

a song of

*blood*

A Song of Blood by Renee Peters and Rae Stilwell

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*This book is dedicated to:*

*My husband Robert, who supported my dream of becoming a writer even when it meant sacrificing quality time with his wife for months on end. Thank you!*

*My mom and dad, for the gift of an unshakable foundation and the ability to walk free; you are gone but never forgotten.*

*-Renee*

*My mom. Thank you for being there for me every step of the way.*

*My family, who had the patience to listen to me rant about how stressed I was and still supported me. Thank you.*

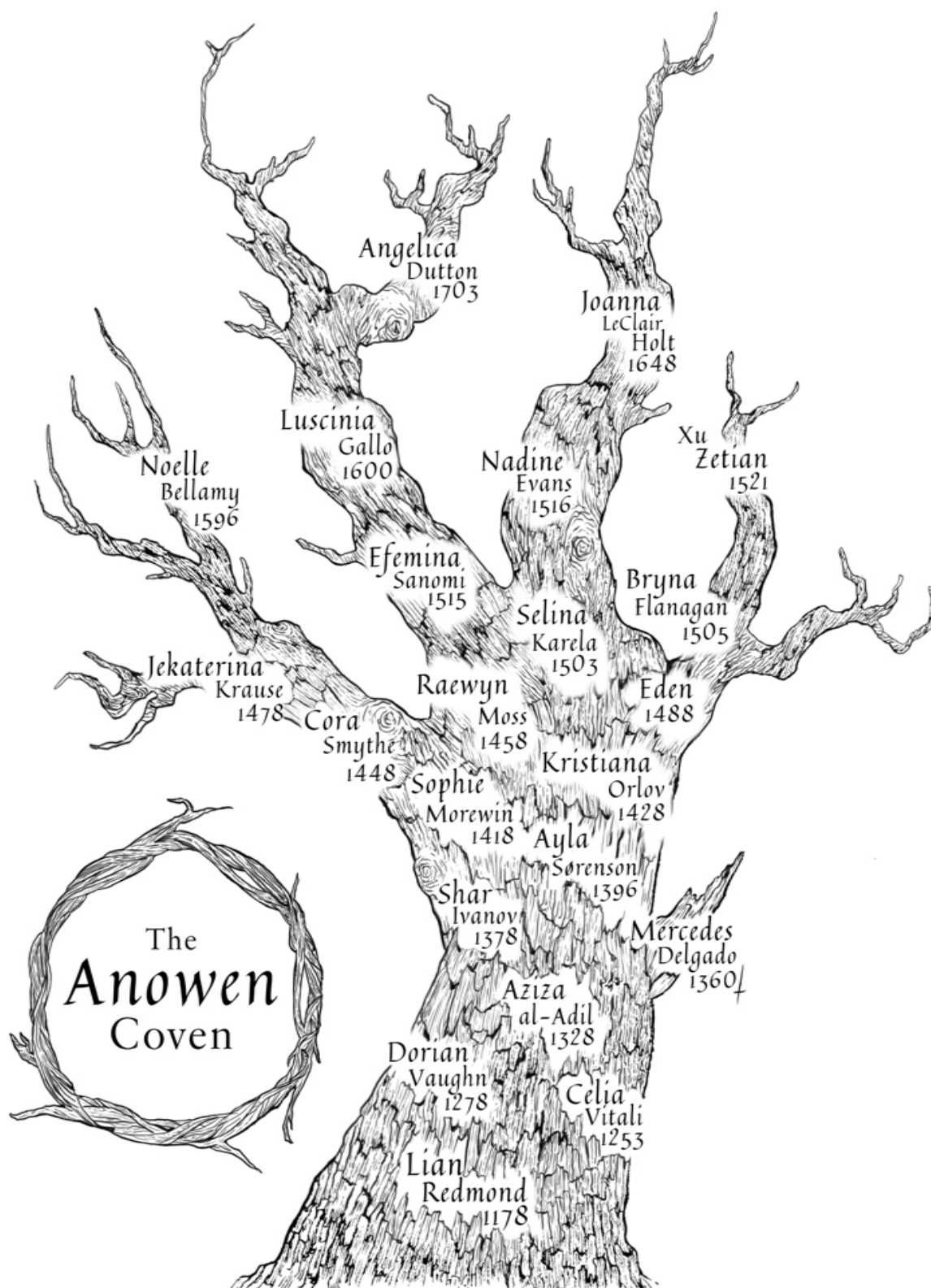
*As a special note to my papa and Lou, please skip chapter thirty-six.*

*-Rae*

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*We are all as men, too selfish to be anything but less than perfect in our efforts.*

*It matters only that the intentions of the heart are pure...*

*-Delilah Flowers, A Song of Blood*



*I do not love you as if you were salt-rose, or topaz,*

*or the arrow of carnations the fire shoots off.*

*I love you as certain dark things are to be loved,*

*in secret, between the shadow and the soul.*

*-Pablo Neruda, I Do Not Love You*



*Oh, how beautiful is your Perfect Darkness?*

*To hold it for just a moment, I would never see the Sun again.*

*-The Songs of Blood Saga*

# A Song of *Blood*

Book One of the Songs of Blood Saga

Renee Peters and Rae Stilwell



🌹 Prologue 🌹

Maggie Hansen did not want to die. Not that she hadn't nearly managed to do so on more than one occasion in the past. All things considered, those situations had been entirely her fault. Tonight, for once, she was a mostly innocent party. The light drizzle that had begun to fall in the fog rolling in off the Humber caused the already thin muslin of her gown to cling to the ample curves of her body. The brunette clutched the small, worn purse that held the key to her rented room closer to her chest. There would be safety at the house of the bawd, surrounded by other women luckier than she at finding paying company for the evening. She was at the last of her coin, and after tonight, she would not even be able to afford the rented room. In the morning, she would be reduced to the streets, a common hackney whore — assuming she survived the night. As it was, Maggie was quite certain she was being followed.

She was not sure when she became aware of the shadow following her through the side streets of Easthaven. The darkness drew closer, but it never stepped into the light to show its face and never made a sound. Every terrifying story she had been told by the women of her profession came to mind. If her stalker sought the rewards of honest pay, he would show himself. What gain could be found in remaining hidden? Women had disappeared in Easthaven before, never to be heard of again. Few cared for the loss or absence of a common country whore. Maggie could feel her heart racing while rainwater trickled down her face and between her breasts like perspiration. She needed to get out of the dark; she needed the safety of light, even if there was no one to see her. On the other side of the street, a street lamp beckoned, but it was dimmer for the rain and mist in the air. Beyond it loomed the tall, dreary faces of older townhomes, securely buttoned down for the night. Between herself and relative safety lay the wide, empty expanse of the street. Throwing caution to the wind, Maggie dropped her hands down to gather up her skirts and ran.

The shadow fell onto her path like a bird of prey swooping down upon a little field mouse. Just when Maggie had nearly reached safety, a strong arm clamped around her stomach, wrenching her into the hard chest of a man. A second hand, broad and soft as an aristocrat's, flew to her face to stifle her scream into his

palm. Without thinking, she began to twist and kick in his hold, flailing her legs in a tangle of skirts against the unyielding strength of his body.

“Gentle, gentle, gentle...” the voice, throaty and rough, though young, chided her under the heat of his breath. His long fingers dug into her cheek.

“Be gentle, now,” he continued. “I will be as gentle as you are, sweet one.” The whispering lips on her temple curved into a smile against her skin. “Do not scream. My ears are just! — so! — sensitive!” He jerked her backward, punctuating each word with a drag of her body deeper into the darkness of the alleyway from whence he came. “Should have stayed out of the rain, sweet. Only monsters come out on nights like —”

He grunted suddenly, and with no sign of a second assailant, Maggie and her attacker both went flying through the air as though shoved by some great force. Her stalker rolled on the ground, releasing her to fall into her own heap on the cobblestone, and snarled, “You —!”

The man froze and his gaze, as bright as two polished gold coins, fixed toward the end of the alley, widening for what he saw. Her attacker scuffled backward on the grimy cobblestone pathway to scramble to his feet. “Apologies,” he mumbled, dropped a bow and pivoted on his heel to flee into the darkness.

The new arrival stood quietly over Maggie Hansen — a tall silhouette at the opening of the alley. Beneath his umbrella, the paleness of his jawline and the rain soaked gold of his hair seemed to glow faintly through the haze. “It is all right. You are safe from him...” He spoke gently, like a parent soothing a frightened child after a nightmare. Her rescuer extended a hand, inviting her back to the light beneath the security of his umbrella. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head reflexively, as if she had no thought or choice other than to answer her savior. Words formed in her mind but could not quite make it to her lips. She barely managed to gather her legs under her to try for a rise as she clung to his hand. Some part of her mind wrestled with the way in which her attacker had been bested, and with the respect he had meted out to the man who had saved her from almost certain death.

“No.” She managed a word, finally. “You stopped him before he could do his worst.” Her tone carried the faintest hint of worship.

He held her hand, as cool to the touch as the golden-eyed shadow, and led her to the street lamp. Even in the safety of the light, he kept his fingers curled around hers. He seemed to have been cut from marble, with a face as chiseled and pale as a Grecian god. Although darkened by the moisture in the air, his blond crown appeared to be woven from gold. He wore an expensive suit, black, and double-breasted with golden buttons atop a silk vest; a vest matched to the storm-blue of his eyes when he looked at her.

“There...” He lifted his hand, his umbrella balanced on the crook of his arm, and touched long fingers to her chin. Turning her face up to examine her, he offered a small, polite smile. That close, she smelled a scent of age like old books from him, amplified by the mist. “Safe and sound, but not for long in this weather and this darkness.”

His fingers dropped away from her face, and keeping his hand on hers, he bent forward in a half bow. "It would please me to escort you to my home. I can spare you the rain." His eyes lifted to hold hers.

Maggie nearly did not hear his words for how intently she lost herself in his eyes. They seemed to go on forever in depth, so perfect a match for features almost divine. "Me?" Her fingers fluttered to rest on the fullness of her bosom. "You're wanting me?" She almost seemed surprised by the fact, and then, as if the indecent proposal finally sank in to remind her of who and what she was, she stood a little straighter. He was not some dashing lord swept off his feet by the damsel he had rescued from a fate worse than death; he was a man like any other, walking the darkness of Easthaven's streets looking for the pleasures he could pay for.

"I'm not cheap, I'll have you know." She looked him dead in the eye. Who knew the next time she would land an offer from a well-padded noble such as he? She would have to make tonight pay for as many more days of boarding as she could eek out of it. "And I don't do those strange things. No whips and such. Just a toss, but I'll make it one you won't soon forget."

The man nodded, extending his hand into the darkness. "My Lady, my carriage is not far. Please. I assure you, my intention was far more humanitarian." He leaned in close to offer a quiet murmur: "But I am sure you will not be disappointed by my wealth."



The carriage ride swept them from town into the heart of the northwestern forests. The man filled their time with polite, if distant conversation, asking of her name and life as he sat alongside her in the carriage. After well over an hour, the trees began to clear, and by the time the mud and dirt of the off-beaten paths gave way to the tamed length of a courtyard, the rain had picked up to a thundering pace.

He stepped out first, splashing into a puddle on the cobblestone and offered his hand to help her vault over the water. "Mind your step, Maggie." Before them stood a castle like a white-armored sentinel in the fog. Its walls and spires reached skyward, disappearing into the rain, seemingly without an end.

Maggie had never seen anything so grand as the castle before them. In town, she had heard such a place might exist, but no one seemed to have ever actually seen it. Most only knew of the woman in black who sometimes rode into town and out again. The woman never shopped or did anything else to indicate that she worked as a housekeeper at the place others whispered she came from. There were none in town who claimed employment there and surely something so big as this needed a small country of servants for management.

Distracted, the woman settled into the escort of her company for the evening. No, his wealth did not disappoint at all. Fortune had finally shone on her with favor. The first stirring of excitement turned in her stomach. She might be working tonight, but this golden god was by far the most beautiful man she had ever seen. Despite the gentleness of his touch, she knew he would be, if nothing else, a satisfying ride. All things

considered, she felt like a princess being invited to a ball, and she found she could not wait until the dancing began.

Maggie's escort led her beyond the large front doors, through the gilded halls and past tall paintings and Roman-styled sculptures on white pedestals. With a hand against her back and the other still curled lightly around her own, he encouraged her deeper into the castle. Finally, they arrived in a white-paneled room, trimmed with gold. Plush, high-backed chairs of blue-velvet and comfortable sofas and chaise lounges were arranged in such a way as to accommodate a multitude of guests. The walls themselves were bare, save for a large mirror hanging above the marble fireplace, reflecting the entirety of the space. He stepped between the seats, leading her directly across from the hearth to the back of the room where the longest sofa waited.

"The ride and the excitement have left you weary, Maggie." He helped to ease her down into the gold embroidered pillows. Touching a hand to her cheek, he lifted her face, and his eyes found hers.

"Oh, I'm not at all ti—" Maggie began, but the denial faded away into a hesitant and confused silence as she found herself lost in his eyes again. Everything about her body felt soft and heavy, as if she could not quite control her own movements. She wanted to sit up straighter but found herself reclining.

"It is all right," he assured her, resting her head on the pillow and tucking her arm across her middle. "You can sleep now."

"Yes..." she murmured. "So very tired. Maybe just a little nap..." And after? She could not remember what came next. Her gaze fluttered, a beat of wings, as she tried to fight the power his eyes alone seemed to hold over her. She managed to raise her hand toward his face. "*Beautiful...*" she slurred softly before giving way to the encroaching darkness.

## Chapter



The rain poured over the forests in heavy sheets, obscuring the view outside the windows of Anowen Castle. A jagged flash of lightning split the roiling darkness of the sky in two, briefly illuminating the corpse of the prostitute in white light. A rusty-red stain sullied the low neckline of her gown, and the round column of her throat showed puncture wounds on either side: some neat and clean edged, while others bore evidence of a more jagged savagery. Part of the bodice of her dress had been torn away and the round fullness of one breast had been likewise punctured in a grotesque echo of a lover's kiss. The length of rounded arms bore witness to an onslaught with wounds that peppered her thick wrists and forearms. For all of this seeming brutality, an expression of ecstasy remained frozen on the face of the woman, sealed there with her last breath in a macabre tribute to the price paid for the theft of her future.

Darkness fell again, inviting the roar of thunder. It rattled the glass of the ancient fortress, and for a moment, the castle seemed to be a living, trembling behemoth.

The Lord sat near the fire where he had settled and remained impassively as his brides tore into his offering. Silent and still as if he had been cut from the marble he resembled, he watched as they filtered out to their night's entertainments. His eyes followed them and occasionally, he dredged up a nod in response to the goodnights and flirtations passed his way. Only four had the boldness to remain in his presence despite his own dark humor.

A fine-boned woman with long, golden hair that fell almost to her calves sat on a footstool at the side of a larger armchair with an old book of poetry in her lap. Her melodic whispers filled the air over the crackling of the fireplace. Seated in the armchair above her was a stately woman with a crown of braided silver hair. Neither seemed interested in the bloodied remains of the meal or the Lord who had graciously provided it.

The silver-haired Queen held the Lord's attention. He studied the shimmer of her hair, watching the way the light caught the diamond pins that secured her braids like stars in a milky way. If he focused, he could pick through the symphony of music that played through the shared bond of the coven's blood and find her harp.

She was his first, the oldest song he knew. In the cold apathy of his withered heart, even her soothing melody felt muted and flat.

A single, honeyed croon of his name broke his concentration: "Lian."

Lian Redmond turned his gaze upon the youngest of his brides: Angelica. Where his first Queen's face bore noble lines and angles, Angelica's features were rounded, as soft and sweet as her namesake, with large brown eyes and a mound of raven curls already unpinned for the night. Her thumb lifted to sweep across the bottom of her full lips, wiping away the remnants of blood on her mouth. She sucked on the tip of the digit, sauntering closer to the Arch Lord's seat.

"You are soaked from the rain," she breathed, letting her hand escape her lips to reach out for his face.

Lian did not move. Instead, he watched her through thinly veiled apathy as she stroked the crest of his cheek.

"I could warm you." She threaded her fingers into the damp tendrils of his hair.

"Enough."

"Enough, enough, *enough*," Angelica sang, pulling her hand back to rub it dry against its twin. "I am afraid I do not know the meaning. Keep your wet clothes on if you like, then." She dropped in a puff of red fabric, kneeling before his chair and lacing her fingers atop his knee. Her mulish gaze lifted to his face. "I can work through them just as well." With a pout, the fledgling leaned forward to accent the pale spill of her bosom beneath the ruby and gold choker she wore. "You are being dreadfully cruel to me, Lian."

A sharp laugh interjected over the croon of the young queen. Angelica turned a glare on the tall figure of a High Queen where she stood alongside the window. The weight of Shar's chestnut hair fell freely and provocatively over the low neckline of her burgundy gown, but she seemed either unaware or careless of the picture she presented. Lian suspected the latter. The glitter of the Queen's aquamarine gaze met the fledgling's own.

"You have known little of cruelty in your life, sweet Angelica, and have much to learn about the flow of seasons," Shar added.

The Arch Lord felt a pinch of something close to self-depreciation for the High Queen's reminder of an unwelcome truth. Angelica deflated a little, before jutting her jaw upward. The fledgling was the last of the brides he had claimed and lived under the same coven roof with an eternity of predecessors who were evidence of what could not be. They were, each of them, a unique song that for a season had brought life back to his withering soul, and kept the hearts of those others bonded to him alive and flourishing. He had collected them, seduced them or stole them into his forever, in pursuit of a lasting song that could keep the curse of atrophy at bay.

None had lasted. Each had been condemned to the darkness of eternity, suffering alongside him as the withering came until the next song let them thrive again for a season. His treasure hunt had lasted for over six

hundred years. Time and again, he had failed to find the one true song capable of drowning out the silence forever.

Since Angelica's song had faded, he found he was too weary of eternity to continue. All he had created was a castle of misery. Even as close to a death of the soul as he was, watching the two queens cool the air between them with a silent battle of wills, Lian knew regret. He could give neither of them the highest place in his heart, nor could he give the coven of women — his brides and children both — the light of a new song to enliven the suffocating silence of the darkness in his soul that had spread through them all.

Such was his failure that he no longer had the stamina or will to feign at more than a polite upkeep of his garden. Duty bound him to the souls he had imprisoned, and while he kept them fed, watered, and lavished with the riches gained over centuries, he could not give them that which they most craved. His gaze turned to rest briefly upon the Silver Queen where she sat, feigning inattention.

A shift of movement from the window drew his focus back to Shar. The High Queen moved closer, with a goblet of blood wine in her hand. "Perhaps our Lord is inclined toward a more aged blend, tonight."

He rarely turned his attention her way. Organs and oboes composed a dark melody that held no comfort, warmth, or seduction in her song. It clung to him like oil when he came to her, a cold, bitter cup that oozed over the apathy of his soul and left an aching misery. Yet, even her distorted melody and the way it twisted his heart felt more palatable than the hollowing nothingness.

From the armchair, the silver-haired High Queen spoke, "I would hope that your directive is not intended to include me, Shar." Always, Celia had a voice like a snowstorm, at once soft as snowflakes and sharp and unforgiving as ice.

Dry amusement glimmered in her steel-gray gaze, but she straightened slightly in her seat, a keen focus pinning the other Queen. "I am quite enjoying being read to by Nadine and have little inclination to leave my comfort." Her eyes drifted to Lian, meeting his for a heartbeat before turning over his posture, thoughtful. "I am sure Lian appreciates my sentiment."

He felt her observation, heavy as a weight on his chest. As if the touch of her gaze alone held the power to kick his heart into feeling again, an almost childish sense of unfairness rose within him. No matter what he did, no matter how he strived to be the Elder and sire his conscience demanded or wanted to be, his failures haunted him. There was none he felt that failure for more than Celia. She alone held the place no other queen among his brides could claim, and she alone he considered his true heart. Even in the seasons of other queens, flush with life and feeling again, he had gone to her, shamelessly chasing the ghost of love that could not last.

Now, she saved him again from the poison in the cup Shar intended to offer, and he could only look away from her.

Angelica turned her head from Shar to Lian, watching his face with a feline smirk. She curled her fingers tighter into the damp folds of his clothing.

Lian's leg shifted from its crossed position to sweep her hand from his knee. Uncaring that she still sat in front of him, he moved to stand, and the fledgling had little choice but to scoot backward in a most undignified way to make room for him.

"Keep your comforts." Lian stepped toward the couch where the corpse lay. "I have no desire for them tonight."

He hooked one arm beneath the back of the late Maggie Hansen, the other under her knees, and drew her into his chest. The corpse's head rolled backward, an arm dangling limply.

"You treat the menu better than you treat your brides," Angelica whined, her shoulders shaking in the fretful onset of a tantrum. With a huff, the woman unfolded to a stand and smoothed down the front of her dress, "You have no heart, my Lord." She kept her eyes lowered when she spoke her next words: "No wonder your weaker queens have been driven away."

Sighing dramatically, Angelica lifted her jaw and pivoted on her heel to escape, avoiding the gaze of her Elders on her way.

Lian spared a final, lingering glance toward Celia before turning to leave. He took the opposite door from where Angelica had fled, without a word to the other three. There could be no fire pit for the rain, and so he gently consigned the remains of Maggie Hansen to the river.



## Chapter



The rains abated early the next morning. From behind the gray clouds, the sun did little to warm the cooler temperatures of an early English summer and even less to dry the mud and flooded puddles left over from the evening's downpour. Easthaven's eastern countryside tended to suffer worse for storms — its packed dirt pathways blurring into mud and pits at the slightest rainfall. Dotted across its expanse, the estates of the wealthy stood far from the cobblestone paths that made travel easier. Most of their residents were out of town, spread across other summer homes or enjoying country entertainments; a few bore evidences of occupancy.

A steady slipstream of smoke curled from the chimney of one of the town's oldest manors. The estate was a relic of a time when Gothic architecture had begun its revival, with red brickwork and elegant crown moldings that decorated the arched windows and doorframes. Recently, the pocked brick had been scrubbed and the moldings repainted. The restoration efforts did little to hide the age from the manor. Creeping ivy had already reclaimed the facade, the vines reaching as high as the steep gables. For that fact alone, the manor nearly blended with the wildness of the garden in its front.

Upstairs, Dorian Vaughn, the Lord of the manor, stood before the largest window of his master suite watching a carriage as it rumbled up the paved pathway leading to his residence. A look of thoughtful study shadowed his features as he identified the heraldry emblazoned on the side of the transport: two red bears standing in support of the coat of arms — the Redmond insignia. Dorian folded the poetry he had been perusing, not for the first time, and tucked it into the pocket that sat on the inner lining of his sateen vest. A faint waft of orange blossom and vanilla tickled his senses, and hesitating, he retrieved the parchment and turned away from the window to cross the room to his dresser. He opened a drawer, placed the document inside and closed it with a quiet click. Lifting his head, he stared into the dark eyes that looked back at him from the mirror.

It was the same face he had seen every day for over five hundred years. He carried enough of his Castilian ancestry to be considered exotic in the staid parlor rooms of the Regent's England. It was a fact he was only

too aware of and played up to his advantage. He kept his ebon locks trimmed into a style long enough to wear free, but wild enough to hint at the High Lord's inclination to entertainment and play. It was that inclination that had cost him his mortal life and resulted in his eternal bond with the man who had just arrived. Now, a troubled murkiness muddled his expression.

Back then, Lian had not caused his shadows but had been his ally in attempting at their resolution. Even that effort had been met with a failure. The irony that he was once again hell-bent on a course in folly involving a woman did not escape the Castilian. Lian Redmond was no Sultan of Algeciras, nor was the Elder's young bride anything like the Moroccan beauty who had captivated him all those centuries ago, but Joanna, as much as Naia had, stood to suffer the greater harm for his selfish indulgences. He had lost Naia to the blood price that her family's honor had demanded; he was not prepared to lose either the man he regarded as a brother or the friend he had in the Elder's queen, for the sake of his impulses.

He straightened and turned his head toward the open door of his suite. The low murmur of voices below stairs indicated his guest had come inside. There had been no sound of the bell pull; he had expected none. Lian never knocked. Without another thought for the betraying evidence in his dresser, Dorian reached for his costume accessories and headed for the door. With each step, the weight of his shadows fell away as he summoned the familiar security of the mask that kept most of the world at bay. That Joanna had seen past it was not something he let himself think about as he descended the stairs.

Dorian paused at the bottom, arrested for a moment by the picture framed in the open doorway of his study. Lian had settled into the guest's chair and was rifling through the cluttered surface that the Castilian called his desk. The blond's long fingers drifted toward an all too familiar polished gift box and without a shred of shame, nudged the lid from the container to reach for the stack of parchment contained within. Dorian crossed the threshold and entered the study with a soft bark of a laugh.

"One of these days, old friend, you will be the death of me for actually pulling the bell cord — " he paused " — or for permitting me the illusion of privacy." His voice carried a blend of flippant amusement and a dry resignation that echoed over the sound of his steps on the polished wooden floor.

"I only thought that you might have your own paperwork on hand," Lian offered. He nested the lid of the box without examining its contents and began unpacking the financial documents he had brought instead. Dorian eyed the paperwork as it emerged with a baleful gaze.

"Ah, you've brought your satchel. I suppose it was too much to hope that you had actually come for a visit. If I was of an unsteady constitution, I should begin to think you only loved me for my money." There was a time in their relationship when that had been a truth and vice versa. It had taken no short time for each to discover that the other had not been a man of means when they had first met in Castile five centuries ago. Theirs had been a game; one charlatan attempting at outplaying the other until they had joined forces and used their combined gifts to lift themselves out of the poverty that had been their birthrights.

With a flick of his wrist, Dorian sent the top hat held between his fingers flying. It landed at the precise angle to catch and whirl a dance around a hat hook perched atop a coat rack at the door as he headed for his chair behind the desk.

“Well, it is certainly not for your wit,” Lian responded, distracted.

Dorian feigned a hurt look in Lian’s direction that faded as quickly as it emerged. The Castilian casually moved the box containing the pages of poetry out of Lian’s reach. Once seated, he leaned back, raising his legs to rest them, crossed at the ankle, on the surface of the desk.

“You look almost human...” Dorian offered helpfully, tenting his fingers against his chest. A vampire’s beauty seemed less than perfect in the light of day when they had not fed in some time.

“Nor for your powers of observation,” Lian added, shuffling through the parchment.

“Sparse pickings?”

“I have simply been without the inclination.”

“Inclination means little.” The Castilian’s dark eyes shaded, thoughtful. With time came the thirst that thinned the veins and burned the throat with desperation. As human as Lian appeared, there would be no denying the call soon.

Finally, Lian pulled a thick sheaf of documents free. “Unless you would like to bequeath your estate to your partner and his lineage, you are to be dead in a year or two. I could not help but notice that in the distraction of moving back to Easthaven, Dorian Vaughn — the younger — was not properly willed his due inheritance.” Lian extended the papers for Dorian to take. “When you have the time to take it to the courthouse, I would certainly rest easier knowing there are no kinks in your imminent demise.”

Dorian leaned forward, distracted for a moment out of his cavalier posture by the reminder of the business that had closed in unawares. “Good God, is it that time already?” he muttered over the documents. He did not spare time to look through them; they had gone through the same action countless times as their shared enterprises both profited from and echoed the world’s development.

“It creeps up quickly.” Lian frowned, lifting his hand to press his thumb and forefinger to his nose. “And I need to marry.”

Not one of Lian Redmond’s brides counted for a public record. Fortunately for the Lords of the coven, coin now spoke loudly enough to render the public appearances of the queens unnecessary. It saved both men from having to take one of the castle brides for a faux wedding, and Lian the infighting that rose along with it.

“I’m not surprised that getting wed would slip your mind,” Dorian answered. “I should think most sane men would get tired of looking for a wife after the... how many is it now?”

“Seventeen.”

Dorian withheld the sympathetic grimace that threatened for Lian’s detached reply. The Elder’s garden had bloomed with more delights than Dorian had had the fortune to see gathered in one place, even for his

haunting of centuries worth of society parlors. A man could only stand so much beauty and perfection before even that became a bore, and he had seen the effect of it wearing on his friend in the last half-century. He worried for Lian. Were it not for the weight of the secret he carried in his heart, he might have set himself to thinking of ways he could help. He could feel the cold silence pressing into his sire through the reverberation of the Elder's song into his own soul.

Lian shifted and folded his portfolio closed, continuing his thread of thought regarding his brides: "All of whom were entirely unsatisfied that I left this morning after a brief visit rather than remaining in the castle. If you have other business to attend, we need not concern ourselves further. Unfortunately, the storm delayed the mail, and I think we shall not see anything of this new rifle we are funding until the war has ended."

Dorian grunted. "I would hope not. I'm fairly certain about half a lifetime's worth of profits have gone into making sure I do see the bloody thing before they expire." Whether he spoke of the gun or the mortals who wielded it was not immediately evident. "And I am always glad for your company, Lian." Dorian stated the truth openly. He was not sure he knew how to live without the Elder's song now; it was as familiar as the breaths he took. Lian had saved his mortal life in giving him immortality, and Dorian owed him loyalty and a steadfast bond that could never be broken, would never be broken — least of all by a woman who wove magic with words.

Dorian swung his feet to the floor. "You know better than to ask if my preference is for work or play." His grin flashed white. "I was off to the races. I've put down a pretty penny on Walmorth's three-year-old black. You should join me. It would do you a world of good to take in a round of entertainments. What's the point of living forever if you cannot be bothered to enjoy it?" He adjusted the cufflinks that had been skewed out of place for his lounging.

"Ah, my friend — there is no point." The Arch Elder pushed to a stand. Lian rarely denied Dorian anything, least of all his company when the Castilian extended the invitation. "Unfortunately, my coin and I are at your mercy." The blond did little to keep up with the races or current events, save for what might affect filling out their share certificates; he left *that* to Dorian. He spared a moment to pull his coat straight. "There will only be you to blame if we fall into ruin and must live as paupers in the street."

With a pause, Lian added, "And it will be you sharing the side of the road with the queens." The corner of his mouth twitched in a rare show of a smile, but it faded in the next instant. "I could not weather the storm that would arise."

## Chapter

### III

The rhythmic sway of a well-padded coach drawn behind a team of four of the best-blooded horses money could buy could lull a man to sleep — especially with his pockets weighted with an afternoon’s winnings. That Dorian and Lian had been manipulated into an evening of dining and cards after the track had not surprised the Castilian. He had expected it and had taken a measure of pleasure in watching Lian unbend just enough to not stand out like a sore thumb among their compatriots. *That* was not a difficult task. Two-thirds of England’s elite were sour enough without the aid of dreary immortality to make his friend’s reclusive nature more the norm than the abnormality in the northern estates.

Dorian stretched out in a relaxed lounge in the seat facing the one his sire occupied, his eyes closed and his fingers laced across his chest. He listened to the song in his blood and the tale it sang of his brother’s heart. For the sake of listening to that unspoken story, the Castilian had been silent for the last quarter of an hour.

There was something unsettling about the song in his blood tonight — something not quite, but near to death. A cold shadow wrapped around Dorian’s heart in the haunting call of an oboe drifting listlessly on wings too fatigued to soar any longer. He opened his eyes and turned them Lian’s way.

“You sing a dark song, old friend. I cannot but admit that I do not enjoy its resonance.” He paused in the stillness. “Something has changed...” That change was beyond Dorian’s ability to identify. His sire had been the one gifted with mind reading. “Know that I am here if you wish to talk.” He smiled faintly. “If I have any gift at all, it is for saying just the right thing in season.” At least where women were concerned — except for one.

“Only that I fear I have not the stamina for eternity.” Lian turned his head, his eyes resting on his brother before he looked back to the window. “Just as I fear that I can do little else for the song you hear.” He had nothing else to give. “The silence, were I to fail, would only be too much.”

Lian lifted a hand, swiping his thumb against his bottom lip before his fingers lifted higher to massage the space between his eyes. The silence was hollowing him out, heart and soul again, muting the bond of the covenant, but for all his fatigue, he had sworn an oath of blood to ensure those he sired never faced such a

withering. “It is always the same after a time. There is only one thing for it, and I am... weary of their fighting.” Only a new song could bring him to life again, and he had tired of the inevitable result. He wearied of all of them; of those who had learned to flourish without his sun and of those who fought over dying embers. He tired of his weariness and had no appetite for blood that no longer sated him. “Let them fight over dust. I find I am far and beyond caring.”

Dorian studied Lian’s profile in silence. If Lian refused to take a song, he would condemn them all to his own fate, and yet the Castilian could not find it in his heart to be angry with his friend for considering an embrace of the final silence. With a wry twist of his lips, Dorian said, “Have you ever considered, old friend, that you have only yourself to blame for at least one aspect of your predicament?”

In the half a millennium they had lived, Dorian was nothing if not honest with his friend about *most* things. “I should like to point out” —the Castilian affected a flamboyant twist of the wrist — “that I am neither female nor cattily fighting over dust, and yet I daresay my song served as well as any other to hold the silence at bay.” His tone shaded grimmer. “You would have done well to add brothers to our family over the years.” It may have served, if nothing else, as a distraction for the queens. There would be nothing but catfights and the war of body politic in a castle full of competing brides.

“I do not deny this,” Lian agreed. Sighing, he leaned back in his seat. “I should still make them brothers. They could use a new preoccupation.” It would mean raising up new fledglings and teaching them to hunt and be clever enough to avoid the attention of humans or hunters. Salvation might have been found in forging new songs, but Lian found he felt content to wither.

Dorian’s expression shifted to something close to pain as he watched the Elder unobserved, before it slid away into the safety of his mask. As much as any of the women bonded to Lian’s song, the dark Elder felt a near constant need for connection. It resonated more in the whisper of his song, the sound of the waves of a dark river sucking at barren banks, than in anything he said to his sire, but it remained a constant companion. He had tried to fill the void with human lovers and, more recently, with the words and presence of one of his sire’s brides.

To seek solace from one as tormented as he by the absence of Lian’s sun was a twisted torture, but Joanna’s moonlight had become a stolen sonata for his mind, if not his blood. He still had hope that his sire had not discovered his secret. There had been enough centuries of watching Lian exercise his particular gifts to know he would have felt that intrusion of the mind if it had come. Only Dorian’s song could betray him, and the Spaniard had done what he could to protect that. If Lian had chosen not to explore his brother’s secrets, it was more for the respect of his privacy than for any lack of ability to do so.

“Absalom has been less fickle about taking new fledglings,” Lian offered for a change of subject. The name belonged to the Arch Elder of another coven recently discovered to reside in Easthaven. That both Lian’s coven and Absalom’s occupied the same space had not been a pleasant surprise upon their return to the territory in

the past few years. “I encountered one last night in the queens’ hunting grounds.” Something close to amusement drifted into the Lord’s tone. “It is becoming so that one cannot swing a cat in this town without hitting another vampire. Where he finds the time and energy to tend so many children who cannot yet see the sun, I do not know.”

Dorian’s lip curled. “You do well to gift Absalom the respect of his stolen rank. It is no coincidence that his most recent sirings have occurred since our return. He seeks only to ensure his dominance with numbers while we are present. One would have thought Denard might have informed him that the territory has been claimed, but I do not doubt that he thought only of the opportunity to keep his pockets lined during our season away.”

Easthaven had grown over the centuries. It was far away from the cities frequented by England’s elite, and large enough to allow vampires to feed without drawing attention to themselves. It made for attractive hunting grounds. Rarely did the cycles of residence rotations the covens used to avoid detection converge on the same city. Tensions had been operating at a low simmer for two decades now, restrained only by the ancient pacts that governed the survival of their species.

“Stolen though the rank may be, it is his to claim. He is nothing like his brother before him.” Lian glanced Dorian’s way. “Shall I consider myself fortunate that you hold me so dear, old friend, to not take the coven or queens for your own?”

The Castilian had not expected the comment and was unprepared for the visceral spike of guilt that twisted inside of him, the truth of his soul’s song betraying his will. He turned his face toward the shadows of the window on his side of the carriage. For all the stillness that had taken Dorian’s form, there was a ring of absolute truth in his voice when he spoke. “My dear Lian, you could not pay me to take your hellcats off your hands.” Joanna was no hellcat, but that was a technicality. “I should rather raise you from the dead to see to your duty than endure much more of my sisters than I must.”

Lian’s gaze found his brother’s face with a sharper focus. Even dulled, he felt and heard the singing peal of violins, staccato sharp and layered with a slurred resonance. Silence settled in the carriage, and the Elder forced himself to look away. “You did well marrying Ayla when last we needed to take a bride for the world...” he managed to tease softly, propping his arm on the siding to cup his palm over his mouth. “I am sure she would be terribly disappointed.”

“About as disappointed as she might be not to have earned that honor on your part,” the Spaniard answered dryly. If there was a member of their family who had mastered surviving with the Elder’s apathy, it was their black widow.

Lian managed a faint curve of his lips but spoke no more on the matter. His brow pinched, and he glanced back to Dorian without turning his head. “Absalom is not the only one siring new fledglings. Denard has made children of his own. Or there has been an influx of rogues with a distinct attachment to his house of vice for more than pleasure.”

The Raven Manor, a brothel that had been under the ownership and management of one of their kind for four centuries in that town, was one of the main places that vampires found refuge within the city limits. Serviced by thralls who traded body and blood for the gifts the dark ones could offer them, it had become something of a neutral ground on which members of rival covens and rogues could meet on equal footing. Dorian was even less inclined to care for the news that its owner, Philippe Denard, had claimed the siring power that could only come from draining the sitting Arch Elder of a House. Whether the power had been given or taken, it made Denard an unknown element in a known game.

“You think he means to establish a House?” the Castilian asked with a furrow of his brow. “I should think he’d be more interested in keeping his doors open to all who might be of a mind to pay for his services.”

“He may.” Lian’s hand lowered to twist his signet ring; it was the seat of the power of his House and inherited from his own sire, a bastion of one of the purest bloodlines of their race. Establishing a House without a pedigree would be difficult. “I only know that he has made children, but he may be attempting to stave off his own withering.”

“As must we all.” Dorian’s rejoinder was a quiet reminder of the weight of what had remained implied between them for his sire’s earlier words. Angelica’s season was over; it had been for a long time. The coven was dying. If Lian intended to let it happen, the time would be almost upon them to admit that truth. If he did not, it was time for the Arch Lord of Anowen to find a song, if not love. There were, however, more pressing needs at hand. “If you wait another day to feed, I shall no doubt mistake you for my long-deceased sire.” The Spaniard breathed a soft laugh for the intentional pun, though he spared a mental blessing for the man who had given him his first life. “It is past time that we hunt.”

Again, Lian did not refuse Dorian.



## Chapter ❀ IV ❀

Three days passed before Lian made the trip into Easthaven's center to see to his own impending 'marriage'. His current lawyer, Mr. Morgan Curry, possessed one of the larger homes on one of the nicer streets available in the heart of town. A naïve man might have attributed the barrister's good fortune to a successful business in law. His more astute and affluent clientele however, were only too aware that his wealth was directly tied to his willingness to compromise his ethics for a cost.

The lawyer, a small man with thinning hair and a shining dome of a head, leaned forward at his desk. Married three times himself, Mr. Curry had seven children who accounted for most of the background noise echoing throughout his house.

Lian suspected that helping to forge marriage certificates was among the least questionable business dealings of the man. If it were true, then Mr. Curry had proven to be shameless in overcharging for a paltry task. As if *he* were the mind reader, the lawyer casually added another large weight to his scale.

"I daresay it seems as if you are trying to swindle me." Lian's voice was flat. Despite his complaint, the blond reached into his wallet and dropped two more guineas on the scale. It tipped the balance in his direction and before Mr. Curry could say anything, Lian lifted his hand. "It does not matter. I only wish the papers signed so they can be taken to the courthouse."

"Of course." Mr. Curry smiled. "And your bride's name?"

The sound of crashing from the children grew louder.

"Celia."

"And her maiden name?" asked Mr. Curry, looking down at his papers and frowning for the chaos that seemed to be exploding in his home. "I apologize, Lord Redmond. We have a nanny to tend the children, but —"

A louder, resounding crash accompanied the sound of breaking glass. The hoot of triumph of a male voice, a long, childish wail, and then the thundering of several pairs of feet running down the hall outside the door of the office chased all that was left of peace from the lawyer's home.

"Edward Morgan Curry!" the exasperated voice of a young woman rose over the mayhem. "You will return your sister's frog — at once!" The chortle of delight from the child that answered her appeared to indicate he would do no such thing.

"Papa, Papa, Papaaaaaaa!" the pitch of each cry from the younger, feminine voice grew louder with each wail. She belted out the last *Papa* with the power of an operatic virtuoso, just as the office door exploded open to reveal a girl of about six-years-old. A head full of wild red curls was the neatest thing on her. The yellow day dress she wore had been spoiled by the spreading dampness of what appeared to be water and rust-colored mud. "Eddie kilt froggieeee!" she sobbed, her mouth wide open as tears streaked down an otherwise dainty set of features.

"I did NOT!" The stubborn rebuttal accompanied the sudden appearance of another redhead over her shoulder, one similar enough in appearance and height to be a male twin. "See? He's right here!" The boy grasped a large bullfrog between his hands, holding it aloft into the room past his sister as evidence. A squirt of liquid, likely urine, escaped from the frog and landed squarely on the girl's cheek. She began to wail again in earnest.

The noise startled the creature and a kick of legs procured an escape in a flying leap that landed the frog squarely in the middle of the room. It began a heavy, slime-slick hop toward the nearest shelter — which happened to be Lord Redmond's highly polished boot.

Edward Curry darted into the room. "I'll get him! Here, Froggie!" He dropped on all fours crawling to the Lord's person.

The mayhem seemed to reign for an eternity, but it had not even been one minute from the time the office door had been flung open before the warden of the escaped rascals appeared. Her wide, lavender eyes were horror-stricken as she took in the scene. The dusty-rose color of her dress was a slight shade darker on its puffed-sleeves and scooped neckline; likely from the same spill that had ruined her ward's own ensemble.

A single silver necklace, weighted by a hammered and delicately engraved heart-shaped pendant, lay nested between the rise of full breasts — a girlish piece of jewelry for a female who had clearly reached the age of maturity. Her hair, a deep chocolate-brown in color, had begun its own escape from an army of invisible pins. The flyaway curls spiraled from the piled mountain of her hair, framing the woman's softly rounded features.

Lian watched her, his eyes tracking her mad scramble as she tried to repair the irreparable.

“Mr. Curry, I’m so very sorry. There was glass, and I had to tend to — Mae, love, please don’t cry.” She crouched to look at the girl at eye level, swiping her thumbs across the child’s wet cheeks. “I’ll get him for you — Eddie, do stop!”

Exasperated, the woman hitched her skirts to free her knees to the ground, exposing a smooth length of ankle and leg as she began crawling toward the boy and the frog. “Eddie, I’ll shoo him toward you. Be ready to catch him, yes?” That she gave the order from between the legs of her employer’s client seemed to escape her notice until she lifted her head and her eyes met his own. “Oh...” Color flooded her cheeks and she held up a single index finger in a silent request for a moment more of his patience.

“Now, Eddie!” She slapped her palms against the polished wood of the floor. Froggie cooperated and hopped right into the chest of the red-haired culprit.

The woman whispered a sound of triumph, backing up on all fours to unfold to a stand. Another of her long locks had escaped and awkwardly dangled near the small of her back. The rest of the pile had slipped off balance to the side of her head, and she looked as if she wore a hat fashionably askew.

“There,” she sighed, placing her knuckles on her hips. “We’re all sorted now, aren’t we, children?” Turning, the woman finally looked her employer in the face. “I do apologize,” she said politely, as if a disaster of epic proportions had not unfolded on her account.

Mr. Curry began to color from his neck to his ears, until the entirety of his balding head flushed a brilliant red. In a matter of seconds, only the tight, thin line of his lips remained white. “Apologize?” he repeated. With the release of that one word, the floodgates opened. “No, no. I apologize — pardon, Lord Redmond —” He surged to a stand, and Mae’s tears threatened to burst anew. “Rooms!” One hand shot to point a finger at the door while the other banged a fist against his desk. “Rooms now — both of you!” They obliged with their flight.

The woman flinched for the rise of Mr. Curry’s voice and the impact of his fist. She closed her eyes as if to brace herself against the rising tide of rage directed her way.

“Is it so difficult?” Mr. Curry asked, a thick, purple vein pulsing in his temple. “What else have you to do with your day except to keep them from entering this single space? They could have the run of the bloody house if they do not kill themselves before their mother returns home.” His voice rose to a shouting volume as his fist hammered on the desk for emphasis. “And here I stand embarrassed in front of my client for your incompetence — *again!*”

She stood straighter beneath the torrent washing against her and folded her hands into fists at her side. Her lip quivered — not with tears, Lian noted — but with the force of self-control needed not to

turn a rebuttal on the man. It was there in the flush of her cheeks and the furrow of her brows as she turned a steely stare upon her employer.

Mr. Curry breathed in through his nose, his nostrils flaring. He roared, “You are dismissed, Delilah!”

The blood drained from Delilah’s face, and the fullness of her pink lips trembled for a few heartbeats before she firmed them to a steadier line.

The lawyer had not finished his tirade, yet: “You will not expect a letter of reference for the poor sod who might think to pity you again —”

“Vitali,” Lian interrupted.

“What?” Mr. Curry spat.

“Vitali. The name.” The blond lifted a hand to indicate the documents on the table. “If you will kindly finish signing the paperwork, Mr. Curry.”

“I —” Mr. Curry frowned and seemed briefly confused. The press of Lian’s will against his own took little by way of effort on the part of the Arch Elder; it was like pushing a hand against wool and feeling it give way to the touch. For a moment, Mr. Curry looked lost in a haze. Then the color drained from his face, and he lowered back into his chair to pick up his quill. “...Of course.”

Lian felt the woman’s eyes on him, although he did not look her way; even when he heard her step slowly away. Then he heard something else, something quieter that echoed through his blood, yet louder than the orchestra that played through the coven’s bond: a single hammered note of a piano. His eyebrows stitched and his fists curled lightly on his lap. He turned his head to face the woman, allowing his eyes to drift over Delilah’s face and down the smooth column of her throat.

“I should like for you to wait outside a moment, if you please,” he said gently. The tone of his voice made for a poor match with the solemnness of his expression. He had *heard* it, the smallest inkling of a song, and he swore he had heard it from a mortal’s blood. For all the power he could have used to keep her rooted to the spot, he made only the polite request and chased it with his attempt at reassurance: “It seems you have no more pressing matters to tend for the household.”

Confusion spread across Delilah’s face, and for a moment she stopped, staring at him as if she had to be sure he had, in fact, been speaking to her. The uncertainty shifted, darkening to a storm that brewed in her eyes. She lifted her jaw against whatever offense he had managed to cause by addressing her so directly in breach of society’s manners. It lasted all of an instant before her gaze lowered respectfully in submission to his power and authority over her person in the circumstances.

“M’Lord...” With a sweep of skirts, she headed out into the hall.

As the door clicked closed, the Lord glanced back to Mr. Curry, who had begun to complete the documents with a mechanical sort of rigidity. “Once the paperwork has been taken to the courthouse and a notarized copy delivered to my estate, I will be pleased to send a monetary expression of my gratitude for your... professionalism.”

Distracted, Lian watched the lines of ink dry, straining to listen for music. If he could hear another note, he would know it was not a fluke of the moment. Mortals could not play songs in the way his kind could hear it. It did not flow through their blood and souls on a symphony unmatched by any physical instrument. No, that was inaccurate. It had, once. He had heard Celia’s harps singing from her mortal blood long before he made his claim. She had been the only one. In the all centuries of brides whom he had claimed, he had not heard their own songs until he turned them.

So why *now*?

Mr. Curry made a final, flourishing signature on the paperwork, and grimly, the Lord unfolded to a stand. He gathered his documents into his portfolio, and without a word to the lawyer, took long-legged strides to the door. He closed it behind him, keeping his hand on the handle in case Mr. Morgan Curry decided to interrupt.

Delilah had waited as requested. The storm in her gaze had not abated as she made her assessment of him; she was clearly struggling to find the unreadable mask of a servant again.

For a few moments, Lian only stared at her. He listened to her heartbeat, could hear the rush of blood through her veins like a river, but no music. “Your dress is wet,” he offered finally, unhelpfully.

Her brows lifted by degrees before her eyes narrowed. “I’m aware, sir. Young Edward broke the reptile habitat. We are fortunate it was only the frog that escaped. There was water... and mud. I do hope we spared the finish on your boots an assault.” Her tone held a hint of the facetious, though her expression displayed nothing but the polite attentiveness that was the uniform of her station.

“I believe I can spare the boot.” He had not even thought to look at it. His gaze traveled the soft lines of her face and came to rest on her lavender eyes with such intensity that she reached up to brush at her cheek as if to whisk away the feather of a touch.

“I apologize,” Lian continued. “I am inclined to curtness.” Particularly when leashing the authority his words could have. He was out of practice for niceties. He dipped his head in a slight bow. “I had no intention to cause offense.”

She offered him the ghost of a curtsy, and a polite, “None taken...” in what even the Lord knew was a blatant lie. The beat of a moment passed before an impish humor caused her eyes to dance. “Although you *are* inclined to curtness,” she affirmed, blithely. “It is not at all the thing to point out to a *lady*... her faults.” She immediately spoiled the soft emphasis she had placed on the word ‘lady’ with

a quiet curse when she discovered the length of the weighty lock brushing against her waist. “And I used a devilish number of pins, too,” she muttered, ignoring Lian entirely in her efforts to wrestle her hair into order.

Lian followed the shape of her arm, down the dips and curves of her body, pale and perfect like a drop of light in the darkness and smelling of roses beneath the must of mud. For a moment, it was as if he were watching a living painting; a spectator, bound to the sight of beauty. He felt the gnawing emptiness in his chest once again. He had a garden already filled with any number of flowers plucked from one century to the next, all cast aside for the next fragrant, living bloom. He swallowed back his temptation. She was no different; she would be no different.

Delilah pinned her hair back into place, her attention returning to him. The moment his eyes met hers, he heard it again: a soft, tinkling piano melody that rose in his blood. There was no mistaking it for what it was, nor that she was the source. Lian’s brows pinched and his eyes narrowed so that he all but glared at her. As quickly as the sensation arose, it vanished once again, and he had little choice but to drop his free hand from the door handle into his pocket to keep from reaching for her. His study lowered from her face, trailing down her neck to the glint of her necklace, and he let himself focus on the distraction the silver offered. “I am, unfortunately... less than well-versed in how to avoid causing further offense. I am in possession of a large estate, and my housekeeper has been asking for an assistant. I understand it might be presumptuous on my part...” He caught himself and lifted his hand from his pocket to press against his nose, shaking his head.

“...This is not how this is done. Please,” he lowered into a deeper bow, “I am Lian Redmond. The... excitement has rather thrown me off, I am afraid. If you should not wish to consider my offer of employment, I will be pleased to escort you to your destination, if you would allow me to apologize thusly.”

For not the first time in their conversation, Delilah seemed either to be entirely confused or concerned as to whether he had lost his mind. She spared a glance away from him, to the door of Mr. Curry’s office, then back again with a thoughtful expression lingering at the edges of her features. “I am very pleased to meet you, Lord Redmond,” she responded finally. “I am called Delilah Flowers.”

She paused, considering her next words. “I shall be honest, sire, in admitting that when I leave these doors, I am quite without a destination to head to, save a coach house, and it would be quite inappropriate for me to be taken up into your carriage alone.” Her eyes searched his face. “I suppose it would be safe to say that the only way I could decently accompany you from this residence would be as a member of your employ,” she finished. “So if it is acceptable to you, sir, and your offer is sincere, I should like to be taken directly to meet with your retainer, and to discuss the terms of my

employment.” She met his eyes directly as if daring him to try to take the last vestiges of her respectability from her grasp.

He watched her as he had through the whole of her speech, greedily listening for the music he knew existed, now, as if it had been hidden somewhere beneath her words. Yet he did not hear it again and only conceded to her demands with a bow and the brief appearance of a smirk. The expression sobered as quickly as it had appeared. “I suppose you are correct, my Lady. I was quite sincere. I am sure Alice will be pleased to have the assistance... and you will find my household free of children and frogs.” As if those were perks of employment.

Lian cast a glance to the office door then, and his brow furrowed. Men did not change much over the centuries. If Delilah left with him, he knew well the stories Mr. Morgan Curry would spread of her, and deep within him, he felt the first raw flicker of possessiveness.

“Madam,” he said, “it occurs to me that you might have belongings to collect. If there is anything that you might wish to pack for the trip, please do so. Should the terms of your employment be acceptable, I will be pleased to send a carriage to fetch the rest at a later time. For now, I will have my carriage brought to the door for you.” He dipped into a bow again and lifted his hand in encouragement. “I fear I have one last matter of business with Mr. Curry that has come to mind, but I should not be much longer than a minute.”

Delilah dropped into a deeper curtsey. “I do not have much more than can be packed into two bags, my Lord,” she answered. “I will see to packing those and saying goodbye to the children. Then I am pleased to leave with you.” With only a final, quick look turned on the office door, Delilah made her escape.

Lian watched her go, or, more accurately, watched as a loose curl escaped to swing and bounce against her back as she left. He turned to the door, closing it behind him once again as he crossed the threshold. Whatever business the men attended and whatever words passed between them, was left behind that door when Lian made his own exit. Mr. Curry, however, never spoke a word against his former nanny once she left his employ.