you're studying hard for your midterms and will not try to search for you. As for your college, it may be a bit of a problem. It is not as easy as wiping someone's memory. We also do not know if you will be returning from your trip."

She shoved her hands in her pockets. "I understand."

Alexander opened a drawer and placed the envelope in it. He rested his elbows on the desk, his smile fading. "Lucious told me of what you did yesterday for us. Although he couldn't express it, I'm certain he is grateful for what you did, as am I."

Helena said nothing. She turned on her heel and returned to her room. There was nothing she could do about what happened last night between them. She was angry with him and infuriated with herself for letting Lucious get so close to her.



## 13

# OUTBOUND

Darkness looked back at her as Helena focused on the ground through the tiny aeroplane window. She imagined people below sleeping in their comfortable beds, dreaming sweet dreams. They had nothing to do with vampire politics, strange nightmares from which they awoke covered in sweat, or magic. She was envious of that now.

Vincent sat across from her, reading a newspaper in one of the leather seats. She could no longer feel the overpowering energy around him. For that, she was thankful. Suffocating because of it would make a useless hostage out of her.

Helena had nothing to say to him and concentrated on the twinkling lights in the distance. Their shrunken size made her realise how insignificant she was in the vast world. No one would notice if she was gone.

The seat beneath her became uncomfortable, and she shifted her weight a few times, immediately giving up once Vincent's frosty gaze settled on her.

She closed her eyes to think. Her mind locked onto the hum of the engines. She thought past them, imagining being in a safe place with her family. Even her imagination gave her no sanctuary as it pushed away the happy, idealistic thoughts and flooded her with the possibilities of what was to come next.

Unable to keep her eyes closed, she looked out the window again, seeing the abrupt change from the twinkling lights to the vast darkness of the Irish Sea.



They landed an hour later in a small airport somewhere in Scotland. Her jacket couldn't keep away the breeze. Helena stretched the material tighter around her with her free hand. In the other, she carried her belongings—the few things Alexander had taken from her apartment after her failed attempt to run away.

Vincent seemed unaffected by the cold in his grey suit as he led the way towards an already waiting silver car.

A short, balding man climbed out of the driver's seat and hurried over to them.

"Welcome back, Master Vincent," the man said and bowed.

"It is good to be home," Vincent admitted.

Helena studied the driver who stood proudly in his pristine suit and polished shoes. He appeared to be human, yet there was no fear in his eyes. He behaved as if he truly respected Vincent, which made her furrow her brow.

The driver opened the backseat doors for them and took her bag.

She ducked inside the car, followed by Vincent. Once she secured her seatbelt, the Councilman said, "You are quiet this evening."

Helena glared at him. "I have nothing to say to you."

He pushed his sleeve up, giving his wristwatch a brief glance. "It is late. I suggest you get some sleep."

She couldn't help but stare at him. Did he expect her to relax and sleep in the presence of a vampire who could control others with a single word? She jumped at the sound of the boot of the car being slammed shut. This wasn't like her. She grew up thinking with logic in mind. Assessing her options and deciding on her actions. Being frightened wasn't new to her, but she felt more on edge since Michael's last disappearance. She could barely feel his presence around her anymore.

*Has he given up on me?*

The driver got in his seat and started the car while Helena clamped her arms around her middle in a poor attempt to ward away the haunting chill.

They drove through the unlit country roads. In the rural areas, she noticed some people had already put up their Halloween decorations. She couldn't believe she got into this mess mere two weeks ago. It seemed like forever since she had visited the Angel Realm.

Helena had missed Michael's constant presence. When he first showed up, she was seven. He drove the shadow-like monsters away that kept her up at night. But now, the monsters were real, and they weren't hiding in the dark anymore.

Her eyelids grew heavy. She couldn't sleep the night before because of her fight with Lucious. He hadn't apologised for what he did, even though he asked for her trust—something she hadn't given to those closest to her.

One moment she was looking out into the distance and the next she was forcing her eyes open to Vincent's grumbling voice. "We have arrived."

With her mind emerging from a haze, she remembered where she was. She sat up abruptly. The hasty movement blurred the world around her for a brief

second. When she regained her sight, she took a peek out the window and her words fled from her because of a monstrosity before her.

*What is it with vampires and huge buildings?*

Forget about Alexander's place, this was an actual castle. It reminded her of the times she had gone on tours with her school. Andrew would argue with the teachers to be in her group and would tell her jokes in which she always found logical flaws. Back then, she had paid little attention to the structure. Now, her eyes were drawn to the weathered stone walls of this fortress. The ivy had grown tall enough to reach the top of one of two towers, covering the windows with vines.

Vincent nudged her elbow. "Come. Sleeping in the car must be uncomfortable."

Outside, she heard waves crashing against the cliffs with an almost silent hiss. The fresh air so close to the shoreline gave her a salty aftertaste. An entrance door illuminated with yellow light opened, and a dozen uniformed staff came out. They lined up into one thin line, smiling brightly as Vincent approached.

"Welcome home, Master Vincent. It is good to have you back," the man who spoke first seemed to be eldest. Wrinkles were etched into his tired face, showing years of stress and hard work. His beady eyes scanned Helena. "Is this the guest who will be staying with us?"

At Vincent's nod, the man waved for the rest of the staff to go back inside. They bowed and scurried back indoors, leaving a young girl behind in a maid's uniform next to the old man.

"Thank you, Rupert. Have you prepared a room for her?" Vincent inquired once the last servant disappeared out of sight.

Rupert bowed his head. "We have. Perri should be able to guide the young Miss when she is ready."

They talked about Helena as if she wasn't there. This was no different to the way Alexander and Lucious behaved.

"Excellent. You may retire for the night," Vincent added.

The butler bowed and joined the rest of the staff.

The maid gave Helena an infectious smile that made her smile back.

*What is such a sweet-looking girl doing living with vampires? And, why weren't these people cowering in fear when Vincent showed up?*

Vincent led the way out of the cold towards his enormous home. They marched up two steps and were welcomed with blanketing warmth coming from within. She didn't think a castle was easy to keep warm. Her hands prickled, and she rubbed them together. A place like this should have been placed on a

historical tour. The interior had medieval tapestries and suits of armour along the corridor walls. The floor under her feet was well-scrubbed white granite. Based on the lack of dust, the servants didn't slack off here. *Perhaps they would die if they did.* Helena pushed the vile thought away and folded her hands in her pockets to retain some of the warmth she managed to gather.

"This is Perri. She will be your attending maid during your stay here," Vincent said.

In the light, the girl looked like any normal teenager. Her frizzy, short, blonde hair fell past her small ears. Her large brown eyes glistened with excitement against her porcelain skin which was speckled with freckles.

"It would be my pleasure to attend to your needs," Perri said.

Helena regarded Vincent, expecting him to put shackles or some kind of restraints on her so she wouldn't run away.

He glanced at his watch. Again, she saw something like disappointment passing across his face. "I shall retire to my study for the night. Perri, show Miss Hawthorn to her room and try not to keep her awake for long." He turned on his heel and ambled away at human speed.

*Why was he pretending to be human at home?*

"Please come with me," Perri opened the oak doors behind her. She led Helena up a large winding staircase, bringing them up two floors.

"Why do you work here?" Helena asked with a deep-set frown.

Perri glanced over her shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"Why do you work for a vampire?" was what she wanted to ask. Instead, she went with something that wouldn't make her sound like she had escaped from a loony bin. "I meant to say, you seem a little young for this kind of work. Shouldn't you be in school or with your family?"

Perri faced Helena with an empty stare. "Master Vincent is my family. He adopted me into his family as he had welcomed many others who work here. We will always be grateful for his generosity."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." Helena pursed her lips. Surely, an orphanage was a much safer place for this girl. Living with a vampire, who could tear her limb from limb in a blink of an eye, was not a place for people with such an irradiating smile.

"It's fine. I am thankful Master Vincent is in my life."

Helena didn't want to pursue this conversation any longer. There were other things she wanted to know about Vincent, but her stubborn side would not capitulate. "You do know what he is, right?"

Perplexed, Perri scratched her head. Her light brows drew together in confusion. "I don't understand what you mean."

Helena nibbled on her lip. If she told her what he was, would it save this girl's life or endanger her further? If Vincent found out she told Perri about it, she was certain he would stop his act of decency and take her life. She let out a nervous laugh. "A great host. I am so happy to be invited here as his guest."

Perri's frown didn't go away, but she continued to lead until she stopped at a door.

Helena was deep in thought when they had arrived at her new prison.

"Well, here we are. This will be your room. Mine is over here." She pointed to a room next to it.

"Thanks for showing me the way."

"It's no problem. I am at your service and"—Perri lowered her eyes to the ground—"I wanted you to know that I'm happy to have someone my age around here." She moved in and whispered, "Everyone here is so *old*, especially Rupert."

Helena raised a brow. The maid was more like Laura than she wanted to admit.

Perri straightened her posture. "Paul brought your things in first, so they should be in there. If you need anything, I will be next door."

"Thank you," Helena said and meant it.

She parted with Perri and entered her room. The maid's footsteps echoed in the hallway in the direction of the bedroom adjacent to hers.

The moment the heavy door closed behind her, Helena rested her back against it. The room seemed cosy. Better than at Alexander's home. Yet, it was another place where she had to sit quietly while vampires dictated what she did and where she went. The weight of her burdens piled on her shoulders, and she slid to the ground. Helena did her best to hold back the stinging tears. She blinked repeatedly and stared at the ceiling in silent prayer.

After a while, she assessed the room Vincent had provided for her. The windows didn't have any iron bars to prevent her from escaping, although jumping from the second floor of a castle didn't seem appealing either. She didn't hear Perri locking the door when she came in, yet she couldn't help feeling trapped.

"This is only for a month," she whispered and found the strength to push off the ground to get back on her feet.

Her bag was already in her room. It looked small and insignificant, laying there on the four-poster bed. The heat from the fireplace warmed the space around her while the light danced on the walls, capturing her attention as she sat on the bed.



Since there was nothing she could do, she decided it would be best to get as much rest as possible. She was unsure of the real reason Vincent wanted her here. The way he looked at her in Alexander's club worried her.

Helena pulled out a T-shirt and pyjama bottoms from her bag and changed into them. Once she climbed in bed, she gazed at the dancing shadows on the ceiling. It felt too familiar...



She stood in a candlelit room crammed with jars, bottles, and herbs scattered around it on uneven shelves. The worn wooden flooring creaked under her as if straining to hold her weight. She stared at her reflection in a mirror. Her surroundings were shaking. No, that wasn't it. She was shaking and an endless cycle of questions roamed her mind.

*Where is she? Who could have taken her?*

*There is no other way.* She had cast all spells in the grimoire and nothing worked. Her precious child was still missing, but she could no longer cry. Her tears dried up a long time ago when this torment began.

*No, I must not give up.*

She had to complete the contract for her daughter's sake. Nothing else mattered.

Helena fought the tremors. This was not her body. The face in the mirror belonged to someone else—an older woman who looked like her. Her thin, dry, light brown hair reached to her waist. The paleness of her skin made her seem almost transparent and dark circles framed her dead eyes.

Helena once more was trapped in Eva's body.

The witch sucked in a shaky breath. The smell of burning sage calmed her.

Helena's grandmother used to grow a lot of herbs and burn them in her house. When the evening came, she would sit Helena on her lap and tell her endless tales of witches. They were almost superheroes to her back then.

*"I can do this!"* Eva thought. *"I have to do this, even if the Circle will never forgive me."*

She scanned the candlelit room. The preparations were done. She had to find a way to concentrate. She couldn't afford to break down, not yet.

Eva glanced at the flickering candlelight on the ceiling. "Mother, forgive me for what I am about to do."

With her last plea, she picked up a curved dagger with engravings of runes lining the side of the blade. The carved hilt felt heavy in her hand as she dipped it in the bowl of herbal paste next to it and rubbed the green mixture into the cold onyx with her quivering fingers.

“Forgive me, Mother, and provide me with guidance...”

Eva let the dagger rest on her palms and faced the mirror. The stone blade glistened as she mumbled foreign words.

Helena strove to understand what she was saying. The Russian she used was old. It was more complex than what her mother had taught her. From what she could gather, Eva spoke of a soul, a lifeline, and a bloodline.

Her heart beat faster as if trying to catch up to the rhythm of the words she uttered. She grasped the hilt of the dagger. Her knuckles turned white. Outstretching her wrist over the bowl, she cut deep into her flesh. At first, it stung. Once her blood rushed to the surface, a dull ache emerged, too.

Helena screamed, but no sound came out of Eva’s dry lips. Crimson rivers ran along the sides of her starved wrist and trickled into the bowl. The herbs were beginning to work, numbing the physical pain, but nothing seemed to take away the gnawing desperation in her heart.

*She will be safe. Nothing else matters.*

The green paste darkened when she mixed it with her blood using the dagger as a stirrer. Satisfied with the amount, she dipped her finger into it and drew a pentagram on the mirror. Eva wrote her name in the centre and encapsulated each of the five pointed ends with mystical symbols.

*“Te invoco, Lazare. Audi orationem meam.”* She told her bloodied reflection.

The small room filled with buzzing dark energy as the same energy seeped out of the mirror. The sinister feeling emanating from it reminded Helena of the creature outside of her shields.

The hair on the back of Eva’s neck stood to attention as the energy wrapped around her possessively. A shadow blurred her reflection until the mirror displayed nothing but darkness. A moment later, the shadow cleared enough to reveal a sharp-toothed grin spreading across it.

“At last, you have come to me for help, Eva,” it growled.

“I accept the contract, Lazarus. You can do as you wish with me but promise me that my daughter will be safe,” Eva said with her hands trembling at her sides.

The dark energy tried forcing its way in, but she needed to be sure he would save her daughter before she gave in.

“Your daughter will return, alive, of course,” the darkness spoke with a hint of amusement.

“Swear to me!”

“The contract binds me as much as you, Eva.”

She sighed. Ruby liquid encircled her feet and, in seconds, she stood within the bounds of a different pentagram. Small text ran in loops until the ends met.

*The contract*, Eva thought.

The long-awaited peace was upon her. She let go of her shields, and they collapsed. There was no more reason to fight anymore. Her precious child would live and be safe. Nothing else mattered.

Dark energy flowed into her. It vibrated with the creature's power, and Eva dropped to her knees under its pressure. She saw nothing other than his sharp-toothed grin as he began collecting his payment.

When the darkness reached her soul's core, it lunged at it like a starving animal. Her body wouldn't relent. Searing pain shot through her chest. Tendrils of energy pulled and tugged at her heart until she felt something separate from her body. A bright flame emerged and was swallowed up almost immediately.

Eva was gone. Helena knew it the moment her thoughts ceased. What remained behind was an empty shell.

"The price has been paid." The creature laughed in triumph, leaving a trace of his energy prickling along her skin.

"Oh, Eva, what have you done?" a voice filled with surprise came from behind her.

Helena knew who it was. The woman she saw in the cave.

The soulless body turned to face Marina with a wicked smile playing on its lips.

Marina's eyes widened and her mouth hung open.

"Our deal is complete, Marina. Your son's soul is mine and this witch's Circle is yours," the creature spoke through Eva's lips.



Helena awoke to find a pair of large brown eyes focused on her. The surprise made her shoot up into a sitting position without thinking. She bumped heads with Perri, sending the maid falling off the bed and onto the floor, groaning in pain.

She massaged her forehead to remove the ache building from the impact.

"What are you doing here?" she asked Perri who was also rubbing her nose with her fingers.

"I came here to give you a wake-up call. It is already late afternoon." She blushed and continued, "But, when I called you, no one replied, so I came in. You were tossing and turning. I thought you were in pain. And well..."

"And you thought it would be better to climb on top of me?"

Perri stood and began fixing her uniform into place. She kept her eyes cast to the ground. "No matter how much I called from the doorway, you wouldn't wake up. I came over to take a better look and then—" Perri's face turned bright red.

Helena took a calming breath and let it out slowly. Perri didn't deserve her scolding. Looking down, she saw her T-shirt was drenched in sweat. The material clung to her body, reminding her of the way that creature clutched Eva's heart. She shuddered.

"You said you couldn't wake me up?"

"Yes, I called your name and shook you, but nothing worked. Then, you woke up on your own," Perri explained with the help of her hand gestures.

"Look, I'm sorry if I seemed ungrateful..."

"Don't worry about it. I came here to tell you that Master Vincent has requested your company for dinner tonight. He sent you some clothes. I left them over there." She pointed at a large cushioned recliner by the fireplace where two white boxes were stacked atop of one another.

"He requested my presence?" she repeated, unsure whether she heard her right. If Vincent wanted her there, he could order it. There was no need for the charade he was playing.

"Yes, but if you don't feel well, I could tell him that."

Helena raised a hand. "No, it's alright. Tell him I'll be there."

Perri's lips tugged into a faint smile, and she scurried out of the room.

Hearing the door close made Helena's shoulders drop. Her skin was beginning to get cold from the wet clothes.

She climbed out of bed to rummage through her bag before she picked out a clean set of spare clothes to change into. Searching the room for any indication of where the bathroom was, she realised there was no en-suite here. A shower was a must if she was going to meet with Vincent for dinner. She chose not to wait any longer and changed into what she scavenged from her bag. Her eyes lingered on the white boxes resting on the chair. Helena didn't bother checking what was in them. She wasn't going to become a dress-up doll for a vampire. And, if he did mean that she was his guest, there was nothing binding her to accept his gifts.



Dinner took place in the main dining hall. The walls were lined with framed pages from ancient manuscripts and paintings of battles. Helena didn't have time to admire the room for long since she felt Vincent's presence.

He sat at the head of a long table with enough chairs pulled up for two dozen people.

Rupert led Helena to her seat on Vincent's right. He pulled out a chair for her and left the room.

She took her seat and noticed Vincent's energy retreated inside his shields.

“Good evening,” he greeted her.

“Good evening,” she whispered.

Trying to avoid eye contact, she concentrated on the grey suit he wore. After all, she wasn’t sure how he would react to her rejecting his gifts.

“You did not like the dress I sent you?”

*Here it comes.* Helena swallowed. She wasn’t certain of how to answer him. What if she had offended him?

Her voice shook. “We both know I didn’t come here to be dressed up.” She grabbed a glass of water, making the liquid dance against its crystal confinement.

“I see.”

Vincent remained silent for so long, she had to glance up to see if he was still there.

Their eyes met, and she felt like a deer staring into the headlights of an oncoming car. She knew she needed to look away but couldn’t. When he diverted his attention to the red wine in his glass, her chest was burning from holding her breath. If he was able to command vampires with a few words, she feared what he could do to humans.

Vincent took a tentative sip and swirled his wine. A look of longing was present on his aged face. “I am leaving for London tonight, for a week. Perri will be in charge of your care while you stay here.”

Helena briefly closed her eyes and took a long drink from her glass of water. “And what am I to do?”

“You are free to roam the grounds.” He paused to look at her. “You are my guest, after all.”

She stared at him, burning with questions she wanted answers to.

“Master Vincent, the food is ready,” Rupert interrupted from the door leading to what she assumed was the kitchen.

“Please, bring it here. Our guest must be starving.”

Helena couldn’t tell him the dream from last night kept her from eating. Then again, Perri would most likely inform him of the tiny details. She couldn’t think about food when there were too many worries lodged in her mind.

Rupert placed a plate of delicious smelling steak in front of her. The herbs used in the simple dish made her recall the dream. Her stomach reeled, and she pushed the plate away, lowering her eyes. “Sorry, I can’t eat. I’m not hungry.”

Vincent rose to his feet, outstretching his large hand to her.

Helena bit down on her lip and took it.

To her surprise, he brought her hand closer to him and brushed his cold lips over it. His moustache tickled her skin. “Perhaps we can have dinner another time when you are feeling better.”

She yanked her hand out of his grasp, and Vincent bowed with the grace of a gentleman before sitting back down at the head of the table.

Not waiting any longer, she ejected herself out of her seat and left the room as if her tail was aflame. In the fictitious safety of her room, she rested against the door and closed her eyes.

“What was that?” she voiced her thoughts.

“*Helena*,” Michael’s voice echoed in her mind.

She opened her eyes to see him, but he wasn’t there. “*What’s wrong? Where were you?*”

“*I don’t have much time. Something bad may happen soon. I want you to be careful and don’t—*” He broke off. His presence vanished along with the end of his warning.

“Michael? Michael!” she screamed aloud.

He was gone. Not a trace of his energy lingered in the room or inside of her mental shields.

“Don’t drink? Don’t drive? Don’t spend time with vampires? What?”

Gathering what was left of her calm, she glowered in silence. *Was Vincent angry with me because of the way I behaved?* She buried her face in her hands. “Ugh, there’s no way of finding out if he’s not here!”

She pushed away from the door and staggered over to the window. It was dark outside. She heard the faint lulling of nearby waves. Helena cracked the window open, and the smell of the sea filled the room. Cold air brushed against her face, and she looked at the dark sea beyond.

“What is going on?” Her eyes moistened, and she brushed the first teardrop away. *Why can’t things return to normal?*



Vincent was true to his word. He came by to say his goodbye and left. Afterwards, Helena tried to get some sleep. She was tired, more so than usual. The fear of reliving the nightmare kept her up while draining away what little strength she had left. Michael’s words kept repeating in her mind as she lay on the bed, trying to figure out what she wasn’t supposed to do.

There was a light knock on the door and Helena sat up. “Come in.”

Perri pushed the door open with her hip while balancing a tray of food in both hands. “I brought you breakfast.”

Wide-eyed, Helena glanced out the window. The sun was already shining through the curtains which confirmed a new day was upon them. She hadn’t noticed the time pass.

“Thanks,” she mumbled.

Perri sat on the edge of the bed. “What’s wrong? You don’t sound well this morning. Was it another bad dream?”

Helena didn’t want Perri knowing too much. She was Vincent’s maid, which meant she had to mind what information she passed on to this innocent-looking woman. She shook her head. “No, just couldn’t sleep last night.”

The smell of fresh food and coffee reached her and her stomach chose to make an announcement, stating how empty it was.

Perri giggled. She passed the tray to Helena, helping balance it on her lap before letting go.

“You’ll feel better after you eat. Sometimes, when I watch a horror film, I can’t sleep at night either and then, the next morning, I’m falling about the place while cleaning windows. I’m lucky Rupert hasn’t kicked me out.”

Helena poured some coffee from a small silver teapot that accompanied her meal. She offered the cup to Perri who shook her head.

“I can’t. It’s for you.”

“I won’t tell if you won’t. Plus, I’m going to eat first.” Helena waved a fork in the air.

The girl grinned and took the cup. “Thank you.”

Helena prodded her omelette with the cutlery. “So, do you like it here?”

“Of course, I do. This place has been my home since I was five.”

Helena recalled that Vincent was taking in orphans. *Could it be because he has a kind heart?* She snorted inwardly. No, a vampire wouldn’t do something so selfless. People without a family had no strings attached. If anything happened, no one would know or care. Helena’s mood turned sour since her situation was almost the same.

She scooped up a few forkfuls of egg into her mouth. When she finished chewing, she glanced at Perri who was blowing on her coffee. “Don’t you find it strange that Vincent hasn’t aged?”

Perri seemed to think about it. “Master Vincent must have hit the age when you look the same until one day you unexpectedly prune up, much like George Clooney.”

Helena observed her with care. There wasn’t even a hint of doubt that Vincent was a normal human. Maybe she didn’t want to see the truth right in front of her. “Yeah, or he is a vampire who drinks other people’s blood.”

Perri giggled. “Yes, but vampires don’t exist.”

She forced a smile.

The maid set down her cup on the tray. “I am sure it is rude of me to ask, but how did you end up knowing him? Master Vincent didn’t tell us much about you.”

“I met him a short while ago.” How short, Helena didn’t want to elaborate. “He said he could give me more information about the myths in Scotland that I need for my college report, so he invited me to come back with him for a short stay. That’s about it.”

Perri cocked her head to one side. “What about your family and friends? Won’t they miss you?”

Helena stopped chewing. How was she going to reply to this question when she didn’t want to think about the answer?

The silence between them stretched. Perri took a loud gulp of her drink and scratched her head. “Sorry, I bet they are missing you and you must miss them, too. I didn’t think the question through.”

Putting her fork down, Helena shook her head. It took a lot out of her to push back the tears that banged against the floodgates. “You’re right. I do miss them.”

Perri wrapped her hands around the half-empty cup of coffee. She stared at the dark liquid. “Do you have someone you love?”

Helena was glad she stopped eating. The question was as unexpected as this girl’s oblivious survival in this place. She mulled over her response. If she had never met Lucious and Alexander, she would be dating Andrew. They parted in a terrible way, and she had only herself to blame for it. Even now, she wasn’t certain what she felt for him.

“Helena?” Perri asked, drawing Helena out of her reverie.

She cleared her throat. “No. I don’t have anyone. Why do you ask?”

Perri’s cheeks grew pink. “Well, there is this guy who comes over with Vincent. He sometimes stays here like you. He tutored me in literature once. And, you see...I sort of have a crush on him.” She got up and paced around the bed. “I mean, I don’t know what to do. Should I tell him? Shouldn’t I? Does he even like blonde hair?”

Helena raised her hands, stopping her tirade. “Whoa, calm down. First of all, you should find out if he’s single or not.”

Perri gave a long blink as if it was too hard to digest that statement. “I can’t talk to him. I freeze up. But, when he greets me, I melt in here.” She pointed at her heart. “His accent is so beautiful.” Perri sighed with a dreamy expression. “Not like the rough bark everyone here has.”

The maid seemed to be in her own little world. When Perri realised Helena was still in the room, she blushed tomato-red. “I’m so sorry. You must think I’m weird.”

Helena pushed the tray aside. “No. Nothing like that. Every girl has to go through that stage at some point, right?”



Perri grasped her shoulders. “Then you must help me. I want to learn how to, you know, charm him.”

Helena cringed. Someone like Laura would have been a better choice to provide her with a plan of action for romance. Yet, the hopeful look in Perri’s big brown puppy-dog eyes made her cave in. “I’ll see what I can do, but no promises.”

The maid let go of her. She glowed with excitement. At the back of her mind, Helena couldn’t shake the fact that this guy was someone Vincent knew. What were the chances he could be a vampire when Vincent seemed more than happy to be among humans?



A week went by quickly. Perri continued working on summoning up her courage to talk to this mysterious Hans. According to Rupert, he left with Vincent for London, and they were due to return tomorrow.

Helena stared at the door of her room as she sat in the armchair. She couldn’t sleep again—wouldn’t sleep. The images from that nightmare haunted her. At night, she would wake up dripping with sweat and unable to break away from the nightmare until it was over.

Tonight, she could tell something was different. When she concentrated on her shields, she sensed they were weakened. The darkness pressured her from all directions. With a loud screech of metal, she saw a long crack had appeared and trailed along the metal surface above her head. The mental shields could no longer withstand the pressure that was building around her.

Helena clamped her arms around herself. She had to do something before the darkness could reach her.

The heartbeat thumped in her head, reminding her of how frightened she was. So, she aimed to reinforce her shields with another layer, but a sudden headache made her lose the concentration she had managed to gather.

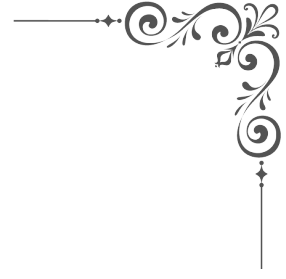
“Michael, help me!”

He never showed at any other time she had called him in the past week. This left her with Lucious. She didn’t want to talk to him after their fight, but she sent him a message over the link, anyway.

A biting chill ran through her, and she knew who it was. Her shields dissolved under the force of its power, allowing the dark energy to engulf her.

“There you are, my sweet little soul,” a deep growl echoed in her head.

Before her brain could react and produce a scream, she was swallowed up by the dreaded darkness.



## 14

# HIS CHILDE

Lucious' hands shot up as he paced around Alexander's office. "Why did I do that?"

He couldn't stop thinking about what had happened with Helena. Yes, he began calling her by her name in his mind. This piece of information troubled him, stating how much closer he had allowed her to get to his dead heart. Whatever magic she had cast on him, he had to fight it.

Lucious raked his fingers through his hair. "I kissed her, Alexander. I let myself lose control. I never lose control!"

Alexander reclined in his office chair. "Don't think too much about it. You were driven by adrenaline. Hell, even I had a few girls to keep me company after the elders left."

Lucious collapsed into the seat opposite Alexander.

"Think of it as I do," Alexander began. "My women are beautiful, accessible, short-term rides. Why not grab one of my girls and enjoy yourself for a night or two? The stress with the elders has messed with your mind."

"You are correct. I have been thinking too much about this. As for the offer, I must refuse. There are certain matters that need to be taken care of."

Alexander's expression grew serious. "I've been looking into your case, Lucious. So far, I have found nothing. My contacts in London are either unable to talk about the matter or went missing. Whoever brought you to Eliza's attention must be protected by the Council."

Lucious' eyes narrowed. "Do you think someone on the Council is after me?"

"Unless you had any personal run-ins with them beforehand, I doubt it." He shrugged. "Although, it is something we can't rule out." He stood and made his way to the window. The lights from the sign outside coloured his platinum hair a

fiery red as he looked into the distance. “Everyone has adversaries, Lucious. The quicker we figure out who yours are, the faster we can get over this hiccup.”

Over the years, Lucious had angered many people. The families of humans he had slaughtered in his rage when he was informed of Anna’s death, the hunters he had tracked down and tortured for information. There were too many to count. It bothered him that, in the end, they chose to go after him through the Council and not directly. What kept his mind busy were the supposed proof they had against him and the pointless claim that he wanted to disrupt the Council. “I have thought of this a lot. Somehow, I doubt they would listen to a human claim or that of a hunter. A vampire must be behind this mess.”

Facing him, Alexander rested his back against the windowsill. He crossed his arms, which stretched the material of his shirt. “I’m constantly entertaining the thought that it’s someone trying to get back at me. Too many people know that you are my closest friend. If they can’t touch me, you are the next best thing.”

Lucious picked up the half-filled glass of whisky from Alexander’s desk and downed the contents in one mouthful. He wished alcohol affected him in the same way it did when he was human. Instead of giving him a much-needed escape from reality after a few glasses, he needed to consume two bottles of strong liquor to get a similar effect. He set the glass on the table and stood up. “We don’t have time to cover all bases. In four weeks, I will be standing before Eliza without anything I can use to defend myself.”

Alexander pushed away from the window and strolled over to Lucious. “I’ll keep looking. I may need to ask Max for his help on this one. He has more contacts than me. As for you, get some rest and stay away from her until she leaves tomorrow.”

Lucious trusted his friend with his life. His levelheadedness was what he needed most in that moment. Since he met Helena, the control he had practised throughout his new existence persisted on slipping away, and he hated it.

“Yes, I believe I will do that,” Lucious agreed.

“Don’t forget to check up on your protégé.”

Lucious groaned. He was uncertain as to what to do with the newborn. This was his first *childe*—a mistake he didn’t have time to babysit. “I am not good at dealing with newborns.”

“Andrew is not a bad kid. He seems to have a good head for business when he’s not frenzied by the thirst. If you don’t want him, I wouldn’t mind taking him under my wing.”

“He would be better off with you. Too bad the law dictates that as a sire I am responsible for him.”

“I’m amazed you still care about our laws,” Alexander mused.

“The fewer laws I break now, the less I have to be proven innocent for later.” Lucious stood and checked the time on his phone. It was already 3 a.m. “I best get going.”

Before he could get through the door, Alexander’s hand landed on Lucious’ shoulder. “What do I tell the human tomorrow if she asks for you?”

“Anything you like.”

Alexander let him go. “As you wish.”



Lucious arrived in the quiet part of the city, cramped with empty, abandoned warehouses. There wasn’t a single heartbeat for miles, which made this a perfect place for him to relax and think things through. He stalked through the unlit street until he found the building that matched the address Alexander sent him.

A small converted warehouse with boarded-up windows stood before him. The place seemed ageless and dull. His vision allowed him to see the moss growing in the clefts of the grey stone. Around the corner, he found an entrance where one of Alexander’s employees guarded the door.

The vampire eyed him with suspicion. “Lucious, I presume?”

Lucious gave a curt nod. “Yes. I take it Alexander has informed you of my arrival.”

“You have brought a lot of trouble to my boss. You better not get him killed.” With that, the vampire opened a large metal door for him.

Lucious already knew he was endangering his friend. He also knew that without Alexander’s connections, he was as good as dead.

He marched inside. The warehouse design allowed him to see all three floors. The common room occupied the whole of the ground floor. Rust clung to metal pipes high above his head as he made his way further in. This place was better than the apartment he stayed at in London before his search went downhill.

All the stress and healing made him feel like he could sleep for a week. Such pleasure was not something he could afford. The air prickled with familiar energy. His sired vampire was nearby. As he approached one of the faux leather sofas, the energy grew more potent.

Lucious glanced down at the newborn vampire lying there, staring up at him with inquisitive green eyes.

Andrew jumped to his feet. “How is she? What happened?”

“Your human is fine,” Lucious said, trying to sound indifferent.

His *childe* ignored the obvious dismissal. “No, she’s not. Tell me what happened!”

Lucious would have to punch whoever had a big enough mouth to tell this kid she was involved in their meeting with the Council. He tried walking past him, but Andrew stood his ground, moving when he did.

“There is nothing to worry about. Now, let me pass,” Lucious said, hoping the kid was going to let this conversation go.

“But your clothes...” Andrew smelt the air. His expression darkened. “You smell like her and there’s blood. So much blood...” An emerald glow rimmed his pupils, and his hands jerked upwards. “What aren’t you telling me?”

Lucious’ skin prickled with Andrew’s energy. For a new vampire who had awakened less than a week ago, he was unusually strong. And, after the fight with Andreaz, Lucious didn’t want to get into another one when he was not at his best. That and he was certain if he told this kid the truth, the fool would run out of there and try protecting her as he had attempted to do in the past.

“I may have taken some damage, but she remains unharmed,” Lucious reassured him.

Andrew eyed him with scepticism.

In return, Lucious gave him nothing other than his schooled blank expression. He had learned long ago that hiding his emotions was the best way to survive in their world.

“We can discuss this another time. *Move*,” Lucious ordered, sending his energy into the final word.

Andrew cringed and stepped aside.

Disregarding the young man, Lucious brushed past him. This proved he wasn’t cut out to be a sire. Anna never used her will on him. She did her best to keep Lucious out of trouble and taught him how to be a vampire with patience and support. He would do anything to have her back, even learn to get along with his halfwit *childe*.

He climbed the metal stairs and stumbled into the first room with a bed.

“Finally, some peace and quiet,” he muttered, collapsing on top of the sheets.

It had been days since he got proper rest. With so much feeding in the recent weeks, it was becoming harder to reign in his thirst. Feeding was as strong as a drug to vampires. The more he drank that rich, crimson water of life, the harder it was to refrain from draining the human dry.

He rolled over on his side and closed his eyes. Even now, he felt her through the link. The sound of Helena’s heartbeat that pumped her warm blood through her veins replayed in his mind. Her tears had destroyed any fantasy of drinking her sweet blood until she lay without a pulse in his arms.

He shut his mental barriers. She was not his problem anymore.



Evening came and his throat ached from the early signs of the thirst. A faint scent of blood caused his throat to burn. With much effort, he sat up. The sweet aroma was coming from his clothes. His ruined tuxedo from yesterday was covered in blood.

He shrugged the jacket off his shoulders and tore the remnants of the black shirt off. Tossing them on the ground, he scanned the room for any spare clothes. The only material in this empty space was the bed sheets he had ruined with his filthy attire.

Lucious sighed and searched his pockets for a phone. He dialled the first number that popped into his head, and when Alexander didn't pick up, he went with the second-best option.

Tanya's bored voice purred down the line. "Russian Roulette main desk, how may I help you?"

"Tanya, it's me. Can you put me through to Alexander?"

He heard her inhale sharply. "Oh, darling, I missed you last night. As for Alexander, he's not in right now. I believe he went back to the hotel to sort something out."

Lucious recalled the trade was on tonight. "Thank you."

"Anything else, my love?"

"Actually, could you send me some spare clothes to Alexander's warehouse?"

"As much as I would love to have you remain naked, I will get someone on it."

Before she could add anything else, he ended the call. He had to find out about the vampire who was behind this farce. The sooner he started; the quicker things would get done.



A distasteful bar came into Lucious' view. The last time he was here, he had to sneak in to get Helena out. Today, he was visiting 'The Rift' during the opening hours.

The stench of trash and the filthy river nearby besieged the place, confusing his vampiric senses. Thick, smoky-grey walls contained most of the noise and the black painted windows kept the prying eyes out of their business.

He entered the bar, eyeing the dancers and sparing a glance to the entrances. Not too long ago, he had slaughtered a bounty hunter in here. Marcus won't be too ecstatic to see him return for another visit so soon.

The air prickled with energy, and the hair on the back of Lucious' neck rose. He searched the area for any threats, discovering a group of young vampires

trying to show off their power levels.

*What a waste.* He pushed his way through the thick crowd of dancing patrons.

His eyes focused on the old Viking who tended the bar. Marcus' long braided beard reached his chest. His auburn hair cascaded around his shoulders, brushing his brawny arms. He polished a pint glass with a tattered cloth when Lucious drew closer.

Without looking up, Marcus asked, "What are you doing here?"

Ignoring the displeasure in the old vampire's tone, Lucious lowered himself onto one of the available barstools. "You know why I'm here."

The bartender placed the glass on the counter. His deep-set, brown eyes seemed to see right through Lucious. "I hope that's to apologise for leaving a mess in my bar."

"They had my human."

A cruel smile spread across Marcus' face. "Since when do you care about anyone but yourself and your dead sire?"

Lucious' fingers curled. The old man had a few centuries on him. There was no need to start a scene, not in a place where the odds were against him. He forcibly relaxed. "That is none of your concern."

Marcus' foul breath escorted his spiteful words. "If I didn't have to clean up my bar after you and Alexander, I wouldn't ask."

Not flinching, Lucious returned the stare. "I'm here to get some information."

The old vampire chuckled. "I don't deal in that business anymore. As you can see"—Marcus waved his hands around and in the directions of his customers—"I am an owner of a prestigious bar."

Lucious didn't bother looking. He knew the weakling vampires that dwelled here. Most were discarded by their sires. Others came here to get on someone else's nerves. Without another word, he pulled out a thick envelope out of his back pocket. He waved it in the air and placed it on the countertop. "I need a name."

"I'm not interested in money."

Lucious smirked. "Who said I was offering money? Here—" He tapped his index finger on the envelope. "—I have something much more valuable."

Marcus raised a questioning brow. Lucious knew he had him the moment the old vampire licked his thin lower lip. Marcus loved secrets and dirty deeds.

"All I need is a name of the man who set me up."

The bartender studied the envelope as if trying to see through the matte surface.

“Well?” Lucious slid the information away from Marcus who grabbed his wrist with his huge hand.

“You are good at getting what you want, Lucious. You should come and work for me when this mess is over. If you’re still *alive*, that is.”

Lucious found no interest in working for him. Marcus was a good man who never broke any laws on the surface, but there were more important things he had to return to.

Upon hearing no reply from him, Marcus grabbed a clean glass from under the counter. “Would you like a drink?”

The corner of Lucious’ lips quirked. “Alright.”

“Anything in particular?”

Lucious shook his head. “I’ll leave the choice to you.”

Marcus made his way to the other end of the bar. He searched for something under the counter and returned with a bottle of old scotch.

“Are you sure I can’t change your mind?” Marcus poured him a drink, placing something small underneath the glass and slid it across the counter.

“Quite.”

He passed Marcus the envelope, taking the piece of paper from under the glass before finishing his drink.

Lucious left the bar knowing that Marcus was anything but a friend to him. Information brokers did not have friends. They would sell their mother for the right price without a second thought. Lucious’ staying there would only bring him more trouble.

He crossed the road and glimpsed at the folded piece of paper. One name was written in an almost unreadable handwriting ‘Eliza’. Lucious scrunched up the note and threw it on the ground. Alexander’s hunch was right. This was personal.

He had no time to pick up his phone. A group of three vampires had him surrounded. They were purposely leaking their energy to intimidate him, which merely annoyed him. Over the years of hunting people down and extracting information from them, Lucious learned that flaunting one’s energy meant one of two things: the opponent was old and powerful, a notion he dismissed, or young and stupid. He stood, unmoving, and observed them.

The first vampire with greasy hair tied back into an uneven ponytail, spoke in a thick Irish accent that made it hard for Lucious to understand his slurred words. “Yer not going anywhere, fella. We’ve got ya figured out. Yer the vamp who’s got one hundred grand on his head. This is our lucky night, boys!”

“I suggest that you let me pass before you get hurt,” Lucious warned.



Their movements were uncertain—nothing a trained group of vampires would display. He mentally calculated their possible ages to be below fifty.

“Sorry, can’t do that. When we trade ya in, we’re going to party for a long time with the gals,” the self-proclaimed leader jeered.

The other two vampires laughed while the leader vulgarly thrust his pelvis back and forth in a poor imitation of sex. Grins spread across their faces and their movements became more fluid as they gained confidence in the success of their plan. Two of them flanked him from behind.

No matter what, Lucious had to vaporise their confidence. “Seriously, mate, if you don’t back off with your pups, I will be forced to ruin my new clothes.”

The leader burst out laughing and the others joined him, echoing his amusement. “Ye shouldn’t be trying to act tough when yer about to have yer pretty little face broken with me boot.”

The leader’s eyes lit dark-green, and he cracked his neck and knuckles.

“Look, Joe, he’s already shaking in fear,” one of them said from behind Lucious.

He was shaking, but not for the reason they believed. He was trying hard to suppress his anger. Too many things were not going according to plan ever since the elders put a bounty on him. He closed his eyes and took in a calming breath. Without a second thought, he plunged his hand through the leader’s ribcage.

The vampire screamed in agony and confusion.

To contrast the panicked man, Lucious was returning to his old self. He regained the control he felt slipping these past few weeks. His fingers broke through the lung as he searched for the most important organ.

The leader clung to his arm in a desperate attempt to halt the process.

With his hand locked around the heart, Lucious flattened it. Cool liquid travelled up his sleeve. He jerked the fool’s heart out.

The vampire’s surprise showed on his face, and he began ageing. The other less brave souls remained silent with petrified faces. Their eyes were glued to the remains of their friend who was turning into a leathery corpse at Lucious’ feet.

“I suggest you leave before you meet the same fate. Your friend here should be a good example as to what may happen when you do not heed my warning.”

“W-we were about to leave,” said a short, redheaded vampire.

Lucious could almost taste their fear which they were no longer able to hide. “Be on your way then.”

Their heads bobbed at his instruction, and they disappeared in the opposite direction of the bar, leaving their leader’s body behind.

“Pathetic.” Lucious spat on the corpse and threw the shrivelled muscle in his hand on the ground before wiping his hands on the vampire’s poor choice of

clothing.



A week passed and there had been no news from his blood-brother and sisters. Lucious' patience was wearing thin.

*Where could they have gone?* Their silence meant many possibilities, some of which he did not want to entertain. He drummed his fingers on the metal desk he found in one of the warehouse's offices.

A ringing sound from a laptop Alexander had provided brought his attention back to the bright screen. Finally, he received word from Alexander's informant in Europe. As he read the message, his lips forged into a grim line. The vampires Anna had sired were missing. It was as if they were in hiding or worse. The thought of his family's death brought an ache to his heart.

Lucious slammed his fist against the table. The shock of the impact sent a black line across the laptop's screen. The elders had to be involved in their disappearances, too. The frustration of not knowing what was going on was driving him mad.

"Damn them to hell!" he shouted.

A knock on the door allowed him to be distracted long enough to push back the vile images. He took in a calming breath. There was still time. After all, the elders must have missed something.

"Come in," he said.

The door opened, and Andrew walked in with a piece of paper in his hand. His accusatory expression made Lucious lock his emotions away and display a bored look on his face.

Andrew marched up to the desk. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Lucious eyed the letter he was holding. "Tell you what exactly?"

"That Helena left for Scotland. You even let her go with the bastards that kidnapped her in the first place." Andrew's shoulders shook. His body trembled with his rage and, although he was a newborn, he had been growing in power much quicker than most.

Lucious decided to keep watch over the development of his *childe*. Andrew was becoming accustomed to his new life without any visible trouble faster than anyone he'd ever met. Alexander sang praises of the boy's self-restraint, but Lucious feared that he would soon overpower him.

"I have told you this before. This has nothing to do with you. I hope she had mentioned in her letter that she was not forced to go. She could have taken her freedom there and then." Lucious shrugged. "Helena chose to go with them."

Andrew rolled his eyes. "You can't expect me to believe that!"

“It is the truth, I assure you. She sacrificed herself to keep Alexander and me alive. Something I never thought I would witness.” Lucious let bitterness show in his words. He couldn’t pinpoint why she did that for them. Her sacrifice prevented him from hating her.

Andrew’s expression softened. “We have to get her back.”

“And how do you propose we do that? She is in the possession of a vampire that has been alive longer than Christianity. He can command you with his voice alone.”

“There must be a way, something we can do to get her back!”

Lucious made his way to his agitated *childe* and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Do you honestly believe I wouldn’t have kept her here with us if there was any other way? She saved my life, and I was unable to protect her.” His words rang true even in his ears. Had he begun to care for her since her sacrifice?

The boy’s shoulders slumped, and Lucious watched a battle of emotions fighting on his defiant face. At last, he was drawing close to getting Andrew to let the matter go.

“If there was a way for her to remain here with us, I would take it. In the end, it was her choice to save our lives.”

Andrew glanced up. The young man’s eyes were red from what Lucious assumed was crying. *Is she that important to him?* He could never understand human love or the need to sacrifice oneself for it.

“I could go alone,” Andrew mumbled.

Lucious snorted. “And do what exactly? Even if you did somehow get past the guards and Vincent, which you will not, you will be her worst immediate threat. We can do nothing but wait, for now.”

Andrew grimaced as if remembering something painful. He took in a shaky breath. “You’re right. As much as I hate to admit it, right now I can’t protect her.”

Lucious fought the urge to clap his hands together. *Finally!* “Let it be. Nothing has happened to her, otherwise, we would know about it. Let us wait for things to play out.”

He decided to keep her repeated agitation that leaked through their connection out of the conversation. There was nothing to worry about because it vanished as soon as morning arrived. He had dismissed it as night terrors. She was around vampires and was bound to be frightened.

Although reluctant, Andrew allowed the conversation to drop. He clutched the letter in his hand and left the office without another word.

Lucious waited for him to be out of hearing range and contacted Alexander. "It's me. I have a favour to ask."

"I should buy an event planner for the favours you owe me. Go on."

"I would like you to stop playing postman between the saint and the newborn."

"Any particular reason for that?"

"Just do as I ask."

Alexander sighed. "Alright, but when they find out about this, I am feigning ignorance."

"You have my gratitude."

Alexander chuckled. "Don't I always?"

Lucious hung up. He continued to hear Alexander's laughter even after he had stashed the phone back into his jacket's pocket. He reached for the laptop, and his whole body froze. There it was. An unmistakable presence in the air of someone he had not seen in over a decade. Someone he wasn't ready to see again after she decided to return and serve the American Council.

Facing the doorway, he found what he expected. His Mexican beauty stood there, casually resting her hip against the doorframe.

"You're as beautiful as I remember, Zafira," he said.

She smiled, revealing her white teeth. She brushed her hand through her long black curls that trailed down to her waist. "I thought instead of waiting for you to come to me, I should come visit you."

Zafira started towards him, swaying her hips from side to side like temptation itself. She watched him with those hungry dark brown eyes that could get a hold of his soul if he were not careful enough. Yet, he was certain that he did not have a soul as he never loved anyone. He respected people and cared about them enough to not kill them. She was probably the closest he had come to loving someone.

She stopped a few inches away from him and pulled him in for a kiss. Her soft lips caressed his as she deepened their contact. The smell of spice and summer heat—a combination he had grown to crave and despise because of her comings and goings—filled his nostrils. He groaned in anticipation.

When she pulled away, Lucious fought the urge to hold on to her. He slid his hands into his pockets to keep from running them all over her curves. There was more to this visit than a mere need to see him.

"I have definitely missed your greetings," he said, scanning her face for anything that would tell him her real reason for crossing the Atlantic.

Zafira's laugh was a rich, musical sound that always made him warmer on the inside. Yet, he was certain it was not love. *Desire*? She always walked into

his life at the most unexpected times and left without as much as a goodbye. It drove him mad.

“You have? I heard from Alexander that you’ve become fixated on a human female. Almost a child at that! I thought you liked them older.”

Lucious retreated, struggling not to be swayed by the appeal that was growing harder to fight.

She placed her slim hands on her hips and pursed her lips together. The light in the room made her bronzed complexion shine while she studied him.

Lucious lowered his voice. “He was merely teasing you, my dear. I am interested in that particular girl for a reason.”

A knowing smile spread across her face. “I see. Love was never the cause you found a woman interesting. She must be something special to get your attention.” Zafira dropped her hands to her sides. Taking the liberty, she glided over to the door and closed it with a loud click.

Lucious sat on the desk. His fingers dug into the metal to keep him in place. “Is she the reason you’re here?”

“Oh, darling, when I heard you are being chased by the selfish European Council, I rushed right over.”

He snorted at her selfless pretence. “You are the same as me. Nothing you do is without a good reason. So, why are you truly here?”

Her finger found a lock of her hair, and she toyed with it. Zafira knew the effect she had on him. With heat in her eyes, she drew closer. “We both know how things with the elders turn out. So far, you have been lucky. I’ll have you know, there is no ulterior motive behind my visit but an honest concern for an old friend’s wellbeing.”

There was no way he was going to get any information out of her without force, and that was not something he wished to use. “Did you have another vision?”

A dark look fled across her face which she covered up with a smile. “You’re too smart for me. I have come to prevent a certain event from happening, yes.” She grinned. “Enough talk!”

At an excruciatingly slow pace, Zafira trailed her tongue over her plump red lips. She ran her hands up his chest, pulling the shirt he wore apart in one strong tug. Her soft hands travelled over his abdomen muscles, and he couldn’t help but close his eyes to enjoy the sensation fully.

“I’ve missed this,” she said.

Lucious opened his eyes. “You’ve missed my chest?”

A fire burned in her eyes. Her fingers wrapped around the material of his ruined shirt, and she pulled him in for another kiss. This one was no longer a

greeting.

He pressed her closer to him, enjoying the feel of her body. She was not the only one who had missed their time together. What irritated him was that he couldn't keep her to himself for more than a month. Zafira was a woman who preferred multiple partners, sometimes at the same time. The reason their relationship worked was because he didn't dare try to possess her.

He picked her up and seated her on the desk.

Zafira pulled away and took off her blouse. She tore off the remnants of the shirt that clung to his shoulders. Grabbing his face, she continued the kiss with more skill than any woman should possess.

"Make love to me like the time we were in Venice," she breathed against his lips.

Lucious' restraint crumbled. He grabbed a handful of her hair, forcing her to remain in place as he devoured her mouth.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and moaned. His hands ran up and down her slim back. When his tongue brushed her fangs, she bit down.

He grunted, tasting his blood in her mouth. The brief pain dissipated and enhanced his pleasure in their kiss. He slid his hands under her lace bra—damned things were always in the way—and played with her full breasts, summoning more eager moans from her.

Lucious slid one hand behind her back to undo the catch when the link to Helena juddered. He paused. A flood of fear roared into him, tearing him away from Zafira. A stronger wave hit him, and he shivered from the unknown-to-him cold that chilled him to his bones.

"What's wrong?" Zafira scanned his face for an answer.

He felt her holding on to him as his legs give way. He landed on his knees and pain exploded in his kneecaps.

"I don't...know!" he choked out, finding it hard to speak.

"*Help me, Lucious!*" Helena's words were laden with soul-shattering fear that had appeared out of nowhere and engulfed his mind.

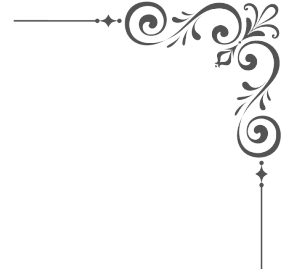
He wanted to go to her, needed to be at her side. Lucious cursed aloud when the link went dead. The string quietened, and he could no longer feel her. It was as if she wasn't there anymore.

His body finally relaxed, and he concentrated on the link between them. Something sinister circled her shields. It was the same creature that had been lingering around them since he met her. The power it emitted now came in much greater quantities than before.

Lucious opened his shields. His worries were proven to be correct. She was swallowed up by the darkness that was travelling across the link, getting closer

to him.

There was no way he was going to risk having something like that get inside him. He slammed his shields shut, reinforcing them with his energy. Whatever that thing was, he did not want to have anything to do with it because the hunger he felt from it was greater than any thirst he ever felt.



## 15

# THE DARKNESS BEYOND

*So cold...*

Helena shivered. The cold had permeated from the rough surface she was laying on right down to her bones. She wrinkled her nose. The smell of rotting hay filled her nostrils, and she lifted her heavy eyelids.

Her head rested on a brownish pile of thinning hay. The rest of her remained on a filthy stone ground. Through tiny cracks in it, yellow blades of grass fought their way to the surface in the dank prison cell.

She sat up, allowing some time for her eyes to adjust to the surrounding dimness. Did Vincent decide she should be kept in a cell instead of a bedroom? She couldn't recall him returning home or anything that had happened for that matter.

Covering her nose with her sleeve, she wasn't sure which smell invaded her senses through the material more: the stench of something rotten or the sewage that seemed to fill the rest of this cramped space.

Something at the other end of the room shifted, making her heart begin a frantic dance. She pressed her back against the wall. The uncertainty of her situation had her body break out into a cold sweat.

"Hello?" Helena's whisper bounced off the walls.

The shape didn't answer or move. She couldn't distinguish if it was her sight playing tricks on her. Her mind urged her to see what it was, yet the rest of her body disagreed.

*I would already be dead if it meant me harm, right?* Once she made up her mind, she used the wall for support to climb to her feet.

"Please don't let there be anything else in here with me," she chanted.

The cold from the wall forced her to move away from it. Absorbing a deep breath, she took the first cautious step. The shape remained stationary. Upon drawing closer, the shape became a figure and, soon, turned into a woman.



The stranger hugged her knees to her chest, revealing scraped white knuckles. Her face remained hidden behind a veil of greasy brown hair.

Helena stopped a safe distance away. "D-do you know where we are?"

The woman lifted her head but not enough to let Helena catch a glimpse of her face.

"*Chto?*" the stranger mumbled in Russian. Her voice came out hoarse.

Kneeling next to her, Helena took a better look at the poor thing. She didn't have to wait long before a face came into view. The woman's emerald eyes were huge against her starved, sharp cheekbones. Her hair was plastered together from lack of a shower, and bits of hay peeked through her locks here and there.

Helena wanted to pick them out but didn't dare touch her fragile form, not when those round eyes held so much fear.

"Where are we?" Helena asked in Russian. Even though it had been a while since Helena used it, she was somehow able to hold a basic conversation.

"Where do you believe we are?" She studied Helena with curiosity. Her grip relaxed around her knees, and she lifted her head.

Despite the dirt covering most of her face and torn attire, Helena knew who this was. She had seen her face too often in her dreams. "Eva?"

Eva's eyes narrowed. "How do you know my name?"

"It doesn't matter. Why are you here? What is going on?" Helena scanned the place once more. "Where is *here*?"

"You do not know?"

"No, I don't have a clue."

Eva gasped, and the sound of crunching bones filled Helena's ears.

She winced when a gut-wrenching scream came from the witch. Eva's hands shot to her side. On instinct, Helena rubbed the woman's arm, hoping it would help soothe her pain.

Eva's face relaxed, and she shook her head.

Understanding her silent message, Helena removed her hand, careful not to touch her more than was necessary. After a minute or so, Helena cringed.

Eva whimpered after each tiny breath she took. Once her breathing evened out, she opened her eyes again. "We are in prison, to be executed for witchcraft at dawn."

Helena stared at her in disbelief. "You are joking, right? I am not a witch. Why would Vincent execute me?"

Eva frowned. "Who is this Vincent you speak of?" She tried sitting up properly but changed her mind when she let out a sharp hiss.

*Has Vincent managed to brainwash this woman? Why create the charade with the execution?* "He's the vampire who has us trapped here, a member of the

Council.”

Helena’s knees hurt, so she settled on the ground next to Eva.

“And where is this Vincent?”

“I don’t know,” Helena said with a frown forming on her brow. *Could I be wrong? Maybe Vincent is uninvolved.* She thought back to the last thing she could remember. She was in her room, waiting for him to return home from London. The rest was blank. She shook her head. No, that couldn’t be it. She was certain she was missing some vital piece of information.

“If you are not a witch, why are you here?”

Helena had no idea what to say. She never believed in magic. Guardian angels, sure, but magic was on a whole different level.

The slight movement of Eva’s body drew her out of her thought. “I didn’t plan for things to become like this.”

“Nothing we do is planned,” Eva stated. “Things have already been predetermined for us by fate.”

Helena rolled her eyes. The same fate hogwash Michael was always going on about. Not everything was set in stone. Everyone had their free will. There was no major superpower that sat there and nit-picked at each one of them, deciding that person’s path.

Helena made her way over to the metal bars that kept them from leaving. She grasped the icy iron and pulled as hard as she could. The metal creaked around the edges, but nothing else happened.

Eva wheezed with a mixture of laughter and pain.

“What’s so funny?” Helena glanced back at her, scowling.

“Do you believe I have not tried that? I have spent a week in here, perhaps more.”

“There must be a way out of here!” She wasn’t about to give up, so she studied the cell one more time. No apparent escape revealed itself. Then, it dawned on her. “Can’t you do a spell or something?”

Eva pushed away from the wall, her hands shaking as she supported her weight. She raised her hand to stop Helena from coming to her aid. “I do not need help.” She managed to stand on her own two feet and proceeded to brush her dress down with swollen purplish fingers.

“You don’t understand anything about magic, do you?” Eva’s voice came out cold. When she stopped fussing with her dress, she turned her empty, emotionless gaze to Helena.

“No, I don’t. People, well vampires, keep telling me that I’m something I’m not.” A half-smile spread across Helena’s lips. This whole set-up was ridiculous. Her life had become an endless cycle of mistakes, and no matter what choices

she made, there was no shortage of misery. What was it that she had done to aggravate Vincent to bring her to such a place? And what happened to the darkness that was creeping around her shields?

*Darkness.*

Helena assessed Eva who seemed to have forgotten her presence altogether. Her eyes no longer looked at Helena. Instead, they focused on the metal bars she was holding on to.

Eva's eyes widened with terror. "They're coming..."

"Who's coming?" Helena strained her ears to listen for anyone's approach.

Though muffled pain, Eva formed a ball in the corner and started trembling.

In a few short seconds of listening to her pounding heart, Helena heard voices in the distance. Not knowing what to do, she ran over to where Eva was mumbling something and pressed her body to the cold stone.

Two stocky men unlocked the cell and entered. One glared at Eva and reached for her with grimy hands before dragging her away from Helena's side.

Eva screamed in pain as something inside of her snapped.

The second man scanned the room briefly. Seeming satisfied, he grabbed Eva's other arm, propelling her towards the cell door.

Immobile, Helena watched the scene unfold.

Eva fought in their grasp, screaming foul curses between her sobs. "Help me, I don't want to die!"

There was nothing Helena could do. She wasn't strong enough to fight off those gorilla-sized men. The sad revelation hurt her more than any physical pain. She wanted to help—to save Eva.

She shook her head. There had to be something she could do. With newfound determination, she strained to move. As if bound by the vines of fear, her body wouldn't listen to her commands.

They dragged Eva out of the cell and, a minute later, they were gone. They vanished into thin air, leaving the cell wide open.

Helena blinked rapidly. *Is this real?* Even if they were vampires, there would be some kind of noise when they carried her through the dark corridor.

Puzzled, she kept peering into the darkness beyond. She must still be in shock. There was no other explanation. She clung to the stone wall for support and swayed as she approached the way out.

*I could go out there and try to save her, but how?* At the same time, she heard another voice in her psyche, urging her to run, to get as far away as possible.

*It's not right. Eva asked for help.*

*“And how are you going to do that? Beat them with your hands or throw hay at them?”* her mind mocked.

Her shoulders fell. There was nothing she could physically do to help. This was her fault. She was always useless, always the one being saved. Her logic told her to run, but she had to try. It didn't matter if things went wrong. At least, she would be happy with the fact that she tried her best to help someone.

The next thing she knew, she was running. The wide corridor stretched further than she had anticipated and not one other prison cell was in sight. Soon, the light vanished. She was stranded in the shadows with no idea of what direction to take.

She glanced over her shoulder. Her cell had disappeared into thin air.

“Help me!” Eva's voice echoed in the void.

Helena picked up her pace, her legs aching, lungs burning. “Where are you?”

Eva's pained scream broke the unnerving silence. It came from the left, or so she thought, and she sprinted in that direction.

A glimmer of light appeared in the distance, and she hastened her pace. The ground became softer and short blades of grass tickled her feet as she burst into the sunlit courtyard filled with violet nasturtium flowers and untrimmed hedges. She squinted, adjusting to the bright light above her head.

Loud curses and shouts came from around the corner. Helena slowed her pace and edged around the tall hedge that blocked her vision of the epicentre of commotion.

A buzzing crowd of more than two dozen people dressed in old ragged clothes, similar to Eva's in design, chanted words she couldn't make out earlier.

“...the witch. Burn the witch!” their unified voices sang whilst their fists pumped into the air.

Helena searched past the crowd to find five frightened women, tied to tall wooden stakes in the middle. Her gut squeezed. She knew what was going to happen to them. It made her want to run away, to avoid getting closer to the murderous gathering. She could already see the thick smoke beginning to rise from underneath the women, from left to right.

Excitement bubbled in the air. The audience clapped and cheered.

“Die, you monsters!” someone shouted.

Helena clenched her fists. She could no longer stand there and do nothing. She pushed her way through the swarm of people. The smell of sweat and alcohol flowed from men and women alike. They stood side by side, discounting her existence. She pressed on.

The screams of the trapped women got louder the closer she got. Her clammy hands trembled, but she kept fighting her way to the front row.

*Just keep going*, she told herself, determined not to stray from her path.

Once she burst through the final row of hateful people, she was met with the horrid goings-on that took place before her. The first woman who was tied to the stake was not Eva. An agonised face came into view, causing her to intake a sharp breath.

“Grandma?” The word rolled out of her mouth of its own accord.

Her grandmother’s long hair was a mess of silver that reflected the orange glow of the flames beneath her feet. Her clothes were the last thing Helena remembered her in—a long blue linen dress and a pale green, flowery apron.

“Why her?” Helena screamed her question at the cheering crowd, not managing to dampen their spirits in the least.

“Don’t cry, child,” her grandmother said.

Helena didn’t realise when her tears emerged. She brushed them away with her sleeve.

The fire had reached her grandmother’s skirt and continued to climb. Helena raked her eyes over her surroundings. There was nothing useful there. No buckets, no water, just disturbed people who enjoyed the show.

“I’ll find help, I promise!” Helena shouted.

The courtyard they were in was bound to have a source of water. She tried fighting her way through the crowd again, but Eva’s voice stopped her in her tracks. “There’s one thing you can do for us.”

Helena faced the woman who was next to her grandmother. She hadn’t noticed Eva being there. If the witch knew of a way she could help, she would do it.

“What can I do?” Her gaze flicked back to her grandmother. Most of her lower body was engulfed in flames. She had to do something. There was no time.

The women vocalised their suffering in an almost perfect unison. Her heart pumped hard enough that she thought it would fight its way out of her chest.

“Please, tell me!” she begged Eva.

Helena’s body shook with agitation. She took in a deep breath. It was a mistake. Her nostrils filled with the smell of smoke and burning meat. Her hand covered her mouth while she willed the contents of her stomach to not rise any higher in her oesophagus.

“Tell me!” Helena screamed over the cheering crowd.

Two women on the left of Eva had grown silent. She was running out of time. Eva did not respond and continued to scream with the remaining women, their voices becoming hoarse.

Helena turned to those who had gathered. None attempted to breach the line in which they arranged themselves to observe their victims' suffering.

"Someone, stop this! This is madness," she shouted. Her voice began to wither. Her pleas were drowned in the noise they produced. She stood in their way, but not one of them bothered to look in her direction. It was as if she didn't exist.

Helena tried her best to force her way back through the crowd, yet they stood there like a solid wall. Using what little energy she had, she hit at their chests to get some attention. She froze in confusion when not a single member of the crowd brought their eyes down to her level.

Her grandmother's weakened voice filtered through. "Helena, help us."

Helena's tears blurred her vision as she turned back and saw her beloved grandmother looking into space with her eyes glazing over.

"I don't know how to help you!" Her breaths came faster which made her stomach churn. She covered her nose and mouth with her hand, but it didn't stop the fetor of burning. She tasted the charred flesh on her tongue. Bending over, she collapsed to her knees and vomited what she was fighting to keep down. Her throat hurt and her eyes stung with tears.

When she glanced at the smoking remains of her relative, her heart missed a beat. No matter how hard she tried, her eyes wouldn't move away from the unrecognisable woman who spoke with her a moment ago.

*She can't be dead. Not again.*

"Help...me," a heaving voice came from above.

Helena found Eva who was struggling with the flames that licked at her chest. As if unable to comprehend anymore, Helena remained still.

"Help!" Eva croaked.

*She's alive!* Helena shook her head and dug her nails into her palms to get a grasp on reality.

"How?" She stood, frantic to get an answer before Eva was gone, too. "What can I do?"

"Accept the deal," she choked out.

Her brows drew together. "What deal? I don't understand."

"Accept the deal."

Eva's face melted into the flames. Her cheekbones showed through the muscle tissue that leaked away like wax on a candle. Helena stared, incapable of uttering a single word.

She felt something wrap around her chest. The strange energy that was unfamiliar to her. When she glanced down, there was nothing there.

The energy began squeezing the air out of her lungs. She gasped, and her hands shot to her throat. Without much warning, it pulled, landing her on her ass.

“No! She is mine,” Eva’s voice turned into a growl.

Alert, Helena’s eyes raked over the commotion. Eva was no longer a burning woman but a cloud of darkness. It hovered above the pyre which rapidly faded.

Unable to take in a breath, her lungs ached from the lack of oxygen.

The darkness drifted closer. And, the closer it drew, the better she felt. The strange hold around her loosened enough for her to swallow a breath. The thick cloud climbed up her leg, sending shivers down her spine. She fought to move away from the creature lurking in the shadows but remained paralysed.

A sharp-toothed grin became visible to her, and a lump formed in her throat. “Now then, where were we?”

The darkness shrunk until it reformed into a female shape, and Eva stepped out with a toothy grin stretching her unmarred face. “I have waited a long time for this, my flower.”

Helena’s back hit something. She looked up at the wall of legs that worked as a barrier, keeping her in place. The crowd’s attention was on her. Their unnerving grins made her want to disappear into the dirt.

Peeling her eyes away from them, she found enough courage to ask, “Waited for what?”

“Why for you, of course! Finding you has been a tad more work than I have anticipated.” Eva eyed her, pleased with whatever she saw.

Helena’s soul quivered with fear under that penetrating stare.

Drawing closer, Eva wrinkled her nose. “I can smell his energy around you.”

Helena didn’t want that thing coming any closer. She shuffled away as far as the pillars of legs would let her. “Who are you?”

“Oh, you know who I am.”

“What?” She fell silent. The dream about Eva resurfaced. This was the same darkness that stared back at her in the mirror and had been circling her shields for the past two weeks.

“*Lazarus*,” she spat the name out.

“Alas, you remembered. There may be hope for you yet... Oh wait, no there won’t be. After I retrieve my payment, you will no longer be around.” Lazarus snorted at his own joke.

Helena’s mouth went dry. “What payment?”

The whites of Eva’s eyes became black as the irises changed to crimson. “You humans are the same, always asking boring questions. I’ll give you a hint. It is something that tastes better than anything your human money can buy.”

*Not good.* Helena's heart was pulsating in her head. This thing was almost upon her. She ran Lazarus' words through her mind until a simple answer surfaced. "My soul..."

This creature was after her soul. Helena clasped her hand over her heart. She didn't want to go through that agony again. "But I never agreed to anything with you, so you can't take it."

The grin on Eva's face—*its* face—slackened. "I can take it whenever I please, but where would be the fun in that?" Her long forest-green dress turned the shade of the night, morphing into the darkness that appeared to crawl from beneath her skirt. The demon bowed to the audience. "I want you to remember this, mortal. I always get what I want."

Helena gasped when the energy from earlier returned. It twisted around her once again and tugged. In that instance, it gave her a sense of Michael's presence. Knowing it was a warning, she sucked in more air, and the pressure increased on her chest. Like before, there was nothing physical for her to see.

Eva narrowed her eyes and towered over Helena. The pillars of legs behind her back dissipated, and the support for her back vanished.

An animal-like howl escaped Eva's lips. "You are not getting away this easy!"

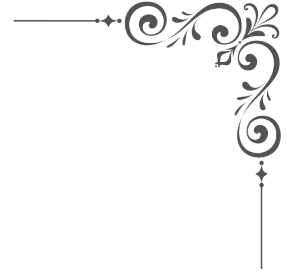
Helena's lungs were beginning to burn. She could do nothing but hope that whoever was behind the energy was on her side. It squeezed harder, and her body was pulled away from the demon's grasp. That didn't last long. Without realising it, Helena was no longer in the courtyard.

Instead, she hung suspended in the air, with no light to show her where she was. Something cold ran up her legs, weighing her down.

Two energies fought over her body, tugging at her as if she was a prize to be won. The air in her lungs ran short, and she gasped. Her hands sought her throat.

She couldn't win, so she stopped struggling against them. Dying by suffocation was a better way to go than losing her soul to a demon. She closed her eyes and let the converging energies swallow her up.





## 16

# ENDLESS NIGHTMARES

Nothing mattered in this darkness. The emptiness brought peace and tranquillity—something she hadn't had in weeks.

"She's not going to make it!" a faraway female voice broke through.

*Who isn't going to make it? What's going on?* Helena's interest vanished as fast as it came. She was safe and far away from her problems. *This is another strange dream.*

Her stomach lurched when she heard Vincent's rough voice. "Then do something so that she does."

The female cussed and started chanting something. The Latin words seemed to echo in the vast space, wrapping around her like a gentle blanket.

"Master Vincent, is Helena going to be alright?" Perri's worried voice followed.

*Is Perri concerned about me?* They had almost finished developing their plan on how to get Hans' attention. Helena couldn't leave her like this. She made a promise.

The tension in her body departed. There was no need to return. Nothing mattered anymore. Perri worked for Vincent. She was not her friend.

"Leave this instant, Perri. This is not something you should witness," Vincent said.

"Yes, Master."

Helena heard someone closing the door with a loud click. A warm glow broke through the shadow. She recognised it. There was no mistaking the calm Michael's energy radiated. Her guardian angel had returned to her, but she couldn't recall the last time she had seen him.

He wore a frown on his face which didn't suit him. She wanted to reach out and wipe away the uncharacteristic expression.

"Fight for it, Helena. You must fight!"

She tilted her head to one side in confusion. "What should I fight for?"

"Your life. Fight or you will die."

As he glided over to her, the light blinded her vision. She had to squint to see him outstretch his hand.

"Take it," he urged.

She didn't move. Biting her lip, she thought hard. *Isn't this enough? Why fight for a life where I am a prisoner? Every choice, every mistake I made had alienated me from those I hold dear.* "Why? Why should I bother?"

"You are loved and needed. Andrew needs you now more than ever. For him, please take my hand."

She cast her gaze to her hand. It was growing transparent as she relied more on the tranquil warmth. She glanced at her guardian angel. Michael had been with her for over a decade. He was someone she could always rely on. Yet, these past few weeks, he was nowhere to be found. He abandoned her when she needed him most and withheld information.

Her jaw clenched, and she battled against the tears that wanted to surface. "Andrew will improve and live through this without me. He's strong. Michael, I don't see a reason to fight."

Someone else's energy appeared, stirring the air. A dark figure parted with the shadows.

Lucious had a pained look on his face when his eyes fixed on her. "What are you doing?"

His anger gave her the strength to keep the tears at bay. She could finally get a grasp on her calm. "I'm not doing anything. I *want* to rest."

"You foolish human!" he shouted. "Can you not feel it? If you die, I will, too. I can feel my life slipping away because of you. Do something!"

Helena studied him. His usual composure was gone and his good posture became a slouch while he held onto his gut where his string would be. She remembered the time when the Council first arrived. Back then, she felt the pain Andreaz inflicted on him. Her heart jolted. She couldn't let someone suffer because of her. Not again. Even if it meant she would be hunted by vampires and tortured by a demon.

She lifted her hand higher. Her fingers tingled with the mix of energies around her and pushed through the dark.

Once Michael's hand wrapped around hers, he pulled her into his arms, enveloping her in a big hug.

"So bright," she murmured.

Michael smiled. He wasn't a man she considered to be beautiful. Handsome was a better description. His long golden hair cascaded around them when he

looked down at her, creating a shroud of protection.

“Hurry it up!” Lucious growled.

The link between them shook. Michael turned them to look at where Lucious stood, glaring at the angel.

“I never thought I’d say this, vampire, but I am thankful she had created a bond with you. Otherwise, I would have lost her today.” Michael returned his attention to her. A sad smile formed in the corners of his mouth. “You must value your life more. Your existence means a lot to those who care about you.” His light enveloped them like a comforting glove, forcing Helena to close her eyes.



An unfamiliar woman’s face hovered above Helena, too close for comfort. “She’s okay! She’s back.”

“Is there any permanent damage done?” Vincent inquired.

The woman lifted her head higher, and her copper curls swayed. When her face came into focus, oval brown eyes were studying Helena. A faint smell of summer flowers came from the stranger.

A ghost of a smile tugged at Helena’s lips. She was finally safe.

“Do you know your name?” the woman asked.

“Helena.” Her voice came out as a hoarse whisper. She lifted her hand to her throat and massaged it.

“And, do you know where you are?”

Helena raised her head off the floor. She appeared to be back in her room at Vincent’s. She let out a slight moan. “Scotland?”

The redhead helped her sit up, supporting her shoulders with a gentle touch. She turned her head to face Vincent who was standing by the door. “She’s going to be fine.”

“You have done well, Madeline.”

She scoffed. “I didn’t do it for you, you bloodthirsty demon. If you are telling me the truth, and she is one of us, I had no choice but to help. Leave us. I must speak with her alone.”

Helena thought it was strange that Vincent did as Madeline bid. He left the room without glancing over his shoulder once.

The second she looked down at her body, she knew why. “My clothes...” Her hands flew to cover as much of her naked flesh as she could.

“Let us find you some.” Madeline rushed over to the wardrobe and flung the drawers open.

Helena ran her fingers over her stomach, smudging the charcoal runes drawn on her flesh. “Why was I naked?”

All the recent events were too much for her to handle. The nightmares persistently gave her the chills. She shivered at the thought of being there with Lazarus again.

“Sorry, you must be freezing.” Madeline handed her the clothes she managed to gather.

Grateful, Helena accepted them. Her arms and legs ached as she moved them to slip the clothes on.

“I needed access to your skin, and that required stripping you,” Madeline said.

Helena blushed. This woman was not the only person who got to see her fully exposed. There was no way she would be able to face Vincent after such an incident.

Noting her reaction, Madeline added, “Don’t worry. For most of the ritual, you had a sheet over you. It fell away in the last ten or so minutes.”

Not feeling any better, Helena climbed her feet. Madeline provided support by holding onto Helena’s waist and guided her in the direction of the bed. No matter how she looked at it, her arms and legs were the least of her problems. Her whole body ached as if she had been running an endless marathon. Individual nerve endings seemed to want to make their presence known to her at once.

She sat on the bed, wincing. “Thanks for your help.”

“There’s nothing to thank me for. You would have done the same for me.”

“What do you mean?”

Madeline patted Helena’s head and smiled knowingly. “It’s alright if you want to keep it a secret, my sweet.”

Not getting the point, Helena decided to move on. She could ask Perri later. “Why am I in so much pain? What happened?”

Madeline gave her a pitiful look and settled on the bed next to her. “I keep forgetting how isolated you’ve been from the real world. I will explain everything in due time.”

The woman shifted to stand, and Helena caught her wrist. “No, tell me now, please.”

She lowered herself back down, her expression growing grim. “You were possessed. A demon took hold of your body and...”

“And what?”

“And, you’ve hurt people. Humans of this household were concerned about your wellbeing and held you down. I believe the girl called Perri got the worst of it.”

Helena remained silent. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. A sickening sensation built in her stomach.

"Don't worry. The demon is gone. I made certain of that."

Her brows creased with confusion. "Why would a demon want me?"

"There are various reasons for something like this to happen, and I will tell you about them once you get some rest."

Madeline peeled back the covers.

Taking her up on the invitation, Helena climbed in bed. The woman didn't look a day older than thirty-five and treated Helena like a daughter, something that pulled at her heart strings.

She made a mental note to hug her mother and Richard the moment she got back home—if she got back home.

Madeline brushed Helena's hair out of her face with a tender smile. "I should be going now. Get some sleep."

Helena closed her eyes and waited until Madeline left. When the door was shut, she climbed out of bed. Her limbs hurt as if she went through a meat grinder, but she had to find Perri. Up till now, she couldn't believe she had hurt the one person who was nice to her.

There was a light knock on the door, and Helena urged whoever it was to enter.

"You're awake?" Perri's muffled voice came from the other side of the door.

Helena rushed over and flung the door open. "Perri—" Once her eyes rested on the maid, she halted. There was a large white cast on the maid's right arm, stretching from her knuckles to her shoulder. "Are you alright?"

With the frantic waving of her hands, Helena motioned for Perri to join her in the bedroom. Although the maid seemed reluctant at first, she walked in, bowing her head so that Helena couldn't see her face well. Helena wanted to help her to one of the seats in the room, but Perri recoiled from her touch—a reaction she wasn't prepared for.

She eyed Perri, and her gut tangled at the possible reasons for such behaviour.

"You don't remember anything, do you?" Perri lifted her head, and her round eyes glistened with unshed tears.

Helena's eyes grew wide. "Did I do that?"

Not knowing whether she wanted an answer or not, she took an unconscious step away from the maid.

Perri seemed relieved at the new distance. "Vincent told me you weren't yourself, and I'm not one to hold grudges."

“It was my fault? My God, I’m so sorry. I don’t remember anything. I—” Helena held back. She rooted her body to the spot to prevent the fear in Perri’s eyes from resurfacing. “I’m sorry. I can’t begin to say how sorry I am for this.” She waved at the cast and immediately brought her arm to her side.

Perri lowered herself into the available seat. Her face remained mostly hidden from Helena by her blonde hair. “I will heal in time. Don’t worry.”

Helena’s heart grew heavy and her voice came out more shaken than she intended. “What happened while I wasn’t myself?”

Perri finally met her gaze. Three raw nail scratches ran down her face, making Helena gasp in horror.

Seeing her reaction, Perri gave a soft smile. “I will tell you what I can. You may want to take a seat first.”

She didn’t bother looking for a chair. Instead, Helena sat where she stood.

“When I came to check on you two nights ago, you were on the ground in what looked like a lot of pain. So, I ran over to help.” Perri paused, her eyes moving rapidly at the recollection of the memory. “You were saying strange things that I couldn’t understand, in another language. Not knowing what to do, I went to look for someone. It was a blessing that Vincent had returned. He took one look at you and left me to watch over you. That’s when you became violent.” Perri gripped the hem of her white apron, fiddling with it in silence.

“What happened next?” Helena asked, but she had a pretty good idea. She hurt Perri, and she was sorrier than she could ever say, but she needed to know.

“You wore an angry expression, almost wild. The look of a caged, starving animal. I called out to you, but you didn’t seem to understand me. The next thing I know, I was flying across the room. After that, I think I blacked out.” Perri’s fingers traced her cast. “When I came to, you were held down by Master Vincent and Hans. I was ordered to leave and see a doctor. I’m sorry, I couldn’t help you.”

Helena was speechless. *Perri is apologising to me?* “None of that was your fault. I was...ill.” She clenched her fists. “Did I hurt anyone else?”

“No, the two of them were able to hold you down until Lady Madeline arrived and did something to help you.”

*Madeline must have started doing her ritual then. It’s no wonder Vincent didn’t want Perri to see any of it.*

Helena eyed the cast again. “Are you okay now? Does it hurt?”

A forced smile spread across her face. It pained Helena to see her this way. “I’m fine. Vincent is letting me off the housework for a while. I guess I got out of doing the chores.”

“I’m sorry...”

Perri shook her head. "It wasn't your fault."

Taking a deep breath, Perri rose to her feet. Helena noticed her putting more weight on her right leg.

"After lunch, Vincent wishes to speak with you in the library."

"He's awake?" Helena's voice jumped. She had already learned that vampires could sleep whenever they wanted after spending almost a week in Alexander's care. "I thought he would be exhausted after these events."

Perri seemed to accept her explanation. "He's been up for as long as you have. He seems eager to have a word with you."

She could already guess what he wanted to talk about. It wasn't common to get a possessed human in your house, even if you were a Vampire Council member. But, his quick reaction to the situation was astonishing. According to Perri, he knew exactly who to contact and what to do. "Well then, I shouldn't keep him waiting."

Helena adjusted her shirt once she was fully upright.

Disapproval on Perri's face made Helena shift her weight uncertainly. A change of clothes was the least of her worries it seemed. She touched her hair with her fingertips and cringed. It was a cluster of greasy strands shaped like a bird's nest.

"I think I'll get in a shower first."

Perri smiled at her, a first genuine smile Helena had seen since the maid came to see her. "How about a bath instead?"

Unable to contain her grin, Helena said, "Hell, why not?"



The hot bath was more than Helena could have hoped for. It relaxed her and took away some of the stiffness in her shoulders she didn't know she had. The one thing she chose to avoid was a mirror. She had seen enough of them in her nightmares. Looking into it would bring back thoughts of Eva.

She grabbed a hairbrush Perri left for her on the bedside table. Helena ran it through her wet hair, her mind still in a whirl. Eva looked so much like her. *Could it have been a trick?*

Her eyes filled with tears at the memory of her grandmother's burning body. It felt so real. It even smelt real. Suppressing a tremor, she shook her head. She wouldn't think of it again. It hurt too much to remember the wails of agony from her beloved relative. The pleading words begging for help she couldn't provide.

She let the tears flow, vowing she would do anything to save those she loved.



Once she was presentable, Perri led the way to the library on the ground floor. Helena didn't realise they had stopped until Perri nudged her in the side.

A large door loomed over her. Without another word, Perri departed from her side and disappeared down the hall.

Helena knocked loud enough for anyone inside to hear. When no reply came, she pushed the door open, assuming she could enter.

Her eyes took a moment to adjust to a fire-lit room. Rows upon rows of tall shelves and bookcases filled the space. She wasn't sure there was enough room for them to have a conversation until a small seating area near the fireplace presented itself. There, Vincent stood with his back to her while he fixated on the orange flames dancing around the logs.

She approached him. The noise of her movement must have alerted him to her presence because he turned to look at her as she reached one of the large cushioned seats.

Helena remained in place. She searched his face for any emotion. To her dismay, most of it was hidden by the shadows.

"Take a seat." His words were cold. This didn't shock her. After all, she had endangered his staff.

Her legs moved by themselves, and she was soon assessing him from the sofa. Her body tensed.

Vincent strolled over to a desk that was almost hidden in the shadow of the bookcases. He selected a book and returned to stand beside her.

Not revealing anything, Vincent handed her an opened leather-bound tome. "Do you recognise any of the names?"

She wrinkled her nose. The book smelt a little stale. The first two pages were filled with names and dates in Russian. The name her eyes stopped on was 'Eva Valerijevna—1805'.

"Eva," she whispered.

Vincent nodded. "I see that you do know her."

She didn't know what to say. It wasn't that she knew her in person. Helena had no choice but to dream about her. She closed the tome to find no title on the cover. "What is this book?"

Vincent retreated to the fireplace. His face hid his emotions behind a blank expression as he clasped his hands behind his back and observed the crackling fire. "It is a list of the witches who were captured and executed during the witch hunts in Russia in the nineteenth century."

Helena remained silent. She had already guessed some of this information from the horrid dreams.



Vincent turned around. His full attention was on her. “What do you know of her?”

She set the book on the seat next to her while contemplating what she could and couldn’t tell him. This vampire wasn’t on her side, even if he did pull her out of the nightmare.

“I don’t know much about her. The name seemed familiar.”

His tone lowered. “There’s no need for you to lie, human. I can tell when you speak the truth.”

The sudden change in his personality raised the tiny hairs on the back of her neck.

“Tell me what it is that you know. If you do, I may be able to fill in some blanks for you.”

She had to answer his questions. After all, he had the power to take her life at any moment, which meant she would be risking two lives. “I had a few dreams about her, and her name appeared in them. That’s how I came to know the name.”

Helena felt his icy-blue eyes on her. She swallowed hard under the stern gaze until Vincent nodded.

A sigh fled from her lips. “I found out she was a witch because of this.” She pointed to the book. “I am now certain, but I don’t know what any of this has got to do with me.”

“So, you have no idea why a demon is after you or who Eva is to you?”

“No, I don’t.”

A loud laugh erupted from Vincent. “And here I thought you already knew most of the story. How wrong was I?” He cleared his throat and leant against the mantel. “I believe it is my turn to share.”

Helena straightened in her seat, eager to have some light shed on the situation.

“She was, indeed, a witch and a high priestess of her Circle. When I first met Eva, I could tell she was something else. She was too kind for her own good. Perhaps that’s why she ended up doing something her coven did not approve of.”

“Taking a deal with Lazarus,” Helena finished for him.

He smiled. “I suggest you do not speak his name so carelessly. Madeline should have warned you.”

“I’m sorry, she didn’t say anything.”

His expression turned grim. “It is not something that should be taken lightly unless you wish for that being to take your body over again. I am uncertain whether Madeline will be able to bring you back a second time.”

Helena bit her lip. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I am repaying an old debt. Eva was good at making enemies, but she was also quite skilled at making friends.”

“And which were you?”

“Neither. My feelings for her were curiosity at best. Her way of living was intriguing.” He sounded closer to a man in love than an intrigued bystander.

Vincent tilted his head, and she couldn’t see his eyes anymore.

Helena thought hard. There had to be more to it than that. “I can’t understand where you’re going with this.”

“You had those dreams of her because she is your ancestor. You possess her power as well as everyone else in her direct bloodline.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What else you aren’t telling me?”

Vincent pushed away from the mantel and rounded the sofa. “To answer your curious mind, I want you to train as a witch and serve us, indefinitely. That way, you will be able to fulfil your purpose.”

The energy he hid till that day returned. Somehow it was different, colder. His power flooded the room with great force and pressed her into her seat. It took a lot of effort for her to breathe. Movement under such strain was a luxury.

“I mustn’t forget that you have another option available to you,” he said. “Taking that demon’s deal could be your way out of this, but I doubt that’ll be the choice you will make.”

Helena hadn’t thought of Lazarus as any option at all. Serving the Council was not something she ever wanted to do either. Her wish remained the same—to return home to her family in one piece.

His voice came from behind her seat. “If you do not agree, I should try persuading you in a different way.”

Vincent’s hands landed on her shoulders, pressing her deeper into the cushions. He chuckled and called out to Perri who promptly arrived in the room.

Helena had no idea where this was going. His hands left her, and the silence was filled with her heartbeat hammering in her chest.

The vampire circled the sofa. As if preparing for his performance, he straightened his jacket’s sleeves. Once his frosty eyes met Perri’s, her emotions fled from her face, leaving behind an obedient shell.

“Come to me,” he ordered.

Perri obeyed and faced Helena.

“What’re you going to do?” She struggled to get up, but his energy held her down.

Vincent tilted Perri’s head to one side, stroking his long fingers along the line of her neck. “This is what happens to those who defy me. Remember this,” he hissed and savagely bit into her neck.

“Please, stop. Don’t do this!” Helena screamed as blood oozed past his lips and seeped into Perri’s uniform.

Vincent did quite the opposite. He pressed Perri’s body closer to him by wrapping his arm around her waist.

“Stop!” Helena begged, wishing for the strength to move.

Her pleas went unanswered. After an agonising minute passed, he pulled away from her and let Perri’s immobile form slide to the ground.

Helena wanted to reach out to her, to take her away from this suffering. There was no denying what Vincent was. He was a cruel being that wanted nothing more than to use her for his goals.

Her eyes remained fixated on the body at their feet as he said, “You have until dinner to make a choice. I hope it is the right one.”

He strolled out of the room at a leisurely pace, humming a happy tune.

When the energy dissolved, and the control of her limbs returned, she scrambled out of her seat. She knelt at Perri’s side and touched the girl’s wrist. Seeking a pulse, she found none. The person lying on the floor was no longer Perri. Her pleasant bright smile would never appear next to her freckled cheeks.

“He killed her,” she whispered.

“No, you did.” Michael’s voice made her head snap towards the doorway.

He stood there, leaning his back against the wall with his arms crossed over his chest.

Helena fought back the tears. They weren’t going to help in this situation.

“I didn’t. It’s not my fault.” She brushed a loose strand of golden hair away from Perri’s face. Her eyes were open, staring at nothing in particular, so Helena closed them for her.

“Perri didn’t deserve to die like this,” he said softly. “She grew up knowing nothing of the vampires or magic, so why did she have to get involved? It was because of you, Helena. You have brought this on yourself and those around you.”

She gaped at him. She didn’t do any of this on purpose. How was she to know that Vincent was going to kill someone if she didn’t agree to his conditions?

Tears ran down her cheeks. “I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

Michael sighed and squatted next to her. “I am powerless here, Helena, and for that I am sorry. But the vampire was correct, you have two options left.”

“No...there must be another way.” She ran her fingers through Perri’s soft hair one last time and stood. “We must find a way out of here. Get somewhere safe.”

“That will not be possible.”

“Why not?” It was becoming harder to hide her hysteria. *Why can't he understand me?*

“It's already time. How do you plan to run from a house full of vampires in the dark?”

It couldn't be that late. A short while ago it was daytime. There was no way they spent more than twenty minutes in here. Helena looked at the door. The corridor was getting dark.

He sighed. “Vincent has offered you a deal, are you going to take it?”

Helena's attention returned to him. He seemed curious. Not a hint of worry in his eyes. She glared at him. “I don't want to accept it. I can't.”

He rose to his full height. “Are you willing to accept the consequences? What will happen to Lucious if you die now? Did you think about him?”

“I don't know! Maybe I could sever the link?”

Michael gave her a half-smile that didn't reach his eyes. “It's too strong to be broken by the power you have.”

She was running out of ideas.

Michael combed his hand through his hair. “There is another option. The demon can get you away from here. Give you a new life.”

Helena stared at him, trying to figure out if he was joking or not, but there wasn't a single shred of amusement in his voice. *He's serious.* She raised her hands in defence. “I'm not asking that creature for help. Not after what he did to me.”

Helena moved away from him. Her leg landed on something soft, and she stumbled backwards.

Michael caught her by the elbow. “You are being selfish, just like *her*.”

“Who?” She tried to get out of his iron grip, but he wouldn't let go.

“Eva. Who else? She was the same as you, stubborn to the last bone. You must trust me on this. You must know that I would never betray you. This could be a chance to destroy the link with the vampire and get out of this mess alive.” He loosened his grip and placed a warm palm on her damp cheek. “Trust me.”

Helena couldn't argue with him. She got into this mess because she had ignored his warnings before. He wouldn't tell her to take a deal with a demon unless it was the final option. Michael was someone who had always placed her safety first.

“*Don't do it,*” a feminine voice warned in her head. The same voice she heard when she created a link with Lucious.

Helena edged away from her guardian which made his hand fall away.

“You must trust me on this, Helena. You've ignored me until now and it made you suffer.” Michael appeared concerned, yet she knew something was

amiss.

She needed to be alone to think this through. Before she knew it, she was running out of the library. She could no longer stay in that castle.

At the front entrance, she came to a stop and scanned the area for servants. No one was in sight. Straining her ears, she couldn't hear anything but her loud heartbeat and rasped breathing. She pushed the heavy doors apart.

Cold autumn breeze wrapped around her. She wanted to run, to get away from this place. Yet, if she left, she would be sacrificing someone else's life. *How many people have suffered to keep me out of trouble? How many of them died because of my wrong decisions?*

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and she wiped at them to clear her already blurry vision.

*"Run!"* the voice urged her.

She did, not caring for the consequences. Not bothering to look behind her, she forcibly moved her feet to match the pace of her erratic heart.



The sun was setting and giving the forest ahead a haunted look. Adrenaline pumped through her veins, keeping the cold off her. The wetness from the ground had seeped into the thin material of her slippers. There was no other way to go, so she aimed for the woods.

Her lungs burned as her legs continued to carry her past the ancient bare trees that swallowed up most of the light. She knew that sooner or later she would need to stop to catch her breath.

She slipped on the dead leaves that covered the ground and came crashing down.

*"Don't stop. Keep moving,"* the voice ordered.

Helena's legs trembled under her weight. She started regretting the times she had produced an illness note to get out of P.E. classes. With much effort, she climbed into a standing position.

*"Hurry!"*

Gasping for air, she continued to move until she reached a dark void. A wall of darkness washed over the area as far as she could see. There was nothing past it. No trees, no houses, just emptiness.

She asked, "I never escaped, did I?"

"No, but it was fun having you around," a familiar growl sounded behind her.

She whirled around to find Eva standing less than a foot away, her sharp teeth framed by her thin lips.

“I won’t take your stupid deal!” she spat out.

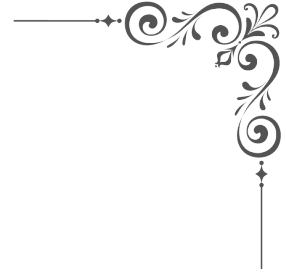
“Don’t worry. There will come a time when you will think otherwise. Remember, I always get what I want.” Eva grabbed her shoulders. Smiling, she pushed Helena into the void and waved. “I’ll be seeing you again.”



Helena’s eyelids fluttered open. A banging headache made it harder for her eyes to concentrate. When her vision cleared, she saw Vincent’s and Madeline’s faces hovering over her, their eyes filled with worry and confusion.

“No! Not again,” she mumbled, and Vincent’s face drew closer.

She screamed.



## 17

# THE TRUTH

“Don’t move,” Vincent’s command froze Helena’s movements against her will.

The simple words had strangled the scream inside of her, forbidding her from making another sound. Her eyes darted between the vampire and Madeline. Her mind conjured questions quicker than she could comprehend them.

Madeline’s palms hovered an inch above Helena’s chest. She closed her eyes for a second and, when she reopened them, her expression relaxed. “She appears to have returned to being herself. I don’t sense the demon’s presence anymore.”

The faint blue glow in Vincent’s irises subsided.

“You can let her go, Vincent,” Madeline said softly.

He glanced at the woman. With a nod from her, he moved away.

When Helena felt his energy retreat, she pushed away from them and crawled backwards. Her back hit the wall or the wardrobe. She wasn’t sure which as she didn’t dare look away from them. If this was another nightmare, she was not falling for it again. She wouldn’t let her heart be tormented any more than it already had been.

Madeline shifted towards her, raising her hands in mock surrender.

Tucking her knees closer to her chest, Helena watched her getting closer. *Breathe. Just breathe.*

The witch spoke as if talking to a wild animal. “I’m not going to hurt you, Helena. Tell us what happened.”

“Don’t come any closer!” Helena warned.

Madeline stopped advancing and exchanged looks with Vincent.

“I shall leave you for now. If you require assistance, I will be waiting outside,” he informed them and closed the door behind him.

*This has to be another dream.* Helena’s heart sank. She wanted to get out of this nightmare more than anything. Why wouldn’t Lazarus let her go?

“Now will it be easier for you to talk?” Madeline eyed her with caution.

Helena shook her head, not as an answer but to clear her mind. *There has to be a way out!* She scanned the room. The exit seemed to be through the doors behind Madeline. She couldn’t use that. On the other side stood Vincent. She had to be smarter than this. A plan was needed. She gulped down a breath to calm her racing heartbeat and shaking body.

The woman lowered herself to the ground, making no sudden movements. She behaved as if it was Helena who was the dangerous one here. “Alright, I will start. I am Madeline. Vincent has contacted me to help you banish a demon that has been—”

“I know!” Helena shouted.

Her eyes narrowed around the edges. “And, how do you know this?”

“I have met you in the previous dream. I won’t fall for it again,” she mumbled into her knees.

“What else did this demon show you?”

Helena buried her face in her palms. She wanted to cry, to scream, to do anything that would wake her from this endless nightmare. Why was this woman demanding answers again? Was this what Lazarus wanted, to replay the same day until she caved and gave up her soul?

“Please, tell me what he showed you.”

Helena peered at her through a gap in her fingers. Madeline hadn’t moved a muscle. She patiently waited for Helena’s answer.

Trying to slow her frantic breathing, she took in another deep breath which made her want to cry more. “He showed me that I could trust no one in this nightmare, so I won’t start now.”

Madeline seemed to think for a moment. She walked over to where Helena was huddled in a ball and knelt next to her, wrapping her thin arms around Helena’s trembling shoulders.

“What’re you doing?” Helena screamed, fighting her way out of her hold. It wasn’t hard, but the woman was persistent.

Madeline took hold of her again and stroked her hair. Something her mother used to do when she was scared at night.

“This is an illusion, a dream,” she repeated and cried into Madeline’s shoulder.

The woman held her closer, brushing her hand through Helena’s tangled mess of locks.

Once she managed to relax, Madeline took her hand and led her to the bed.

Helena kept waiting for some cruel remark or a hint about the deal with a demon. None came.



Madeline sat her on the bed and knelt in front of her. Large green eyes searched her face for something. "You are back in the real world. The demon's hold has dissolved over you."

As much as she wanted to believe the witch, Helena couldn't help doubts rising at the back of her mind. "Why would he let me go so easily?"

Madeline rested on her haunches. "You were trapped for a week. It requires a lot of power to keep you in that state for that long. He must have exhausted his resources."

"He got tired?" Helena burst into laughter that mixed in with her emerging sobs.

"At first, he had a strong hold on you. I've tried every spell I know, and I could tell we were running out of options. Then, you came back by yourself."

"But why would he be after me?" Helena demanded. She held no particular power if any at all.

Madeline's confusion reflected on her face, so Helena wiped away the tears with the back of her hand.

"At least, I woke up dressed..."

With her tears gone, she stopped to assess the woman. Her hair was a deeper, richer red than Helena remembered. She spotted an indistinct scar on the witch's right brow that wasn't there before. Even with that, she appeared as a beautiful middle-aged woman. Helena couldn't understand why she was dealing with vampires and demons. "Why didn't he take my soul?"

"I have heard some demons require a contract with the soul-bearer to extract it. Some desperate people would give it away while others would rather see themselves dead. One thing is for certain, you were lucky to come out of this alive."

Helena hadn't realised her hands were balled. She uncurled her numb fingers to find them tingling.

"I see you're getting better. I'll leave for now as you will need some time alone to think things through." Madeline smiled at her. "I live in Aberdeen. It isn't far from here. I'll come back for a visit and check on you."

With the grace of a swan, Madeline rose and fixed her skirt.

Helena said nothing as she watched her leave. She was wary that at any moment things would change and her life would be threatened again.

None of that happened. She was left to her own devices.

Outside her room, Helena heard Madeline murmuring something to Vincent. Their two sets of footsteps headed away from her room. When everyone was gone, her shoulders slumped. She was finally left alone to get accustomed to the situation. What else was the truth and what was a lie?

Her peace and quiet didn't last long. There was a knock on her shields. She recognised the energy on the other side as Lucious'. She didn't want to speak with him.

His anxiety and worry vibrated the link. She fell back on the bed, relaxing against the soft sheets. To avoid speaking with him directly, she sent him a message, assuring him that she was fine.

In return, he replied, "*You cannot avoid me forever. We need to talk.*"

His energy left her as quickly as it came.

Helena had no time to rest. She had to find Michael. Closing her eyes, she stood inside of her shields and called out his name until a figure materialised.

"Michael," she began, but her words stuck in her throat when he turned to face her. He looked like Death himself with dark rings under his eyes and pallid complexion. He even lost the shine around him.

"What happened to you?" she choked out.

"It has been a long week..."

Helena's heart jolted. "You look like this because of me?"

If that was the truth, there was no one left whom she hadn't managed to hurt—directly or indirectly. She held back a sob. She couldn't cry when he was holding on to his pride.

"I have been trying to protect you. I hate to admit it, but my power alone was not enough. Even when the witch arrived, both of us put together were no match for *him*."

She reached out to take hold of his hand. His skin was colder than she remembered. To warm it, she wrapped her hands around his chilled fingers. "I'm so sorry, Michael. I didn't know something like this could happen."

He placed his free palm on her cheek, gently running his thumb over it. "It was not your fault. If anyone is to blame, it's me." He sighed and drew his hands back. "I have to tell you something, something that I've held back from you."

A bad feeling settled in her stomach at the remorseful tone he used. "What is it?"

"Let's sit down. This may take some time."

Helena visualised two armchairs for them and waited for Michael to settle. A moment later, he seemed to give up on finding comfort and knotted his fingers in his lap.

"I will begin right from the start," he said.

Immobile with interest, she waited for him to continue. She knew this was important to him, otherwise, he wouldn't show her such a grim expression.

"In the late eighteenth century, I was assigned to observe a young woman who went by the name of Eva Valerijevna. I was permitted to communicate with

her but never to help directly.”

“Was she a saint?”

“Yes.”

She wanted to ask more. When she opened her mouth, he shook his head. “I cannot tell you about them.”

“Okay... You were Eva’s guardian. What happened then?”

He visibly relaxed. “When I first met her, she was a young woman untainted by the darkness. Her soul was as pure as freshly fallen snow.” He hid his face from her by studying the floor. “I watched her day and night and nothing happened. Her life was peaceful, and the village people loved her. I was beginning to believe that my assignment was a mistake. Who would want to harm such a beautiful creature?” He paused. “But saints are never safe. When she birthed a daughter, her life changed.”

Michael lifted his head, his eyes burning with the hatred she had never seen before.

She swallowed. She knew such a strong emotion wasn’t directed at her once she understood he was looking through her. A memory he recalled had torn him away from reality.

“As we entered a new century, the witch hunts began throughout Europe. The fear of magic and of witches soon spread to Russia.”

“And she was one of them.” Helena knew where this was going.

“Yes. She dedicated herself to healing and protection magic.” He drew in a deep breath. “In the end, it was not enough to save her. The news of the hunters spread to nearby villages and towns. That was when he appeared to her.”

A sudden chill brushed past her at the image of Lazarus’ sharp teeth grinning back at her.

“The demon offered her more power. The power to protect the Circle and those she held dear. Eva knew better than to fall into his grasp and never accepted the offers he presented her with, no matter how bad the times became.”

Michael held his trembling hands in a firm press, and his knuckles paled. His voice trembled with emotion. “That was true until the hunters arrived in her village. They caught two members of her coven whom they tortured and abused prior to their public execution. The demon kept pressing for an answer, telling lies that changed her, and I had to observe the outcome.”

A glistening tear ran down his cheek, and Helena automatically reached out to wipe it away.

He stopped her an inch short of his face. “Please, listen to what I have to say first.”

She withdrew her hand and gestured for him to continue.

“A day came when her daughter went missing. The hunters were in the area, but Eva wouldn’t run. She kept on looking for her.”

“That sounds like what happened in the first dream I had.” The panic Eva felt on that day never stopped haunting her.

“It was not a dream but a memory. The demon in possession of her soul was able to locate you by making you connect with her. It worked out well for him. Something, I have missed out on. For that, I am sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, Michael. You have always protected me. I am the one who gets into ridiculous situations, like the one I’m in now.” She sighed. “I could have taken my freedom. I could be at home with my family, forgetting that supernatural ever existed. Instead, I chose to save the vampires.” She gave a bitter laugh. “Who would have thought I’d be so generous with my life.”

“You made the correct decision.”

She raised a brow. Michael chose to side with her? His reassurances didn’t make her feel any better as the representation of her ill choices was right there, in the form of an exhausted guardian angel.

He studied her with his clear, aquamarine eyes. “You don’t believe me?”

Helena bit her lip. Eva was her complete opposite. That woman did her best for those around her. “I think that there’s no reason for you to guard me. I’m not one of those saints, nor am I special. I’m no Eva.”

“Being the opposite of her doesn’t make you any less important to me. Even armed with caution and advice from her elders, she was not able to withstand the demon. He used his power to torture her, her loved ones, and her coven to the extent where she could no longer take it.”

“Why did she accept the offer in the end?” That question was on her mind for a long time. If she was Helena’s ancestor, why did she take the deal? In her memories, Eva fought him to the end. What could bring such a strong-willed woman down?

“Her daughter was taken by the hunters. No one knows how, but they thought Dominica was part of the Circle. Eva then made her final decision to submit to him.”

Helena’s heart sank.

“Eva sacrificed her soul to protect her daughter. She was a good person to the very end,” Michael said with pride.

Helena agreed. They were the complete opposites. Where Eva fought for what she believed in, Helena ran as far as she could. She ran from Michael’s advice, wanting to fulfil her curiosity about her missing father. She avoided her mother and Richard to give them more room she thought they deserved. She

even fled from Andrew's side and abandoned him in the hands of strangers at the worst possible time.

"I was unable to do anything to help many others since her. Always forced to observe and never permitted to intervene." Michael's hands covered his face.

She watched him with an aching heart. *What would it be like to have someone to guard and not be allowed to help?* She shuddered at the thought. It would be too painful for her to bear.

"When the demon reached your grandmother, I spoke to your mother in her dreams, urging her to find a new home for both of you."

Helena narrowed her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

He drew his hands away from his face. As if he finished processing what he said, he sat up straight. "I was mumbling."

"Don't try to avoid the subject! What did you mean by that?"

He ran his hand through his hair, pushing the long strands back. "I saw the intentions Richard had towards your mother, and I gave him courage. With that, he was able to get you two away from that country, and the demon lost track of you two."

She stood abruptly. "*You* got my mother and Richard together? Isn't that prying too much into things?"

"Would you prefer if I left your mother in the hands of that creature?" He stood to join her, lowering his voice. "Helena, this is not the time for us to fight. Please..."

Even though he pushed the two of them together for his personal goals, he was trying to do some good. Where would she and her mother be if not for Michael? Her eyes grew wide as images of her dead mother flooded her mind. She would not hand her mother over to him. The demon could have her, but she would fight to her last breath to keep her family out of his clutches.

"You're right, I overreacted."

There was a loud knock on her shields. To her dismay, it was another man in her life that had more secrets than answers.

Michael glared in the direction from which the knock came. "*Him* again."

"He's worried."

"You shouldn't be involved with that vampire. He has brought nothing but trouble with him."

Helena couldn't disagree. She wanted to keep Lucious outside her shields and not have to face him, especially after their kiss.

"Helena, are you listening?"

She blushed. "Yes, sorry. What were you saying?"

“Perhaps you should inform him of your wellbeing, if he is so concerned, and cut ties thereafter,” he suggested.

Another loud knock made her jump. He was being persistent. She rolled her eyes and opened the shields for him to pass.

Anger didn’t look good on Lucious’ face. Michael shifted closer to her side as Lucious crossed the threshold. To not risk anything getting in after him, she slammed the shields shut as tightly as she could.

“Why have you not been answering me?” he demanded, marching over.

Helena placed her hands on her hips. She was tired of his possessive behaviour. “I’m not obliged to answer. You don’t give me that pleasure, so why should I bother?”

Lucious stopped, his eyes burning with the bright blue flame she had grown accustomed to. “Fine, my dear. Do as you please. But answer me this, what in the Devil’s name has been going on for this past week? It was as if you were eaten by something.”

Michael moved to stand in front of her, creating distance between her and Lucious. His tall frame had blocked her vision of the vampire. Squaring her shoulders, she pushed past him. Lucious wasn’t going to scare her, even if he was undead.

Now that she was closer, she had a chance to study him. He didn’t look any better than Michael. The two of them were suffering on her account, and she could do nothing about it.

Any normal human would wither under Lucious’ intense stare. She didn’t dare look away.

“Helena, answer me.”

“There is no need for you to listen to him,” Michael interrupted.

She lifted her hand to stop Michael from protesting any further. “He needs to know. It’s affected him as well.”

Helena waved her hand in Lucious’ direction which he caught and pulled her against him. The undercurrent of his scent filled her nostrils. Being this close made the odd sense of security resurface. She didn’t want to move, didn’t want to be separated from his hold. When she looked at his face, his features had softened, and his eyes returned to their normal blue-brown.

She smiled.

“Let her go,” Michael ordered.

“It’s alright, I’m—”

Lucious didn’t let her finish. “First, I want to know what happened on this end of the link.”

She fought her urge to bury her face in his chest. To take her mind off it, she whirled in his arms to face Michael. Lucious' fingers caressed her right shoulder, and she shivered from the pleasant sensation.

"Did you get a tattoo?" Lucious asked.

She moved her head to see where he was touching her. "What are you talking about? What tattoo?"

"There is one of a black nasturtium on your shoulder." Lucious ran his fingers over her skin, outlining the shape, and let her go.

With a bitter smile, she touched her skin where his hand was a moment ago. As she peered over her shoulder, she made out the outline of something dark and foreign being there.

"She's been marked," Michael said as if those words were an explanation enough.

Helena eyed her guardian, and Lucious gathered her back into his arms. "It seems to me that I have arrived at the right time. Wouldn't you say so, guardian?"

The faint sound of Michael's teeth grinding against one another was carried over to her and the tension between the men rose.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

Michael broke eye contact with Lucious to meet her dissecting gaze. "It is a demonic flower. The mark means that no matter where you are the demon will be able to find you."

Her stomach grew heavy at the thought of that bastard's face emerging wherever she was. No wonder Lazarus let her go without a fight.

Lucious stroked her arm, giving her the much-needed support. She glanced up and found him watching Michael intently. In this situation, his gentlest touch didn't take away her agitation.

"What am I supposed to do now? I can't hide. I can't do anything to prevent him from coming after me or my family."

Her string jerked as if to reflect the turmoil of emotions fighting in her heart. It didn't last long. Lucious folded her closer to his chest, making her lean into him, and calmness washed over her.

Michael advanced and, to mirror him, Lucious retreated. Helena felt no need to fight him because he kept the terrifying thoughts at bay.

Her guardian glared at them. "Stop this. I must see if I can remove it."

She could almost hear Lucious' smile growing wider above her. He was toying with Michael on purpose.

"Why is this demon after her?" Lucious demanded.

Michael ignored him. His full attention was focused on her. “Helena, snap out of it! His touch is clouding your judgement.”

“You have not answered my question,” Lucious growled.

Being this close to Lucious was wrong. She needed to create some distance that would diminish their contact. When she strained to peel away the arms around her waist, he didn’t budge.

“Leave this instant, vampire. You are the reason she got into this mess in the first place.”

Lucious shook his head. “The Council trouble I’ll admit was my fault, but demons? No. I don’t think so. What are you hiding behind that stoic composure of yours?”

Helena tried prying away from him and heard his voice in her mind. “*Trust me, my dear.*”

She stopped her struggle. Whatever he was plotting, he could get more information out of Michael and, currently, they needed anything that could help them.

“He is after her because of her bloodline. Call it a family curse if you must.” Michael gave her a pleading look. “Release her.”

“I can’t do that yet. There is something else that has been on my mind as of recent. Why is it that we can feel each other’s pain?”

Helena had been wondering the same thing. If Michael knew the truth, she needed to know.

The angel said nothing. He remained stationary, piercing Lucious with his stare.

“Michael, is he telling the truth? Are you hiding something from me?”

He seemed hurt by her words. Her guardian looked at the ground.

She knew he was upset and wanted to reach out.

“Don’t go to him,” Lucious whispered into her ear.

After a moment, Michael lifted his head. The anger from earlier was washed away and replaced by sadness that tore at her already aching heart. “I didn’t want to tell you this until I was certain.”

Lucious indicated for him to hurry the speech along.

Michael replied, “I believe you have been soul-bound.”

Helena’s brows scrunched up. She was marked and now soul-bound. Next time, she would need to bring her angel-to-English dictionary.

“What’s soul-bound?” she and Lucious asked in unison.

“It means that your strings have become one. You are part of one soul with two bodies. You can feel each other’s pain, feelings, emotions. But even as that already is a downside, there is a bigger one.”



“If one dies so does the other,” Lucious finished for him.

“You already knew this?” Michael asked.

Lucious shrugged. “It wasn’t hard to figure out.” He let go of her and moved so their shoulders were barely touching.

Helena’s head dropped. Michael knew everything and never spared the time to tell her any of this. Her chest felt tight. She needed some space. Being in the vampire’s arms took away some of the worry and panic that came crawling back, but she couldn’t keep relying on him. She erased the minuscule contact they had by moving aside.

The next time she glanced at Michael, he had a minute smile curving his lips.

“To bind two souls together requires a lot of power. For a human, it is impossible. There isn’t a being that can do something like this.” Lucious said.

She felt the vampire’s measuring stare on her. “I am human,” she said in defiance, but she was beginning to question that fact.

Lucious burst into laughter. “Even you don’t believe your own words, my dear.”

“You are correct. There are no beings left that could do that,” Michael said.

Lucious’ tone grew serious. “What is she? If she’s not a saint and not a witch...”

“Helena is a human. There is no doubt about it.”

She let out a shaky laugh.

“Then, how did she join our souls together?”

“It’s an improbability, but not impossible that the demon had something to do with this,” Michael replied.

Helena’s hand brushed her mark. Things were starting to make sense. She alone couldn’t possess the power everyone saw in her. Lazarus had planned this from the beginning. She clutched her arms, her nails digging into the sensitive flesh. “That meticulous, evil, son-of-a—”

Michael strode over to her. “Let me have a look at the mark. I’ll try to remove it.”

She turned her back to him. His fingers brushed her shoulder blade, and she felt his palm pressing against it. A warm sensation spread from her shoulder and around her whole body. Her skin tingled under his touch. Soon after, it grew more unpleasant and became painful. She winced through gritted teeth, and he stopped abruptly.

Michael jerked his hand away, cradling it with the other. “I can’t do it. He’s too powerful for me right now.”

“You are as useless as always,” Lucious remarked.

She shot him a glare he deserved. “It’s not his fault. He wanted to help.”

“Obviously not hard enough!” Lucious shouted.

She raised a brow at his childish behaviour. Something was amiss. *Is he scared?*

Lucious rubbed his temples and sighed. “I’m sorry. Tell me this then, how do we split this bond?”

“It’s not possible.” Michael’s answer made her stare at him in disbelief.

Lucious grabbed Michael by the collar of his shirt. “What do you mean it’s not possible? There must be a way.”

Helena slapped Lucious as hard as she could. Pain zipped through her arm as if she had hit a stone wall.

His eyes blazed with blue fire. He let Michael go and reached for her instead.

Not having enough time to think, she did what her instincts told her. Helena wrapped her arms around his waist and held on to him as if her life depended on it. She willed for him to stay calm, and gradually his anger subsided.

“Do you realise what you’re doing to me right now?” His lips brushed against her ear.

To hide her blush, she buried her face deeper into his chest. She was never this brazen with any man. This was too out of character for her.

“I cannot watch this,” Michael mumbled and vanished.

Now that they were alone, she couldn’t stop her mind from running wild and seeking a way to explain her reasoning. The problem was that she had no explanation. She began peeling away when he caught her.

“Where do you think you are going?”

Her heart fluttered in her chest. If he held her any longer, she would not be able to let go. “Let me go, Lucious. I did that to protect Michael.”

“You cannot do what you did without repercussions.”

She gazed at his smirking face. Her next words hurt when she voiced them. “Please, *let go.*”

He brushed a lock of her hair away from her face. Lucious leant in. His lips hovered inches above hers. “As you wish.”

His hands fell away, and he headed towards the shield’s wall.

Helena balled her hands at her sides to avoid begging him to return. It was ludicrous. She couldn’t possibly have feelings for him.

She created an opening for him to pass through. *The faster he leaves the better.*

He hovered next to the hole in her shields. “I will look into a way to break this bond. If your guardian doesn’t know how to, doesn’t mean there isn’t a way.”

“He said it’s impossible...”

Lucious chuckled. As he walked through the shields, she heard his last words echoing in her mind. *“And do you believe him?”*



There was so much to consider and much more to figure out. The quiet of the room allowed her to hear the sound of waves crashing against the cliffs nearby. Discarding her dreadful thoughts, she pulled the curtains apart and looked out the window at the mesmerising sunset.

The warm oranges mixed with the purples over the shimmering water made her wish she had brought a camera with her. The last time she had seen a view as beautiful as this was when she was a child. She remembered her mother on her left and Richard on her right. She beamed at him with a smile that was missing two front teeth. Her memory became clearer. No, it wasn't Richard. She knew who it was—her father—the man who went missing without a word and took what little happiness she had as a child with him.

Getting a grasp on reality, she suppressed the painful memory. There was so much information to absorb. Michael had protected her bloodline for centuries. She had Lazarus on her tail, Vampire Council wanted something from her, otherwise, they wouldn't make that bargain, and she had become soul-bound with a vampire. “Never have I imagined that these would be my problems.”

One of those mysteries could be solved by speaking with Vincent. A chill ran through her when she recalled the library vision with Perri.

“That was Lazarus,” she repeated until she felt better.

She pushed away from the windowsill, threw on a shirt that covered her mark, and left the room to find the Councilman.



Helena stood stranded in the large hallways decorated with tapestries and suits of armour from different centuries. Her eye caught movement, and she ran towards it. Whether it was her imagination or not, this was her best chance to find anyone in this place.

As she rounded the corner, she bumped into Perri who was carrying a tray full of food. It fell to the ground with a loud crash.

She grabbed hold of Perri's elbow, saving her from the tumble down the winding stairs. She propelled the girl forwards, and once the maid found her balance, let her go.

Taking one look at the ground, Perri burst into tears.

Helena eyed her and the tray, not sure whether she had hurt the girl. She refrained from touching the maid because she feared to see the terror in her eyes

she had witnessed in the dream.

Perri dabbed at her cheeks with a handkerchief she had produced from her apron's pocket. "Helena, I'm so sorry! Master Vincent told me to bring you some food, and I didn't know you'd be walking around. I wasn't looking where I was going." She blew her nose into the thin material.

Helena gently patted her on the shoulder. "It's alright. I'm the one at fault here. You're not hurt, are you?"

"No, I'm fine. I'll get this cleaned up or the tea will stain the carpet."

Perri stashed the handkerchief back into her pocket. She started collecting the destroyed meal back onto the tray.

"Let me help," Helena said, kneeling next to her.

"No. You are Master Vincent's guest. Guests are not allowed to help us. You can return to your room and wait there. I'll bring your new meal in a few minutes."

Helena pouted at Perri who gave her an outburst of cheerful laughter in return. She was glad Perri was alive and well. It removed something heavy that resided in her chest.

Sitting on the ground next to the maid, she tucked her knees into her chest. She watched, with great pleasure, Perri's attempts at trying to collect the green peas that would roll away from her in defiance.

"Are you sure you don't want any help?"

Perri lifted her head for a moment and turned tomato-red.

"Are you okay? Should I call someone?"

"It's not that. That's *him*." Perri rolled her eyes in the direction of a tall, athletically built man in a black suit that advanced towards them with long, confident strides.

Helena stifled a giggle. "Perri, breathe."

The maid gave her an exasperated look.

"Good evening to you both," a heavily accented voice greeted them.

Helena stood and brushed her hands over her clothes to make sure they were clean. She returned his pleasant smile. "Good evening, I'm Helena, and you are?"

"Hans Schultz." He extended his hand, and she shook it. His skin felt cold to the touch. *He couldn't be...*

"You're a—"

He interrupted her with a glare that lasted less than a second but was more than enough of a warning. Turning back into a perfect gentleman, he assessed Perri and the tray. "I see that something terrible has happened here."

“Ouch!” Perri hissed, and a piece of glass fell from her hand. Helena watched Hans’ reaction as a drop of blood budded on Perri’s middle finger. The next moment, Hans was kneeling on one knee and holding her injured hand.

“May I?” he asked, bringing the finger close to his mouth.

Perri turned into an excited bobble head, and Helena fought the urge to roll her eyes at this display of false affection.

Hans coaxed her finger towards his mouth and licked the blood off.

Even though she knew it was an act, Helena couldn’t stop a blush from heating her cheeks. A glance at Perri told her that the woman was lost to them. She was on cloud nine and climbing higher.

He kissed her palm and smiled. “There, you’re healed.”

Perri studied her finger. Her eyes widened when she found no cut there. “You’re right. It is.”

“Now then, if you will excuse me and Miss Hawthorn. We are going to go find Vincent, or was I wrong to assume that that was where you were headed?”

Perri smiled and returned to doing her job.

Hans rose, standing next to Helena. He was taller by at least a foot, so she had to crane her neck to look at him.

“No, you were right.”

He inclined his head. “Let us go to the dining hall.”

When they put some distance between themselves and Perri, he stopped. His hand caught her arm, forcing her to do the same. “Not everyone here needs to know what we are, and I suggest that you avoid trying to reveal it to them.”

Helena glared at him. She wasn’t planning on saying anything, yet his actions were prodding her defiant side in a different direction. “Why not? Don’t they deserve to know?”

“That is not something you can decide. They are not harmed and are taken care of here. Do you believe they would have a better life back on the streets?”

She had no idea what that life was like. Those who lived on the street did not have the bright smiles these people wore. “You may have a point.”

He let her go. “We have reached an agreement then.”

The silence between them stretched as they walked the rest of the way to the dining hall. Hans, playing the gentleman, opened the door for her, and she edged into the room. Not waiting for her any longer, he approached Vincent, who sat at the head of the table, and bowed.

Vincent greeted him, and his curious eyes found her.

Helena took a few shaky steps, unsure whether to do the same as Hans or if a simple ‘Hello’ would do.

“Please, take a seat.” Vincent pointed to the chair on his left.

Automatically, she sat where he told her to.

His attention remained on her. "Is there anything you wish to discuss with me before dinner arrives?"

"I—Yes." She balled her hands under the table. "Did you know Eva?"

His eyes narrowed, but nothing else told her what he was thinking. "There are many women who go by that name."

"A Russian witch from an early nineteenth century, I doubt there were that many of them who had their own Circle."

Vincent raised his glass of wine and stared at the liquid with a blank expression. "I have known a woman by that name at that time, yes."

"Was this in Russia during the witch hunts?"

"Prior to the hunts, and I do believe it is my turn to ask you a question, don't you think?" He sipped his drink and set the wine glass down on the smooth surface of the table. "How do you know of this acquaintance of mine?"

Helena pursed her lips together, her mind racing. She chose to go for the truth. "The dream I was in, the nightmare to be specific. It showed me things."

"You mean the demon's illusions," Hans corrected her.

"Yes." There was no need to deny it. Her dreams were nothing more than an artifice designed by Lazarus. Vincent or Madeline may know of a way to remove the demon's mark on her shoulder. No. It would be too dangerous to trust the Council with such information.

"Are you unwell? You seem distracted," Vincent asked.

Helena saw genuine concern in Vincent's eyes, so she gave him a weak smile. "I believe it's my turn."

Vincent chuckled. This was the first time she had seen his serious demeanour stripped away. It was as if he were a different person altogether. "Indeed."

Hans rose from his seat. "You have much to discuss. I will return when you need me, sire."

They both watched Hans leave. Vincent's attention returned to her the moment the door closed behind him.

"Why did you ask me to come here? You don't treat me like a prisoner nor do you demand anything from me. I don't understand."

Vincent rested his elbows on the armrests. "You looked too much like Eva for me to pass you by, but there was also another reason for my actions."

"What's that?"

"Back in that room, you were suffering as much as that vampire, Lucious, yet there was no one physically hurting you." He paused and waited, measuring her response with his steady gaze.

She looked down at her hands. *He's a Council member. He can't be trusted.*

“Helena, if I wanted to harm you, I would have done so already. I am merely interested in your circumstances, nothing else.”

She studied him for a long moment. He didn’t appear to be the type who would gossip or lie. Everyone in this household loved and respected him. She blocked out her doubts that screamed for her to remain silent.

“We share a bond. It binds us together.”

A slight widening of his eyes told her that he had heard her. Vincent leant in, resting his hands on the table. “Are you certain of this?”

“I am.”

“I best not ask any more questions on the matter as it is a personal one.”

She flopped back in her seat. “Aren’t you going to ask me why I was possessed?”

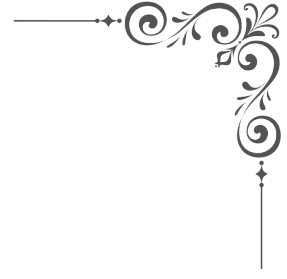
“I believe the less I know about that the better. If Eliza senses there’s something wrong with my reports, she will force me to answer through our connection.”

“She can force you?”

“She is my sire. I cannot defy her as long as she is more powerful than me.” Vincent smiled and called for Rupert who arrived promptly. “I believe we will have our dinner now. Could you inform Hans?”

The butler bowed and excused himself.

“Well then,” Vincent said, “shall we talk about something else?”



## 18

### FATHER J. R.

The next morning, she busied herself by reading through what seemed to be an endless number of tomes. The library was the exact replica of the one in her nightmare, and it unnerved her. Lazarus was able to reproduce the room in perfect detail, and the thought of Perri's death resurfaced when her eyes wandered over to the lit fireplace.

Since Madeline left, Lazarus hadn't done anything to her. There were no dreams and no darkness searching for a way into her shields. It was as if he had vanished. She knew better than that. That was why she was searching for anything to help her in the future.

Helena came across a large leather-bound tome she brought to the desk, letting it land with a loud thud. There was no title obvious to the eye. She flicked through its pages. The rash action made the fine dust rise into the air, causing her to sneeze. She covered her nose and mouth with her sleeve to stop breathing in any more dust.

A few pages in gave her an idea that it was a collection of diary entries, clipped together in a random order. She skimmed over the unreadable scribbles until she found something legible.

*January 19, 1629.*

*At last, I have set sights on the information of great importance that shall aid us in the war against evil. Tis of my personal belief that there are thousands of demons entering our world and each monstrosity was created from one of us. How those atrocities came to be, I do not know.*

*Upon birth, they are branded with a new heart. I do not understand what the shamans meant by there being many difficulties in finding it. Where else could such an organ lay other than in one's chest? They speak of flowers being the source of their power. It makes little sense, but they speak no more on the matter.*

*Father J. R.*



*February 1, 1635*

*An exorcism did not go well. The afflicted maiden held great beauty before evil took hold of her gentle form. She would not cease her nightly screams. In her deluded state, she invariably declared her willingness to accept whatever the devils had offered her. Is that how they steal our souls? Through foreign magics that we cannot understand?*

*I shall be careful in my investigations. I can feel that same evil watching over my shoulder.*

*Father J. R.*

*July 16, 1639*

*I did what I could! Oh, Our Lord in Heaven, I swear I had wasted no time or resources searching for an answer to this blighted curse. We were betrayed by one of our own, a father at that. His possession has shaken the morale within our ranks. We, the men who fight in His name, have suffered a great loss tonight. Father Frederic will be remembered for who he was and not for tonight's terror.*

*I am starting to believe that we are fighting a losing battle.*

*Father J. R.*

Helena yawned. She glanced at the small clock Perri left for her. It was almost noon. Her stomach decided to let itself be known by a sonorous rumble that echoed throughout the library. She flicked through more pages, seeing that the man whose diaries she was reading continued in the same dramatic tone. The order he was a part of witnessed four possessions. In that same year, it fell apart. In their desperation, the Catholic Church took off the reins of morality. She flipped the book and opened the last page.

*December 1, 1640*

*The witches chose to ignore us! We fight on the front lines between good and evil. Is that so hard to understand? They will not be spared in the eyes of God. No, they shall suffer for their wicked deals with the devils.*

*In many a year of my life, I had come to learn one thing: if they are not with us, they are against us. Tonight, we rally our forces. They shalt not be given a chance to use their corrupted magics against us. Perhaps they have used them to cloud our judgement to this day.*

*I made certain the news will travel far and wide. They will be burned at a stake for their betrayal of the human kind and Our Lord.*

*J. R.*

Helena stared at the final words. The man was crazy and seemed to be responsible for the witch hunts because witches refused to participate in their insane war against the powers they couldn't understand.

She closed the heavy tome and pushed it away in disgust. Taking a moment to stretch in her seat, she wished for a brighter room to read in. Vincent gave her full access as long as she did not take any of his possessions outside.

There were three rapid knocks on the door, and Helena rushed to open it.

Perri beamed at her. She balanced a wobbling silver tray of food and coffee in one hand. "I thought you'd need a distraction, so I brought freshly made cookies."

Helena held the door for her. "Thank you. I thought you'd forgotten about me."

The maid left the tray on the table next to the books Helena had finished reading. She poured some coffee into a porcelain cup and handed it to Helena.

Settling back into her seat, Helena watched the maid doing the same in the seat across from her. The calming aroma of black coffee soothed her.

Perri's fingers fiddled with the edge of the silver tray. They fell away and soon found the hem of her apron where she tugged at the frayed ends. "Would you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

Helena put down the cup, not certain where this was going. "Go ahead."

Her large brown eyes searched Helena's face for something, and Perri glanced down. "Have you ever confessed your love to anyone?"

Glad that she had put down the cup first, she straightened in her seat. "Not exactly, no."

Perri's shoulders slumped.

"Are you planning to confess to Hans? Is that what this is about?" Helena hoped she was wrong. He wasn't a bad guy per se. His single downfall was that he was undead, and Perri was a gullible young girl, blinded by her affection toward him.

"Yes. I believe I will tell him tonight."

"But he's a—" Helena paused. She picked the next best word that came to her mind. "He's a little too old for you." She reached for her coffee with a shaky hand, needing something to hold on to. Lifting it to her lips, she took a long sip of her drink.

"He told me he was twenty-five, which is five years older than me."

To keep from spitting her drink on Vincent's books, Helena clenched her jaw. She concentrated on swallowing the burning liquid down as tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. "You're older than me?"

"By a year or so, yes."

"You look younger."

Perri's bubbly laughter filled the room. "I get that a lot."

Helena decided that eating could be just as dangerous as drinking with her around. She put the cup as far away as was possible and thought of what to say. Her fingers came upon something in her pocket. "I almost forgot." She pulled out a white envelope. "Could you post this for me today?"

The maid took the envelope and studied the address. "Is this a letter to your family?"

Helena fell silent. There was nothing she could tell her parents without getting them involved in her situation. That letter was addressed to Andrew. He was the sole person who could understand what she was going through and since she didn't have her laptop with her, she couldn't send him an e-mail.

"Sorry, I won't ask anything more and get someone to post it," Perri said, sliding the letter into her apron's pocket. A second later, she clasped her hands together in excitement. "I figured out how you can help me with Hans!"

Helena watched her cradling her arms and swaying from side to side. Laughing, she managed to ask. "What're you planning?"

"A Halloween party, of course! He may not see me as a woman now, but wait until I put on a fine dress." Perri stopped moving and waited for Helena's reply.

"I don't know—"

"Please, as a guest you may be able to convince Master Vincent to hold one. He used to like such festivities."

She wasn't about to reveal that the 'guest' Perri was referring to was also under constant watch. In her mind, Helena began putting together something that sounded as an easy let down, but Perri knelt in front of her. She looked at Helena with so much hope in those brown saucers that it hurt her to even think of ever upsetting her new friend.

"Please, Helena. *Please...*"

She pursed her lips. "Tell me one thing before I sign my death warrant. Why Hans?"

After rising from the floor, Perri fixed her skirt. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"I may as well know what kind of man he is."

Perri stopped fussing with the already impeccably straight skirt and took her seat. Her eyes lingered on the dancing flames that licked at the thick logs in the fireplace. With her bubblyness gone, she appeared older.

"You know that I lived in an orphanage. The mistress there never liked us and abused the kids under her care. So, I escaped and begged on the streets for months until Master Vincent brought me here. He gave me an education, a home, and a job for which I will be forever grateful. A few years after I settled in, the

villagers began giving me trouble, calling me names, saying that I lived in a haunted castle.”

*They weren't too far off*, Helena thought.

“They threw rocks at me, telling me to never return. That’s when Master Hans appeared, and they left me alone. When he was here, he would go shopping with me and, since then, not once did I hear those hurtful comments. I fell in love with his kindness as there was no need for him to go to such an extent.”

Did Perri know about vampires and was hiding that knowledge behind her smiles or did she choose not to see it? If this happened years ago, Hans would have aged.

“I hope you know what you’re signing up for,” Helena mumbled.

Perri reached for her cup. “I’ll make you another. I bet it has gone cold while we were talking.”



“I still think that this is not a good idea!” Helena repeated as Perri pushed her out of the library.

“It’ll be fine! Master Vincent is a kind man.”

Perri’s words didn’t cheer her up in the slightest. Vincent’s study was mere metres away from the library. Her legs turned as soft as cotton at the thought of asking for such a ludicrous request.

They stopped. His study door seemed like a towering gate to Hell. Helena closed her eyes to gather enough courage to knock. When she opened them again, her mind was set on the goal.

“Come in,” Vincent’s deep voice permeated through the wood the second she raised her hand to knock.

“Here goes...” She pushed the door open and turned to find that Perri was already gone. *That traitor!*

Vincent sat behind an antique desk which was covered in paperwork. He reminded her of an older version of Alexander. She imagined Alexander with Vincent’s moustache. The image alone made her clear her throat to prevent a giggle.

“Is anything wrong?” he inquired, reclining in his office chair.

Helena clasped her hands behind her back and stepped into the room. “I’m sorry for the intrusion. We—I—Well...”

“Is the demon causing you trouble?”

“No, it’s not that.” She shook her head, trying to clear her panicked jumble of thoughts. *No, this is impossible after all.* “It’s nothing.”

“Don’t you and Perri wish to request that I host a party?”

Stunned, she eyed him with suspicion. She knew he could command humans and vampires with his voice, but an ability to read minds was on an entirely different level. “How did you know?”

“You two were loud enough for the whole of Scotland to hear your plans.”

A blush heated her cheeks, and she was glad he couldn’t read her mind.

“And no, I cannot read your mind. I simply observe.” He brushed his moustache and scribbled something down. “To answer your request, you may have your Hallows Eve celebration tonight. It would be a good distraction.”

She frowned. “Why would you accept a request from me?”

“You are a guest here, even if you don’t believe that to be true. I was only curious about your involvement with Lucious Ellwood.”

Her brows jumped in surprise. “What kind of guest is not permitted to leave for a month?”

“I did what I could to separate you from Lucious. If he is found guilty, you will be executed alongside him. This way, I can report that you were uninvolved and, therefore, should not be touched.”

Helena let out a strangled breath. It was such a relief to know he believed in her. “Why would you do that for me?”

Vincent’s usual stern features softened. “In the past two weeks, you could have tried to escape or harm my family, but you chose not to. And Perri, who is a great judge of character, has grown attached to you. That is enough for me.”

“Just because Perri likes me, you would help me?”

“She is like a daughter to me. Her opinion matters a great deal, even if I do not show it.” He cleared his throat. “I should get back to my work.”

“Right, sorry for interrupting.” She whirled on the spot to head for the door.

Vincent’s voice stopped her one foot short of her goal. “One last thing. Could you send Perri here? I have something to discuss with her.”

Helena glanced over her shoulder. Vincent couldn’t possibly tell her off for this.

He must have noticed her struggle because he added, “I want to discuss the details of the party.”

She left his study and the discomfort in her chest perished. A chance that she could soon return home remained. Full of hope, she quickened her pace to find Perri and tell her the good news.



Helena spent the rest of the day reading through manuscripts and books in the library while Perri was determined to find the perfect dresses for them. Having

gone through a few dozen dresses Vincent had provided for them, Helena gave up on having an opinion since Perri countered her choices with better ones. She could already tell that Perri and Laura would become friends in a heartbeat.

When six o'clock struck, Perri dragged her back to her room and left Helena there to wait until her imminent return with their chosen attire for the night.

To stop wearing the carpet down, Helena crawled onto the bed. A second later, she clambered off and resumed her pacing. She couldn't put her finger on the source of her agitation.

Perri squealed from the doorway. "I brought your dress!"

"Let's see what you've got." Helena's voice reflected a tiny portion of her friend's enthusiasm.

Perri laid the dress on the bed with care and unzipped the plastic wrapping that held the mysterious gown. Paying little attention to it, Helena couldn't take her eyes off Perri. Her green faille dress trailed along the ground, shimmering in the fire-lit room like an emerald in the sun. The uniform she wore on the daily basis did her full figure little justice. Her blonde hair was styled back and the make-up she wore made her look her age.

Perri pouted. "Helena, are you paying attention?"

Helena diverted her attention to the short cream lace dress spread out on the bed. A thin pink belt was strapped around the waist.

"I was, I mean am. Sorry."

Perri grinned. "Good. So, how do I look?" She twirled around for Helena to get the full impact of her dress.

"I think you look amazing." Helena searched for any sign that could tell her if Perri was supposed to be dressed as someone famous. Nothing came to mind. "Isn't this a Halloween party?"

"We can always be somewhat unorthodox." Perri ran her hands over her dress fabric with a question in her eyes. "Do you think he'll like it?"

Helena drew her into a crushing embrace. When she pulled away, her eyes burned into Perri's. "Are you kidding me? Any man in that room will be begging for a dance, and counting every male in the building that gives you five to choose from."

"I'm so happy right now. This is the most fun I've had in years," she gushed and pushed Helena to sit on the bed. "Now don't move. Let's do something about that hair."

Helena raised a brow. "*That* hair?"

Perri shrugged. "You don't seem to do much with it. Sometimes, you forget to brush it."

"You may have a point."

The maid left the room and returned with a bag full of brushes and make-up. Her pink glossy lips twitched into a devilish smile. "Don't worry about anything and sit still."

Helena couldn't help smiling as Perri brushed her hair. Although spending time with this girl was a lot of fun, it made her miss her friends even more.



After what seemed to be an eternity of Perri's sighs and grunts, they were ready. Perri took Helena's hand, and they hurried to the dining hall where the ball was going to take place. To stay balanced on her high heels, Helena held on to Perri's arm. Once they reached the dining hall, she let her go and managed to keep her posture straight enough not to fall over like a bowling pin.

"Let us enjoy ourselves to the fullest," Perri chirped when Rupert, smartly dressed in his grey tuxedo, opened the door for them.

The dining hall had undergone complete remodelling. The long table had been pushed back against the wall and was filled with food and drink. Crystal chandeliers had replaced the candle ones. The paintings in the room were changed from their usual mysterious scripts and captured scenes of battle to beautiful heart-warming landscapes.

Near the refreshments table stood the chef, Terry. She wore a neon pink dress and seemed most pleased with it as she kept swirling her layered skirts around to the ballroom music while talking to the other staff.

Helena murmured into Perri's ear, "Is that Terry?"

She grinned. "She wanted bright pink and something puffy, so I got her that."

"Wow. It's *different*..."

"My thoughts exactly," Perri whispered back.

Helena studied the others. Everyone wore well-designed suits and dresses. She felt someone moving to stand next to her, and, when Helena turned, Hans extended his hand to her with a bow at his waist.

"Would you care for a dance?" he asked.

From such a simple gesture, she could almost hear Perri's disappointed thoughts.

"I'm so sorry but my first dance was already promised to Rupert." Helena grabbed the butler's arm and shot him a pleading look.

The old man's cheeks flushed a shade of a pomegranate. Rupert patted her hand. "Yes...the dance with Miss Hawthorn. How could I forget?"

Helena faced Hans with an apologetic smile. "Perri, on the other hand, is free I believe."

"Yes, I'm very free." Perri spoke dreamily.

Hans offered his hand to her. "It would be my pleasure if you would accompany me."

Perri took his hand and mouthed a "thank you" to Helena. Whatever was to come out of their relationship, she would try to support Perri's choice. If Hans was anything like Vincent, he would not play around with her, and that set Helena's mind at ease.

"About the dance, Miss Hawthorn..." Rupert interrupted her train of thought.

Helena realised she kept holding on to him, and he had become almost purple in the face with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry. Let's go." She propelled him to the dance floor where, as they waltzed, she kept stealing glances at Perri's brightest smile.

After a dance with Rupert and Mr Felgrove—the gardener—she chose to take a break by the wall with a glass of water. In the meantime, Perri had changed dance partners. Hans' eyes hadn't once left the maid since they separated.

*Maybe there is hope for them yet.*

"Do you have a moment?" Vincent asked.

She hadn't noticed him move from across the room. "Yes, of course."

Helena set her glass on the table and was escorted by him into the garden.

Cold October air made her shiver. It had been raining all morning, and the sky was displayed bare with stars twinkling above their heads. She breathed in a lungful of air that smelt of the sea.

Vincent shrugged off his suit jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders.

"There's no need for you to do this," she protested.

"Do not worry about me. I will not get cold." He offered her his arm. "Shall we take a stroll? There are some things I wish to discuss with you."

She looped her arm through his, and they started moving. The moon was nowhere in sight, hidden behind a lone dark cloud that spoiled the perfect sky. Light from the windows helped illuminate the garden's deciduous trees that stood tall on a bed of fallen coloured leaves. Their shadows danced on the ground to the wind's silent tune.

Vincent cleared his throat. "First, I wish to apologise for the way I treated you during our first meeting. I was taken aback by your resemblance to Eva."

"I don't need an apology. I want to go home."

"That may not be possible for the time being. My interest in you has gotten Eliza and Andreaz curious."

"Who exactly is Eliza?"

"Someone you should hope to never meet."



His cryptic answer intrigued her. She fought her urge to question him further but knew better than to press him for answers. "Alright, I'll take your word for it."

"It would seem that Andreaz has spoken to her and was granted permission to take you for the remainder of the time."

She stumbled and withdrew her arm. "What are you trying to say? I have to go with the man who nearly killed Lucious and Alexander?"

"I have tried to combat his request, but he remains Eliza's favourite. He will collect you tomorrow."

Frosty bite of the wind brushed her legs, and she hugged herself. "Is there another way to convince her?"

"Eliza does not care for human lives. She values that which benefits her. Unless I can offer her something better to grasp her interest, she will send you to him without a second thought."

She was at a loss for words. Vincent did not seem like a vampire who would lie to her. He may be one of the few people who didn't want to exploit her.

After a moment, Vincent gestured for her to keep moving. When they reached the end of a path, they orbited the pond, making progress back towards the castle.

Helena stole a peek at him. Whatever he was thinking brought a frown to his face.

"I must warn you," he said. "There are certain rumours about him."

"What do you mean?"

"He's from an era when women were considered to be a commodity. I fear he has not learned to see them as anything more."

She gave a bitter laugh. "That seems like fun right after being possessed by a demon."

He looped her hand through his and patted it with the gentleness of a concerned father. His touch felt almost warm against her skin. She hadn't realised how cold she was until then.

"You are cold. We should return."

Her hand slid away from him. "What do I do if he tries something?"

"I fear that I do not have an answer for you."

She opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out, so she closed it again. What could she say to that? If she tried to escape, she was endangering herself and Lucious. Staying with Andreaz was not on her things-to-do-before-you-die list either.

"I almost forgot." He reached into his breast pocket and retrieved a small necklace with a pale amber stone encased in restricting metal vines. "Madeline

left this for you. She told me that you must remember to leave the necklace in the blessed salt when the stone turns black.”

Helena took the necklace from him. “Thank you. Could you thank her for me?”

“I will.” He inclined his head, and they threaded the rest of the way without another word.

If she slipped away from the party now, she could reach the town and find a train station there. *What then?* She could never return home. What was stopping the vampires from attacking her parents to force her to return?

They parted in the hallway after she asked to remain there for a moment to gather her thoughts. Helena rested her back against the wall. Closing her eyes, she imagined she was back home with Laura, Andrew, her mother, and Richard, having dinner and discussing some dull local news. A tear rolled down her cheek, making her skin sting with heat.

“Helena, are you in here?” Perri’s distant voice destroyed the little patch of delight she had assembled.

She blinked a few times to push back the sadness. “I’m here.”

Perri ran over, full of concern. “Why aren’t you enjoying the party?”

She forced a smile. “I needed some air, so Vincent stayed with me.”

Perri looped her arm through hers, forcing Helena to move towards the music. “This is your party and, therefore, you have to have a lot more dances than two.”

Helena laughed. “I thought you were too busy watching Hans.”

“Very funny. Let’s hurry.”

Perri brought her to the dance floor. Another waltz played, and she took Helena’s hand into hers. She wrapped her other arm around Helena’s waist. As they danced, Perri proved to be a great lead.

Concentrating on the music, Helena started having fun.

They parted, and Perri asked, “Didn’t that feel good?”

The next song had come to a sudden stop, and everyone moved to see what was going on. Vincent stood by the door with Hans. Their broad backs blocked the view of whoever was there.

“Let me through. I’m here to do my duty, Vincent.”

Helena shuddered, remembering Andreaz’s accented voice from the Russian Roulette. It slithered up her body like an invisible hand and looped around her throat like a noose.

“We weren’t expecting you until tomorrow.” Vincent’s tone came out cold and unamused.

Perri shot Helena a questioning look to which she shrugged in return. There was no way she could tell her the truth.

“Step aside, old man. I believe it is my turn to play. Eliza has given me permission to take her whenever I please. Call her if you don’t believe me.”

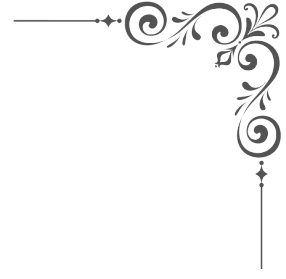
When Hans moved to block Andreaz, Vincent put his hand on Hans’ shoulder and shook his head.

Although reluctant, Hans moved away. His eyes were fixed on their unwelcomed guest.

Helena met Andreaz’s cold and calculating stare. He knew exactly where she was. A slow smile spread across his thin lips. He brushed past Vincent and outstretched his hand towards her. The orange glow in his eyes betrayed his pleasant demeanour.

“Come here, Helena. We’re going to have a lot of fun together.”

She balled her quivering hands at her sides. Her nails dug into her palms as she spared one last glance at Perri and took the first reluctant step towards her new captor.



## 19

# NEW CAPTOR

“**W**hy do you have to leave now?” Perri asked and folded away one of Helena’s decrepit T-shirts that were scattered on the bed.

Helena gathered her remaining belongings from the wardrobe and threw them on the bed to join an already existing pile. “I don’t have much say in the matter.”

“I don’t like the man you’re travelling with. He’s creepy.”

“Honestly, I think that even his mother doesn’t like him.”

Perri snorted.

Helena reached down to gather her two pairs of shoes and proceeded to toss them over her shoulder without looking. She scanned the room and frowned at the pile in the centre of the bed.

“When did I manage to accumulate so much clothing?” She glanced at the possible culprit. “Perri, what did you do?”

“You brought so little with you, so I lent you a few things.” Perri took one of Helena’s most-used sweaters and poked her finger through the hole in the sleeve. “You don’t seem like the type to go out shopping much.”

She yanked the sweater from the maid’s hands and busied herself with folding it. Unable to make the material behave, she crumpled it and tossed it into the travelling bag.

Perri’s hand landed on Helena’s shoulder. Her eyes filled with concern. “Are you alright?”

Helena’s throat constricted. She didn’t want to show her true panic to her new friend. *This is not Perri’s problem.* “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Perri grasped her shoulders. There was that look in her eyes again, one that saw more than she let on. “I thought you would be happier to return home.”

A strained smile appeared on Helena’s tired face. “You’re right. I should be, shouldn’t I?”

“Two pretty ladies standing here alone. May I join?” Andreaz’s words breezed in from the doorway.

Helena’s eyes darted in his direction. He stood there, hands folded in his black coat’s pockets, leaning against the doorframe. The tendrils of his energy crawled along the ground towards her and when they reached her, she shivered.

Perri’s hands slid away. “I am going to get some more clothes for your journey.” With a final, fleeting look at Helena, she rushed out of the room.

Unable to contain her glare, Helena shot daggers at her retreating form. *How could she abandon me?* Taking a shaky step back, she felt his predatory gaze on her. Her leg bumped into something solid. She looked down to find the bedside table digging into her thigh.

Andreaz moved promptly to her side, filling the air with the sickeningly sweet cologne that encompassed him like a cloud of bad odour. He didn’t touch her. He didn’t have to. His energy wormed its way around her, making her skin crawl.

She held her breath.

“You are a curious little creature. Skin as white as porcelain and those eyes...” He lifted her chin with two fingers. “Yes, defiant to the bitter-sweet end.”

Helena turned her face away. His touch was worse than the invading stench of his cologne.

Andreaz caught her jaw, forcing her to face him. “You must look at people who are addressing you.”

She winced. *It’ll be alright*, she chanted as her quivering hand searched for anything she could use as a weapon.

“From now on, you should be a good girl and listen to your new master.”

Her hand gripped the scissors on the end table. “I will not be your servant.”

Deep laughter erupted from him. He drew back and tapped his chest as if he was short for air. Meanwhile, she shifted closer towards the doorway.

He coughed. “You couldn’t be more wrong. And, I suggest you don’t try anything either.” The elder grasped her wrist and yanked on the hand in which she held the scissors. He lowered his voice to a growl. “Because if you do, I will kill you.”

“Andreaz, what is the meaning of this?” Vincent’s voice brought an involuntary sigh from her.

“I was acquainting myself with my new charge. Don’t you think it’s appropriate?”

Vincent’s eyes lingered on her. “Leave her to pack. We have other things to discuss in my study.”

“Yes, yes. It’s always discussions with you,” Andreaz said and left with Vincent.

With rosy cheeks and ragged breath, Perri ran over and gathered Helena into a warm hug. “I got Master Vincent as fast as I could.”

*She hadn’t betrayed me.* Helena relaxed her stiff body, feeling her energy draining away.

“You’re alright,” Perri murmured into her ear. Her small hand massaged Helena’s back as she melted into Perri’s warmth.

Once she gathered her thoughts, Perri had a strange look of determination on her face.

“What?” Helena asked.

“I’m going wherever you’re going.”

Helena blinked in shock. When the words sunk in, she shook her head. “No, you’re not.”

“Yes, I am. I can’t leave you alone with him!”

No matter how much she wanted to accept her selfless offer, Helena’s kept envisioning the image of Perri’s emotionless, glassy stare. She grasped the maid’s arms with what little strength she had left. “There’s no need to worry about it. Nothing happened between us, trust me.”

Perri narrowed her eyes. “But you were so pale when I arrived, and there are marks on your face.” She touched her fingertips to one of the faint bruises forming on Helena’s jaw. It stung, but Helena did her best to pretend like nothing was wrong.

“I’m fine and *will* be fine.” At last, her legs regained enough strength to move. “Help me pack.”

“Helena, I—”

She silenced further protests with her raised hand. “If you don’t want to help me, you may leave.”



They had been in the car for hours. Helena pretended to find the vast darkness outside her window interesting while Andreaz sat in the driver’s seat of his sports car. He hadn’t touched her once since they left, which she believed to be great progress.

A few times, she caught him glancing in her direction. The hungry look in his dark, almond-shaped eyes made her shudder. So, she shifted closer to the door to create as much distance as the small space would allow.

The world seemed to be dying as winter neared. Half-bare trees stood strong against the wind that tore at the remaining leaves. Headlights of the car

irradiated the dark road she wished would lead her back home.

Soon, the sun rose over the horizon and an estate came into view. The country road guided them towards not one but two grand Victorian mansions. They were almost identical to one another as they shook off the shadows wrapped around them with the help of the morning rays.

There were no trees here, not even a bush for as long as a mile. *There is nowhere to hide.*

The car pulled to a stop, and she grew rigid in her seat.

A woman with blonde hair tied into a bun opened the door and captured Helena's arm.

"Get her adjusted to her new life, Hannah," Andreaz said from his seat.

"Yes, Master." The woman bowed. Her cold fingers dug into Helena's wrist. And, once the seatbelt was undone, she was jolted out of the car and into the morning breeze.

"I can walk by myself," Helena snapped.

Hannah surrendered her hold. A large red imprint of a hand remained on Helena's wrist where a small ache was building. She glared at the stranger for branding her with a new budding bruise.

The blonde rounded the car. The boot popped open with a loud click. She reached in and tossed a bag on the ground at Helena's feet. "Take your things, human. You're staying with the rest."

Helena lifted her bag and held it close to her chest in an attempt to gather some warmth from the thick material.

While Hannah and Andreaz exchanged words, Helena studied the vast emptiness of the barren fields over her shoulder. No weed was taller than two feet. The tyres screeched against the gravel and an icy grip that she felt through her jacket got hold of her upper arm.

"Let's go," Hannah barked.

Helena didn't struggle. She followed Hannah—if being almost dragged could be called following.

As they drew closer to the main entrance, Helena spied a few faces lingering by the windows. She gathered the bag closer to her chest, not caring about the contents inside, and took a peek at the retreating faces.

Hannah grabbed her face with both hands, lifting it with much force to meet her eyes.

The bruises Andreaz left on her jaw still hurt, and she winced.

Dark grey orbs met her hazel ones, and Helena felt energy seeping out from this vampire, trying to invade her. Persistent, the energy pushed at first. Then, it rammed against her mental shields.

Helena clutched the bag with an iron grip as she fought a mental battle with this woman.

Hannah's sharp features drew into a frown, and the energy died down. "Strange," she muttered and unlocked the door. "Get in. You will be notified when Master wishes to see you."

Helena massaged her face with her chilled fingers. She marched into the house without further protest. When the door slammed shut behind her, she heard the faint click of a lock setting into place. Scowling, she stared at the door that had no handle or keyhole on her side.

*I think I prefer maids and butlers.*

Straining her ears, she listened past her thudding heart. Faint whispers from the room on her right caught her attention. She took her first step towards it but stopped short of entering. An excess of cream sofas and colourful overstuffed armchairs were tastefully scattered around. The walls in the grand living room were painted white, much like the hallway in which she stood. Even now, she saw no one.

*Are they waiting for me to come in first?*

She peered around the corner, counting five women before everyone converged on the spot where she stood. Hands reached out to draw her in further into the room. Some grabbed at whatever they could find, and Helena struggled to prevent the gropes aimed at her chest.

Excited female voices blurred into one.

"Her hair is so soft," someone said.

"*Très mince*," someone else added.

Helena ducked down, covering her head with her bag, or as much of it as she could manage. She squeezed her eyes shut. *When will this madness end?*

Someone cleared her throat and the excessive grabbing and mumbling ceased.

Unable to help her curiosity, Helena lifted her head and saw the crowd thinning. A beautiful woman emerged with a warm greeting which was exhibited on her ivory face in a form of a perfect, toothy smile. She knelt in front of Helena and two large lavender eyes locked on her. "Welcome, *ma chérie*."

Helena found no words. Her eyes darted around the dozen or so gathered females who were waiting for something.

A French woman offered Helena her hand and spoke with affection. "I'm Viola. It's a name given to me by our master, Andreaz."

Acid climbed Helena's throat. She would rather die than consider that vampire as her master.



Viola inclined her head to one side. Her eyes never left Helena's face. "Have you been given your *nom*?"

*Given a name?* "I have a name, it's Helena."

Those listening in on their conversation clapped in unison.

"A beautiful name," someone in the crowd commented.

"Allow me to introduce everyone." Viola motioned to the tall brunette first. "Cora and Moira... This is Fran, Monique, Lisa, Anya." She moved to the row on Helena's right. "Louise, Mina, Lisbeth, Anita, Leah..."

Helena lost track of who was who halfway through the long list. *How long did these women have to be here to memorise each other's names?* It was as if they rehearsed this scene many times over. Plus, each woman could not be any more different from the next. Their complexion, hair, body shape, and facial features were as though they were hand-picked like souvenirs from distant travels. And, as of now, she was one of them.

Viola helped Helena stand.

Reluctant to move from her spot, in case the others decided to grab her again, Helena picked up her bag. "It's nice to meet you, but how did you come to be here?"

The room buzzed with a sudden outburst of whispers. Their eyes filled with something close to confusion, which was when Viola's hand rose and the noise ceased.

"I will show the new arrival to her room," Viola announced.

The women bobbed their heads. Their suspicious eyes assessed Helena as they returned to their seats, resuming what she had originally interrupted with her entrance.

Viola's hand landed on her back, and she nudged Helena. "You must be tired. Let's go find you a room."

Saying nothing, Helena went with her. Viola seemed to be the one in charge of the things in this house. Questioning her was Helena's priority, no matter how weary she was from the journey.

They climbed the staircase together. A long wide corridor awaited them once they reached the top. The same white coat of paint deprived the place of any personality or soul of the owner, even the doors were labelled with golden numbers as if this place was a hotel.

Her guide pointed to number eight. "You will be staying in *numéro huit*."

A tall blonde emerged from one of the rooms. Her platinum curls fell around her face and her judging gaze rested on Helena. Disgust contorted her statuesque features. She blocked their path by cocking her hip to one side and slapping her hand on it. "Who is she?"

Helena held her tongue. She had grown accustomed to people talking about her like she didn't exist, so she refrained from sparking an argument.

"Crista, this is Helena. She is the new addition to our home." Viola fixed the woman with a harsh glare. They stood there, unmoving, for what seemed like a day.

Eventually, Crista allowed them to pass.

Viola shot Helena another smile and continued leading the way.

"She won't last long as a favourite," Crista called after them.

Viola didn't respond.

Helena glanced over her shoulder and saw that Crista was already gone. "What did she mean by that?"

Once they reached the room, Viola pushed her inside and closed the door behind them.

Helena studied the woman with care. She betrayed no emotion to the naked eye as she stood there, poised and model-like. Those lavender eyes assessed her in the same, wary manner the women downstairs did.

"You have a name on your first day. Are you somehow special?"

"He didn't give me a name if that's what you're asking."

Viola's eyes bulged with surprise. "You have memories?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because the rest of us cannot remember anything, *ma chérie*."

Helena's lips pressed into a grim line. There were a lot of questions trying to fight their way out. She settled on the first one that came to mind. "Why aren't you like the others?"

Viola leant against the door. Her hands rested on her tiny waist. "Strong will perhaps?" She gave a weak smile. "*Je ne sais pas*. I do not understand why we do not remember or have the will to leave. All that remains is a wish to please our master."

There was no joy in Viola's eyes. Any cheer she had displayed downstairs had vanished as if it was all an elaborate act. If what Viola told her was the truth, she could trust no one.

Averting her gaze, Helena let her bag fall onto the aged, grey carpet. To her left were two evenly spaced single beds and a tall wardrobe was built into the wall to her right.

"So, who is my roommate?" Helena asked and shuffled over to one of the beds. She sat on an uncomfortable mattress, but it did not take away the urge to rest.

"That would be me." Viola pushed away from the door and seized Helena's belongings. She headed for the door when Helena charged at the woman,

reaching for the strap of her bag.

“Where are you going with that?”

Viola stopped. Her hand wrapped around the gold-plated door handle. “You do not trust me, I understand, but tomorrow Hannah will come looking for this. I must take it.”

Helena’s hand slid away from the strap. “And what am I supposed to wear if not my clothes?”

“Master orders Hannah to get us clothes that he likes, and she brings them here.”

She gaped at Viola. This place was exactly what Vincent feared it to be. *How could the Council turn a blind eye on such terrible treatment of people?*

“Please leave,” she asked Viola through clenched teeth.

“Do not do anything you may regret, *ma chérie*,” Viola said and left the room with the last of her belongings.

Her knees gave way, and Helena stared at the door. *What is Andreaz planning to do with me?*



Helena slept most of the day away. She opened her eyes to an already dark room.

A figure stood by the window, and, once her vision adjusted, she abandoned any thought of returning to sleep. “It’s nice of you to *finally* join me.”

Michael sighed. “Helena, I’m sorry. Believe me, my hands were tied.”

She pushed the quilt off and sat upright. By the smell of it, she could tell it was used by others. Nonetheless, she was too exhausted from both emotional and physical bombardment of dealing with the undead on the daily basis to complain. Not like anyone would listen to her.

“And, are they untied now?”

Michael’s lips pressed together. “I fear for what will happen to you here.” He didn’t move or offer anything else. Instead, he returned to looking out the window.

“Is there a way out?”

Her guardian shook his head. “The moment you linked yourself with that vampire was the last time you had a way out.”

She was taken aback by his frank words. Taking a moment to climb out of bed, she thought hard about what she could do or say.

Michael broke the awkward silence. “Why must you do this to yourself? Why couldn’t you abandon the unknown and have a normal life?”

His blue eyes burned with anxiety and worry that boiled beneath the surface. Sure, her choices were rubbish. At first, curiosity got the best of her. Becoming

soul-bound to a vampire wasn't what she expected when it happened. Yet, nothing could be changed now.

Michael stopped her from moving with a slight shake of his head. "It is too early for you to understand. I have forgotten myself; I must apologise."

No matter how she looked at it, he still treated her like a child. The control she exercised over her emotions unravelled. She was in over her head, and she knew it. And here, her guardian was telling straight to her face that she always made the wrong decisions.

Her lower lip quivered. "I'm sorry, Michael, for everything."

His face softened, and he stopped in front of her. His light warmed her enough to bring marginal comfort. "We'll get through this. We will."

"I hope so, because I missed Laura's birthday and, if I don't die here, she will gut me."

Michael smirked, and she chuckled. Soon, they were both laughing hard enough that Helena didn't notice the door opening.

Viola's blonde head peered through the small gap. She scanned the dark room. "Were you talking to someone?"

Michael's presence retreated, and she cleared her throat. "No, I sometimes talk to myself. It's soothing."

The blonde pushed the rest of the door open and slipped inside. "Well then, would you like something to eat?"

Her stomach clenched at the thought of food. She covered it with her hands, hoping it would not voice its needs. "Yes, that would be nice."

Viola hesitated. "Do not try to run, Helena. I do not wish to see you get hurt."

A shiver ran through her, demolishing the warmth Michael provided earlier. "What makes you think I'm planning to?"

"We had a girl here not too long ago. She was a lot like you and did not want to serve our master or accept his gifts."

Helena swallowed hard. "Where is she?"

"*Morte, ma chérie*. She no longer lives."

"Is that a warning or a threat?"

A sad smile stretched Viola's lips. "A warning, nothing more."

She didn't want to dwell on the topic any longer. The information may have upset her, but her stomach begged to be fed. Her body was as confused by these circumstances as she was. And since there was no point in starving, she said, "So, where's the food you've mentioned? I'm famished."



A tour around the house proved how isolated they were. There were no phones or phone lines for that matter. No internet either. Contacting anyone for help would be impossible. She doubted Andreaz would allow her to send a letter or two. Even if he did, he would most likely read the contents.

Helena sipped her cup of coffee while melting into one of the cushy armchairs in the sitting room. There were a few other girls who sat by the fireplace and played a game of cards. Another group was discussing Andreaz on the sofas. None of them appeared to be unhappy with their lifestyle.

*'I do not understand why we do not remember or have the will to leave. All that remains is a wish to please our master.'* A shudder reverberated through her spine. They were brainwashed. Their reaction was unnatural for Andreaz and this house. *Would I become like them?* She clutched her mug closer to her chest. There had to be a way out, and she had to find it, soon.

Over the laughter and murmur of the women, she heard the front door unlocking. The conversation in the room died. The girls gathered at the entrance. Their eyes glistened with excitement.

Helena set her cup on the nearby coffee table and joined the commotion.

At the centre of madness stood Hannah who scanned their faces until her eyes rested on Helena. "You are to attend dinner tonight with our master. Get her ready," Hannah ordered and locked the door behind her when she left.

Everyone's attention was on her, and she took a step back. They had almost manhandled her back into the living room and pushed her into a nearby chair. The girl, Anya—she guessed—rushed in with hands full of hairbrushes, make-up bottles, and colourful tubes.

Helena gripped the armrests of her seat. "I don't want you to pretty me up for Andreaz."

"Don't worry, you will look beautiful," Anya said with a grin.

She raised her hands in defence. "I'm good. Thanks, but no thanks."

Anya tsked. "You can't go the way you are. Master wouldn't be pleased."

*And what if I don't want to please Andreaz?* She searched their faces. They didn't appear to care for her thoughts. No one here did.

Anya's smile never faltered, and Helena grumbled under her breath. She found Viola standing near the fireplace, watching the scene with light amusement.

Helena shot her an exasperated look to which Viola whispered something she couldn't discern over the chatter and shook her head. Seeing that there was no way out of this situation, Helena gave in. As much as she hated it, there was little she could do against fourteen other women.



An hour later, she was released from the clutches of Andreaz's fan-girl horde and led to the second mansion by Hannah. They exchanged no words during their freezing stroll.

Deprived of her comfortable clothes, which she noted were thrown away once they left her body, Helena's shoulders deflated. Anya forced her to wear a pearlescent silk gown. The thin material kept no heat in. They even changed her hairstyle six or seven times.

Her eye twitched. She recalled how they had assaulted her with waxing strips. The skin where they had been placed stung as if her flesh had been rubbed raw.

Hannah opened the door for Helena and waved for her to step inside. Since Helena had undergone enough manhandling for the day, she obediently complied.

Andreaz's second home was much more decorated. A black carpet with golden trims spanned the marble-walled hallways. The paintings on the walls appeared Persian and reminded her of the art classes she took with Laura at school. At that time, they always giggled at the man's exposed extremities. The painting on the walls displayed men and women in the middle of their most intimate hour. Heat tinted her cheeks rouge. She looked away to avoid stalling the stiff-faced servant.

Hannah paused at a set of brilliant white doors. She pushed them open and waved for her to enter. "Master is waiting inside. You are to listen to his orders. If not"—she leered at Helena—"then I will help you learn some manners."

She gave Hannah a shaky nod. "Here goes..."

Her eyes bulged at the expanse of this room. It looked as if the ceiling had been knocked down to make two floors become one. Stone columns were evenly spaced out, supporting the painted ceiling. Her appreciation of a good interior design ended when she saw him, seated at a large golden table, watching her.

She was nothing more than a deer to a hunter. Then, it hit her. She had forgotten to take anything she could use as a weapon from the house. The fuss with the other women had taken her mind off him and the reason she was here in the first place.

"Come. Sit," he said in an almost pleasant voice.

She didn't move. Couldn't. Her whole body screamed for her to run, but where? She glanced at the door which was now closed. Hannah awaited her on the other side. There was no way out.

"I dislike games, Helena. Come here," he ordered and pressed his lips into an uncompromising line.

“*Move!*” Helena pinched herself, and the stinging pain pushed her fear back a bit. She stumbled on, one edgy step after another until she arrived across the table from him.

“Good girl. Come and sit next to me.”

Biting down on her aching lip, she took her seat. The sickening, sweet cologne that he wore made her stomach churn. Somehow, she managed to refrain from pinching her nose.

“Bring in the food,” he shouted to no one in particular.

The sudden outburst of noise from him made her sink deeper into her seat. Maybe, if she became insignificant enough, he would lose interest in her and send her back to Vincent.

A group of servants rushed in with plates and drinks through a door disguised in the wall she hadn’t noticed till now. The plate that was lowered in front of her had medium-rare steak at the centre of it, decorated with a few mint leaves on the side. She wrinkled her nose and pushed it away.

“Don’t like the food?” Andreaz studied her, holding a glass of crimson liquid in his hand.

“I’m not hungry...”

Something cool brushed her thigh. She jumped in her seat and shifted her legs away. When his hand came into view, she jerked into an upright position and took a step away from the table.

“What are you doing?” she shrieked.

Andreaz’s smile dwindled and his brown eyes lit with an orange glow that had her heart halt for a beat.

She grasped the back of the chair for support as his vampiric energy filled the room. *Way to go, Helena.*

He rose to his full height, which was an inch taller than her, and slammed his hands against the table surface, making the dishes dance. His glare pierced down to her soul. “You dare insult me?”

She slowly retreated, praying for something, anything that would take his attention off her.

Andreaz closed the distance she so desperately tried to create between them in less than a second. Her back crashed against the far wall, knocking the air out of her lungs. The glass in the window gave a faint quiver in its frame.

She gasped for air while her eyes adjusted and her brain attempted to process the events.

Andreaz moved his face, his lips hovering next to hers.

Helena wanted to scream, yet what escaped her was a whimper. She concentrated on her breathing instead. Something was wrong. She looked down

to find his hand clamped around her neck, his bony fingers biting into her throat.

“And here I was treating you like Vincent would. I guess my old methods are better after all,” he said, pressing harder into her flesh.

“It...hurts.”

Andreaz loosened his grip. His other hand climbed up her thigh. That was not all she could feel. His energy had swarmed her shields. She wouldn't be able to hold out for much longer.

“Let us get acquainted on a more personal level,” he whispered into her ear, and his tongue left a wet trail down her neck.

She shut her eyes, concentrating on the shields. They shook under the pressure of his energy. She wasn't strong enough to hold him off for long. The fact that he was running his hands over her body did not help her in the slightest. So, she reached out to Lucious through the link.

*“Help me, Lucious.”*

Andreaz's hand slipped away from her throat and slid between the folds of her dress. As if her heart wasn't beating fast enough, it forced her pulse to soar.

*“What's wrong, my dear?”* Lucious asked.

Never in her lifetime did she think his voice would become her solace.

*“Andreaz is trying to break through.”* She didn't care if her voice was panicked. She needed his help. To her dismay, he didn't reply.

Andreaz lifted her dress at a slow, measured pace. Even when she pushed at his chest, and punched it a few times, there was no effect. It seemed to excite him...

The vampire drew closer, trapping her hands against his chest. No matter how hard she pushed, he wouldn't budge. It was like trying to fight against an immovable object.

The link buzzed with Lucious' energy, and she allowed it to enter her. Unlike a vampire's touch, it was warm and soothing. It roamed her body, wishing to be used.

Helena concentrated on her shields. She visualised more layers of steel and, with Lucious' energy, was able to create them.

Andreaz stopped her torment and took a step back.

When she opened her eyes, she remained trapped between him and the wall. He watched her intently. “I see that good old Vincent lied.” He grinned like a Cheshire cat.

Helena had no idea what he was talking about.

The main door burst open, and Hannah appeared. She stopped in her tracks, bowing her head. “Master, I'm sorry to intrude on your meal.”



Tearing his gaze away from Helena, he spoke low. “This better be important, Hannah.”

“A call came from Lady Eliza. She wishes to speak with you in person.”

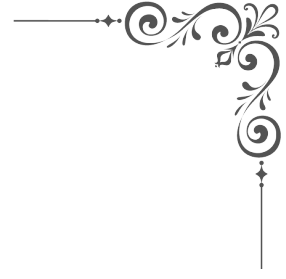
Helena noticed the strain in Hannah’s voice. *Is she also scared of him?*

“This one is my choice for when I return. Keep an eye on her,” he ordered.

Once he left the room with inhuman speed, Helena’s legs could no longer support her weight. She slid to the ground. Her whole body was shaking.

The dress spilt around her on the stone floor and hot tears wet her cheeks. She didn’t bother wiping them away. She was tired and weak.

*How am I supposed to get out of this?*



## 20

# ALL ALONE

The spray of hot water beat against her aching back. The clear liquid swirled and exited through the drain between her feet. If she could melt and disappear in the same way, it would be great.

Her forehead had become numb from the cold of the porcelain tile it rested against. A life she once had was taken from her and replaced with endless horrors. She kept feeling his hands on her thigh, her stomach, and her breasts. Her mind ran in an endless loop, trying to torment itself into madness. She sucked in deep breaths to push the sick sensation away.

The nausea subsided, and she ran her sponge for the tenth time over her body. Her skin burned from the rough treatment she had put it through.

The sponge slid out of her hand. It fell lifelessly at her feet and absorbed more water.

Helena shifted her head to the left. Light of the day had already cleansed the room of the night. Her fingers peeled away strands of wet hair clinging to her face. She was back in the second house. After the incident with Andreaz, Hannah brought her back. Not many words were exchanged other than a command or two which were barked in her direction. Her limbs moved without her telling them to. She trudged past the curious eyes and whispers of others until she arrived in the bathroom.

*What if I end my life here? Would things get worse?* The easy way out would deprive Lucious of his life. *Do I even care anymore?*

“Helena?” Michael’s voice reached her through the blue veil of the shower curtain.

She grabbed for the plastic curtain, but her fingers were unable to catch it properly. She gave up her effort and let her hands fall to her sides.

“What is it?” she whispered.

Through the thin plastic, she could make out Michael's silhouette. He ran his hand through his golden mane. "How are you doing?"

A tiny flame inside of her sparked to life. She pushed away from the wall and jerked back the curtain, not caring whether he would see her naked.

"Look at me, Michael!" She pointed to the red patches and scratches on her skin. "I can't do this anymore! His touch, it plagues me every time I close my eyes. No matter how hard I've scrubbed, it doesn't—no—won't go away."

Helena clung to what little control she had left to prevent the tears from reaching her eyes. She couldn't fall apart here. Not yet. Perhaps Michael came to tell her that he had found a way out for her.

He lifted his pained eyes to meet hers, and she knew it was futile.

"I'm sorry, Helena. You know I cannot interfere."

She crumpled the shower curtain in her hand. "Why not? Aren't you supposed to look after me? If not now, when can you help me?"

"I will never be allowed to help you. That is my punishment."

"What'll happen to me if I stay here?"

His silence was enough. *You will die*, echoed in her mind, but not before she was broken.

They stood there in silence. Neither wished to be the first to say what was on the tip of the tongue. The metal rings of the curtain clinked against the pole, and her hands shook with silent fury.

"Leave," she whispered.

Without a word of complaint, he left the room. Her thoughts were drowned out by the hiss of the falling water.

Helena turned off the shower and stepped out of the bathtub. She wrapped a towel around her body. Taking a moment, she cleared the steam off the mirror to see the mark Lazarus left on her. It was as Lucious had described it, a black nasturtium flower embedded on her skin like some kind of brand or a tattoo. It spanned across most of her right shoulder blade. If she didn't know what it was, she would think it was almost beautiful.

A sad smile played on her lips. Her mother would kill her if she saw it. It took months to convince her mum to allow for her ears to be pierced. Getting a tattoo without permission would warrant daily lectures about hygiene and possible diseases that could come from tattoo parlours.

"I miss you, Mum," she admitted, watching the steam distort her reflection. She let it.

Helena towelled off. She found nothing she could wear, and the last piece of clothing she possessed was in a metal bin under the sink. Wrapped in a fluffy

towel, she sneaked back to her room. On top of her bed rested her clothes from last night.

"I kept them safe for you," Viola's soft purr made Helena jump as she silently crept up on her.

She whirled on the spot, clutching the towel to her chest with her hands. "Thank you."

Viola gave her a brief once-over. "You look better."

She backed away until her legs touched the frame of her bed. Goosebumps consumed her skin. "What do you mean?"

"You were distraught when you returned. We have never seen anyone like that after meeting with Master."

*Because you were brainwashed*, she thought and quickly donned her clothes on.

Viola pointed at Helena's bed. "May I have a seat?" With a nod from Helena, the woman settled onto the rough mattress. Her manicured hand patted the spot next to her in an inviting manner. "Do you want to talk about last night?"

Helena's lips twitched. She didn't want to talk. She wanted to forget those horrid memories. The only way to do that was by giving Andreaz what he wanted. "No, I don't."

Viola placed her warm hand on Helena's and intertwined their fingers. "We are a family here. You should accept your role as Master's favourite and enjoy yourself. Once he grows tired of you, you can do as you please."

Helena jerked her hand away. This woman was telling her to do what exactly? To play a happy little family with them? "I'm not planning on continuing his demented game!"

"Master will not be pleased with your behaviour."

"I don't give a toss about what Andreaz thinks!" she screamed, her outrage heating her up from within.

"I guess you still need time to accept this." Viola stood and tucked her loose strands of hair behind her ear. "When you wish to talk, I will be here."

The second Viola left the room, Helena jumped off the bed and began pacing. She rubbed her hands together. *There has to be a way out of this prison.* She glanced out the window. The sun was preparing to turn in for the night.

Vampires couldn't go out in direct sunlight. She rushed over to the window. Placing her hands on the dusty windowsill, she peered through the glass. The dust rose up, tickling her nose until the sensation was too much to bear, and she sneezed.

Helena brushed away her damp hair with her fingers. Patches of snow capped the mountains in the distance. They had a handful of cosy houses

decorating their base. The gap between the mansions and safety was as bare as a stone. Exactly as she had remembered, there was nothing taller than two feet between her and civilisation.

She tapped her lips with her index finger. Her heart thumped with excitement and possibilities that flooded her psyche. If she found a way out of the house, she could make it to those houses and call for help. The police could get them and keep her and her parents safe. If she had to, she would prove what Andreaz was to the whole world.

Helena's body tensed. Hannah strolled around the perimeter of the house, bathed in the late afternoon sun. Her movements resembled a military march more than a leisurely walk of a woman.

*How?* Lucious told her vampires couldn't go out in direct sunlight, and Hannah had the strength and the mental powers of one.

She shrank away from the window while her plans of escape shattered. A headache she hadn't noticed previously had made itself known, and she swayed on the spot. She grasped the windowsill for support.

In that moment, a knock sounded against her shields. The energy behind it gave away the identity of the intruder. She sat on the carpet and closed her eyes, visualising her shields. Once she was standing on the chequered floor, she let Lucious in.

Today's encounters all ended in a quarrel, so she didn't bother putting on a smile to greet him.

His blue-brown eyes found her, and he closed the distance between them fast enough to make her catch her breath.

"What happened?" He searched her body with his eyes for anything that could provide him with an answer.

She gave him a strained half-smile. Her lips refused to move into a more cheerful position. As he reached to touch her, she flinched.

"Don't," she whispered.

He ignored her request and pulled her into his arms. Her hands pressed against his chest, taking note that there was no heartbeat. Somehow, that didn't matter to her anymore. Her worries were slipping away in his inflexible embrace.

Lucious drew back. "Tell me."

Helena pushed at his chest, untangling from him. He didn't struggle, and her terrible memories from the previous night re-emerged. Mere hours were not enough time to forget the humiliation and powerlessness she had suffered.

"I don't want to talk about it."

“If you don’t wish to speak of what happened, I won’t ask again, but I must know if you will last until the trial. I will figure out a way for the Council to take back their claim and put you somewhere.”

Her eye twitched. “*Put me somewhere?*” She couldn’t hold back any longer and slapped him across the face.

He glared at her. “Until this bond is broken, I will keep you safe, even if it means locking you up.”

Her mouth fell open as she stared at him in disbelief.

“Helena, it has not been easy.”

“You think it’s been easy for me? The things I’ve been through these past few weeks should never happen to a normal person.” She let out a curse. “I have been kidnapped, tortured, bitten, possessed, and almost raped, and you are telling me that *you* are having problems.”

Her shields hummed loud enough to hurt her head. She was losing the battle. How long would she last? No one seemed to be able to help her. Her hands covered her face, trying to block away the world, to keep her in the darkness that would take away her pain.

Lucious’ fingers brushed her arm. She didn’t fight him as he enveloped her back into his firm hold.

“You must stay strong,” he whispered in her ear.

“Why? So you can exploit me? So you get to live another day?”

They stood there in silence for what appeared to be an eternity.

He unravelled his arms and looked at her. “I will give you my word. If we get out of this alive, I will not force you to do anything. For now, I must go. It’s getting late.”

Rocks settled in the pit of her stomach, weighing it down. She would have to face Andreaz again. Her blood drained from her face, leaving behind a pale representation of a person behind.

Lucious planted a soft kiss on her forehead. “I will find a way out for you.”

As much as she wanted to believe him, her mind protested. She had been shown, again and again, she had no one to rely on. “Goodbye, Lucious.”

Without further ado, she gathered her energy and pushed him out of her shields. Satisfied that he was gone, she let her concentration crumble. She opened her eyes. The room had already been swallowed by the darkness in the absence of sunlight, but the time didn’t matter anymore. She had made her decision.



An hour ticked by at a torturous pace. Her body tensed the instant she heard the front door being unlocked. The furore of excitement from downstairs was loud enough to wake a bear from his winter hibernation.

Helena imagined everyone gathering at the entrance hall to find out who would be the next victim.

Hannah said something. The noise died down, and someone's heels clicked on the staircase as they made their way up. Soon, the door to her prison swung open.

Until now, Helena had an hour to compose herself and appear calm. On the inside, her heart wanted to jump out of her ribcage with its frantic beating. She was in way over her head. She knew it as did everyone she used to put her faith in.

"You are being summoned. Get ready," Hannah barked and stepped into the room. She tossed a black plastic bag along with a small shoebox—that somehow remained closed—by Helena's feet. "Hurry up. I'll wait outside."

Hannah closed the door, leaving Helena to stare at the presents left by Andreaz's servant. She slid off the bed and crouched over them. With a prolonged sigh, she unravelled the plastic to find another cream gown with a low décolletage.

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she put it on. She shivered, realising the dress had no back, and a knot formed at the back of her throat. There was no way she could overpower Andreaz. If she let him brainwash her, she would become like Viola and be happy with anything he does to her.

A tear escaped her, and the door clicked opened again.

"I'm not done yet," Helena said in a shaky voice.

"I'm here to do your make-up, *ma chérie*," Viola chirped.

Hearing Viola's soft voice made Helena turn to face her.

The woman motioned for her to take a seat on the nearest bed.

Complying, Helena did as she was told while Viola opened a silver case she had placed on the bed and rummaged through it until she found what she was looking for. Her fingers skilfully massaged Helena's face, making her wonder who this woman was before she met Andreaz.

"You will be beautiful tonight."

Helena grimaced.

"Why pull such a face? Do you want to get wrinkles?"

Helena held in a pout. Viola was beginning to sound like her mother. The comfort of that thought made her lips tug at the corners. Her smile didn't last long. It faded as soon as it came.

Viola finished her fussing with Helena's face in less than ten minutes. She lifted Helena's chin, turning her face right and left in assessment.

"Stick out your lips like this." Viola puckered her lips.

Disinterested, Helena did the same.

Viola's soft lips collided with hers, and Helena's eyes grew wide. By the time her brain caught up, Viola retreated with a pleasant smile back in place.

"There. They are nice and red and no need for lipstick," the woman said proudly.

"You just—" The rest of the sentence appeared to be stuck in Helena's throat.

"It is a kiss, nothing more than a greeting. *Oui?*"

Helena was dumbfounded. This woman was definitely nothing like her mother.

She wrapped the leather jacket, Hannah not-so-kindly threw at her downstairs, around her body. Even though it was sturdy, the cold managed to get through.

Hannah didn't seem to notice her discomfort, or she didn't care.

Helena's breath formed a misshapen steam curtain. The dark grey clouds overhead promised heavy rain. Being outside when that happened would be a bad idea in this attire. The knot in her stomach expanded. There was no way she was going to be able to cope with what was going to happen tonight.

*Losing my memories may be a good thing after all.* Her next step faltered, almost sending her falling onto the slippery pavement. Once she regained her balance, she voiced muffled curses at the high heels that were forced upon her.

From the entrance, Hannah led her in the different direction of the dining hall. Helena had to will each of her legs to move, one after another, so Hannah wouldn't drag her like a sack of potatoes.

They took a few turns after ascending a curved flight of stairs. The corridors were almost identical in this maze-like mansion.

"*Not like you are going back without an escort,*" her mind retorted.

At the end of the hall was a black ominous door. Red carpet directed her eyes towards it like a tongue guiding food further into the beast's mouth. Her pace slowed as if trying to stall the inevitable.

"Hurry up." Hannah grasped Helena's wrist and propelled her forwards, at the same time, taking Helena's jacket off.

Helena glared at her. Hannah was the only obstacle between her and a way out of this hellhole. She grasped the round golden door handle for support. With a soft click, the door glided open. And, once more, she stood there gaping at the décor.



It was a large bedroom with white and red drapes hanging from the ceiling as well as concealing much of the room. Through the see-through white veils bordering the bed, she found Andreaz propped up on his side.

Helena felt a push from behind, and she stumbled inside. In the gap between the veils, he looked almost human. His golden silk shirt was opened wide enough to show the dark curls covering his chest. She was somewhat relieved to find him dressed and not on display in his birthday suit.

“Well? Come here. I won’t bite.” His eyes gleamed with something dark.

Her body froze in the same manner it had the night before, binding her trembling form to that one spot.

“You can come here or”—he sat up, shifting closer to the edge of the bed—“I can come to you.”

She raised her hand to stop him. *You can do this.* She knew better than to believe her own false assurances. Her body was quivering. Her stomach had been replaced by a solid rock that pressed down on her gut, and she could already feel his energy creeping around her shields, forcing her to feel dizzy.

*One foot at a time,* she thought and edged closer.

The lustful look he shot her made her dinner churn in her stomach. She swallowed a few times to keep from spilling what little food she had eaten on his expensive carpet.

Helena lowered her eyes and felt his presence behind her. His cologne drifted closer while his cold fingertips travelled down her exposed back. She wrapped her arms around her waist to not dodge his touch. Rooted to the spot, she forced her eyes shut, thinking solely of her trembling shields, which were strained under the power battering against them.

*I can’t let him in. Not yet.*

“I waited a long time to get my hands on you,” Andreaz murmured into her ear. He brushed her loose hair to one side and ran his wet tongue down her neck.

Her body reacted by itself. Her heel pierced his bare foot, and he howled in agony. She shuffled away, quickening her pace and leaving a tiny stream of blood on the carpet behind her.

She didn’t get far. His hands grasped her sides, and he flung her onto the bed. She landed on the hard mattress like a broken toy. Her head was in the middle of trying to make sense of how she got there when he climbed on top of her, pinning her to the bed with his body.

“Women must obey their master.” His eyes found hers, inflamed with a scorching red glow.

“Let me go!” she screamed, flailing her arms.

Andreaz grabbed each protesting limb, pressing them against the linen sheets above her head. He was much larger than her. There was little she could do against his inhuman strength, but she wouldn't relent. Why did she ever think she could let him erase her memories?

Her hands were gathered under a single hold. She winced when her wrists were forced to grind against one another.

He slapped her. "I will train you to respect me."

The rough treatment of her skin brought out a pulsating ache in her left cheek. On the tip of her tongue, she tasted blood.

"Soon enough you will be begging for more." He moved his face closer to her neck. His tongue traced a long, slow, wet trail downwards.

Helena raised her upper body, hoping to shake him off. When his fangs grazed her skin, she stilled. Her eyes burned with unshed tears. *Help me. Someone, anyone!*

Nothing happened. Michael didn't come to help her, and she knew Lucious wouldn't be rescuing her anytime soon. She was alone and in the clutches of this monster. It tore at her heart, knowing she had been abandoned by the people she trusted.

His hand slid to her chest, and he fumbled with the golden clip holding the front of her dress together. Andreaz grew frustrated and simply tore the dress off her.

Helena screamed.

Her sight grew blurry, and her shields closed in on her. She couldn't let him have what he wanted. Her mind was hers alone. She didn't want to be like the others in his harem.

Her eyes grew wider when his head moved down to her chest. This was her first time. She didn't want it to be with this creature. Helena whimpered her protest while his other hand found her breast which he grabbed with a bruising hold. She faced away, unable to look at what was happening anymore. Her eyes found a dark figure emerging from the shadows.

"*Having fun?*" Lazarus' voice slithered around her mind.

Helena tugged at her arms, trying to free her wrists.

Andreaz's hand clamped her down, cutting off the blood supply and numbing her fingertips.

Through watering eyes, she focused on Lazarus as Andreaz bit into her breast.

"*I could free you,*" the demon said. "*You know what I want.*"

Helena couldn't think. Her shields were about to fall apart as was her sanity. If she made the deal with him now, she would be saved from Andreaz. She

would live.

*You would lose your soul*, she reminded herself.

Andreaz fought to spread her legs, and she screamed again, her voice hoarse with exhaustion.

Lazarus sighed. *"No one will help you but me. They have abandoned you, left you for this creature to take."*

*What can I do? What would anyone else in my place do?* The deal Lazarus was offering her was too tempting. If only her lips would move.

Lazarus stepped closer and smiled a sharp-toothed smile. "You are running out of time."

Andreaz managed to pry her legs open, and his hand trailed up her thigh.

"No!" she wailed.

Lazarus sat on the edge of the bed, not making a single dent in the mattress. *"You will be raped and devoured, my flower. Your soul tarnished by this beast. Is that what you want?"*

Helena shook her head.

*"You know what you must do."*

Her legs and arms ached from fighting the vampire. Her mental shields violently shook under the strain of his energy.

Andreaz lifted her lower body and began positioning himself between her legs.

"I can't," she cried out.

*"You are a stubborn woman. To prove to you that I'm on your side, I will give you a gift,"* he said and vanished.

Her mind blanked. She felt her shoulder burning with dark energy. It seeped into her body, giving her knowledge she hadn't possessed before.

She stopped struggling.

Andreaz paused and gauged her reaction. "Why the change of heart?"

She trailed her tongue over her lower lip seductively. The measured action let her know it had a cut because of a sudden sting that followed. "I realised that since I am here, I may as well enjoy myself. If you loosen the grip, I can play, too."

For a moment, he seemed to consider her offer while searching her face. He released her, sending pins and needles through her hands when blood flow returned to her fingertips.

Helena wrapped her legs around his waist. The action summoned a groan from him.

She smiled.

*It will be alright.* She took his face into her hands, guiding him towards her lips. Their mouths collided. His long dark hair brushed against her swollen cheek. She hadn't expected him to be so eager when his tongue found its way into her mouth. Clutching at his long curls, she fought back the disgust that came with his touch.

Tension left his shoulders. His cool hand went down to her thighs, and she feigned a few moans to play along. Once she was certain she had a strong enough hold on his body, she concentrated on his energy. Within him, she sensed it dancing like a bright red flame. She extended her energy towards it, winding it around the flame and trapping it in the thick vines.

She pulled, but his life-force struggled against her. It was determined to remain where it was. She persisted and tugged it into her body through their kiss. After a few more pulls, his energy flowed willingly. It ran down her throat and settled in her.

Andreaz's body shook and his muscles deteriorated. His eyes shot open, but there was no light left in them. When he wanted to pull away, it was already too late. She had taken more than enough of his energy to paralyse him.

The skin on his face sank into the crevices of his skull. While the skin around his eyelids shrivelled, his eyes continued getting bigger. The horrifying image made her want to stop.

She mentally kicked herself. If she didn't finish this, he could be saved. She couldn't allow him to get away.

When a single drop of energy remained, she paused, realising she was taking someone's life.

*"Finish it,"* Lazarus ordered.

*"He will die if I do this!"*

*"It is you or him. Which is more important to you?"*

Leaving her qualms behind, she dragged the last drop across. She pushed away the husk of what used to be Andreaz and rolled off the bed. His body crumbled to dust seconds later.

*Something's wrong.*

The new energy wouldn't settle down. Her body convulsed, and her face met with the carpet.

*"Lucious,"* she summoned him with her remaining will.

*"Helena?"* His voice soothed the hammering of the wild energy a little.

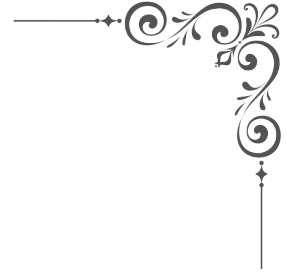
*"Lower your shields,"* she begged.

He hesitated but did what she asked. Once there was a large enough gap, she grasped the link and ejected Andreaz's energy out of her body and into the string.

*“I’m sorry,”* she said to him and shut her shields.

Her eyes focused on a pair of polished heels. Helena rolled her eyes skyward and discovered Hannah standing there, petrified. She stared at the remains of her master on the bed. She didn’t touch Helena. The woman didn’t say anything and stormed out of the bedroom.

Helena’s body refused to move. Her arms and legs were too weak after absorbing so much energy. She burst into uncontrollable laughter mixed with tears. In spite of what she had been through, she still couldn’t get away.



## 21

# NEW POWER

Lucious drummed his fingers on the desk in his room. *How could I have been such a fool?* The Council was behind it all. More importantly, where were his blood-brother and sisters? Not one of Anna's children could be found anywhere in Europe. It was as if they had disappeared, or were taken out by the Council. He formed his hand into a fist and slammed it against the desk. He was the last one left in Europe, and Eliza wanted him to come to his "trial" in two weeks.

A shudder rushed through him. Helena's emotions were stirring again. She had become more unsettled these past two days. If he had known their situation would become so convoluted, he would have had his fill of her blood and left.

He closed his eyes.

Alexander's sources had notified him she had left Vincent's residence to stay with Andreaz—a man with a long history of abuse. Tonight was the second night. He could feel her panic creeping over their connection. Her soul-chilling fear made the string tremble between them like a leaf in a storm.

Lucious let out a breath. Helena's human emotions were clouding his mind when he wished to concentrate on something else. He had wasted too much of his energy maintaining his mental shields—energy that could have been used to make him stronger. Even his sleep was disturbed by her constant agitation.

*How many miles do I need to put between us to not be able to feel her?*

Lucious buried his face in his hands. *What am I doing?*

Having spent most of his life avoiding any serious relationships, what drove him to sacrifice such an ideal and bind himself to a mortal?

He ran his hands through his hair. There had to be a way to separate them. The last time he saw her, she was a child who had lived a sheltered life. Over the weeks, her image in her mental shields had grown older. It was foolish of him to

vow he would keep her safe when he couldn't even protect his friends. She didn't belong in his world, saint or no.

"There has to be a way to snap the link..."

"*Lucious*," Helena's pain-stricken voice sounded in his head.

He leant back in his chair. "*Helena?*"

"*Lower your shields.*" She sounded tired, exhausted even.

*What happened to her since our talk? Did Andreaz hurt her?* Whatever it was, he had no choice. Any harm to her would make him weaker, and he needed his strength. He concentrated on shattering his shields and felt the energy around his body retreating into his shell. A moment later, when they were gone, he felt the string buzzing with excitement.

"*I'm sorry...*"

Her end of the connection closed, and he knew something was wrong. An influx of power travelled down the soul-bond towards him. He couldn't begin to guess how much there was.

Lucious thought of closing his shields and paused. Doing so would send it back between them, making them both suffer. No, he had to get himself under control. He was not someone who backed away from a bit of pain.

He clutched the armrests, bracing for impact, as a wave of wild energy slammed into him hard enough to make him double over in agony. His jaws clenched shut, and his fingers dug deeper into the leather.

"So much...power."

The energy felt like it was setting his insides on fire—a fire that kept burning brighter as more of it seeped into him. He wouldn't last much longer if it continued.

He slid to the ground, weak from the ordeal. His body jerked from another wave that crawled beneath his skin. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, and he struggled to think.

With his last bit of strength, he dragged himself to the bed across the room. He crawled onto the mattress, grabbing at the sheets with quivering hands. Drained from the task, he relaxed, allowing for the energy to absorb and merge with his own. Whatever Helena did to get this would surely bite them in the posterior.



"Lucious, get up!" Alexander shouted, banging on the door.

Lucious stirred in bed, exhausted from the energy transfer.

The wood that held the door in place screeched as the whole frame fell at Alexander's feet.

Lucious blinked a few times. What could be going on to wind his friend up so much?

“Get up already!” Alexander shouted.

Sluggishly, Lucious sat up, his body swaying.

“I’ve been trying to wake you for the past twenty minutes!”

Lucious’ hand shot to his forehead. A pulsating headache proceeded to cause him discomfort and Alexander’s loud voice did nothing to soothe it. “What’s the matter?”

Alexander rolled his eyes. “Do you want the good or the bad news?”

He swung his legs off the bed and massaged his temples. “I don’t care.”

With a nod, his friend paced around the bed. “Your human somehow managed to kill Andreaz last night. She was transported to London, and the trial is tomorrow.”

Lucious’ hand fell away from his face. Uncertain if he had heard him right, he stared at Alexander. “Come again?”

“She killed Andreaz for God’s sake.”

His mind raced. That would explain the influx of energy and the panic she felt last night. “How?”

“Perhaps she was a saint all along and finally cracked. Not surprised, though. Andreaz must have put her through hell, or worse.” The excitement in Alexander’s voice subsided. “But this also means Eliza will destroy her.”

“I have to go.” Lucious climbed to his feet, taking a moment to find his balance. The thirst burned the back of his throat. He needed to feed as soon as possible. He wouldn’t get far in the state he was in right now.

Alexander stepped in his way, his eyes full of confusion and disbelief. “Have you gone mad? They will kill you both. Why do you care if she lives or dies?”

“I have no choice!” Lucious drew in a calming breath. Alexander didn’t know about their connection, and Lucious didn’t have time to stand there explaining it for hours.

“You do have a choice. Stay here and watch the fireworks.”

“I have to go,” he said firmly, shifting his weight from one leg to another to get across the room.

His friend caught his arm and turned Lucious to face him. “Why are you acting like this?”

Lucious hated feeling helpless or weak. He glared at Alexander with intent to kill. Friend or foe, no one was going to stop him once he made a decision.

Alexander’s eyes widened, yet he kept his grip in place.

Cursing under his breath, Lucious knew if it came to a fight Alexander would win because of his present state. He couldn’t even stand on his own two



feet without looking like a human drunk.

“Tell me what’s going on, and I will let you go.”

Lucious drew in a laboured breath. “Helena and I are soul-bound.”

Alexander’s dark brows drew together. “What does that mean?”

“It’s a long story. In short, if she dies so do I.”

Deep laughter erupted from Alexander. When his eyes scanned Lucious’ face, the mirth died in his throat. His eyes narrowed. “You crazy bastard. Why on earth did you agree to something like that?”

*Why indeed?* He had been asking himself that same question since the link became a problem instead of a device to track the saint. Not willing to provide any more information on the matter, he brought his gaze to Alexander’s hand that was restraining him. “If you understand my situation, then let me go.”

Alexander withdrew his hand. “Fine, you can tell me the embarrassing details on the way there.”

Lucious swung around to face him. “You are not coming. This is my problem, not yours.”

Alexander grinned. “What are friends for?”

Lucious wasn’t certain where this illogical comradery came from. Defying the Council was the same as breaking one of the few laws they had. Alexander was playing a gamble with his life. He shook his head. No wonder he named his favourite club after a game of chance. “Do as you wish.”

“Let us feed first. I have some pretty ladies waiting for me outside.” Alexander hopped over the door frame that lay at their feet.

Lucious’ throat burned with the thirst at the promise of being sated. He fought the urge that was more animal than man. Hatred for vampiric nature overrode his need to feed. It had taken him years to become a master of his thirst, and he was not going to begin giving into it now.

He started after Alexander. At first, he managed to walk at a human pace which his friend pretended not to notice.

Near the front entrance of the warehouse, Lucious grabbed his jacket off the coat hanger. As much as he didn’t want to be seen by the others, he heard footsteps drawing near. He shot Alexander a questioning look, and his friend shrugged and placed a smile on his face as Zafira’s voice grew louder.

She sashayed into the room, clinging to Andrew’s arm. Lucious’ lips tugged into a faint smile. The kid was in for more than he could imagine if he were to give in to her.

“You look like shit, Lucious. Did your partner get too rough with you last night?” Zafira asked.

“Something like that.”

“Where are you going?” Andrew asked.

Lucious had to hand it to the kid. He would make a good informant because of his suspicious nature.

Alexander shrugged on his coat and faced Andrew. “We have some business to attend to. Have you finished with the accounts?”

Andrew gave him a curt nod. “Tanya has them.”

Zafira looked from Alexander to Lucious. A silent second passed, and she pushed Andrew in the direction of the living room.

“I’ll stay here and babysit,” she told them.

Lucious held back an urge to question whether she had seen the outcome of their endeavour and watched her and the kid leave.



Outside the converted warehouse awaited three young brunettes in large fur coats that engulfed most of their bodies. Lucious took in a whiff of the air. November was here as was the thick smell of burned coal, permeating through an overpowering mixture of feminine perfume. The one good thing about being already dead was that the chill no longer bothered him.

“Girls, meet my good friend, Lucious,” Alexander said.

Two girls gave Lucious an appraising look. They draped themselves on his arms, giddy with laughter as if they were in on some kind of joke.

Their young hearts pumped blood beneath their skin, tempting him to sample them. His fangs extended and his hunger fought for control of his body. He glanced at Alexander. Without his approval, it would be rude to indulge in his dinner.

Alexander was already too busy enjoying his meal. The metallic scent of blood reached Lucious, and he took that as permission. He lowered his face to the first girl’s neck.

She brushed her silky hair aside, exposing her soft, milky flesh.

Unable to restrain his instincts any longer, he bit into her—a simple action that summoned a loud moan from the girl.

Manipulating his dinner’s emotions came naturally. He willed her heart to pump quicker, making her pulse rise as if she were kissing a lover she had not seen in years. His energy reached her mind, and he induced warmth and pleasure to course through her while rich, coppery liquid slid down his parched throat. He greedily swallowed it and sucked harder.

The other girl tugged on his arm. “Me too. Don’t forget about me.”

Reluctant, he pulled away from the human’s neck and bit into her friend. This one was a smoker. Her blood tasted slightly sour. He took no more than a

mouthful from her and bit into the pad of his thumb. He pressed it to the marks on their necks, smearing his blood on the raw surface of the bite. By the time he finished, their blood had absorbed into his system. He never felt better. The energy from last night had accepted him as its master and was buzzing throughout his body. He grinned. Whether his mirth came from the intoxicating effect of the blood or something else, he wasn't certain.

"Let's go. We don't have much time." Alexander's voice brought him back to reality.

Shaking the dazed women off, the men got in Alexander's car, which was parked in the driveway.

"What about us?" one of the girls shouted after them.

Alexander lowered the window. "Wait inside until someone comes to pick you up, my darlings."

Lucious raised a questioning brow. "Since when do you care whether they live or freeze out here?"

Alexander shrugged, easing the car out of the driveway and onto the road. "Since when do you link souls with a human?"

They grinned at one another like two mischievous children.

"Touché, old friend."



As Alexander sped towards the airport, Lucious stared out the window at the passing cars and, upon occasion, bright lights illuminating the motorway.

*I must be insane.* Not once in his existence did he imagine he would go to the Council without being dragged there by the neck. But then, never did he think he would share an unbreakable bond with a human or whatever Helena was. Humans were disposable. Or so he kept telling himself since he became a vampire. No. It was since his mother turned away from him after his father's death.

Alexander broke the silence between them. "I don't know if I should be saying this, but I don't think there will be a better time. My acquaintances in Rouen had a look for Pierre. They found his remains in a warehouse a few miles from his home."

Lucious balled his hands. He and Pierre had their disagreements since Anna's murder. They could never be in the same room without a fist fight starting. Yet, finding out his blood-brother was dead charged his anger towards Eliza.

"And the others?" Lucious asked through gritted teeth.

"No news. Don't know if that is a good or a bad thing, though."

Lucious faced away and stared at the passing lights. Why was it that even with the news of his blood-brother's death, he could think of nothing other than protecting *her*?



Changed and seated in Alexander's jet, Lucious watched him tap away an e-mail on his laptop. A low notification sound escaped from the speakers, and Alexander's eyes scanned the screen with a deepening frown.

One look at Alexander's sorry expression was enough for Lucious. "I don't think I want more news from you."

"I am not surprised, but this concerns you."

Lucious grunted. "Let me guess, Eliza wants to advance my trial process?"

"She is eager to get her hands on you. The fact we are going to her may as well be the craziest thing you have done."

Lucious thought about Alexander's words. "I believe tying my life to Helena's precedes that."

"Why do it in the first place? She is an unknown, and I don't trust her."

"I did it because the first link told me where she was. I thought, this time, it would be the same." Lucious shrugged. "Guess I was mistaken."

"You are taking this far better than I anticipated."

Lucious was also confused by his calm demeanour. He should be afraid or angry. Any emotion other than calm would fit this situation. Yet, why did the thought of seeing her summon such peace in him?

"I guess I am," Lucious replied.

Alexander eyed him with suspicion.

"What?"

"I thought I was wrong at first, but I can sense it. When did you get so much raw energy?" Alexander inquired.

"Last night."

Alexander raised a brow. "And where did it come from?"

Lucious crossed his arms over his chest. The energy was buzzing inside of him, wishing to be used. "From the same person we are trying to rescue."

"From *her*?" Alexander's brows shot up in disbelief. He opened his mouth and closed it again. With a shrug, he said, "For once, I'm speechless."

A pleasant female voice announced over the intercom that the plane was about to land at Heathrow Airport. They had less than six hours before the night was over.

Lucious rested his head against the headrest and closed his eyes. They were about to break into the Council holding cells, rescue a prisoner, and do what

exactly? He did the only thing he could think of. He prayed that luck was on their side.



They stood at Phil's back-alley entrance. His trouble seemed to begin and end with a visit to this information broker.

Lucious cleared his throat and knocked three times on the metal door, shouting, "Phil, open up!"

When nothing happened, Lucious glanced at Alexander who shrugged. "I sent him an e-mail. He's usually prompt to check them."

Lucious knocked once more, loud enough so that the stray cat from a box a dozen feet away scrambled for safety. The mechanical sound of the locks on the other side stopped him from continuing the battering on the door. He took a step back when the third lock was being unlocked.

The door creaked open, and Phil stood there in navy pyjamas. He stroked the head of a white Persian cat. "What is it now?"

"It would be nice if you invited us in first," Alexander said.

Phil glowered at them. "And why should I? You two are insane. I don't need insanity in my house."

"We do not have much time," Lucious said.

Phil shot him a stern look and stepped aside, allowing them to enter. "Don't expect free blood and whores, Alexander."

Alexander chuckled. "Why? Do I get them here if I pay? Plus, I believe I have had more than enough of that before our arrival."

Shaking his head, Lucious closed the door behind them and reached for the first lock when Phil grasped his hand with his bony fingers. "Leave it unlocked. One more person has yet to arrive."

"And who would that be?" Alexander asked.

Phil set the feline on the ground. "Your way in."

"The only people who can get us inside are working for Eliza," Lucious said. "No one would be daft enough to go against her."

"He is not under her command per se." Phil waved for them to follow. "He's more of a freeloader."

They trooped through the small white door to the right of the office desk and scaled the stairs that seemed too small for one man to fit. Lucious' shoulders brushed against the wall, leaving white smudges on his jacket.

"It's hard to imagine someone Eliza doesn't control," Alexander muttered behind Lucious.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Phil opened another door, and they filed into a cosy living room. A brownish sofa with frayed cushions, a ceiling-high bookcase overstuffed with folders, and half a dozen stacked wooden chairs in the corner were claiming most of the space.

“Come. Sit,” Phil offered.

Alexander scanned the room with evident distaste. “I think I’ll stand.”

The informant dismissed his comment with a flick of his hand. “I wasn’t asking you.”

“I guess I will sit,” Lucious said. Not like they would all fit if he remained where he was. He crammed into a seat next to Phil. The cat found its way into the room and jumped onto its owner’s lap. “So, who are we waiting for?”

“Someone you will not like, I’m certain.”

Alexander snorted as he rested his side against the bookcase. He crossed his arms. “Wouldn’t that be you?”

“Your smart mouth will dig you a grave one day,” Phil retorted.

“I am already dead. What’s there to be scared of?”

Lucious cleared his throat. “Before you two decide it’s wise to exchange blows, I believe our mystery guest has arrived.”

A towering, cloaked figure entered the room. The man had to bend his head to fit in the door frame. Black dreadlocks ran down his broad shoulders, over the wide chest, and touched the tip of his round belly. The power emanating from this being was close to that of a Council member.

Lucious shifted closer to the edge of his seat, ready to spring up in case this was a trap.

Alexander’s laid-back act also seemed to become more strained as he stared at Phil’s guest.

“Welcome, Ghoul Master,” Phil said with a smile.

Lucious jerked into a standing position. Any wish to continue the conversation with this being was soon dismissed once the man’s title rang in his head like an alarm bell.

“Sit down, Lucious. He’s here to help,” Phil said in a low drone.

It was enough to give Lucious a warning not to do anything stupid. He ground his teeth together, and Ghoul Master lowered his hood with bandaged fingers. Rumours in the vampire community said that for every masterless ghoul he tamed, he had to feed it a part of his flesh that never regenerated.

A pair of crimson eyes stared back at him, fuelling Lucious’ urge to get out of the tiny space. The old vampire’s face had many white scars on his olive skin, distorting his original features. A large scar ran horizontally across his face, from one ear to the next, as if someone was close to cutting his head in half.

“You must be the infamous Lucious Ellwood, *childe* of ‘The Demon’,” Ghoul Master said with a deep baritone that bounced off the four walls.

“She had a name!” Lucious snarled.

Ghoul Master tilted his head to one side as if contemplating if Lucious was someone he should take seriously. He looked at Phil who was dwarfed by the height of everyone else.

“It was a mistake resting our hopes in your hands, Phil,” Alexander said.

Phil pointed to the corner of the room. “Be a good lad and get a chair for Master.”

Alexander raised a brow but didn’t say a word. The silence was filled with the creaking of floorboards under Alexander’s weight as he crossed the room and came back.

Lucious kept his eyes on Master. He didn’t trust anyone who worked for the Council without being forced into it, especially someone who had over twenty ghouls at his beck and call.

Dumping the chair next to the elder, Alexander retreated to the bookcase. Lucious noted that he, too, seemed unhappy with the arrangement, yet he wasn’t voicing further objections.

“Sit down, Lucious,” Phil said.

Lucious eyed Ghoul Master and Phil. His mind remained undecided. Seconds ticked by. He bit back a curse and collapsed into his seat.

Master managed to sit down with grace even though the wooden chair creaked under his weight. Out of the corner of his eye, Lucious saw Alexander’s lips curve.

“I hear you want to rescue a damsel from Eliza’s clutches. Is that true?” Master asked.

Lucious glared at Phil who absent-mindedly stroked his cat’s fur. “She is someone of no importance.”

Master clicked his tongue. “If she was of no importance to you, we would not be here.”

“Just tell him what you need,” Phil urged.

Lucious rested his elbows on his knees. “I heard Ghoul Master never does a deed out of goodwill.”

“You’ve heard right,” Master replied with a faint smile. “Now speak your terms, and I will name my price.”

“It is never easy with you Council freaks. What happened to comradery?” Alexander grumbled.

“You speak of friendship but, in truth, you—a man of business—would do the same.”

Lucious ran his hand through his hair. There was little time left to find their way into the holding cells without an insider's help. Who knows how long they had till Eliza decided to take Helena's head? "Alright. I need to get a human out without anyone noticing. Is that possible?"

Master rested his hands on his belly. "Not a human, I am assured. To take Andreaz's life in a lover's embrace is a skill no human possesses."

"Perhaps she was better than he'd hoped," Alexander added.

Lucious struggled with the urge to plant his fist in Alexander's face. "Fine. Not a human. We are uncertain as to what she is."

Master stared at him with the eyes that burned into Lucious. "I don't care for such matters. Her existence merely piqued my interest. I only wish I could see Eliza's face when she hears the news of an escape." He traced his fingers over his bandages. "I can permit you entry through the delivery entrance preceding the trial. At such a time, most of the guards will be posted at other entrances."

"So, you won't help us once we're inside?" Lucious asked.

Master nodded.

"And what would be the price for such cooperation?"

"If a time arises when I am in need of your assistance, you will answer my call without question. A simple transaction I believe."

"So, if your request is to go and jump into a pit of silver stakes, he has to do it?" Alexander asked.

"Not a request I would make, but, yes, that is what I ask," Master replied.

Lucious sat back in his seat. He glanced at Alexander who was shaking his head with disapproval. The time was slipping away. Owing a favour to the Ghoul Master of the Vampire Council would be something he was certain would be a mistake. Yet, his options were limited. It was either that or being turned to dust when Helena's head rolled off her shoulders.

"Fine," Lucious said.

"There must be another way!" Alexander snapped.

"The offer is fair, Alexander," Phil cut in. "If everything you mentioned in the e-mail was to be believed."

Master rose. His head was a mere inch away from touching the ceiling when he straightened his posture. He reached into his robe and retrieved a folded piece of paper. "Here are the directions to the entrance. Eliza likes to begin her trials at sunset. I suggest you arrive on time."

Lucious accepted the note. "Just keep your end of the bargain."

"I always do and hope you do the same," Master said and left the room.

Lucious and Alexander glared at Phil. The man seemed to shrink into his sofa under their intense stares.



“You were the ones who gave me an impossible task to solve!”

Alexander sighed. “It’s fine as long as we don’t have to sit through another negotiation with that degenerate. I swear I will be surprised if he doesn’t double-cross us.”

“Master keeps his word,” Phil said, “but I must warn you, Lucious, if you don’t do as he says, you will be flayed until you beg him to take your life.”

“Sounds almost romantic,” Alexander muttered.

Lucious was dead tired. He marched out of the room. Some fresh air and a bottle or two of good whisky would help him clear his mind.



Several hours passed and hope began budding inside of him. They found a way in and could remain unnoticed. All that was left to do was to get Helena out of there.

He glanced at Alexander who was on his third cup of coffee. His smile faltered. “Are you certain you want to come along? This is a one-way trip.”

“What kind of friend would I be if I abandoned you here?”

“A living one.”

Alexander shot him a half-smile and flopped onto the unfolded wooden chair. “I always wanted to go out with a bang. If my story is ever told, I would be the guy who helped a criminal get into the Council and took on Eliza. My grave would have more visitors than Elvis’.”

Lucious couldn’t help but laugh at the outrageous thoughts his companion voiced. He had little time left to explain to Alexander how much his friendship meant to him. Alone, this task seemed almost impossible.

“What will we do about weapons?” Lucious asked.

Alexander seemed thoughtful for a moment. “If worse comes to worst, I believe it would be in our best interest to go unarmed.”

Lucious rubbed his tired eyes. “That’s suicidal.”

“If we go in unarmed and get caught, we can say we came to sort out the details of the trial and got lost. On the other hand, if we burst in with weapons... Well, we may as well shoot ourselves in the foot now.”

“If I was a hound, I would shoot anyway.”

“Then take a knife or two. No guns.”

Stretching out on the sofa, Lucious rested his head on the armrest. “Get some sleep, Alexander. Tomorrow we will need our energy.”

“I can’t disagree with that.” Alexander pulled out another chair from the stack, and placed it next to the first, making a makeshift bed. “I think I know what I’m getting Phil the next time I want to trade information with him.”

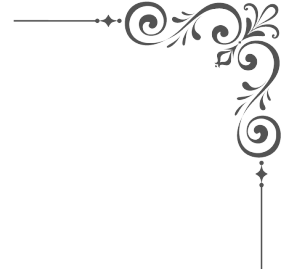


Lucious stared at the chipped, dark ceiling. His friend had fallen asleep some time ago, and he contemplated leaving Alexander behind. He could go to the location alone in case this was a trap designed by Eliza but knew this was not what Alexander wanted.

So many things had happened today. Alexander turned out to be a better friend than he deserved. Lucious was willing to burst into the Council and rescue a human woman he convinced to create a link with him out of curiosity and greed. What bothered him most was that the dark shadow around his mental barriers hadn't left. The creature that marked her was after their souls.

Lucious held in his laughter as it was laughable that he had a soul to begin with. He was a predator, an evil being that lived for an unnatural amount of time, feeding off humans—nothing more than a demon of a different kind.

His thoughts returned to the job at hand. If luck was on their side, and they did manage to get out alive, he'd be stuck with her until they found a way to destroy the bond. Eliza's hounds would track them wherever they would go, and he would protect her as he had promised. That thought did not bother him as much as he thought it would.



## 22

# LIGHT AND DARK

Helena couldn't tell how much time had passed since Hannah left. The tingling in her limbs told her she was regaining control of them but moving her legs remained troublesome. At least, her arms obeyed, so she used them as support and propped herself up against the bed.

With Andreaz's life energy out of her body, an unyielding chill clung to her. Her skin had populated with gooseflesh. She ran her hands over her arms to bring back some of the warmth she had lost. Taking her time, she scanned the room. She mulled over whether she should wrap the bedsheets around her. That idea dissipated as soon as she remembered Andreaz's remains rested on them.

Her dress laid discarded a few feet away from her. Moving to retrieve it was an impossible feat in her current state.

She heard an approaching march of booted feet. Her right hand covered her chest when two strangers, dressed in dark coats, stormed in with Hannah at their heel.

A bald vampire with a crooked nose took one look at her and the bed. His dark brows skyrocketed. "The ghoul spoke the truth."

"Gather the remains," his partner said in an authoritative tone. He strode over to where Helena sat and knelt down. A strand of silver hair escaped from his ponytail, swaying in front of his youthful face. He reminded her of a younger version of Vincent.

"Are you responsible for this?" his voice was soft, almost caring.

Helena's throat was as dry as a desert. She tried squeezing the syllables out. When no sound left her lips, she gave an awkward nod.

The vampire raised a brow and surveyed the room with his green eyes.

Holding her breath, her attention jumped between the two strangers. She had admitted to murdering a Council member and, in the state she was in, it was

impossible for her to get away. She forced her legs closer to her chest as if shrinking in on herself would help her become invisible to their judging stares.

The silver-haired man pointed to the discarded material lying next to the bed. "Pass me the dress, Norton."

Norton grumbled something unintelligible and tossed the dress over with a jerk of his wrist. The thin piece of clothing was caught by the second stranger safe of it hitting her head.

"I'm not here to do her laundry. You might be in charge today, Levile, but that won't always be the case," Norton growled and returned to gathering the ashes into a small plastic bag.

The tension in the room was almost palpable. Helena looked at Hannah who remained standing by the door with her eyes fixed on the bed. There was no emotion on her face. If she hadn't witnessed the woman moving a short while ago, she would think her to be a wax figure.

Levile raised the dress above her head. "Allow me."

Helena eyed him with suspicion. There was no reason for him to behave like a gentleman. She found that she, even with her legs closer to her body, hadn't warmed one bit. There was no point in fighting him. She would be the one to get hurt in the end. Lifting her arms, she slipped into the torn material.

Helena didn't dare guess what was going to happen next. There was bound to be some kind of penalty for the death of a Councilman. Why hadn't these vampires taken her life? *What are they waiting for?*

Once Norton finished gathering the ashes, he strode over to Hannah. "I'll take the ghoul and finish up with the other house."

"Do as you see fit," Levile replied. "I'll take care of the suspect."

Norton grabbed hold of Hannah's upper arm and jerked her towards the door, making the woman stumble after him. She didn't protest or make a sound at the sudden rough treatment.

Levile rose to his full height which wasn't much more than Helena's.

Closing her eyes, she waited for the final blow that would end this torment once and for all. When none came, she stole a peek to find his amused expression.

He offered his hand to her. "Can you stand?"

She shifted her weak legs. The chance of her being able to stand without help was close to zero. She shook her head, her loose locks falling over her eyes.

Levile undid his coat and wrapped it around her shoulders.

Trying to comprehend his kindness, she looked at the dark material covering her as if it was a foreign matter to this world.

He lifted her with little effort. “You should rest. We will arrive in London soon enough.”

Wholeheartedly, she had to agree. She couldn’t remember the last time she was in the comfort of her own bed. Helena blinked a few times. Each time, his face grew hazier until she saw a colourless dream.



The hum of the engine woke her up. How long had she been sleeping for? Her body rocked on something that smelt of old leather. A cold feel of metal restraints on her wrists told her she was treated as a prisoner.

When she peeled open her eyes, she was in the back of a van. Hannah and Levile sat in the seats across from her. Hannah’s hands were also bound with large metal bracelets.

Helena moved her head around until she was able to see Levile better. He appeared indifferent as he sat there, scribbling something in his notebook with a plastic ballpoint pen.

Hannah remained unchanged with the same blank look on her face she had at the mansion. Her usually immaculate hair was a mess of blonde waves covering the front of her face like a web.

Fine hairs at the back of Helena’s neck stood to attention. Levile, although was busy writing, was definitely taking notice of her movements.

“Where are we?” Helena asked in a grating voice.

“Look outside,” Levile said.

Moving around had become much easier for her. Her arms and legs were functional after her rest and no longer trembled. She stole a peek out the tinted window, and her jaw came undone. She stared at the London’s empty, street-lit office blocks. They were already here, too fast to give her any comfort. “Why London?”

“This is where you will be trialled and judged for your crime by the remaining Council members,” Levile informed her matter-of-factly.

A tiny ray of hope budded inside of her. Vincent would be there. She needed to talk to him and convince him that what she did was in self-defence.

They drove through the isolated streets and arrived at a dead-end of an alley. Two metal gates blocked their path.

Helena lifted her eyes to assess the structure. It appeared to be a normal office building. Scattered lights on upper floors indicated a couple of employees had remained behind to finish their paperwork. She frowned. This was not what she expected the Council to look like.

*Where are the gargoyles and hordes of vampires?*

Norton rolled down the window and stretched out his long, tanned arm covered in tattoos which consisted of numbers and names. His beefy fingers assaulted the intercom button.

After a loud beep, a female voice flowed through the speaker. "Name and ID?"

"Norton Sills, number two-three-eight-one-seven."

Leville bent over the seat.

His partner grunted at the sudden closeness.

Dismissing Norton's obvious displeasure, Leville moved closer to the speaker. His words came out clear and concise. "Leville Frost, number one-one-seven-eight-four."

There was a sound of quick typing, and the woman approved their return. The gates languidly unlocked, allowing Norton to proceed.

They descended a few levels and parked in what appeared to be a half-empty underground car park.

Norton turned in his seat and looked at Leville. "I'll take the ghoul to the GM. You can deal with the witch by yourself."

*There it is. That 'ghoul' word again.* From college, the myth she recalled about them was that they feasted upon dead human flesh. She cringed, imagining Hannah chomping on someone's limp leg.

As if being controlled with a remote control, Hannah opened the back door and climbed out without as much as a word. Her movements had lost their fluidity and became rigid and unsure. She stood there with her eyes fixed on the ground.

Norton killed the engine and clambered out of the vehicle. Striding over to the ghoul, he grabbed Hannah's upper arm roughly. When no protest came from her, he dragged her towards the lifts.

Helena couldn't help but be grateful she was leaving here with Leville and not his partner.

Leville indicated for Helena to get out.

Careful not to trip, she made her way out of the van. With her hands handcuffed like that of a criminal, the situation was becoming more real by the second. She set her feet on the tarmac and smiled at Leville who outright ignored her.

They took one of the lifts to floor 'B2'. He hadn't once tried forcing her to follow him. Instead, he led the way, stopping occasionally, which allowed her to catch up with his stride. Sometimes, she caught a look of wonder on his face. That short-lived expression never remained there long enough for her to be certain.

With long, winding corridors behind them, Levile paused at a key panel on the wall. He typed in a four-digit code, and the wall slid to one side, revealing a white corridor lined with prison-like glass-and-steel cells.

Helena stopped in her tracks. Were they going to jail her until they decided on what to do? She didn't want to stay here.

She took an unintentional step back.

Levile observed her, his face impassive. "You may enter by yourself or I can carry you in. It is your choice."

She bit her lip and examined the bright corridor which, to her dismay, revealed nothing else. With nerves twisting her stomach, she trailed after him. Her eyes lingered on the occupied cells in which vampires lay on metal benches. Their hungry stares tracked her.

She quickened her pace, desperate not to be left behind.

Levile stopped abruptly, making her bump into his back. His hands grasped her shoulders, steadying her. "Depending on how urgent the Council sees the matter, you will remain here until someone comes for you."

"Can I speak with Vincent?"

The look of complete outrage spread across his face as soon as she uttered Vincent's name. "Preposterous!"

None too gently, he pushed her into the nearest empty cell. He fished out a key from his trousers' pocket, undid the locks on her handcuffs, and dialled some numbers on the keypad. A glass door slithered across, and Levile stormed away without as much as a glance back.

Helena stared at the place where he stood a moment ago. Her mouth was wide open with shock at the sudden change in his behaviour. Why would asking for Vincent summon forth such a reaction?

*Vampires are like Pandora's Box, she thought, you never know what to do or say around them.* Sighing, she slumped on the metal bench.

"At least, they were kind enough to give me an en-suite," she muttered when she saw a toilet through another glass door.

Helena heaved a sigh. She no longer had any of her belongings. They remained behind at Andreaz's home. There was nothing she could do here to pass the time.

A shuffling noise from the other side of the wall told her she wasn't alone.

"Hello?" She stood and pressed her ear to the cold steel barrier.

"I can hear your fluttering heartbeat, little girl. That's music to my ears," a merry, male voice came from the other side.

Helena jerked away. She wasn't planning on being too close to a prisoner, even if the walls here appeared sturdy enough to contain an elephant.

“Scared you off already? My deepest apologies for that. Tell me, what’re you in for?”

Helena contemplated whether she should talk to him. She nibbled on her dry and aching lower lip. There wasn’t much else to do here.

“You aren’t going to ignore me, are you? Sure, I sound hoarse, but that’s ‘cause I’ve not eaten in...” He paused and added, “six days.”

“I’m sorry. I’m Helena, and you are?”

“Is that manners I hear? I like you already. You can call me Karl. Well then, what they got you in here for, kiddo?”

“I killed Andreaz.”

Karl burst out laughing. Once he managed to contain his outburst, his voice was filled with mirth. “Good one but, seriously, did you steal some vampire’s boyfriend? Or did you get adventurous and stab the wrong vampire when he wasn’t looking?”

Helena shook her head. “I’ve told you the truth.”

A long pause came from her neighbour. She didn’t know whether to pursue the conversation or change the topic altogether.

“How did you do it?” he asked.

“Do what?”

“Kill Andreaz. He’s known as ‘The Death Hound’ on a battlefield. Vampires could never block his attacks as they came too fast.”

His words reminded her of the fight Lucious had with the Councilman. Most of it she couldn’t see because they moved too quickly. It was evident Lucious was losing from the start.

“I always thought a woman would do him in. He had it coming,” he said with a light chuckle.

Helena sat on the bench and rested her back against the wall. Talking to Karl was a pleasant change. “I don’t know how I did it. It just happened.”

There was no way she was going to tell a vampire she had help from a demon. Would he even believe her?

“*Just* happened? Well, I guess having something like that happen to me would make me a Councilman. As for you, little birdy, I don’t have a clue how they’ll deal with it.”

“So, if I was a vampire, I’d have to join the Council?”

“Yeah.”

Well, she wasn’t one. *Would they try to turn me?* A cold chill swept through her. If they turned her, it would kill her and Lucious. “And if I don’t want to be a Council member?”



“You can be excused from a seat if you bring forth someone more powerful than you and have a duel to prove their worth. That or you can have a singing contest with the angels.”

“Great,” she mumbled.

Something stirred in the air. Dark energy rapidly gathered around her shields. Her right shoulder began to ache and, before long, her discomfort morphed into burning pain. She touched the skin where the demon placed his mark. It was hot. Helena screamed in agony as the pain grew to an unbearable level.

“Are you alright, kiddo? Your heartbeat is having a race to the stars,” Karl’s worried words filtered through the wall.

Her headache was back and cold sweat ran down her spine as she concentrated her energy on maintaining her mental barriers.

“Kiddo...?”

Her body was losing the battle. She didn’t get enough rest to put up a fight. Her teeth ground together, and she slid off the bench.

When the wave of darkness retreated, she relaxed. It was a mistake. Lazarus’ energy slammed against her mental shields, shattering them with little effort. She was encased in the darkness, and the cell melted away.



“What a pity, my flower. I thought you might withstand me a little longer,” Lazarus said.

They stood on an old stone bridge. Thick grey fog merged with the shade of the wet cobblestone beneath her bare feet. Under the bridge, an unhurried flow of water devoured the silence.

She leant over the edge to find nothing but emptiness there.

Lazarus grabbed the railing and peered over the edge as she did. He wasn’t in Eva’s form anymore. His ivory horns protruded from underneath a long mane of raven hair that trailed down his back. Black feathers were entwined into it like decorations.

She studied his clothing. It wasn’t material. Instead, an inky shadow wrapped itself around him in different shapes. She eyed his pale face. A pair of black eyes with red irises watched her.

“What do you want from me?” She knew it was a stupid question. Asking anything gave her time to search for a way out.

“Now, now, Helena,” he chided. “Of course, you know what I want.”

What could he possibly offer her that she would be willing to pay her soul for? Seeing as things had hit a dead-end in the real world, being offered another

choice wasn't so bad. She shook her head. No. This wasn't like her. Being in a company of a demon had to be worse.

"Haven't you already realised what will happen to you?"

She had. So many bad occurrences amassed to one conclusion. Helena took a nervous step back.

Lazarus' lips formed into a pout. "Poor Helena. She wants to go back home to her mummy and daddy."

"Stop it," she snapped.

"She made a few bad choices in her life and became entangled in a web of supernatural beings and decisions she never thought she would have to make. Poor, poor, Helena."

"Stop it!" she shouted, drawing further away.

"Your angel won't help you; the vampires can't save you. You are alone and no one cares..."

She covered her ears, but it didn't drown out the demon's voice. On a subconscious level, she knew she was alone. Michael told her he wouldn't intervene in the course of these affairs, and Lucious was looking for proof to clear his name. She couldn't take on the Council by herself, not when she needed Lazarus' help to do it.

The reality was that she was scared. She was that same little girl who lost her grandmother when she was five. The same little girl who was forced to go from one psychologist to the next because she saw her guardian angel and no one believed her. She was scared to make another step, another decision, without hurting someone else. Scared to be where she was now.

She retreated until her back hit the opposite railing.

"It is your fault Andrew died. He wanted to protect the one he loved, but you were too afraid to give him an answer, to tell him the truth."

Helena clutched the railing. Her fingers twisted around the metal to the point where she thought the blood would stop flowing to them.

He outstretched his hand to her. "All these problems can disappear if you let me *help* you."

She shook her head. Lazarus was a demon who wanted nothing more than to devour her soul. Her voice rose with every word. "Like you've helped Eva or like you have helped my other ancestors? You can take your deal and... I don't even have the energy to curse at you!"

Her heart was beating against her ribcage, forcing the pulse to echo in her head. She studied the environment she was thrown into. It had to be a trick of some sort. It was similar to the dreamlike state she was trapped in when she was at Vincent's.

The demon shrugged. “Do you believe their lives were easy before I was known to them? I did not force them to make a deal with me. They always had a choice, and they came to me, asking for my help.”

“No, it can’t be!”

Lazarus spread his arms out. “Eva was worried about her daughter. I helped her save her child. Your grandmother wished to protect your mother from your father. I, once again, came to the rescue. I can sit here all day giving you reasons for their agreement to my deals, but we do not have much time left.”

He gave her a grin that made her gut clench. “The instant the sun sets, you will be killed by those vampires, and dead people can’t go home to their family or apologise for their mistakes.” He approached her with his palms exposed. “Don’t you see? It is in my interest to keep you alive.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

She couldn’t deny the fact that sooner or later something bad would happen which would lead to her death. It was a matter of time. Was she ready to die? Could she leave what she once knew and loved behind? ‘No’ was the answer to each of those questions. She didn’t want to die. Not because of something she didn’t mean to do. Not because she refused to be violated by a beast.

“How can I collect a soul I’ve marked if the body dies beforehand? That would be no good.” He swayed his head from side to side. “How about I’ll do you a better deal?”

Lazarus disappeared and, in a split-second, re-materialised next to her with his back resting against the railing. When he clasped his hands together in excitement, Helena nearly jumped and retreated.

“If you accept, I’ll save you from the vampires and return you home. I will let you forget about those monsters *and*”—he beamed at her—“you get to die your own death. What do you think?”

The deal was reasonable. Things could return to the way they were. She would be able to go back to college, hang out with her friends and family again. She had missed Laura who was normal. Helena wouldn’t need to worry about vampires or fear for her life.

She opened her mouth to speak.

“How dare you tempt her with your evil?” Michael shouted from the other side of the bridge.

Lazarus turned to face the intruder shrouded in fog. “Dare? Shouldn’t you be in your realm, singing happy songs or fighting over an Archangel position?”

“I don’t care for your insults, demon. Release her.”

Michael took a firm step forward, and the fog gathered at his feet. His movements slowed as if he was wading through a bog.

Lazarus smiled. "I'm not holding her here. We were having a civil conversation, right?"

Helena didn't know what to do or say. Here she stood between an angel and a demon. Both waited for her to reach a decision. This time, she was afraid to make a choice. So far, she hadn't made a single right one.

"Helena, whatever he said to you, ignore it. He's a demon, please don't forget that!" With each step, some of Michael's light waned. He was treading on the demon's territory, and it was taking a toll on her guardian.

"Come to me," Michael said.

She advanced a step to meet him. This was the real Michael. He was her friend, and she had placed her trust in him. Since the demon had finally intervened, maybe her guardian could get her out of this mess.

Lazarus snickered behind her back. "You are pathetic, Michael. You, angels, never stop talking about saving the souls of the saints, doing your best to protect them, so on and so forth. In the end, you are all talk and no action. I can act and save her. Can you do that?"

Helena wrapped her arms around her middle. The demon was wrong. Michael had to have a plan. She shouldn't listen to his ramblings. He just wanted her soul.

"You know that I cannot intervene," Michael grumbled.

Her heart sank.

Lazarus raised his arms above his head. "And the truth comes out!"

"You can't save me? What will happen to me if the vampires try to kill me?"

Michael said nothing.

"Tell me one more thing, angel. If she is not a saint, why is it that you are stuck with this soul?"

She turned around. Lazarus had the widest grin on his face that she had ever seen. If what he said was the truth, Michael was supposed to guard her only if she was a saint. And, since she wasn't, there was no reason for him to be with her. Was he toying with her? Were angels as bad as demons?

"Michael, is what he says true?" Her nails dug so deep into her skin that she wouldn't be surprised if she was bleeding.

"There is a reason for it, yes, but with my whole heart I wish to protect you," Michael said.

That was all the answer she needed. He lied to her, and he would do nothing to prevent her from dying. She would be dead, and he would move on to his next assignment. All that would change would be her keeping her soul, whatever use that had when the body was already dead.

Lazarus closed the distance she had managed to put between them and spread a protective arm over her shoulders. “Humans call us demons for giving them their wishes, providing opportunities for them, and saving their lives whereas this creature will watch you suffer and point out your mistakes.”

She couldn’t think. A headache from earlier made her head pulsate. She needed more time. But time was not something she had much of. Lazarus had a point. Demons may feed on human souls, but they also provided them with the power to do something they couldn’t do alone. They offered a chance to save a loved one or oneself if the need arose. He saved Eva’s daughter from the witch hunters as her last wish. Helena wasn’t certain of the other things he’d done to get his payments.

“Helena, please, you mustn’t listen to him,” Michael said.

If she returned with Michael, a life in confinement or imminent death awaited her.

*Lazarus can save me.*

The demon stroked her tangled locks with uncharacteristic tenderness.

She couldn’t decide. If she agreed to a deal with Lazarus, he would bring her back home. She could be reunited with her parents. *What about Andrew? Would I forget about Lucious and the other vampires?*

*Lucious*, the name rattled in her mind. Taking a deal with Lazarus meant she would be signing over his soul, too.

“What happens to Lucious?”

Lazarus’ smile never faltered. “Anything you want. You can keep him as a pet if you wish.”

She glared at him. “What happens to his soul?”

“*That* is between me and him.”

Helena shrugged off his hold. To her surprise, he didn’t try to grab her. She took a deep breath. Leaving with Michael meant death for her and Lucious. Taking a deal with the demon was pretty much doing the same but with their souls staying intact. She shot a final glance at Michael. Her gut was telling her to go with her angel, but her mind rebelled against the idea.

*Living longer, isn’t that more important?*

The pained expression on Michael’s face tugged at her heartstrings. There was nothing he could say to sway her decision. He had an ulterior motive for being at her side. He hid that from her, saying he was there to protect her, to guide her.

“Why are you with me, Michael?”

He looked up. It felt as if an eternity of pain and suffering was reflected in his azure eyes that were focused solely on her. “It is my punishment, any more

than that I cannot reveal. I'm sorry. You must understand that by taking his deal, you are condemning more than one soul."

"Does a soul matter that much?"

"If you die a natural death, you may be reborn, but if you sign away your soul here, it will be eaten and destroyed."

Lazarus clicked his tongue. "There is no need for more drama. Leave the poor girl to make her choice."

In the end, she was going to die, anyway. Rebirth was a foreign subject to her. Not like it was something she had ever contemplated. Although Lazarus' deal was sweet, she guessed he wouldn't wait until she was old and wrinkly to claim her soul. Demons couldn't possibly possess that much patience.

She glanced at Michael who stood on the same spot. His stance was guarded. A faint smile graced her lips. *Death with a friend at my side is better than any alternative.* Helena nodded as if confirming her choice and ran to him.

Michael extended his arms to wrap her into a warm hug, squeezing her into his broad chest.

"I knew you'd make the correct choice," he whispered into her ear.

"My choice was not based on your debating skills."

"You're making a mistake. They're going to kill you," Lazarus shouted from across the bridge.

Somehow, with her decision made, a great weight had lifted from her shoulders. Even if she were to die because of her actions, she prayed Lucious would forgive her once his soul was reborn in the next life.

"I know," she said.

Lazarus stood there; his expression distorted by the fog. "I don't understand why you would choose death over life."

"It's not a choice of life or death. It's choosing how I die."

Michael's warmth took away the nervous knots in her stomach. When she looked back over her shoulder, Lazarus was already gone. She was left with her secretive guardian angel on the cobbled bridge.

He seemed to struggle with breaching the fog. His body tensed. The light he emitted blinded her, forcing her to look away.

She watched the fog sluggishly dispersing, and the bridge fading away. Soon after, they were inside of her shields which, with a lot of effort, she was able to put back together.

Michael gazed at her with adoration. "There is something I wish for you to hear."

"What is it?"

He hugged her, and she didn't mind as it was the last comfort she was going to get.

"I cannot apologise enough. If I had a chance to take you out of harm's way, I would. The demon was right. I am useless."

She wrapped her arms around him. Her uncertainty in Michael dispersed. Knowing him for many years gave her assurance that he had done everything within his power to help her.

"I'm sorry," he repeated.

Lifting her face to meet his beautiful eyes, she said, "I don't blame you. I only have myself to blame for the situation I'm in."

"I should not have allowed you to link yourself to a vampire in the first place. I am the one at fault." He took in a quivering breath. "I believed I had lost you to him today. Your soul is too important to be handed over."

She tried imagining what it would be like to be given a task to protect someone's soul. The pain of losing the person she had been with for over a decade would be too much to bear. "You won't lose me to him. I'll stay right here with you, but we need to gather our strength. I have an inkling that I'll be seeing the vampires sooner rather than later."

Michael's face fell. "Yes. I should be the one to support you, not the other way around."

She grinned. "Even the toughest people need support once in a while."

"Helena, I will be by your side until the end."

When he let go, she regained consciousness and was back in the cell. She squinted, trying to block out some of the blinding light while she clambered to her feet, using the bench she lay next to for support.

"Kiddo, I take it you're alive. What was that? My skin was crawling with ants once you stopped screaming," Karl said from the other side of the wall.

She grunted and massaged her temples. "How long have I been out?"

"Avoiding the question? I get it. You've been knocked out for the whole day. I can feel the sun setting outside."

"From here?" *Surely, he isn't able to tell the time by sitting in an underground cell.* Lucious mentioned the same thing a few times. Back then, she assumed he knew the exact time of day.

"Hey, I've lived for a long time." He sounded offended.

"How can you tell?"

"When you spend a lot of time avoiding something, you tend to learn a lot about it."

She snorted. "What a convenient superpower."

“For someone who supposedly killed Andreaz, you sure know little about us.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of the main door sliding open. A heavy pair of booted feet advanced towards them. Helena shut her eyelids, hoping it was not someone here to pick her up. As the heavy footsteps drew closer, she knew her luck had run out.

Norton stopped beside her cell with an unsettling grin plastered on his face. He dialled a sequence of numbers on the panel that appeared too small for his chubby fingers, and the glass door unlocked. He stepped into the cell. “You’re first on the list.”

“What about me?” Karl called out.

Norton rolled his eyes. “You’re still here? Get out of the cell and get back on duty, you moron.”

*Wasn’t Karl a prisoner?*

She glared at the arm waving at her from his bench. His door wasn’t even closed. And here she spent the whole time thinking he was in the same predicament as her. She was played for a fool.

“Sure, after I finish napping,” Karl replied.

“Why did Eliza bother hiring you?” Norton asked.

“Because I’m the best at what I do.”

Grumbling something under his breath, Norton grasped Helena’s arm. Her skin ached under his inhuman grip.

Outside of her cell, she turned her head and saw who she was talking to. Deep brown eyes looked at her from under the mop of dark curls. A long, curved scar climbed Karl’s chin and parted his stubble. He was closer to a cheerful pub owner than one of the Council’s hounds.

Norton tugged at her to move and led the way to the lift.

Once inside, Helena gathered her courage and asked, “Where are we going?”

“To your trial.”

“My what?” Her voice came out as a high-pitched squeak.

“No more questions.” He pressed the ‘B3’ button and took a step back, snubbing her further queries.

The trial came too fast. Her stomach sank while her brain pieced the past together. Lazarus wasn’t kidding. She was going to die today. Having accepted her fate didn’t keep the fear from getting its hands on her. She hugged her sides. It didn’t help stop her body from shaking.





Lucious and Alexander parked the car and waited at the location given to them by Ghoul Master. The metal gate remained closed as the sun set over the city. Alexander approached the gate and knocked on the thick metal.

At once, multiple shutters rose, and they ducked inside. They were met by a short, chubby man whose beady eyes assessed them with suspicion. Lucious scanned the storage room. Mountains of stacked brown boxes reached the ceiling. There was only one way in and out.

“Master’s guests?” the dwarf-like ghoul asked.

“Why else would we be waiting in such a place?” Alexander grumbled.

Their plan was too ridiculous and risky to work. Get in, find the human, and disappear. Whatever could go wrong? Lucious continuously felt a prick of uncertainty about taking Alexander. He was a good friend and had more than proven that in the last twenty-four hours. Endangering him was the last thing Lucious wished to do.

“I have to get back to work. The cameras will be disabled soon enough,” the man nattered on.

Lucious grabbed the ghoul’s forearm. “What floor are the holding cells on?”

“Basement two.” He wiped his palms on his filthy trousers and waddled away to the control room.

Alexander sighed. “I have a bad feeling about this trip.”

“It’s not too late to leave.”

“And let you have all the fun? I don’t think so.”

They hurried towards the main door. Once they turned the corner, a lift came into view.

They waited in silence, watching the red light on the camera until it stopped blinking.

Lucious nodded to Alexander, and they *fleeted* inside the lift. Meanwhile, he concentrated on Helena’s presence. She was close. He could feel her like his own arm. An unpleasant shudder ran through him overshadowed by a wave of fear.

*She is scared.*

The doors languidly opened on level ‘B2’, and they got out. Lucious power walked the length of the corridor, checking rooms on either side of him.

When they reached a dead-end, Lucious’ dark brows drew together. “Where are the cells?”

The white wall ahead of Alexander slid to one side. “Ghouls are quite handy. I should try making one.”

“Don’t joke about such matters and hurry.” Lucious pointed at the cells. “You take the left and I’ll take the right side.”

They sped through each one of them until they hit the end. *She is not here.*

“Damn it,” Alexander spat out.

Her panic flooded their bond, and Lucious stopped moving altogether to concentrate on the link between them. He was certain she was in the building but not on this floor.

Lucious muttered, “She’s a floor below us.”

“Looking for someone?” A man with shaggy, chestnut hair relaxed against the wall. His brown eyes, although appeared pleasant and dismissive, observed them.

Lucious knew a veteran when he saw one. Without taking his eyes off the vampire, he reached for one of the knives in his belt. They were detected by one of the hounds and, if he wasn’t mistaken, it was the same hound he met at Alexander’s club.

Working together, Lucious and Alexander created a gap between them, preparing to fight.

The stranger’s hands shot into the air, palms facing them. “Whoa, fellas, I am not here to fight. I have no orders for your heads yet. But if you are looking for a young lady who killed Andreaz, I believe she’s already with the others.”

“I need to get her out.” Lucious shot Alexander a desperate look. “You don’t have to risk your life any longer.”

Alexander shook his head in disagreement. His eyes never left the hound. “We’ve been through this.”

The hound’s relaxed demeanour didn’t fool them. Alexander edged towards him, while Lucious remained in place, watching Alexander’s back in case this was some kind of trap.

“Why are you, brave souls, coming here to save a woman? Surely, she can’t be that valuable,” the hound said.

“It’s none of your business. Either let us pass or prepare to fight,” Lucious said.

The hound chuckled and dismissed them with a wave towards the exit. “Please, be my guest. I want to see how you fare against the Council.”

With a laid-back attitude, the stranger allowed them to leave. It unsettled Lucious. He pushed his concerns aside. For now, they had other things to worry about.



Norton brought Helena to a grand, centralised chamber. Her eyes focused on a raised balcony that overlooked the whole room. Up there, Vincent sat next to two females. Helena assumed one of them was Eliza.

Dark mahogany panels decorated the walls as her numb, bare feet glided along the cold black marble tiles. There was no furniture here other than a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling to brighten the room's interior. It looked almost like the layout of an opera theatre, and she was the performer tonight.

"Kneel, human," a willowy woman with waist-long, straight, blood-red hair ordered from the balcony. She sat between Vincent and another woman with Asian features who seemed disinterested in the process.

"What?" Helena asked, unsure if she had heard her right.

Prickling power filled the room. It originated from that same redhead. Pressure built on top of Helena's body, pushing against her. It forced her to inhale deeper breaths in search of more air as her ribcage felt more constricted, like wearing a corset that was too small. The air grew thicker, and the pressure became unbearable. Her knees gave way, and she landed on her hands and knees. She hissed at the sudden contact with the tiles that sent a sharp pain through her kneecaps and wrists.

"Good. Let us begin," the redhead said.

Helena reasoned it had to be Eliza. No one else seemed worthy of the rumours and stories she had heard.

Eliza leant forward in her throne-like seat. "You are Helena, a witch who helped Lucious Ellwood in his crimes. You later proceeded to murder my *childe*, Andreaz, in his home whilst under observation. Are these statements correct?"

"You're wrong," Helena said between rasped breaths. It was next to impossible to speak with the pressure that never lessened. Her arms quivered, and she struggled to keep from meeting the floor with her face.

Eliza scoffed. "Which part of my information is wrong?"

Through burning pain in her neck, Helena attempted to tilt her head upwards. No matter the effort, she was forced to face her terrified reflection in the tiles. "I didn't help Lucious, and Andreaz attacked me!"

"I have observed her for a long time, Eliza," Vincent said. "She did no harm to me or mine during her stay. Is it so hard to believe Andreaz could be at fault here?"

"Are you defending this witch? Has she used her magic on you also?" Eliza asked in a tone that felt colder than the ground beneath Helena.

"You have read the reports I've submitted," Vincent said. "I am trying to say that Andreaz was no saint towards women."

A new high-pitched voice from above added, "I have to agree with Vincent. He was a menace to women. If she didn't kill him, I would have at some point."

Helena listened to the prolonged quiet. Was Vincent able to convince Eliza of her innocence?

“Your report also said she wasn’t a witch. She killed him with no weapon. Explain that to me.” After a brief pause, Eliza snorted. “Silence? I thought as much. So, do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Helena could no longer stand the pressure piling on top of her. White spots ate away at her vision. She tried talking and, after a few heaving breaths, said, “I haven’t done anything.”

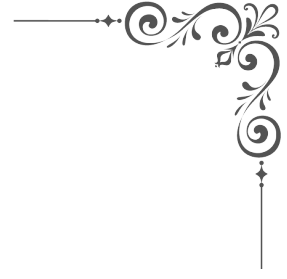
“Lies!” Eliza screamed and burst from her seat. “For the crimes committed to this day, you are sentenced to immediate execution.”

Norton crossed the room to where Helena was in a blink of an eye. He secured his hand on her throat, and she was effortlessly lifted off the ground.

Eliza’s energy kept closing in on her, taking away her ability to breathe in.

*This is it.* She was going to die. No miracle happened to save her. No one came to her rescue. She closed her eyes and gave in, accepting her imminent fate.

The doors behind her burst open and the hold Norton had on her disappeared. Unable to find her balance, she fell. The last thing she heard was the gasps from the Council members.



## 23

# THE COUNCIL

Lucious rushed through the corridors, and Alexander trailed behind him. They had agreed if he was unable to secure Helena prior to the trial, he was as good as dead either way.

His throat burned. She was right there, beyond a set of doors ahead of them. Lucious' vision blurred, and he reached for the wall. *She's growing weaker.*

Alexander studied his friend and flung open the doors, interrupting the proceedings inside.

Lucious rubbed his eyes to clear his vision. Once the dizziness let up, he hurried after Alexander into the Council room. He noticed Helena lying on the ground, too still to give him any comfort. The fact that he remained among the living was enough to tell him she was alive.

Eliza glared at them from the balcony. "I did not expect you to join us so soon."

Lucious ignored the elder. He knew it was a stupid thing to do and, at this point, didn't care. "Let her go. She's done nothing wrong."

Eliza's thin fingers grasped the railing. The marble crumbled under her hold. Many stories circled the vampire community about her and how she controlled the Council by placing those she had sired in the seats of power. Nothing other than perfect evidence would convince her to let any accused go, and that was an almost impossible task to accomplish, especially if she wanted the accused to die.

The hound next to Helena took on a fighting stance.

Alexander did the same, giving Lucious more time.

The bulky underling grinned at Alexander in response, his fangs showing.

Eliza's thin lips stretched into a pleasant smile, but there was an ocean of animosity in her dark eyes. They were like two empty voids, waiting to engulf his soul. "Do you have proof? Or did you come here to participate in the

execution, Mr Ellwood? I would be willing to reschedule your case to this fine evening.”

Lucious didn't waver. He bowed his head in respect to the other two members and met their curious stares. “Master Vincent, Mistress Xi Yi, I would like to appeal to you. I have tried conducting an investigation into who has brought me to your attention and found the information I needed. Eliza placed the charges against me.”

“Why would I waste my precious time on you?”

Lucious ground his teeth together. “It must be related to the disappearance of my blood-siblings.”

Vincent turned to Eliza. “What is going on? You said someone came forth with the information.”

“My dearest *childe*, you would believe the word of a desperate man over your sire?”

“It is not a matter of who sired who, Eliza. We are a Council. We must seek out the truth and protect those under our guidance,” Vincent replied sternly.

Lucious stared at them in disbelief. He never expected Vincent to criticise his sire. “I have no intention of interfering with the Council's matters. I simply wish to find those responsible for Anna's death, nothing more and nothing less.”

“You are interfering now,” Xi Yi pointed out.

Lucious' lungs burned. He glanced at Helena. Every cell in his body was telling him to get closer. He wanted to touch her. Instead, he balled his hands at his sides. Allowing Eliza to see that Helena was his weakness was out of the question. He tore his gaze away.

“Lucious' case is not one we are currently presented with. Tell me, young one, why are you trying to save a witch?” Xi Yi asked, flicking her braid back and forth with her fingers.

“It was my fault she became involved with us.”

“How chivalrous of you, but, you see, she managed to kill one of us already. Doesn't this prove you had plans to use her against us?”

Full of grace, Eliza took her seat between the other two Council members. A victorious smile played at her red lips, and Xi Yi added, “So give us a reason to doubt the obvious. You broke in here, interrupted a trial, and gave us nothing other than your word that you weren't planning to disrupt the Council's dealings.”

“I will stake my life on his word, Masters,” Alexander said. “I've known Lucious long enough to be able to vouch for him. He is telling you the truth. You should be able to sense that.”

“The boys speak the truth,” Vincent agreed. “You know full well the human was also honest when she spoke in her defence.”

Eliza shot him a glare. “Let us vote on the matter at hand. Xi Yi, what do you suggest we do with them?”

Xi Yi dropped her braid and observed the intruders. “It would be a shame to dust such pretty faces.” She paused, her eyes meeting Lucious’. A glint of unmistakable mischief shone in her eyes, and Lucious already knew her answer. “Although they did break in here without any kind of evidence.”

Vincent shook his head in disapproval. “I vote against both executions. I, unlike you two, can tell when someone is speaking the truth.”

Eliza’s smile withered. The pair of her dark eyes reflected no hint of mercy. “As Head of this Council, I deem you are to be eliminated at once.”

Without delay, the hound cracked his neck and launched an attack on Alexander with two blades already in his hands.

Lucious concentrated on getting close to Helena. Moving her away from the fighting became his priority. When he was within touching range, a sharp pain shot through his left shoulder. He looked at it and saw blood oozing from a wound that had suddenly appeared there without a single trace of a weapon.

Helena echoed his pain, seemingly unconscious to what was going on around her.

His eyes darted to the balcony where Xi Yi sat on the ledge, swinging her legs like a toddler on a swing.

“Since Norton is dancing with your pretty friend, I will be your partner.” She blew him a kiss and jumped down. Her long silver dress fluttered around her, splaying at her feet as she landed.

Lucious had no other choice. He *fleeted* a safe distance away, leaving Helena behind, and unleashed the energy he desperately wanted to hide from the elders. It worked as a good distraction to get their eyes fixed on him.

The raw energy he had gained from Helena had developed into an ability he didn’t have time to try. He cleared his thoughts, allowing for his eyes to further adjust to the energies in the chamber. Colourful streams of energy swam in the air. A long chain-like link that came from Eliza had encircled Helena’s body.

Xi Yi’s wild energy twisted around her dress. She took out a small blade with an opal handle out of her braid and toyed with the sharp end. “I never would have guessed you had any power in you.” Her energy morphed into a spear, and she launched it towards him.

He stepped to the right, avoiding the weapon that smashed into the wood panelling behind him. It dispersed into a stream of raw energy and retreated back to its conjurer.

Xi Yi's eyes widened, and she grinned. "I am going to enjoy this." Vines of her power divided into two, each forming into a spear that hovered around her five-foot frame. Without much warning, they surged forwards.

Quick on his feet, Lucious moved to dodge them to the left. A sudden burning in his stomach told him he wasn't able to avoid all of her attacks. Taking a quick glance down, he found her small knife lodged in his gut.

"Silver," he hissed.

Searing pain travelled across his gut, almost making him lose his footing. With a shaky hand, he pulled it out by the handle and tossed it to one side.

"You may be able to see my attacks, but I am a better tactician," she said.

Lucious glanced at Helena. She was too exposed where she lay.

Xi Yi leered at him. She glided closer to Helena's body and withdrew the energy spears, splitting them into a dozen daggers that danced in the air.

Holding on to his gut, he glowered at the Councilwoman.

Xi Yi's perceptive eyes burned into his. Her lips twitched into a telling smile. On instinct, his body jerked towards Helena.

Her smile curved. She had him, and he knew it. Her daggers rushed for Helena.

Lucious launched to protect her, taking the damage of the raining blades that lodged in his back. His agony summoned screams from him and Helena. He did exactly what Xi Yi wanted and didn't dare move away from his human. As long as he remained above her, he could keep her alive for a while longer.

Tearing the daggers out of his back, Xi Yi drove them in repeatedly as she giggled.

The muscles in his back were being torn to shreds. Blood seeped through his clothes and dripped down his sides. He fought to remain conscious and not crush Helena under his weight.

A pair of high heels stopped next to his face. "I thought you would be more challenging. You had such promise because of your past. Sadly, this game is coming to an end."

Lucious glanced away to find Alexander bleeding from various injuries. The hound was wielding dual silver blades, one in each hand. By the looks of it, Alexander had lost his knives in the fight. Blood oozed from his friend's chest, too close to the heart to give him any comfort.

The glint in Norton's eyes told Lucious how much he enjoyed the fight which was drawing to an inevitable end. The hound flipped the blades in his hands and, after dodging Alexander's attack, drove one of them into Alexander's back.

Alexander's knees buckled, and he shot Lucious a faint smile.



Lucious cursed himself for allowing his friend to come along. He didn't deserve to die here.

"Where do you think your attention should be?" Xi Yi asked.

Pain ricocheted throughout Lucious' body as her blades lodged in his back and shifted, creating greater craters. He clenched his jaw to stop his cry of agony as it sought a way out. A few more inches to the left and one of them would slice his heart.

"Stop this at once!" a musical voice shouted from the entrance.

Lucious tried lifting his head and couldn't.

A murmur of voices came from the balcony, and he finally managed to face the commotion. His weary eyes rested on a young girl in an ebony Victorian dress.

*I must be dead.* The figure became the sire he thought was dead for over a century.

Vincent's deep rumble roared from above. "Enough!" His power flooded the room like a tsunami and froze movements of everyone except Anna who continued gliding closer to the balcony.

"You can still move even with his power active? Impressive," Eliza said.

Anna's face remained impassive. She had stayed the same—always perfectly composed, never showing a shred of emotion. She gave the Council members a curtsy. "I am here as you wanted, Eliza. Now let my last *childe* go." She spared Lucious a glance and took in his state. Her eyes flared red. With much visible effort, she returned her attention to Eliza and Vincent.

"Release him and his friends at once," Anna demanded.

Lucious felt Vincent's power retreating, taking away the support it gave him. He collapsed to one side, forcing a few of the blades in further. He groaned.

"Xi Yi, leave them be," Vincent ordered.

She looked at Eliza who gave a flick of her wrist as a sign to retreat. The daggers in his back dispersed into energy and gathered around its master. She created some distance between them, and he blew out a relieved breath.

Lucious' eyes never left his sire's face. She was supposed to be dead. She *pretended* to be dead for over a century! Her actions brought endless bickering to their family. After so many years of searching for her murderers, countless days of agonising over his mistakes, here she was as if nothing happened. As if none of that mattered.

Lucious glared at Anna. "Why are you alive?"

She lowered her gaze. The pain in them didn't take away the betrayal he felt. "I'm sorry, Lucious. I needed to be alone and away from everyone. I never thought things would escalate to this."

“It would seem the sole *childe* you truly care about is him. The others met their end without you showing up to save them,” Eliza said.

Lucious stared at Eliza with newfound rage. To draw his sire out of hiding, the rotten wench had killed them. She slaughtered his family for her own gain. He attempted to push away from the slippery ground that was covered in his blood and couldn't. Although he was already healing, he wasn't doing it fast enough. He slammed his fist into the ground with a loud thud, cracking the tile next to him.

“You bloody wench,” he shouted. “How dare you do that to my family?”

“Be silent,” Anna said.

Lucious' head flicked to his sire's face. She was battling for control of her emotions. His rage was replaced with fear. If her other self emerged here, he wouldn't be able to protect Helena from harm in his current state.

“This matter is between ‘The Demon’ and me,” Eliza said.

Vincent studied Anna with concern. Did he know about Eliza's charade from the beginning?

Anna walked to Alexander's body and touched his forehead. After a quick assessment, she nodded to Lucious. That was all the confirmation he needed. His friend was going to live.

“Speak your terms for their release,” Anna said softly.

A smirk stretched Eliza's lips. “Alright. I shall let Lucious and Alexander return home, but the witch has committed a crime. She stays.”

Lucious found enough strength to sit up. He hugged Helena closer to his chest. “She's coming with me.”

Eliza shook her head. “She killed one of us and needs to be punished for it.”

He stroked Helena's pale cheek with his thumb. He couldn't leave her here. Whether it was his wish to stay alive or the undeniable need to protect her, he wasn't going to abandon her.

“What would it take to return her to him?” Anna inquired.

Eliza tapped her lips with her finger. “Aren't you eager to protect them all? Whatever happened to the ruthless being you are rumoured to be?”

Anna took a menacing step forwards and the power levels in the room shifted. “I owe my *childe* a great debt which I cannot repay. Speak what you want from me and be done with these silly games!”

All eyes were locked on Eliza as she stood. “We are a member short at this time because of your *childe*'s witch, or whatever she is. Someone has to take that seat. If you take it and swear your loyalty to me, I shall let them go.”

“You can't!” Lucious yelled.

His sire raised her hand to silence him. She closed the distance between them in a second and knelt on the ground next to him. Anna's hand cupped his cheek, and her blue eyes welled with sadness. "How important is she to you?"

The words wouldn't leave him. He was trading the life of his maker for a girl. Without one, he would be lost again. Without the other, he would die. He pushed her hand away. "I cannot ask you to do this, sire."

"I owe you much more than this. I wish I didn't have to leave you with a lie. For now, answer me honestly."

It hurt but not as much as the thought of losing her again. A tear escaped the corner of his eye and ran down his cheek. The words he was about to say he would regret for the rest of his life. "Her life is my life. If she were to perish, so would I."

Anna squared her shoulders and faced the Council. "I will accept your offer."

Eliza's blank expression did not betray what she was thinking as she waved to dismiss Norton. "They are free to go once the ritual is finished."

Lucious knew they fell into her well-designed trap when Vincent nodded and Xi Yi pouted.

Eliza jumped down and stood next to Anna. The Councilwoman was, at least, two feet taller than his sire. She placed her hands on Anna's shoulders and bent down.

"Do you pledge yourself to me, Anna Ordayne? Your life shall become mine and your will shall become mine until I deem the contract void," Eliza said.

His once proud sire lowered her head. Her eyes rested on him, and she recited the promise. "My life is yours. My will is yours until you deem the contract void."

Eliza lifted Anna's face and sealed the contract with a deep kiss. The room grew silent as their energies mixed and Eliza's became the dominant one.

Lucious averted his gaze and brought the unconscious Helena closer to him.

"Don't look so glum, Lucious. You can visit your sire if you wish." Eliza told him when she broke the kiss.

He climbed to his feet, his body swaying while he supported Helena with his arms.

Eliza retreated to discuss something with Xi Yi and Vincent.

Alexander managed to stand and stumbled over to his side. He grasped Lucious by the elbow. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

Lucious didn't say anything. He should be pleased Eliza permitted him to see his sire, but at what cost? She now belonged to the Councilwoman. Anna was bound to obey her commands because of the contract between them.

His sire pointed to Helena's shivering form. "Take her. Treat her. She is not able to heal at the same rate as you."

A chill reverberated through his system. He smelt Helena's sweet blood. She must have taken damage in the crossfire. Her eyes were closed and pain reflected on her sweating face. This girl had suffered enough because of him. Upon studying her closer, he noted Helena's right shoulder was bleeding. He touched the wound on his arm and smeared his blood over her cut. *You will be fine.* He brushed away the damp strands of hair that were stuck to her face.

Anna planted a fleeting kiss on Alexander's and Lucious' cheeks and started leading them out of the room.

Before they passed through the doors, Eliza's commanding voice stopped them. "I want to make something perfectly clear. The witch is not permitted to become a vampire. Anyone who turns her will be executed along with her. She is to be placed under Council's watch until I deem she is not a threat to us."

Lucious didn't care about that. These conditions reinforced her safety from other vampires.

"As you wish," he spat out, lifted Helena into his arms, and turned on his heel.

They headed for the way out.



In the night's breeze, Helena's shivering grew more violent. He couldn't help wondering why she was wearing a torn, blood-stained dress that gave her little warmth.

Lucious nudged Alexander. "Give me your jacket."

Alexander shrugged out of it with little protest. It looked as if the material had passed through a cheese grater with many holes, long tears, and blood smears.

*It would have to suffice.* He wrapped the jacket around her, and Alexander excused himself.

Her shivering subsided, and her eyelids opened a crack.

"Lucious?" Helena's voice was weak compared to the chattering of her teeth.

"You are safe. Rest," he murmured.

She huddled into his chest, and her relief flooded the link. The dark circles under her eyes aged her, and her body seemed more fragile with the obvious weight loss.

"Lucious, wait," Anna called after him.

He didn't know what to say to her. His sire had abandoned him for over a century, forcing him to believe she was dead. In that moment, he wasn't certain

whether he wanted to drown his sorrows in alcohol or sing praises to God.

“Why did you return?” he asked.

“I want you to know that I did not abandon the others as Eliza would like you to believe. I was too far away to protect them. I am glad I was able to arrive in time to protect you from her clutches.”

She hadn’t changed one bit, never caring about how the others felt and always making the tough decisions alone.

Whatever she saw on his face made sadness return to her eyes. “The cold season has arrived. Your woman is freezing, so take her home. When you are ready to listen to my apologies, come back, and I will give you my explanation. Until then, there is another matter...” Anna’s hand hovered above Helena’s right shoulder.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, although he already knew about the demon’s mark. *Can the demon inside Anna sense it, too?*

“She is protected by some being. That protection is not enough against the one who placed this mark. If you wish for her to live, I suggest you keep her close. He will do his worst to take her soul as I imagine she already knows.”

“I know that without you telling me.”

Anna smiled. This was the first time he had seen his sire’s attempt at a happy emotion. The smile made her seem like an innocent child who knew nothing of the creatures lurking in the shadows. Her sky-blue eyes full of ancient knowledge ruined the illusion.

She waved goodbye and made her way into the Council building with her long skirts trailing behind her.

Alexander parked around the corner, and Lucious got in the back seat with Helena resting on his lap. Being this close to her made him feel complete. What the guardian angel told him seemed more plausible now. They had become part of the same soul with two bodies. That, too, didn’t seem to bother him anymore.

His friend turned in the driver’s seat. “The sun won’t rise for another seven or so hours. Shall we take a flight to Dublin or spend the night in London?”

“We need to return her home. She has suffered enough on my account.”

“You’re not falling in love with a human, are you? I mean, they’re fun to play around with, but trust me, don’t get too close.”

“Since when was love related to being glad we did not turn to dust?”

Alexander put the car in gear. “Remember my wise words, Lucious.”



Helena awoke to the sound of a ticking clock. She was in a warm bed and no longer on the cold tiled floor. Feeling for a light switch, she found a familiar

bedside lamp. With the low light dispersing the darkness, she sat up, studying her bedroom. The curtains were drawn. The rest remained the same as if this past month never happened.

If she wasn't already lying down, she would have collapsed from relief. She was home, safe and sound. She searched for the switch again, flicking it off, and relaxed.

Helena rolled over. Her hand landed on something smooth and solid. Unfamiliar with the warm object, she gasped. Quick to react, she tried retracting her hand when someone grabbed her wrist.

A familiar pair of eyes with a blue glow sieved through the darkness and calmed her.

"What are you doing here?" She fought the urge to throw a pillow at his face for scaring her like that. He did save her life.

He yawned, covering his mouth with the free hand. "I don't know. Once we returned, I must have fallen asleep."

When she reached for the light, Lucious grabbed her by the waist and drew her closer to his body. Her face ended up being buried in his bare chest. Stuck for words, she fumbled with her pyjama sleeves. When did she put them on? Her ears burned with embarrassment at the realisation that he was the one to dress her.

"Do you feel that?" he whispered.

"Feel what exactly?" She didn't want to be touching anything other than a light switch in the dark with him. Helena pushed at him while trying not to think of what she was touching.

He wouldn't relent, restricting her already limited movements. "Trust me and relax."

She didn't know why, but she obeyed. As she stopped fighting him, she felt the light hum of the link between them. *The link. It changed.* Somehow, they were more in sync. She scanned his emotions and concluded he was not planning to do anything to her.

"It's weird. I can feel you, your emotions, your...soul," she whispered.

"Indeed."

Unconscious of her action, she huddled in closer to him. "You're warm."

She heard him smile.

"I know." His fingers combed through her hair, gently playing with the strands. "I have not felt this peaceful in my entire life."

His words carried so much sadness. She wanted to look up yet didn't dare to. In the depths of her psyche, she knew the feeling he was talking about. It was

similar to the cosy sensation she always got when Michael held her, except Lucious was no guardian angel.

Her peace deteriorated. Something wasn't right. She had forgotten something in this calming embrace. Helena fought her way out of his arms and sat up. This time, he didn't interfere and joined her.

"What's the matter?" He seemed to be already searching the room for any threats.

"I think I have forgotten something. It must be important." Unable to put her finger on what was bothering her, she rubbed her temples in an attempt to soothe her sudden headache.

Lucious climbed out of bed and turned the lights on.

She was relieved to find him wearing jeans even though they were splattered with dried blood.

Helena slid out from under the covers, setting her feet on the carpet, and relished in the feel of familiarity. Her mind raced over the happenings of these past few days: Andreaz's attack, Hannah being a ghoul, Viola's warning, the Council trying to execute her, Norton's hand on her throat...

She jumped up. "Viola!"

Lucious rested his back against the wall, arms crossed over his chest. "Who is Viola?"

She avoided looking at him. "One of the women I met at Andreaz's place. What happened to her, to the others?"

He sauntered over to her desk. It was a mess of college materials and notebooks she hadn't had the time to use. He tore a page out of the first notebook, grabbed a pen, and handed them to her. "Write down the names and descriptions. I'll look into it for you."

His gentleness surprised her. Perhaps there was still hope for them not to be at each other's throats.

She took the items with trembling hands. Sitting down on the bed, she jotted down as many names as she could remember. She recalled enough to describe Viola, Anya, and Crista in detail. The rest of the women she hadn't paid much attention to. She paused. *Were they even their real names? Could Lucious find them?*

Rubbing the back of her neck, she returned the list to him. "Here. This is all I can remember."

He tucked it away into his pocket and knelt in front of her. As if sensing her inner turmoil, he took her hands in his. His eyes were full of silent determination. "I'll do what I can to find out what happened to your friends. I will need to get someone to stay here with you in the meantime."

“I’ll be fine by myself. I don’t believe there is anyone else I’ve pissed off who is after my head.”

“The demon is still after us.”

Helena jerked her hands out of his grasp. She didn’t want to think about Lazarus. He showed up more often than a phone bill. Now that her life was returning to normal, he won’t be able to offer a tempting deal. Not unless he had planned something else for her, and she knew him well enough to know he would try again.

“How long will it take for someone to come?”

He glanced at the clock. “Just over an hour if I call Alexander now.”

She couldn’t imagine what she looked like. She touched her hair. It was a greasy mess. “I’m going to use the shower. I should be out in about fifteen minutes. Are you hungry?”

Lucious’ eyes flared blue. “Are you offering?”

It took her a few seconds to remember what he was.

He studied her blushing face and burst into laughter. With a genuine smile, he appeared younger.

She couldn’t help being fascinated by this new side of him. “I didn’t mean me! I’m...going to go this way.” She pointed at the door and rushed into the bathroom.



After scrubbing her body clean and making herself look somewhat presentable, Helena searched for Lucious.

He sat on a bar stool in the kitchen, wearing one of Andrew’s snug T-shirts and reading one of her mythology books, which he must have picked off the shelf in her room.

“Found something interesting?” she asked awkwardly.

Lucious closed the book, tossing it on the kitchen island. “Not exactly.”

Making a beeline for the kettle, she kept her eyes on anywhere but him. She started filling the kettle. “Tea or coffee?”

“Coffee.”

In silence, he watched her rushing about the kitchen. His intense stare kept her blushing.

Instead of standing around and waiting for the kettle to boil, she saw her answering machine was blinking. She glimpsed at the number of messages.

“I was at home almost twenty-four-seven and never got a single message. It’s when I am kidnapped by vampires and tortured by a demon do people suddenly want to talk to me.”



“That seems to be the grand scheme of telephones.”

Helena pressed the ‘play’ button with much reluctance, and her mother’s agitated voice came through the speaker. “Helena! Why haven’t you called me or Richard? We called your phone a dozen times by now. Pick up.” Helena noted she would need to call her mother once she resolved to listen to an endless lecture.

The second message kicked in. “This is Paul from the registration desk. Please contact me as soon as possible to arrange when you wish to retake your exams.”

She pressed ‘delete’. She would deal with college matters after she settled into her ordinary life again. The rest of the messages were from her mother, shouting into the phone while being oblivious to the fact that her daughter wasn’t even there to respond. When she finished listening to the first ten messages, Helena chose to delete the rest. Knowing her mother, they would be of the same nature.

She glanced in Lucious’ direction to find him chuckling. Helena made their drinks and seated herself on the sofa, holding her steaming cup of coffee. A second later, he joined her, placing his cup on the coffee table, which was a new addition to her apartment.

Lucious took her cup out of her hands. He placed it next to his and tenderly brushed his knuckles against her cheek.

Confused, she watched them as they came away wet with tears. Helena wasn’t sure why she was crying. She was finally home and safe from danger. There was nothing to fear, nothing other than a demon that may or may not come knocking on her mental shields any day now. Things in her life had changed too much. Nothing was normal anymore. She was having coffee with a vampire for Christ’s sake!

Too much time had passed since she was around familiarity that she had forgotten what the word meant.

Lucious drew her into a loose hug. His hand massaged her back in a circular motion as if trying to soothe the confusion she felt inside.

Without a word, she buried her face in the soft material of his T-shirt and let her tears flow. The scent from it made her remember Andrew. She had missed her best friend. Not enough time had passed for him to control his thirst. She knew that. Deep down, she didn’t care. She wanted to catch a glimpse of him—anything to give her some reassurance that he didn’t hate her for becoming one of them.



The sun had set outside, and her tears were replaced with a permanent migraine. At least, she had calmed down.

For the whole hour, Lucious hadn't moved. He was a perfect gentleman, letting her cry her heart out. Who would have thought she would cry on the same sofa and into the same vampire's chest twice?

"Are you feeling better?"

She cleared her throat. "Yes."

"Helena, there's something I have to do." He slid out of his wet T-shirt, and she waited for him to continue while trying not to look at his toned torso.

"I will have to leave for England tomorrow. There are things I need to take care of over there. For the time being, Alexander will keep you safe. Also, when people arrive from the Council, don't trust them, and don't run off seeking danger."

Helena sighed. He was beginning to sound like Michael. "I promise I won't go looking for trouble or trust the Council."

He seemed doubtful. It didn't surprise her. Her tendency to find danger everywhere amazed her, too.

He raked his hand through his hair. "Do you truly understand what I'm asking?"

"I do. Now go. You have other business to take care of, right?"

He seemed torn. "I'll be leaving then."

As he rose, she grabbed his hand. Their skin contact made her want to be closer to him. She ignored the urge. "Lucious?"

"What is it?"

"When can I see Andrew?" She needed to know if he was safe. Her guilt would drive her insane unless she could talk to him.

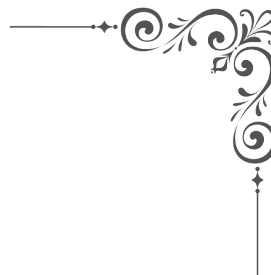
The link shook violently, and he reinforced his shields, hiding his emotions from her. "He doesn't wish to see you. And, you mustn't forget—" Lucious pulled her up and held her against him. "—you're mine."

His hands roamed her back, and he pressed his lips to hers, merging them in a frustrated kiss. The intensity of his hold drew her closer to him, and she accepted the strength and comfort he radiated. As the soul-bond between them danced with contentment, her fingers brushed the pink scar tissue on his back.

She withdrew from him, remembering his stinging words. "I need to see him, call him even. Please, Lucious, if I can explain to him why—"

The calm blue glow in his eyes became an angry flame. "I will look into the women you've listed and tell Alexander to keep an eye on you while I am gone. If your friend wishes to contact you, he will."

Lucious stormed out with a single slam of the front door, replacing the warmth he gave her with a sudden chill that wrapped around her greedily.



“Aren’t you too hot in that?” her mother asked and took a long, satisfying sip of her cappuccino.

Helena feigned a shiver, hoping it would truly make her colder. It didn’t. Under her sweater, beads of sweat gathered and slid down her damp skin. “I find it a bit chilly after my cold, Mum.”

Sasha scowled at her. It was already the middle of May. Dublin had hit its early heatwave, which was as rare an occurrence in Ireland as white Christmas. Helena was unable to enjoy the sun because of the demon’s mark on her shoulder and, therefore, was forced to wear long-sleeved clothes in the presence of her family.

Her mother drummed her brightly manicured nails on the café’s table. “So, what do you want for your twentieth birthday?”

Helena stirred her ice tea with her pink-and-white striped straw. The ice on top drifted along, clinking against the glass. “I don’t think I feel like celebrating it this year.”

“Don’t be silly. Since you have no plans, we’ll have a family meal tomorrow.” Sasha planted her elbows on the table and, inadvertently, closed the distance the small table provided. “Now, tell me how it’s going with you and Andrew? Are you still at odds with one another? I heard from his father that Andrew went to study abroad.”

Helena groaned inwardly. Her mother was stubborn, and she was, too. “I told you this a million times, it’s complicated.”

There was no way she could tell her mother the truth. Sasha would think she needed to make an appointment with a shrink again. And, slipping something like, “Hey, Mum, Andrew is one of the undead because of me. Don’t worry, he’s surviving on the blood of our fellow humans... Exactly, he’s a vampire,” into their conversation wasn’t going to happen.

Diverting her full attention to the bobbing ice in her drink, she hoped her mother would drop the topic once and for all.

“Come on, Helena, you two were so promising together.”

Helena took the straw out and gulped down her drink in a few large mouthfuls. Cringing from the brain freeze, she left her glass on the table, stood up, and grabbed her handbag. “I have to go. I have to meet with my friends.”

Her mother scowled at her. “Are you talking about those two who are always at your apartment? They’re a strange bunch. I don’t mind the girl, but her brother

is...too pleasant.”

Helena rolled her eyes. Perri and Hans were the observers Vincent had sent to keep an eye on her. Hans had managed to ‘convince’ her mother to stop asking unnecessary questions that may reveal anything about vampires or her involvement with them. Perri, being herself, jumped at the chance to get to know her mother. She managed to cook a feast for them out of the little food Helena and Laura had in the fridge. How did she do it? Until this day, it remained a mystery.

“Yes, they are. I’ll come visit you and Richard tomorrow.” She planted a light peck on her mother’s forehead and darted between the tables towards the exit.

Once she was outside of the café, a warm breeze stole the tension in her stiff shoulders. She loved her mother and was grateful to have her, but the constant reminders about Andrew were driving the dagger closer to home with each mention of his name. He hadn’t once called or sent her a message since she returned. So, she had come to the conclusion that what Lucious had said five months ago was the truth. Andrew must hate her for making him one of them and may never forgive her for her rash decision to turn him into a monster.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her bus drive past and sprinted in an attempt to catch it.



Helena and Perri sat on the sofa. Their interest in movies was too different. So, tonight was Perri’s choice of film which was the ‘Titanic’.

Helena wolfed down the popcorn to avoid crying rivers like her friend. She glanced over her shoulder to find Hans reading something at the kitchen island. Although he looked nothing like Lucious, it reminded her of the time they parted. Not once had Lucious appeared since. He sent messages via Alexander who came around once a week to “keep an eye on her”. The first message she received was stuck in her head, always there to haunt her.

*Helena,*

*The women you mentioned were disposed of by the hounds. The ghoul who served Andreaz gave me their real names and addresses if you wish to know more about them.*

*Don’t blame yourself,*

*L*

As if she could erase them from her mind. If she didn’t kill Andreaz, they would be alive and well. Helena pushed away the half-empty bowl and glanced at Perri who was already distracted from the movie and peeking over her

shoulder at Hans. There was a strange ring on her wedding finger, but until Perri said something, Helena chose to ignore it. After all, it could be nothing, even though Hans seemed to be wearing a similar one.

Perri shuffled closer and whispered in her ear, "Isn't he dreamy?"

Helena rolled her eyes. Somehow, her new friend was able to draw her out even from her darkest thoughts. "Should we arrange for another party?" She winked.

Perri blushed and swatted her on the shoulder.

They burst into uncontrollable laughter.

"I didn't think you two were watching a comedy," Hans said, stealing a peek at the screen.

Helena turned to find the main characters struggling not to drown amidst hundreds of other people who were in the same predicament. She tugged on Perri's sleeve and pointed to the TV. "Let's get back to it."

There was a knock on the door, and Helena shot out of her seat. "Must be Laura. She was going to bring some ice cream with her."

"Do you want my help?" Perri asked.

Helena shook her head and scrambled for the front door. Once she unlocked it, she found Lucious standing on the other side with his hands tucked away in his jeans' pockets.

Her fingers played with the door handle, and her words seemed to be stuck in her throat.

"Come with me," he said and headed for the lift.

"Sure." She stalked after him. "It's been a while." *Especially since you left after kissing me like that...* She glared at the back of his head.

They entered the lift, and he pressed the button for the roof. "I have waited a long time to see you again."

The doors closed, and she still couldn't come up with what to talk about. He was gone for over five months. There were many questions she wanted answers to but none seemed important enough.

A faint ding informed her they had arrived.

He grabbed her wrist and almost dragged her out. "I don't have much time, so I shall get down to business."

Momentarily, Lucious' skin reshaped. His hair grew longer, and his blue-brown eyes were replaced with red ones. Horns appeared in the middle of the transformation. He grinned at her with a sharp-toothed smile that haunted her restless nights.

Seconds later, not Lucious but Lazarus stood beside her. She gasped and tried to tear away from him. Helena looked down to find her arm was tangled in the

shadow-like tendrils that made up his clothing. They chilled her wrist as if it had an icepack wrapped around it.

He jerked her closer, making her stumble. "I had to fight my way into this pitiful realm. So many souls had to be eaten for me to materialise. Today, I will take my payment, my flower."

"Let me go!" she screamed and kicked him in the shin.

He didn't seem to mind the pain if he felt it.

Her heartbeat thudded in her head, almost drowning out her panicked thoughts.

"I can't do that. I have other plans for you," he growled.

The shadow mounted her arm, and the cold sensation spread further, numbing the surface it covered.

"Stop this, please!" Her struggling was useless. The more she fought to pull away, the quicker the shadow engulfed her body. She glowered at him in defiance, which seemed to please him more.

Helena reached for the shadow that began tangling itself around her ankles, trapping her in place. Instead of being able to peel it off with her free hand, it clung to her fingers like oil, spreading to her other arm. No matter how hard she fought, her body grew immobile.

"I won't accept any deals with you!" she said through her chattering teeth.

Lazarus couldn't contain his laughter. "I don't need a petty deal to take your soul, human. I can take it whenever I please."

She shuddered, uncertain whether it was from the cold or fear that his words were true.

"This is my game, so I am going to change the rules." He reached for her gut, and his clawed hand disappeared into the shadow covering it.

Helena watched in horror as it passed through her skin with no resistance. Whatever he was doing to her was beginning to ignite a fire inside of her that scorched her insides. The cold of the darkness stung her skin and the heat from within burned mercilessly.

She screamed.

"It'll be over soon, don't you worry." Lazarus licked his lips and plunged his hand in deeper, making her feel as if she was being torn to shreds.

Her white string emerged to the surface, and he grabbed hold of it. The second his clawed fingers clutched it, her whole body convulsed. The darkness from his hand seeped into it, painting it grey.

The rooftop door slammed against the wall. Helena heard a muffled curse escape the demon's lips, and he melted into the night.

A strange woman with long dark curls rushed to her side.



The darkness had retreated, and Helena fell to the ground like a lifeless doll. She managed to roll onto her back, gritting her teeth from the pain surging through her. Eyeing her gut, she found a gaping hole where her skin and muscle was supposed to be. Blood pooled to the surface and burning acid raced up her throat.

“Lucious is going to owe me big time for saving his ass,” the stranger murmured. She knelt by Helena’s side and sliced open her wrist with her long perfectly painted nails. Blood dripped into the wound Lazarus had created.

“Thank you,” Helena whispered. Her vision clouded the longer she tried to remain conscious.

“I’m not doing this for you,” the woman spat out in disgust.

“Helena, what’s going on?” Michael materialised behind the stranger. The vampire didn’t seem to notice him. He studied them briefly, and his nostrils flared.

“Lazarus,” Helena mouthed to him. Her injury was making it difficult for her to breathe without wincing in pain.

The stranger glanced over her shoulder and back at Helena. Without much warning, she lifted Helena into her arms.

Helena muffled a scream that was trying to tear out of her throat.

The woman carried her down numerous flights of stairs until they arrived at the apartment. She held on to Helena with one arm and rang the doorbell.

“He was here? I didn’t feel anything around your shields,” Michael admitted.

“He came...in the flesh,” Helena squeezed out.

Michael’s face paled. He reached over to scan her body with his palm when the door opened, and Perri let out a scream.

“I smell blood,” Hans said.

“Helena is hurt!” Perri shouted.

The woman groaned. “Stop your human’s wailing and get this one off me.”

Hans gathered Helena in his arms. He carried her over to the sofa and gently placed her on the cushions. “What happened? Who attacked you?”

Helena waved him away. “No time. Have to talk to Michael.”

With a frown, Hans moved out of her sight.

Perri rushed to her side and collapsed on the ground next to her. She clutched Helena’s hand in hers and sniffled.

Standing at her side again, Michael scanned her with his hand. He stopped over her wound and jerked his hand away as if he’d been bitten. “Your string. It’s grey.”

“What does that mean?”

Perri raised her head. “What’re you trying to say?”

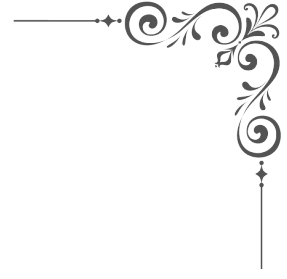
Michael's expression grew grim. He bent down. Whatever he was going to tell her wasn't good. "Helena, I cannot be your guardian for the time being, but I promise you, I will find someone who can help."

His lips hovered above her forehead in the form of a tender kiss that never landed. He straightened up.

She reached out to him with a shaking hand. "Don't go!"

"Hans, do something! Call a doctor or whatever. She's not making any sense!" Perri cried.

A sad smile tugged at Michael's lips. "I must leave since you are no longer considered to be human."



## BONUS CHAPTER HAUNTED VALENTINES

Perri nibbled on her lower lip while she watched Hans working in Vincent's office from the doorway. She clutched a gift-wrapped bag of homemade chocolates in her hands. *If you continue staring, he'll think you're a freak*, she reminded herself.

Sighing, she started heading away from the office. *It's not like he can eat them*. She knew what he was, and his being a vampire didn't take away from his appeal in the least.

As she was about to turn the corner, he grabbed her arm, making her face him.

His emerald-green eyes sparkled with interest. "Are those for me?"

She shook her head. Every logical thought fled her mind. Staring at her feet, she turned beetroot-red and mumbled her apology before running down the hallway to the kitchen.

Once she was safely out of his sight, behind a solid oak set of doors, she cursed. Every time she was close to him, her shyness took over. It had to be some kind of illness. No one else seemed to suffer with the same problem when it came to talking to the people they liked.

Rupert ambled into the kitchen, smiling. "Thank you for those chocolates, Perri. They were magnificent."

She returned his smile. Her nerves were finally letting up. "I'm glad you liked them."

"Are those for someone special?"

She glanced at the bag she was holding. "No! Er...they're for Terry. I forgot to give them to her this morning. I'd better do so now."



An hour later, deflated, she wiped the windowsill on the second floor. Even the dust specs on the windows had partnered up. She groaned. *Just how hard is it to tell someone you like them?*

The temperature around her dropped. Her breath became visible, forming clouds of steam in front of her mouth. She shivered as she drew away from the windowpanes. This wasn't normal. She heard stories from Terry about some parts of the castle being haunted, but she never believed it.

A woman's wail came from the room to her right, causing her to stumble. She stilled. Her heart jumped into her throat as she edged closer to the door. Steeling her nerves, she pressed down on the door handle.

She peered inside before entering. Nothing seemed out of place in the store room.

As she blew out a breath of relief, the door slammed shut behind her. A see-through form of a weeping woman materialised right before a scream escaped Perri's lips...



Hans scowled at his paperwork. *Is she frightened of me?* Every time he was around Perri, she would scurry away like a thief. He couldn't understand her erratic behaviour. She was one of Vincent's most beloved humans. 'She's like a daughter to me,' his sire would say. So, even though Hans watched her grow into a beautiful young woman, he could never lay his hands on her.

Perri deserved happiness with a normal, mortal man—not a cursed creature of the night. Yet, the last time he held her was a precious memory he would never forget. On that fateful Hallows Eve, they swayed to the instrumental music in the dining hall. Her slender form fit perfectly in his hold, and he had struggled to keep the thoughts of a gentleman rather than that of an animal. When she danced with the other men, the feeling of jealousy was certainly there. Since then, he had distanced himself from her. After all, Master Vincent did not need to know about his filthy thoughts that were directed at an innocent girl his sire had so lovingly raised.

Hans rubbed his eyes. He had not slept in three days. The amount of work piling up at the Council surprised him. The number of hunter sightings and engagements had increased over the past month. They were coming out of the woodwork like pests. More than a dozen vampires had been killed since the year began. The tension in the Council continued to rise with the ever-growing number. Something was coming, he just wasn't sure what.

A soft knock on the door drew him out of his dark thoughts.

Rupert stuck his head around the corner, studying the room briefly before focusing on him. “Master Hans, have you seen Perri? She hasn't returned from cleaning the upper floors, and it is almost dinner time.”

Hans stood. Concern etched itself onto his face in the form of a frown. "Could she have gone out?"

"She would have said something about that," Rupert replied. He waved his hands. "We will find her. Don't worry, Master. Please return to your work."

"I will aid you in your search."

"Are you sure? We know you are very busy."

Hans nodded. "Tell me where you had last seen her."

"Rather than see, she went to the top floor. We have checked every room, but she wasn't there. And today is—"

"What is it?"

"Valentine's day, Master. The ghost may be playing tricks once again."

Hans grumbled with irritation under his breath. He rushed out of the room and scaled the grand staircase, taking two steps at a time. They knew little about the ghost of the woman residing on the second floor. She couldn't be exorcised no matter how many times they asked the witches of the local Circle to cleanse the castle. They always said the same thing, 'There is no presence here'. Yet, every Valentine's Day, she would appear like clockwork and haunt the second storey. He could only hope that Perri remained unharmed.

He rounded the corner and went from one room to the next, listening out for any heartbeats. When he came to the second last door, his hand hovered over the handle. A chill crept from the other side and prickling energy bit his fingertips. The ghost had to be here.

The door creaked open, and he entered. His eyes assessed the old furniture covered in dusty sheets. This room had been used by the household for storage. The floorboards strained under his weight and the door slammed shut, making him jump.

As if by magic, the room melted away and, a moment later, he stood atop a hill with moonlight illuminating the mystical world around him. An ancient cherry tree towered ahead, naked of leaves and devoid of life. Dark branches swayed with the breeze that carried the scent of fallen vegetation. At the bottom of the hill, a single church marred the perfectly even field of snowdrops.

Hans headed for the building. He used his energy to seek out the location of the ghost.

Tendrils of power seeped out from within the church. The closer he got, the more his nerves knotted his stomach. His hands fisted at his sides when he imagined Perri being hurt by the damned. He would dispense all kinds of hell on the ghost if a single hair on her head was harmed.

He stepped into the church. Moonlight shone through the stained-glass windows, portraying lovers holding hands or stealing secret kisses instead of the

icons of a Christian messiah. At the Greystone altar, Perri chatted with a stranger.

“The groom has arrived!” the female ghost shouted in excitement.

Hans froze mid-step and glanced over his shoulder. When he noted that no one stood behind him, he scowled. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Her name is Morna,” Perri said. “She was just telling me about her wedding day.”

The ghost glided over to him, her feet never touching the red carpet. “It is your wedding night. Are you not excited?”

“Let us go. We do not have time to play around with the dead,” Hans ordered.

Morna shook her head. “I cannot let you go. Not until the ceremony is complete. Two lovers must take their vows tonight or be damned for an eternity.”

“We are not lovers!” Hans snapped at her.

Morna tilted her head to one side in confusion. “I do not understand. Only those who love each other could be brought here. You must be mistaken.”

Perri hurried over. Her cheeks flared with embarrassment, and Hans glowered at the ghost. He did not wish to bring any more discomfort to Perri than this situation had caused already. After all, Perri’s love for him had to be a lie.

“Whatever spell you have weaved here, it has gone wrong. We are not lovers nor are we in love with one another,” he said, his voice rising. “Release us!”

The woman bowed her head and tears ran down her pale cheeks. Wiping them away, she glared at him. “You’re lying. You have to be.”

Perri reached out, rubbing the sobbing woman’s shoulders. “Why are you so determined to make two people get married?”

Sniffing, Morna’s eyes cast downward. “My love never showed for our ceremony. He promised nothing would keep him. He promised! But he died on the way. The only way to help me rest is to let me see someone else wed in my stead. Where I couldn’t succeed, perhaps another pair of lovers can.”

Perri’s eyes watered.

Hans searched his pockets for a handkerchief. He offered it to Perri, and she gave him a smile that would melt the heart of any mortal. Too bad she did not belong to him.

“I knew it!” Morna shouted. “I knew the spell wasn’t wrong!” She snapped her fingers and the room filled with fog in an instant.

Soon, he could no longer see the ghost or Perri. Seconds ticked by as he readied to call out her name. Yet, when the fog cleared, candles lit the altar and

the aisle. Ghosts sat on the pews while hushed silence occupied the room. He studied his new tuxedo. He lifted his gaze but Perri was nowhere to be found.

“The bride has arrived!” Morna announced from the doorway in her excitement.

Hans tried stepping away from the altar. As if bound by magic, his limbs wouldn't budge no matter how much effort he put in.

An elderly ghost cracked her fingers and started playing the organ, filling the cosy church with a wedding tune.

All words died down in his throat when Perri appeared at the other end of the red carpet stretched along the aisle. She stood in a flowing, sleeveless, white lace dress. Cherry blossoms were weaved into her golden hair.

His breath caught in his throat.



Perri made her way down the aisle. Seeing Hans on the other end seemed like a dream come true. And, a dream this had to be. She couldn't believe the nerves that surged just beneath her skin. Her heart thudded in her chest and her lungs strained as she held her breath. She was tempted to run the other half of the way instead of taking measured, graceful strides to match the endearing music.

With her final step out of the way, she paused next to him and smiled. There was something magical about the whole scenario. The soft candlelight took away the eerie feeling of the haunted church. Compliments about her dress were whispered by the ghostly audience, causing her heart to swell with joy.

“Perri, I will figure something out, I promise,” Hans whispered into her ear. “You will leave here unharmed even if that is the last thing I do.”

She let out a giggle. “I've never been happier.”

He studied her with a stern gaze seemingly attempting to piece a puzzle together. “I thought you would be against this.”

“Why? I have loved you since I was young.”

As still as a monument, he stared at her in disbelief. For the first time since she had arrived in this strange world, she questioned whether this was, indeed, just a dream. She thought back, recalling her cleaning duties, a woman's cry, the door, and the ghost in the storeroom. Her eyes widened and realisation dawned on her. She covered her face to hide her utter embarrassment.

“Oh my God, is this real? Master Hans, you're...you?”

He sighed. “Of course, I am me. The fact that we are trapped in this ghost's domain remains true as well.”

Morna cleared her throat in front of them. “Dearly beloved, we are here today to celebrate a union of two people.”

Hans grasped Perri's hand. "Just say the word and I will stop this whole farce, somehow."

She couldn't say it. This was her only chance to be close to him, even if it was for a short time. Green eyes locked with her brown ones, and she shook her head. "I want to."

Morna cleared her throat again, cutting his response. "You can talk after the ceremony." She smiled at Perri. "Do you, Perri Vivienne Abbott take this man as your spiritually wedded husband? To love him always, in sickness and in health, until death parts you?"

"Perri, are you sure? Once the spiritual vows are forged, they cannot be undone. You will never love another man," Hans warned.

"I am more than happy to keep loving you," she said, then faced the ghost. "I do."

His lips pressed into a grim line when Morna said, "Do you, Hans Schultz, take this woman as your spiritually wedded wife. To love her always, in sickness and in health, until death parts you?"

When he didn't say anything, Morna rolled her eyes. "Say it already."

He let out a strained breath. "I do."

The ghost clapped her hands in excitement and two silver bands formed in her hands. She offered each of them a ring. "Try these on."

Hans took the smaller ring and gently slid it onto Perri's wedding finger. His touch sent shivers all over her. She returned the favour with his ring, unable to contain her glee.

"Now, seal the vows with a kiss," Morna urged.

Hans drew Perri into him, pressing her close to his hard chest. His lips descended onto hers—a simple touch which ignited unimaginable passion within her. Her hands wound around his neck, and she drew him even closer for more than just a peck. Melting into him, her whole being sang as if the angels had carried her to the heavens above. If she didn't know better, she would think her body was glowing with her love for him.

Cheers erupted from the gathered ghosts.

Morna's words echoed throughout the space. "May the gods bless this union of souls."

Once the church faded, the two of them appeared before the cherry tree.

Breathless, Perri broke the kiss to look at the dead tree regaining its life. Cherry blossoms floated with the gentle whoosh of the wind while more of them bloomed in the silver light of the moon.

Hans took her hand in his. "The door has opened, at last."



He was right. A door to the storage room had unlocked a couple of feet away. He tugged her towards it, but she didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay in this fairy tale where he would always be by her side and hold her like a lover.

"Are you alright? I'm sorry if you didn't enjoy the—"

She shook her head. "I don't want to go back."

"Why not?"

She studied the beautiful flower patterns on the lace of her dress. The moment she would cross back into the real world, it would disappear, just like this magical dream.

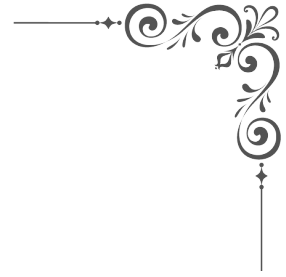
"Because I don't want us to end," she whispered, fighting back her tears.

Hans drew her into his arms. "I don't believe I will be letting you go anytime soon." He spoke into her ear. "After all, a spiritual wedding is for life. Just as you will never find another man to love, I cannot find another woman. I accepted this the moment I said my vows."

"Do you mean that, Master Hans?"

He chuckled. "Call me Hans from now on. But let's keep this wedding a secret for a little while longer."

She nodded, allowing all of her worry to fade with the spirit's magic before they returned to the real world, hand in hand.



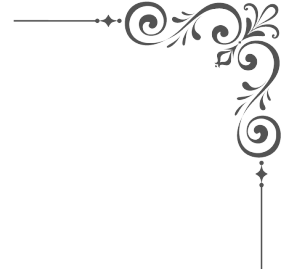
## LIKED THE BOOK?

**Please leave a review.** By doing so, you are helping other readers find the story and helping the author reach new audience. Without your voice, it's easy to get buried in the ocean of e-books.

## FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IN:

*Demon Gates*





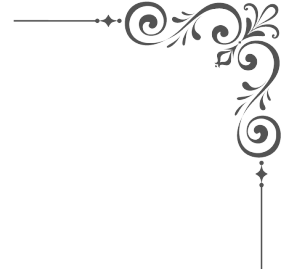
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*“Lover of cake, life, and writing.”*

May Freighter is an internationally bestselling author from Dublin, Ireland. She writes Urban Fantasy, Paranormal Romance, and Sci-Fi mysteries that will keep you entertained, mystified, and hopefully craving more. Her only pets are cacti. They're the only things that survived. It may be too dangerous to entrust her with an animal while she's engrossed in writing.

On sunny, rainy, and overcast days, she spends her time with her fictional friends, putting them through dangerous adventures while wishing them the best of luck. Her hobbies are photography, drawing, and plotting different ways of characters' demise.

You can find her on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or her [website](#) for more information!



# DEDICATION

*To my loved ones.  
Thank you for always being there and supporting me in my darkest hours.*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who helped put this book together, especially C. J. Laurence, Jean Wallace, and Anna Santos. You guys are simply the loveliest people I know!

Big thanks to everyone who suffered with the early drafts of this book: M. Belford, K. Manning, E. Hoffman, S. McEvoy, E. McGinnity, L. M. Lawrence, D. Wright, H. Zapolukh, I. Galvez, A. Grey, K. Wynn.

Lastly, massive thanks to everyone on my launch team: Y. Arcangel, L. Adams, M. Greenhill, J. Rubin, A.I. Diaz, L.W. Stuart, R.S. Kovach, M. Appkova, A. Simons, G. Cabezut, F. Loqman, N. Burger, S.G. Benson, K. Oyatedor, E. Hyder, J. Lyons, K.A. Blount, T. Archer, S. Royal, L. Santiago, J. Stark, A. Santos, R.J. Cieplinski, T. Oja, D. Goelz, K. Jacques, I. Galvez, R.C. Kisiel, C. McDonnell, M. Hayes, S. Mason, P. Patel, M. Appkova, M. Sorierro.

## Don't miss out!

Click the button below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever May Freighter publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

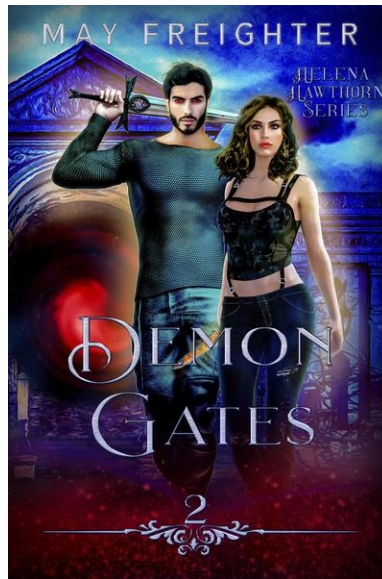
**Sign Me Up!**

<https://books2read.com/r/B-A-HIFD-ZJKK>

BOOKS  READ

Connecting independent readers to independent writers.

Did you love *Russian Roulette*? Then you should read [Demon Gates](#) by May Freighter!



**"Demon Gates is a dazzling sequel with dangerous vampires, a sharp wit, humor, betrayal, and romance." - Readers' Favourite Review**Uncertain whether she is human or not, Helena is forced to undergo new nightmares while her mental battle continues with a demon called 'Lazarus'. Without her guardian angel to protect her, she is left to rely on vampires who have their own reasons for everything. The attraction between her and Lucious grows, whether it is a side effect of the soul-bond they share or of their own volition. Yet, how can they be certain? With the help of her new friends, they must seek out a Demon Gate and enter the Demon Realm to stop Lazarus from claiming her and Lucious' souls. But, will they succeed or perish as the only weapon that can kill a demon has been lost centuries ago.

Read more at [May Freighter's site](#).

# Also by May Freighter

## **Annalise Storm Chronicles**

[Case: 0](#)

[Case: 1](#)

[Case: 2](#)

## **A Vampire In Love**

[Alexander: Memoirs](#)

[Monochrome Interview](#)

## **Helena Hawthorn Series**

[Russian Roulette](#)

[Demon Gates](#)

[Crumbling Control](#)

[Fated Origins](#)

[Dark Affiliations](#)

[Blood Witch](#)

[Twisted Truths](#)

[Desired](#)

[Cherished](#)

## **Standalone**

[Perfect Match](#)

[Annalise Storm Chronicles Trilogy](#)

Watch for more at [May Freighter's site](#).