# Season of Blood Moon

*Book 1 of the Jaeger Series*

Bort Patgia

For God's wisdom and understanding. For my family's love and care. For my friend's patience and laughter with me.

# Point Zero

His mind is in the wrong place. Her heart is in the wrong phase. He was born in this world without knowing his true nature. She was left behind, bearing the world on her shoulder. He holds the power of the unknown. Her power is a curse. His nature is his burden. Her destiny is her end. The loom of fate weaves to their reach. The future is at hand. They will not rest and they will together see the end. Eventually, their fates crossed, and the threads finally entwined. What kind of future will they see?

## Chapter 1

Van rolled down the car window for the third time, taking in a deep breath of morning fresh air. He allowed the pang of wind to come in to prevent him from sleeping back. He wasn’t sure if he had to open for a moment as the passenger nearby shivered. Van closed up a little the window and leaned forward again to watch the sky turn orange as the sun peeked over the horizon. The clouds were painted with shades of orange, creating a mesmerizing view.

As the breeze snapped him out of his reverie, the car made a sharp turn, and the tires screeched. Van’s heart pounded as the car jerked, tumbled on the rumble strips, and he bumped his head against the ceiling. Mick, his stepdad, was at the wheel, grinning mischievously. Van couldn’t help but feel like Mick was punishing him because he knew very well what he had done back then. Nevertheless, what he did was wrong. He deserve every punishment he could receive. Although, he couldn’t help feeling like they were running away from something. Mick was acting odd, strange, as if he were on deep thought when he uttered that he should move in with his brother.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t ya?” Van asked, stifling a yawn. He brushed his hair back, but useless as the wind made a mess of it again.

Mick glanced at him through the rear-view mirror. “Why would I?”

Timothy, Van’s brother, chimed in, “Dad, if you’re looking to blow off some steam, punish Van, not me. I wasn’t the one with the bad reputation.”

“Thanks for the support, Timothy.”

“Anytime,” Timothy returned with a smirk.

Mick’s grip on the steering wheel tightened as he spoke to Van, “We’ve been over this. Van’s previous school was full of troublemakers who wouldn’t leave him alone. I’ve told you many times to stay away from trouble.” Mick briefly paused and sighed. “We have to do what is best for Van. That is why I’m sending him to live with you in Dally’s apartment.”

“Yeah, I’m sure she’s thrilled to have us around. Even you, Van. She’ll love to have you as her assistant.” Timothy snorted, pulling a blanket around himself.

“I wouldn’t mind being her assistant. I’ve always been her favorite, which is obviously why I will personally ask her to pass the heavy work on to you,” Van said sardonically.

“Hey!” Timothy retorted.

“Why are you so against your brother moving with you, Tim?” Mick asked.

“Because he can’t be trusted in the kitchen.” Timothy said, almost a yell.

“Is it about that stupid chicken again?” Van raised his voice.

“It’s about what you did to that thing.”

“Oh, come on.” Van threw up his hands.

“I told you to kill it before you boil it in the water.”

“It’s just one time.”

“I was putting all the spices and everything when that thing began to kick back to life.”

“I did in fact make sure it’s dead.”

“Until it’s not.” Timothy said. “You boiled that thing when it's still alive. That thing can still reproduce man. That’s the day I decided to ban you from the kitchen.”

“That’s enough.” Mick said.

Before looking away, Van and Timothy raised their hand, then flicked their middle finger in a split second and laid it down before their father could’ve seen it. They look away from each other. Van chuckled at his comeback, and Timothy no longer bothered him.

Van’s curly black hair was beginning to irritate his eyes, so he brushed it aside.

“Why didn’t Mom come last night?” Timothy asked out of nowhere.

“Because she’s a doctor, Timothy, not just any kind of doctor,” Mick replied, almost with no energy as if they already had this conversation before.

“Part of Doctors without Borders,” Timothy added the missing words.

Mick turned his eyes to the rear mirror. “I know you miss her, but do you know what’s up with her job, right?”

“Yeah, I know.” Timothy replied.

As they crossed another wide turn, they saw the “Welcome to Maryvale” sign outside the city’s vicinity.

“Finally!” Timothy jumped on his seat.

Van noticed the tall buildings and said, “I thought it was a small city.”

“I’m also surprised. It’s been 17 years since I last visited this place, but I promise you’ll like it here,” Mick assured them.

Timothy whispered to Van, “I promise you, this is the worst place on earth.”

“Uh-huh, sure,” Van said as he observed outside, but quickly averted his gaze as he saw a gang vandalizing a wall with their spray cans in an alleyway. He didn’t want to attract their attention.

“Can we stop and eat something, Dad?” Timothy’s stomach grumbled.

“Sure, after that, we’ll drop somewhere else,” Mick replied.

They walked into a café called La Volonida and were seated in a corner near the window. The aroma of vanilla creamy latte filled the air as the waitress served them black coffee and handed them menus offering breakfast, meals, and sweets as snacks. Mick was the first one to order.

Mick noticed Timothy and Van staring at the waitresses. “Boys, stop staring. You’re embarrassing yourselves,” Mick scolded.

It was too late, and one of her co-workers whispered to her and glanced at them. They flinched and began to mutter, stuttering as they read the menu. The blonde in the maid’s suit sat down in the empty chair in front of them. Her short dress above her knees tempted Van’s eyes, but Timothy interrupted, “Dude, did you check out the new video game? Oh, shoot, I’m so sorry,” his shaky shoulder hit the cup and the plate.

Van volunteered to pick it up, but the blonde lady hurriedly ran with a dustpan and broom. He accidentally bumped into the table, and the lady glared at him. Van avoided her gaze, ashamed, knowing she would remember him.

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Leaving the cafe, they walked towards their apartment, and Dally curiously glanced up to greet them outside the building. The playfully teased for a while, but Dally's attendance at a seminar at school cut their conversation short.

Van wrinkled his nose upon entering the apartment, noticing the piles of dirty dishes and clothes. He was prepared for a bit of a mess, but the scene before him was utter mayhem. The room took hours to clean, and they were so exhausted that they slept the entire rest of the day.

The following day, Mick left and Van was left with nothing to do, resulting in him sleeping for the entire day. They have the luxury of three more days until the class officially starts.

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The bright morning sunlight burned through Van’s closed eyelids, waking him up. Looking out, he noticed that the terrain in front of him was vast and unfamiliar, stretching out far and wide. In the middle of grassland, where only birds could be seen passing by, Van was revolted by the sudden transition of events.

His head hung low as he tried to piece together why he was there, and his head throbbed again. A series of images flash in his mind. Unknown, yet it seemed familiar to him. The images weren’t painful, but he still couldn’t resist them, until they were abruptly replaced by an ear-splitting noise that numbed his other senses. When he heard a distant explosion, the ringing stopped.

Van lifted his gaze as he heard the distant rumble. The ground trembled and split beneath him. Without hesitation, Van jumped out of harm’s way and struggled to find his footing amidst the quake. His boots barely touched the ground as he made another leap. At that brief moment, the ground held steady.

This new vision was immersive, vivid, and clear. The storm hung in the sky, with thunderous strikes and flashes of lightning. The scent of the coming rain trickled to Van’s nostrils. A breeze came, carrying an uneasy message. Van felt unreasonably terrified.

A sharp shiver ran down his spine as lightning struck the ground, revealing two figures locked in a fight as the storm roared on. The first sign of rain trickled down on his forehead, but he was oblivious to it. His attention was on the two. Yet the trembling ground distracted his attention once more and the moment he looked up, they moved away. Van sprinted up to the hillside. A momentary shudder passed through the runner as there was a force that shook the wind blowing in every direction that dulled his senses. His breathing was labored heavily by the headlong dash.

Casting his eyes below the surface, Van decided to remain still in response to a violent call of shockwave. The two men were locked into a ferocious battle. Unflinching with their bout of strength that even the land was attested with every exchange of punch, they shook the very fabric of reality. Van braced himself for another shockwave, and boomed. The sky was thundering out loudly and a brief flash exploded as their fists met. Beneath him, he could feel the ground gradually steadying. Clouds of dust and rocks eased and settled.

Van felt unreasonably familiar with one of the contenders. He slid off the hill and got closer with a certain safe distance away from them. The one who he felt familiar with, blocked a left hook from his enemy. Countered by a powerful uppercut, the enemy was sent in a relatively far distance. Though he seemed to have knocked out the enemy, he paid no celebration to his victory. He still held with his unflinching and calm demeanor.

“Hey!” Van barked and strode towards him. He understood that this was just a dream sequence, but it has to be more. It has to be. Those images that flickered in his mind, felt real, as if there was an unknown force that was sending him messages.

As soon as the man sensed Van’s presence, he stopped moving.

“You know where I am?” Van boots planted on the ground, he hesitated to move further.

It was a complete bet whether this man has a mind of his own or just a vision. However, the man stood silently without turning back and didn’t acknowledge his question with a reply. He was looking out towards nothing, the words seemed floating ahead when breathing, unsure of what to say.

“Hello?” Van asked the man quietly, his voice laden with dread as he stepped closer. The hair, the posture, and the body appealed to him. His life drained with color when he grabbed to confirm his suspicion; the man has the same face as his.

His twin removed his hand and held his shoulders, preventing him from moving, as if all his strength was drained from his body.

It spoke in an inhuman voice. “Seven days of trial. Seven days of denial. Seven days of dread. Seven Days of the Dead. A life for one another. A lie for the sake of his brother. A mistake made by the wooer. And a consequence sired to the lover. The Herald’s raven will bid thee an ultimatum. What will it be? Would thou relinquish what you are or surrender everything you have? Time is new. Time will bid on due. Hurry now, the darkness is starting to spread. The time has come, but do not fret. When darkness overruns, don’t be afraid and embrace it because there is no point in being afraid of the inevitable. Be brave. Have courage. And don’t lose faith in the light.”

The man loosened his grip on Van. He looked back at the place where his enemy crashed and the enemy wasn’t there anymore, but his other self’s eyes knew where exactly his enemy was, floating up to the sky. The enemy’s eyes dropped on him with crimson hate.

In a split second, they jumped onto one another, their fists met and light scattered from the explosion of their fist. The wind erupted in his ears, the ground trembled as the sky trembled.

Van shielded his eyes with his arm from the burning bright. He lowered his arm as everything settled, but there was only darkness spreading. His eyes pressed ahead, but no one was there.

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Van didn’t know how he got here, but he found himself at some abandoned establishment. His jet-black jacket wasn’t enough to stave off the cold wind from seeping deep into his skin. Another ear-splitting sound dragged him unkindly to the ground, his knees bent on the cold cobblestone as he endured it. Moments passed, his mind slowly wobbled back to life, and everything became clear. The unsettling specks of dust and several crowbars and knives that were either struck on the wall or sprawled on the ground – was the first thing that caught his attention.

“Damn,” he muttered, pulling himself up from the wet floor.

As he stepped outside the establishment, the rhythmic chirp of the ravens exploded outside as they flew by. Ahead was the main road and several establishments. Van walked ahead and glanced from left to right, scanning the surroundings. When he couldn’t make any sense of it for another ten uneventful seconds, he decided to ask the old lady who came out from a tailor shop nearby.

“Excuse me?” Van gently called the lady.

The petite old woman turned slowly, her face knit with question and curiosity. “What is it?”

Van blinked. “Do you know where this place is?”

The old lady gave him an uncertain look, studying Van’s dazzled complexion. “Why? You’re lost? Where are your parents?”

Van shook his head. “No. I just… I think I slept too much. I thought I was at my destination.”

The old woman nodded. “Well, in that case, you’re in Daletown.”

“Daletown?” Van began to look around, everything making sense, but at the same time, not.

“Where were you supposed to be headed?”

“Maryvale.”

“That’s a two-hour ride.” She looked at her watch. “Very well, turn right after that. There should be a bus that will lead you to Maryvale.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Van bade the old woman hurriedly.

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Van flinched as another thunderous roar from the dense storm clouds reverberated through the room, followed by a fearful strike of lightning, snapping him back to reality. He wiped off the sweat on his face, even though the cold weather froze his glands. Van decided that it was time to stand up and do the old routine. He pulled the blinds open and saw the light rain slowly pouring onto the land.

In a flash of lightning, his thoughts began to float, just standing - staring pointlessly at the rain. What came next were the flashes of the memories of his childhood days, the day the accident happened, wherein his dad died, his mother went missing, and his life began to change.

It was the usual morning, his mom preparing the food for the grill, and his dad was outside of the house loading the grill stand. It was perfect weather when they went to travel to the place that his dad longed to visit, and then it all went wrong. They thought that it was a perfect sunny day, but heavy rain came, and that’s when it happened. No matter how hard he tried, some of the images of his memories are still blurred.

Van stared back at the journal lay flat on his desk. The blank pages flipped rapidly, empty as some of his memory with his parents. It was useless, whatever method he used, and he couldn’t seem to decipher the contents that his mother’s journal left to him.

He sighed as he glanced down at the road. There was nothing he could do to know the content, should there even be knowledge written in that journal. He tried every method known to mankind to unveil texts hidden in that journal, but to no avail.

Van could see a woman running towards the bus shelter, which seemed like she was about to go home after jogging, but he couldn’t see her face as she was wearing a yellow hoodie. He observed her for a minute, watching the woman make a phone call.

It was cold and the air was filled with a wandering breeze when he saw her glancing around, looking for a ride she could hitchhike. Once again, a roar of thunder drowned out the lapping sounds of rain. She was shaken, that was for sure.

Van wasn’t sure if some deity had willed it, but the second their eyes met, everything slowed down. She has blonde hair, glossy skin, and mesmerizing deep blue eyes. Her lips were thin and pale, her chin well-toned, and her nose nicely curved. The girl made herself flawless with thin eyebrows, and her skin was untouched by any makeup.

Their eyes gazed at each other as though there was some magnet pulling them together. Van got closer to the window, touching it and saw her stare into his deep, darkened eyes. The two were under the same spell. He saw something in her mouth, but he couldn’t hear it. Words were forced out of his mouth in an attempt to call her out but were interrupted by a loud honk.

The car parked in front of her. A middle-aged lady shouted at her, “Get in!” She flinched from another roar of thunder, serving as a bucket of cold water to wake her up.

There was something he couldn’t explain when he gazed into her eyes. He didn’t felt any malice from it, but a nostalgic feeling. Yet, he chose to leave. A feeling that cannot be explained was not good for his psyche.

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“D’ya know where three of our knives are?” Timothy shot the question the moment Van got out of his room.

“I don’t know.” Van shook his head.

“Huh.” Timothy walked to the kitchen and put the lunch box in his bag. “That’s weird.”

Van ate his breakfast and hurriedly came out to their apartment.

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The school wasn’t far, and Van could walk to school in ten minutes from his apartment. However, there were certain places that Van should avoid. He saw several groups of people gathering at the street end of the empty streets and plenty of them at the empty buildings.

All it took to withdraw the tension was a brief honk from the sheriff’s car, which was parked beside the sidewalk. Van halted and saw the window slide down with the investigative look of a sheriff. Van hesitantly moved closer.

“You’re new, aren’t you?” she asked.

Van paid close attention to her. “Yes, actually, my brother and I moved here last week,”

“Do you need a lift?” she offered.

Though her voice didn’t dictate pressure, her face did. Van was about to refuse her offer, but when he looked back at the gang who were staring at him, words wouldn’t come out of his mouth.

“Hop in. It’s free,” she said as she opened the door.

“You know, you shouldn’t go out alone, especially taking this route. There were a lot of delinquents hanging around here,” she warned.

“Well, I prefer to explore alone. My brother is quite embarrassed to be with me.” Van returned.

“An independent one. Huh,” she said, sounding impressed. “Well, if that’s the case, it wouldn’t hurt if you take my advice.”

“What is it?” he asked.

“You should go home early,” she said, flicking her brows. “Look, there are some cases of murder that have not been solved and you might be the next victim,” she said, her voice filled with seriousness.

“Why is that?” Van questioned.

“Most of the killer’s victims were teenagers.”

“Mostly?” Van questioned.

“Yeah, in the recent incidents, only teenagers have been attacked. The autopsy showed weird sketches of the victim.”

“That’s kind of open,” Van commented. “Are you sure it’s okay to share such information with me?”

“Well, it’s already out in the headline. So, it’s better to scare you off while I have a chance.”

“And?” Van urged her.

“There’s nothing much I can say for now about cop business,” she sighed. “Look, listen to me, go early, lock the door, and keep your windows shut.”

“Duly noted.”

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After a few minutes, the car stopped in front of the gate of the school. Van looked up at the metallic carving of the school board as he stepped out of the car: Maryvale Pendleton University.

When Van made his way to the classroom, he noticed the students’ eyes darting at him. It was because there weren’t many people from big cities who came to a quiet city like this. The news must have traveled fast. It could be Tim who told his friends about his arrival. It was a small city, so it wasn’t surprising that some people might recognize someone who wasn’t from Maryvale.

It took him a while, but Van was able to find his classroom. There were only two vacant seats: one was near the window and the other was in front. Van would rather choose to sit near the window; he always hated sitting in front. It was the cardinal rule he has been following ever since.

Van looked at the window, his mind wandering, when he noticed the sudden silence. He turned around and saw the teacher with a stoic face, pounding the desk five times. Van straightened his posture, the same reaction that his classmates did. As he approached, the atmosphere became serious, coinciding with his presence. He must’ve done that to intimidate his students, or so he thought.

He began by introducing himself as Waldon Spotsman. Throughout the class, they did not talk about anything related to academics. Other than their schedules, school regulations, and other topics that most of the students grew bored with, nothing caught his interest.

The class was about to end, but a woman burst through the door and slammed it shut behind her. “I’m so sorry I’m late,” she apologized. When Van laid his eyes on her, he knew that she was somehow familiar. Her hair covered her face, but it was enough to recognize her blue eyes.

Mister Waldon looked at her and said, “Nah, don’t worry about it. We haven’t discussed it yet. The formal discussion will start tomorrow, be sure not to be late.”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, class dismissed,” Mr. Waldon announced, and the others began to leave.

When Van was about to stand up, he heard the girls behind him gossiping about her. “I can’t believe she still has the guts to show up here, not after the rumour.”

“I guess she’s not aware of the gossip about her being a bitch to Brandon. The nerve, she has the leader of the jockey at her heels and she refuses him.” the other one added.

Van shrugged the words off. It wasn’t his business. Van would normally call them out of their bull, he just couldn’t stand people mocking someone behind them, but he was not going to set a conflict. After all, he did not want to create any kind of commotion that would attract unwanted attention. Van knew better than to make trouble on the first day of school. He already made a mess in his previous school back in New York, and he didn’t want to repeat that mistake in Maryvale. His last act of delinquency was final, and Van knew something was wrong with him. He always had this bizarre feeling: a twitch in his flesh, the desire to go out at night, and harmful thoughts that kept revolving until sunrise. He still felt uneasy by those lingering desires.

A crowded line greeted Van when he entered the canteen. He immediately picked up a tray and joined the line. Van only picked the items that he could eat: hotdogs, eggs, porridge, and juice. He didn’t want to add any more weight. He made his way to the reserved seat in the corner, away from the loud ones. He ate in silence until someone bothered his solitary backyard.

“Excuse me, is this seat taken?” The girl asked as she approached Van.

“No, it’s not,” Van replied, without looking up.

“Thanks, I’ll take this seat if that’s okay with you,” She said, sensing that Van wasn’t the most welcoming person.

“Go ahead, it's school property,” Van said, although he didn’t mean it.

“Okay,” She said, and they both sat down in silence. Van looked over at her, observing her as she read her book. She was wearing a pink sweater, a black skirt, and black shoes. Her hair covered most of her face, making it difficult for Van to read her expression. Suddenly, he caught her blue eyes looking back at him, and he froze when she smiled.

“Sorry,” he said, breaking the awkward silence.

“You know, out of all the people I’ve met at this school, I’m not sure I know you. You must have moved here from another city,” The girl said, trying to start a conversation.

“That’s probably why,” Van replied coldly.

“Where did you move from?”

“Manhattan,” Van said.

“Oh,” She muttered, thinking that the conversation came to an end. “Why did you move here? I doubt it was because of the popularity of this school.”

“That’s none of your business,” Van snapped.

“You must have done something, then,” She teased, trying to lighten the mood.

Van didn’t respond, but she could sense his discomfort.

“Sorry,” she said, feeling guilty for making him uncomfortable.

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it,” Van said, trying to ease the tension. “I think we got off on the wrong foot. My name is Van.”

“I’m Kate,” Kate responded, feeling relieved. They shook hands and smiled at each other.

“I’m sorry if I was being nosy,” Kate said.

“Don’t worry about it. I should be the one apologizing. You were just trying to be nice,” Van said, feeling more at ease. He knew she didn’t mean it, but it was still awkward though.

“I kind of like you, Van,” Kate said, surprising him.

“Have we met somewhere before?” Van asked, he was intently making out where he met her.

Kate raised an eyebrow. “Are you trying to hit on me?”

“No, I mean, like, have we met before?”

Kate also scanned her memories and snapped her fingers when she finally found the resemblance of his face. “Aha, you’re the guy who was staring at me in the café, right?”

“I can’t believe it,”

“You’re the one who broke the plate and cup back in the café I’m working at.” Kate teased.

Van was mortified. “I didn’t mean to.”

“Yeah, I know,” Kate smirked, looking at him with a smirk, but Van could feel a tension rose.

“I admit that I admired you in that maid’s outfit, but that’s all. I’m not a pervert,” Van said, feeling embarrassed.

Kate looked at him with a serious expression. “I hate perverts. You should know that.”

“I’m not a pervert, I promise,” Van said, raising his hand.

Kate’s expression softened. “I believe you. You seem like a nice guy.”

“Thanks,” Van said, feeling relieved.

“But you owe me,” Kate said with a mischievous smile.

“What do I owe you?” Van asked, feeling apprehensive.

“You have to buy me something or take me out somewhere,” Kate said, still smiling.

“Okay,” Van said, not sure if she was serious or not.

Kate burst out laughing.

Van’s eyes traveled to the man who was wearing a red jersey with a bull printed on it. He was staring at him and Kate.

“Haha-ha. Was that your boyfriend back there?” Van asked.

Kate turned her back.

“Don’t look at him,” Van told her.

Kate spun to him and shook her head. “Nah, don’t mind that guy.”

“So, he’s not your…?”

“No.”

“No, as in no-no?”

“No-no-no.” She repeated and shook her head.

“For a second there, I thought I might end up dead.” Van exhaled in relief. “So, what’s his deal anyway?” He could still feel the stab of his gaze from a distance.

“I kinda dumped him. The guy is a pervert. He claims that he’s a chick boy. He never had anyone in his entire life because no woman took interest in him.”

“Is that so?”

Van didn’t need to hear it, he could assume that Kate and *he* had a roughed past and it didn’t end well for him.

“Yep. So, Friday night, seven p.m. at the café.” She said, picking up her bag and standing.

“What?”

“Be on time,” she said and left in a hurry.

When Van headed out to the canteen, Brandon, the rejected one, came closer to him. Van could tell from his face that he was not happy. “Hey, new guy. Just because you look cool and flashy doesn’t mean you could just flirt with anyone.”

“I don’t see any reason why I shouldn’t make my move on her,” he said, with pressure in his voice.

“You know, you better back off and play with your kind. You know, the weirdos.”

“No, I don’t think I will.”

“You’re seriously getting on my nerves.”

“What’s with the comeback? You sound like a sissy, you know that, right?” Van mocked. “She’s the one who came to me first, so why wouldn’t you be the one to tell her that? Wait a minute, you can’t do that, of course. You got dumped, right?”

His furious eyes glared at Van as he was about to punch, but Timothy held him back.

“Hey, Brandon. What do you think you’re doing with my friend here?” Timothy said, with confidence on his face.

“Yeah, what’re ya doing? You want to get suspended again?” Lester said, with the other two guys behind him.

He looked at Van again, but this time it seemed that he was calmed and pulled his arm back, walking away from them.

“Thanks, by the way.”

“No problem,” Lester said.

“If he bothers you again, call us right away.” The one who wore the glasses said.

Timothy, however, has something different on his mind.

“I see what you did there, Van.”

“What do you mean?” Van asked, with his eyebrows raised in confusion.

“You were hooking up with a girl,” Lester said.

“What? No. nope, nope.” Van denied it and dismissively waved his hand.

“It’s more like the opposite. The girl is hooking on you,” Timothy said in a mocking voice. “One more step for the worm finally wiggles and enters the cave.” He added.

“I think we’re gonna be late for our next class.” The nerdy guy intercepted.

When the gang left, Van headed out for his next class.

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Here he was, moping in his room, staring at the ceiling. Van was about to fall asleep, but then the twitch began. He hurled in pain and discomfort as he held his breath. He needed to go out.

Van looked at his phone. It was still 8:30 pm and the thing he did all night was play. He started to strip and change into his black hoodie.

As he opened the window, a blast of icy wind on his face greeted him. Van hopped from the second floor and ran to the nearest building, then he started to climb the stairs outside. He started to hop on from another building.

Van scraped and scratched his hands on the ledges before managing to pull himself up. His jaw clenched as he sprang up.

Van made his way and he breathed as he could feel it again. A single twitch. A force resided inside, but within a moment, it calmed down.

He placed his hand on his chest, and for the first time in a while, it doesn’t bug him anymore. He can finally move. He leaped at the nearby buildings, sliding, and propelling onward.

Van has been doing this since he was in New York. What he always needed was adrenaline pumping into his veins, because in this way he felt that he was alive.

Lost in thoughts, he did not notice that the building he was attempting to jump from was far-off, nor did he realize that the speed he was aiming for was not enough which would result in missing the landing spot. Van was certain that his face was going to hit the ground. But his eyes open up in a strong bough of a tree. He could feel that his face was pale, his lips chapped, and the adrenaline was rather slowing down. He breathed in, preparing for another leap.

“Holy crap.”

Until now, he couldn’t believe he survived that fall. A chill struck his spine as he could hear the grass whispering behind him. Van turned around, but there was nothing there. But his suspicion grew as there was something out there whispering in the darkness. There was no one, only Van. As he attempts to climb back up the building, it twitches again.

His eyes shifted to the alleyway in front of the building where he stands. A figure in the form of a shadow standing with his eyes glaring at Van. He shivered as a cold wind passed by, and in a blink of an eye, he was gone. For the second time, Van found him walking towards him.

Run.

He sprinted inside the abandoned building as he thrashed and climbed up the metallic staircase at top speed. He disregarded the tiredness as his feet stomped hard on the ledges. A hand reached Van As he made his way to the end of the stairs. He managed to kick it and plummeted to the ground.

Van was certain that he could not survive falling to such a height, but he was wrong. He stood and saw its first prey, the face contorted with hunger. Van managed to observe his stature, his skin was pale, and his eyes were white, and sharp like a blade.

Van struggled to get up as he breathed, struck and overwhelmed by fear at what he saw. Van couldn’t even feel tiredness or pain, as if the adrenaline overtook his capability to feel.

Van sprinted forward as the door slammed. He jumped into another building without a second thought, and because of it, he didn’t manage to land. Instead, he found himself hanging on an outside staircase with his wrist trying to pull up. When he reached the top, Van tried to spring his feet upward with the ledges as support. But that wasn’t enough for him to grab onto something. He was about to fall, but a hand grabbed him.

Thankful for being saved, that thought was eventually pulled out of his mind when he saw the sly grin of the monster. Van head-butted him and kicked his balls, but he just stared at him as if he was not hurt.

“You have no balls?!”

With sheer strength, he threw Van at the concrete wall. Van stood with his back erupting in pain. Once he got closer to Van, he kicked his knee, bowing in front of him. Van punched him again, even though he knew that it wouldn’t affect him. He answered by grinning at Van as he bent his knees, standing. Van did the best thing he could do.

He ran.

Van was about to head back to his room, but he heard someone.

“I’m impressed.”

When he turned around, no one was there, but he felt something bitter touch his neck and whisper.

“You will fall asleep.”

With those words, his mind turned blank.

\*\*\*

It was late at night when Kate brought Jane home. She carried Jane to her room and laid her down on the bed. Kate went downstairs after placing Jane onto her bed. Feeling thirsty, she went to the kitchen and drank a glass of water. That’s when an eerie feeling struck her down. She knelt, and for a couple of minutes, it persisted, so she decided to go out and investigate what was happening.

She went out, wandering when her eyes fell on a man jumping onto another building. She followed but then realized that she couldn’t catch up to him, so she conjured a spell. “Gravija.” Kate floated not too far from the target while hiding in the dark. Looking down at him, she realized who it was. Van. She observed him with pure concern and amazement. Jumping into other buildings, he tripped off and fell. She saw that there was ground for the tree that could grow, and she released a spell to save him. “Implante savor.”

In an instant, a tree grew out instantaneously from the ground, and Van landed on a strong branch of that tree. She descended to the ground and ran to Van’s location, but when she got there, he was gone. She found herself standing outside the abandoned building. She investigated the alleyway, and what she found was another victim. She looked at the abandoned building. She could sense two presences out there. The other one was human, and the second one who was after him was somewhat supernatural. Her eyes scanned the entire place to know whether there was someone. When she realized that there was no one, she jumped off again at the top of another building. The monster was playing with the defenseless man. When Van was freed from the monsters' grasp and was able to escape, she entered the scene as it aimed to go after him again.

“Loopa Iradovia.” A force clutched the monster away from Van. Kate clenched her fist and threw it aside down the building. “It looks like it’s just you and me,” she smirked as she descended to the ground. The monster growled in anger. It grew louder. Kate realized what this meant. He was calling for backup. A few more screeches could be heard across the city, and they were getting louder.

“Oh no, you won’t! Silencio.” The monster’s mouth closed, and a couple of stitches appeared.

Its claws grew wider as it flew towards her. She flipped sideways, evading and casting another spell.

“Feurballe.” A ball of fire formed in her palm, and she threw it at the monster. Inflicted by the spell, the monster growled. Its wings grew out of its flesh and attempted to fly away. Kate already lowered her hands, opened her palm, and concentrated.

“Vignus fatus, omnis implantus vegus, daselica!” In an instant, dozens of vines reached out at the monster, dragging it back to the ground.

She invoked a fire spell and was about to finish the monster when she felt a presence beside Van. At that moment, she released the grip and raced toward his location. What she saw was Van falling to the ground.

She didn’t think twice and cast a spell on the man who she considered the perpetrator. “Graviga Pulsatio.” The man grunted as he was thrown out of the building. He rumbled as his feet met the ground. Kate drew her attention back to the unconscious man.

“Van, Van?” He didn’t respond. He may be unconscious, but his heart was still beating. She sighed in relief.

“Okay, I think we have a big misunderstanding here,”

The man who she blew out was floating and landed in front of them.

“Laswell! What the hell are you doing?!” she said, with utter annoyance written on her face.

“I saw this boy jumping from building to building. I found it suspicious, so you can guess what’s next,” Laswell explained. He stood with no trace of damage from the spell and even more annoying, he did not regret what he did to Van.

“No, he’s not. Dammit!” Kate exclaimed.

“Why are you angry all of a sudden?” Laswell asked, he casted his eyes on Van.

“Because he was the next victim,” Kate explained.

“Oh dear, I thought he was the one... Did you finish the job?” Laswell blinked, he was beginning to see his errors, but played it off. He didn’t want to further infuriate Kate.

“Nope. If it wasn’t for your meddling, we might be able to trace the others,” a man’s voice receded. They turned their attention to the source of the voice, but no one was there.

“He doesn’t look human to me, neither a vampire nor a werewolf,”

Kate shuddered as the presence of the man appeared out of nowhere. Laswell was not surprised by his uncouth appearance. He was wearing a mask and a complete tuxedo outfit.

“And there he goes again.” She spun and shot a question, “What’s with the attire?”

“I’m just attending a party when suddenly I was disturbed by this ambiance,” he explained.

“Wow, popping out of nowhere as if the man cares about this town. Why do you care, Gilt?” Kate began to check Van’s pulse and immediately carried his head on her lap.

“Well, I am. This is my birthplace after all. So, why didn’t you call me for help?” the man, Gilt, asked.

“Hello, you are the one who always left without leaving any kind of note for me to track you,” Kate said, her frustration rising again.

“Oh, I’m so sorry ‘bout that, but look, I’m here, hooray. So, what’s the deal with this guy?” Gilt pulled out his mask, unraveling his long, gritty hair. He brushed off his hair from covering his haunting dark eyes, and under the light of the moon, his nose highlighted, and his chiseled chin.

Kate took a deep breath as she averted her gaze away from the dazzling gaze of the man.

“I saw him hopping from roof to roof. Maybe he’s supernatural or somehow connected to the mysterious incidents,” Laswell explained.

“And you think that he’s a vampire?” Gilt asked.

“Well, he has a pale face that looks like yours,” Laswell replied. Gilt looked at him with a poker face intended to hide his annoyance.

“Imagine that the scariest monster that you could ever think of pops out of nowhere and tries to suck out your soul. Do you think you wouldn’t go screaming like a little girl if you were in his place?” Kate made a ruffling noise, cleaning herself as if there was a speck of dust on her clothes.

“Point taken,” Gilt concurred.

“But to be sure, I want you to sniff him, Gilt,” Kate ordered. Gilt stared at her again.

“Come on, no pun intended.”

Gilt sighed, “I already sniffed him, and he’s not human either. His blood is different from any other humans. That I can confirm he’s supernatural.”

“What do you mean?” Laswell asked. For a moment, Gilt stared at him, his eyes fixated as if he were staring into his soul.

He sighed, concluding, “I may be wrong, he’s like other human beings. Normal. I don’t know anything about magic, you guys tell me, and you’re the magic experts here.”

“Well, we’re not gifted with high intellect, so you’ll have to forgive us,” Laswell said.

“Am I allowed to feed on him? Gilt asked. “I’m kinda famished.”

“No killing and no sucking of blood. We’ll take him safely to his home, he’s not a threat.”

“Not yet,” Gilt added.

“Not yet and never will be, but we didn’t want blood on our hands, we weren’t killers,” Kate said. “Besides, I was going to put a spell so that he wouldn’t remember this night.”

“I am,” Gilt raised his right hand.

“I swear if you lay a finger on him. I will break every bone in your body,” Kate warned, with pressure in her voice.

“Oohhh, scary,” Gilt said.

“Since there’s no kicking ass today, I’m going to bail. Smell ya later,” Laswell bid farewell as he tarnished a card and vanished into thin air.

Gilt looked at her, brushing his chin. “There’s something changed about you.”

“Like what?”

“You’re glowing.”

“Glowing? No. Glowing is for a pregnant woman.”

“For real?”

“For real. Look, I don’t know what kind of crap you’re thinking about. But I don’t care, I haven’t changed,” Kate explained, but Gilt could see the deniable side when he looked at Van.

“Did you sleep with him?” Gilt asked with a smile on his face.

“No! I didn’t.”

“You didn’t? Alright fine, but the way you looked at him, I’m sure there is something about it. Has the great Kate Faye Anderson been softened by some human being?”

She grimaced. Gilt stood back, knowing this. “Hey, I’m just kidding.”

“Divisible Parisilto.”

Casting the spell, Gilt’s presence vanished, nothing, gone in a cloud of thin smoke.

Kate carried Van back to his room, using her spell Graviga to levitate him. When she carried Van back to his room, Timothy burst inside.

“Oh no.” Timothy muttered. “I’m so sorry if I interrupted something between the two of you.”

“Slowja firesente.”

Timothy’s movement stopped. Kate looked into his eyes, then whispered. After that, Timothy began to walk outside of Van’s room and back to his bed.

Under the light of the moon, Van slept in the comfort of the passing breeze.

\*\*\*

Van woke up with a headache, killing him as he walked dopey down the stairs, and to the kitchen. He took a glass of water. Rubbing his eyes while walking, he tripped over, but Timothy held his arm and guided Van to sit down.

“You look like crap,” Timothy commented.

“Thank you, I already looked in the mirror this morning,” Van replied as he went to the kitchen sink, turned on the water faucet, and washed his face.

“Are you taking meth? I’m gonna kick your ass if you ever do that.” Timothy asked as he minced the fried meat through grinding with his teeth.

“Uh, ew, no. I wouldn’t do that kind of thing.” Van denied.

“Have you ever considered joining any kind of sport? If you want, I can pull you into the basketball team.” Timothy said.

“Nah, we both know that I’m not a team player.” Van shook his head.

“Right, I nearly forgot how you got into a fight because of you being an asshat.”

“Oh, shut up.”

\*\*\*

Van made his way through the crowded hallway, scanning his surroundings for his locker. As he picked up his books and left unnecessary items, he felt a tap on his shoulder. He turned at once to see Kate standing with a smile on her face.

“Hey there,” she said.

Van gave a polite nod. “Hello.”

Kate stepped closer. “What’s up with ‘hello’? Do you have any other words in your vocabulary?”

Van shrugged. “Not really. Sorry.”

Kate’s smile grew wider. “Well, maybe you should start complimenting me or asking me to hang out after class.”

Van hesitated. He wasn’t interested in Kate, but he didn’t want to be rude either. “I appreciate the offer, but I’ve got a lot of assignments to take care of. Maybe some other time.”

Kate’s smile faltered for a moment, but then she recovered. “Okay, no problem. Good luck with your work.”

Van nodded and turned to walk away, but he could feel Kate’s eyes on him as he left.

As Van settled into his seat in biology class, he was relieved to see that Kate was nowhere near. He listened attentively as the teacher introduced herself and began the day’s lesson on cells. When class ended, Van gathered his things and prepared to leave, but the teacher called out his name.

“Mister Koelson? Mister Spotsman wants to see you. Please go to the faculty.”

Van briefly felt a jolt in his stomach as he made his way to the faculty office. Something that he was aware of and associated with something bad must have happened. Regardless, he ignored it as it passed quickly. He knocked on the door and was greeted by several teachers, including Mr. Waldon, the school’s athletic director.

“Ah, Mister Koelson, please come in and have a seat,” Mr. Waldon said, gesturing to a chair.

Van sat down nervously, wondering what this was all about.

“Have you considered joining any clubs or sports?” Mr. Waldon asked.

Van shook his head. “No, I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Well, I think you should. You’ve got a lot of potential, and we could really use someone with your skills for the upcoming regional contest.”

Van was surprised that the teacher thought he had something to offer. “What skills are you talking about?”

Mr. Waldon smiled. “Well, let’s just say that I see a lot of myself in you. When I was your age, I was shy and didn’t have much confidence. But when I started playing basketball, everything changed. Suddenly, I had fans and attention from all kinds of people. It was a real boost to my self-esteem.”

Van considered this for a moment. He won’t deny that he was interested in sports but he never really pursued them seriously. “I’ll think about it,”

“Great!” Mr. Waldon said, clapping him on the back. “I think you’ll find it’s a great way to meet people and develop your skills. And who knows, you might even become a star.”

Van left the faculty office feeling both nervous and excited. He wasn’t sure if he was ready for the attention that would come with joining a sports team, but he couldn’t deny that the idea intrigued him.

\*\*\*

Gilt decided to take a walk through a familiar route in the forest at eleven in the evening. His objective was to investigate the forest where most of the victims was found. The air was chilly, and the ground was soft under his boots as he ventured deeper into the woods. The trees were tall, and the branches were bare, casting eerie shadows on the path ahead. Gilt’s heart pounded in his chest as he listened to the rustling of leaves and the howling of the wind.

As he walked, he heard several footsteps and laughed not too far away from him. Gilt felt the need to see what those people could do in the middle of the night. Not too long he saw the fire, crackling and trailing smoke to the sky. Suddenly, the atmosphere changed, and a thick haze filled up the entire place. Gilt sensed that something must have happened to the couple he saw earlier, but he couldn’t see anything due to the haze.

It all happened in a blink of an eye.

One of the gang members rose, questioning the cause of the sudden change of vision. Brandon, one of the gang members, was attacked by an unknown figure while taking a leak near the car. Before he could wake up the others, the figure killed him by lunging its claws to his throat. The others ran to the car, and as they tried to drive away, the monster attacked them, causing them to crash into a tree. Brandon was the first one to be impaled by its sharp claws, and the monster surely still after them.

Gilt knew by then that the monster was up to no good. He broke a part of the wood and fashioned it into a stake. The two remaining gang members were killed, and the girl managed to escape and run for help. The monster was about to catch up with the woman, but Gilt struck a stake in the monster’s stomach. Gilt pulled out the stake and kicked the monster’s torso.

“Oh no, you don’t. It’s just gonna be you—” Gilt said, also looking behind, talking to the monster who caused this “, and you and me.” With that, a smirk was written on his face. Gilt pulled out the stake and kicked the monster’s torso.

The monster growled as it spread his devilish wings, and Gilt noticed the blood-drenched flesh on its mouth, its red eyes, and the twisted devilish horns on its forehead. The monster snarled, its tongue showing an excessive secretion of saliva, and charged toward Gilt. Gilt evaded it quickly by rolling sideways and aimed at its torso with the stake, but it wasn't deep enough. The monster lunged towards Gilt with its claws, and Gilt managed to evade it, scraping his shirt in the process.

Gilt tried to put some distance between himself and the monster and aimed for its wings. He threw his stake into the monster’s wings and succeeded in pissing it off. The monster grabbed Gilt by the neck, but he couldn’t be killed by choking, being undead. Gilt struggled, feeling the monster’s grip tighten around his neck.

He was confident with his regenerative prowess, not until the monster did something unusual. The monster’s mouth opened wide and leaned closer to his face, he could smell the foul and stinking odor from it, but that was the least of his worries. The monster’s eyes began to emit light, and the same happened to its mouth. Gilt felt a burning sensation erupted inside of him. Gilt pulled the stake out of his back and stabbed it into the monster’s jaw, piercing through its brain.

As soon as the gripped loosen and the monster was croaking for its dear life, Gilt ran, struggling to compose himself, knowing somehow he managed to escape the monster, but luck was on the creature’s side. Gilt could hear the monster’s familiar growl as he went on, ignoring the tendrils of trees that were cascading his presence from the monster. He was relieved that he survived the encounter.

As Gilt made his way out of the forest, he stumbled upon the girl who had escaped earlier. She was frantic and out of breath.

“H-help. Please. There’s a monster…”

“Don’t worry.” Gilt said. “It’s gone.”

“Did you --?”

“That’s the least you should worry.” Gilt interrupted and shrugged his shoulders, “Everything’s fine.” Then he moved with incredible speed in a short distance to her. His eyes lured hers. “But you won’t remember what you saw tonight. You’re going to tell the authorities that you were high, and you thought you saw a monster, but it was just a bear. Also, stay in school. Don’t do dumb things like going out at night or taking any drugs. Do you understand?”

The girl nodded.

Gilt smiled. “Good.”

## Chapter 2

Mia and Kate sat facing each other, the crystal ball floating between them. Mia’s honey-coloured hair cascaded down her back, tied back with a headband. Her deep blue eyes glinted briefly due the mana pouring into the crystal ball. Kate was at the other end opposing her control over the matter. Her serious demeanor made Mia feel uneasy.

“This game is exhausting,” Mia muttered, feeling irritated. This wasn’t their usual sisterly bonding activity that she was expecting. Mia was starting to feel frustrated.

Kate was the one who initiated the game to teach Mia how to control her mana, but it seemed like Kate was the one dominating the crystal ball. Mia struggled to pull the ball towards her side, her mana leaking off the crystal. Meanwhile, Kate remained firm and held her energy in.

“Are you ready to give up?” Kate taunted, her blue mana dominating the crystal.

Mia was determined not to let Kate win this time. “There’s no need to fuss. There’s always next time,” she replied, trying to hide her frustration.

But when Kate mocked her with a smile, Mia snapped. “Oh, you’re asking for it now. I’m going to kick your ass,” she said, pouring all her mana into the crystal ball.

Blood dripped from Mia’s nose as she focused on winning, completely unaware of the damage she was causing.

“You need to stop!” Kate barked, but Mia was in a trance and didn’t listen.

Finally, Mia took over the game, and the crystal ball started moving toward her. But Kate wasn’t going down without a fight. Their charged mana cracked the floor, walls, and mirrors around them, causing Kate to mutter, “Crap.”

Kate managed to disrupt the uncontrolled mix of energy before severing the connection with Mia. The uncontrolled energy burst out, and they were thrown to the ground, landing hard on their backs.

“What just happened?” Mia asked groggily as she regained consciousness.

“You happened,” Kate said, catching her breath as she stood up. “You lost control again. How many times do I have to tell you that mixing life energy into our mana is dangerous?”

“Sorry, it won't happen again.”

Kate couldn’t believe how much her sister pushed her. Mia’s uncontrolled magical prowess was a double-edged sword; it could make her the strongest witch they had ever seen, but it also posed a danger to herself and others. Despite losing the game, Mia’s display of power made Kate realize that her sister has immense potential.

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Mia had placed the spoon and fork on the plate, preparing for their dinner. Kate flipped the egg, and when she saw that it was enough, she put it on the plate along with the bacon she had cooked.

“What are the principles of using magic?” Kate asked.

Mia, whose focus was on digging in, was disturbed and questioned, “What?” Her attention was now on Kate.

“What are the principles of using magic?” she asked again.

“Uhm,” she paused, thinking, and continued. “Use your imagination to shape your mana.”

“And then?”

“Released it with the compassion of something positive.”

“And why was that?”

“If you let negative energy fuel your mana, it would affect your mind, thus losing control.”

“So,” she paused, drinking the water. “What happened back there?”

“You don’t have to nag about it, I’ll find a way to control it.”

“Uh-huh, look, the point of the tug-of-war was for you to learn how to manipulate mana at will and in control, not to freak out because of wanting to win.”

“If you weren’t so provocative.”

“I was testing you. You must do the opposite of it, not let yourself consume. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand,” Mia said. She kept her eyes on Kate. “Now can we continue practicing after dinner?”

“Next time. No need to rush, I also need to rest. You probably have no idea how tiring it is to do a part-time job and study at the same time and train your sass out of your ass.”

“I could never guess.”

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Her woeful gaze surveyed her reflection. Then her eyes landed on her bountiful bosom, on the etched furrow of her forehead, and her crimson lips. Her black dress flailed as if it had a mind of its own, leading her floating body somewhere she hadn’t been in a long time.

Like a stripling film, the light of the moon made its way across the woods as it set down in the west, touching a part of her face and looking down at the grave of her late parents. Her face turned pale as she knelt, remembering the day she let her parents die. It was not her fault, though, but she was the older one. She had exceptional prowess for a child, but she wasn’t able to help to avert their deaths.

A voice receded from the voided part of the forest where light seemed not to pass through it. The voice spoke in an indifferent tone, but persuasive. “You could’ve saved them. If you weren’t such a weakling enough to accept who you are, to accept the power you despised so much,” the voice said, darkly.

Kate could feel the presence of the other being shifting positions. “Why were you doing this?!” Kate shouted, demanding.

“You want to know why?!” She barked at her. “You already knew the answer to that question!”

In an instant, she was engulfed by the shadow enveloping everything around her. She tried to run and resist by chanting magic, but it did not affect her.

“Let me out!” She demanded, her voice echoing in the dark place.

Kate ran wherever her feet might lead her. She paused, as she could feel the presence again. She gasped as she heard footsteps, slowly getting closer to her, behind her. She turned around to see herself, not much like her, as the perfect likeness of her was much more sinister. Her smile crept from ear to ear. Her temples were gray, and her void, menacing eyes stared at her soul.

“This can’t be real.” Her hands covered her mouth, covering her horrified face. “This is just a dream, breath, inhale, and exhale.”

“Oh darling, you have no idea how wrong you are,” she said grimly as she grinned.

With that, Kate screamed, echoing across the void.

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She woke up from a throbbing cheek caused by the slap. Her eyes narrowed. Her pupils dilated. She could recognize the blonde traits of her sister. Still, her voice was not clear. She could feel the weight of Mia on top of her. She could tell that she was saying something based on the movements of her mouth. When she had her hearing returned, all she could hear was gibberish.

“Wait, wait, slow down,” Kate said.

“I heard someone keep knocking at the door.”

“Then, why didn’t you bother to look at it?”

Mia said out loud. “No sane people would go out at midnight and we don’t have any kittens,”

“What’s with the kittens?” Kate shook her head, ignoring her last words. “Fine, you stay here, I’ll go.”

“What if that’s a monster, the one who’s attacking people?!”

“Relax, we’re witches, I-we can protect ourselves.”

Kate walked down the wooden stairs. Silent as possible, wary of the possibility of an intruder. She didn’t bother to turn on the lights. Kate peeked at the spyhole and saw no one. She was startled by another hard knock banging at the door.

She hesitantly questioned, “W-who’s there?”

A familiar voice said, “Is that supposed to be a joke? Because I had better ones.” He jested.

She hurriedly unlocked and opened the door. “Gilt?! What happened?”

“First of all, may I come in?” His face is abnormally pale, her lips are gray, and the stamina she normally saw in him is depleted.

“Fine, you can come in.”

Kate let Gilt’s arm hang on her shoulder, leading her inside their house onto the couch. She left him sitting and brought a glass of water. Gilt drank it. “You know there’s no way that a vampire can produce blood out of the water, right?”

“I know.”

“Then why bother?” He asked tiredly.

“It’s just, I don’t know, it felt the right thing to do to a guest, I guess.”

“Gilt?” Mia asked, hunching down at the chair.

“Hey, kid.” Gilt raised halfway his hand, waving.

“Go back to your bedroom!” Kate shouted.

Mia pouted and then walked with a hard pounding on each step. Kate turned her attention back to Gilt.

“Okay, time for explaining. What happened?”

“A monster brawl happened.” Gilt wearily replied.

“What do you mean?”

“There is someone who put a devil in the forest and fought me earlier.”

“I’m sorry what? A devil?”

“Yes, a fricking devil-ish.” He groaned.

“It doesn’t explain why you’re in the forest. Care to elaborate?” Her brows raised.

“I was investigating, sort of. When I spotted a group of delinquents, I knew that they were the next victims, so,” with a harsh breath, he confessed. “I took the liberty to use them as bait and to know what kind of foul creatures are hiding in the darkness. Well, you can guess what happens next.”

Kate lunged, but Gilt, whose reflexes are not gone, caught her hands.

“You could’ve gotten yourself killed!” Kate yelled.

“Relax, I’m a vampire, I cannot be killed. Well, not by that creature, has no brain though, he thinks that I’m also a human when he tries to suck my soul.” Gilt said, releasing the grip on her wrist.

“What did you say?”

“Oh yeah, the guy can suck out your soul if you let him catch you.”

“Wait a minute!” Kate mouthed, chanting. Her eyes narrowed as a light shone in her eyes. “Crap.”

“What?”

Kate lifted her eyes to see him. Her face was written grimly.

“Your life force is leaking out.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means your soul is leaving your body!” She shouted as she stood up and went inside the basement, “C’mon. You don’t want to die, do you?”

Gilt grunted, pulling himself up with whatever strength he could muster.

“I’m a vampire, I’m already dead. Besides, it’s impossible to kill one if not stab in the heart, and missy, that dickhead didn’t stab me.”

“Technically, vampires are cursed undead creatures with their souls lingering inside the body. If that monster is what I think it is, it somehow broke the curse or something that is beyond the power of the curse to handle.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.” His movements ceased as he landed on the couch. Kate, on the other hand, was looking for her grimoire, a book of a witch filled with different kinds of sorceries that have been passed through generations.

Gilt observed her, his eyes fixed on the grimoire.

“I thought you didn’t want to learn Witch’s sorcery.”

“Well, I need to, it’s not like someone is gonna look after us, or protect us from any kind of danger, so.”

Gilt watched for a minute. He could see her tired eyes begging to be put into slumber. Judging from it, he inferred that Kate was having a bad dream, or probably it was because of him. He wouldn’t know until he asked.

“Did you have a bad dream?”

“How did you know? Maybe because of you barging in the middle of the night.”

“Point taken.” He paused. “It wouldn’t hurt if you talk to me a little. Just to help me ease my mind off the pain.”

“Yes, I had a bad dream.”

“Let me guess, you dream of doing a smoochy-smoochy with that hippie?”

“He’s not a hippie!” She retorted, stabbing him with a glare.

“So, defensive. No need to be aggressive, okay lovebird? Seriously, what’s bothering you?”

“It’s just a bad dream.”

“Is the dream something about your parents’ murder?”

She paused, which means Gilt’s hypothesis is true.

“You never told anyone about this? Not even your sister?” She simply nodded, cornered. Gilt continued. “Listen, if someone knows how to handle demons, it’s me, alright. Take my advice, open yourself instead of finding a distraction to get rid of it. Well, I understand what you’ve been going through, you didn’t intentionally want to do it, it’s just happened that, poof, instant responsibilities, and yeah life is a bitch, but if these demons of you keep persisting, you need to seek out someone, because if not, it will be too late to save you from those demons.”

Kate paused. Then she continued. “I got to say, for a vampire who is a reformed killer, you’re not good at pep talk. But then again, who is? Nice try though.”

“Hey, I graduated with a bachelor’s degree in psychology back in 1964. So, I know one or two things about consoling people.”

With that, she focused back on finding the spell. Gilt stared at her, observing every corner of her face, though not everyone could see it. Gilt could see that Kate had tired eyes. She was trying to be as positive as ever. Someone must be, not only for herself but for her sister.

A few minutes passed by, and Kate managed to find a spell to fix Gilt. He averted his gaze quickly enough for Kate not to notice.

“Lucky you, I found a spell that could fix you.”

Kate sat down in a more comfortable position. She placed the grimoire on the wooden bookstand. Gilt’s eyes followed Kate as she opened a box and grabbed something. She wore a necklace that had an odd-looking eye.

“What is that?” Gilt came closer to get a good look.

“It’s a talisman. It came from Egypt called the Eye of Horus. This will amplify the spell I’m going to use on you.”

“Amplify you say?”

“The spell requires a large amount of life energy. I couldn’t use mine as it might affect me. So, I’m gonna use the life force of nature.”

“Wait, wait. Isn’t that kind of a double-edged sword, since nature’s life force doesn’t just contain positive energy but also negative energy?”

“I will take the risk.”

“No, no. This is new territory for you. I am not going to allow it.” Gilt was about to stand up, but Kate couldn’t let him. She cast a spell that stopped his movement.

“What the—?”

“Don’t worry I’ll fix you.”

Kate began chanting the spell, her hands placed on the talisman. It was long and uncomfortable as the atmosphere became heavy and hard to breathe in. Finally, when Kate finally gathered enough energy, she released it into Gilt.

“You fine?” asked Kate, panting.

“I thought you were gonna show some kind of magic tricks.”

She chuckled, and as she stood, the world slipped through her fingers.

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Kate sat up in bed, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. She looked around the room, trying to calm herself down, and was relieved when her sister Mia walked in.

Mia’s concerned face immediately put Kate at ease, and she gave her a small smile. “Just a bad dream,” she said, her voice still shaky.

Mia nodded, taking a seat on the bed next to her. “You really pushed yourself last night,” she said. “Gilt wanted me to check on you and make sure you were resting.”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “Gilt said that? That doesn’t sound like him.”

Mia shrugged. “He seemed genuinely worried. Anyway, I took care of breakfast already. You should eat something.”

Kate looked at her sister skeptically. “Are you sure you cooked? What did you make?”

Mia grinned. “Risotto. I watched some cooking videos on YouTube last night and decided to try it out.”

Kate’s eyes widened as she took a bite of the risotto. “Wow, this is really good! You’re a natural.”

Mia blushed, clearly pleased with the compliment. After a moment of silence, she hesitated before speaking up. “Um, Kate? I hate to ask, but...do you think I could borrow ten dollars? I’m a little short on cash right now.”

Kate could sense her sister’s nervousness and gave her a reassuring smile. “Of course, no problem. What do you need it for?”

Mia looked down, biting her lip. “Just some personal items from the store.”

Kate nodded understandingly, not wanting to push her sister. “Here you go,” she said, handing over the money.

Mia hugged her tightly, clearly grateful. “Thank you so much, Kate! You’re the best!”

Kate smiled and hugged her back. “Anytime. You know I’ve always got your back.”

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Van stepped out of his apartment building, taking a deep breath of the crisp morning air. His eyes were immediately drawn to an eagle soaring overhead, basking in the warm glow of the sunrise. He couldn't help but marvel at the bird's effortless grace and freedom, a stark contrast to his own life.

He stretched his arms, feeling the satisfying snap of his joints. “It's a beautiful day,” he muttered to himself, before making his way down the bustling street. Van was always cautious, avoiding the sketchy parts of town where gangs tended to congregate.

As he walked, his mind wandered to the recent headlines about mysterious incidents occurring in the city. The police claimed it was just a wild animal, but Van couldn't shake the feeling that something more sinister was at play. How could a mere animal outsmart the police?

Suddenly, he heard Kate's voice calling out to him. He realized he had been lost in thought and hadn't noticed her waving. She was with Timothy and the rest of their group, talking excitedly about the party they were planning to attend that night. Van was preoccupied with his food, barely registering their conversation. When they left, he noticed that Lester was missing, but didn't bother to ask about him.

Kate approached him as he finished eating, concern etched on her face. “Hey, is everything okay? You've been really quiet.”

Van was taken aback by her genuine concern. He hadn't realized he was projecting negative vibes. “Yeah, I'm fine. Just lost in thought.”

Kate regarded him skeptically. “Are you sure that's all it is?”

Van shrugged. “Yeah, it's nothing. What's up?”

Kate hesitated before confiding in him. “I think my sister is hiding something from me. She's been acting strange lately, almost too sweet.”

Van nodded understandingly. “That's tough. Have you tried talking to her?”

Kate shook her head. “I doubt she'd tell me the truth, even if I did.”

Van felt Kate's eyes on him, and he realized his mistake. “I didn't mean it like that. I'm sure she has her reasons for keeping things to herself.”

Kate let out a deep sigh. “I know, I'm just worried.”

Before Van could reply, their teacher interrupted them. “Mr. Koelson, if you don't mind, would you spend your spare time with the principal?”

Van was surprised by the request but knew better than to argue. “Sure, no problem.”

Kate gave him a sympathetic smile. “Good luck.”

Van nodded, feeling a sinking feeling in his stomach. He hoped this wasn't going to be another lecture from the principal about his troubled past. As he walked towards the principal's office, he couldn't help but feel a sense of dread, wondering what fate awaited him.

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Van sat on a brown cushioned chair inside the principal’s office. He read the name “Enrick Malfis” on a standing log. The principal, commanded a strict figure, possessed a robust physique that seemed to demand attention. His formal suit choked his plumpness, clearly a bad impression of his lifestyle. Nevertheless, his presence imposes authority. Van did not dare to return the stare. The only sounds were the ticking clock and the clicking pen in the principal’s hand. Van felt feverish.

“Do you have any idea why you are here, Mr. Koelson?” the principal finally asked.

“Not that I remember doing anything mischievous, s-sir.”

“You were considered a person of interest regarding the murder that happened in the Maryvale Forest.”

“Excuse me? Not that I disrespect you, sir, but you must have mistaken me for someone else. I was at home that night.”

The door opened, and a police officer and two teachers entered. Van recognized the officer as Bella Hemlock.

“Mister Van, I believe we met before. There’s a recent murder case in the Maryvale Forest. You’re a person of interest,” Officer Hemlock said.

“What? Are you accusing me? And what made you think that I’m involved?” Van asked.

“Well, we found footage of you running on the streets,” Officer Hemlock said, showing him the video.

“No, I swear. I was just doing parkour,” Van stuttered.

“In the middle of the night?” Officer Hemlock questioned.

“Yes.”

“Then you would likely consider it as such. I promise I don’t know anything about it.”

Van’s aunt Dally burst into the room, rallying with her strict face.

“You can get out, Van,” she spoke. Van hesitantly looked at her. “What? Just go and close the door,”

After Van left, Dally confronted the principal and Officer Hemlock. Her hands on her hips.

“What are you doing? I know this is a bit much, but your nephew is a suspect. One of my men caught him last night,” the principal said.

“Before you rushed to investigate him, you should have come to me first,” Dally said, almost yelling.

“This is the reason why we wouldn’t tell you,” Enrick said. “Because you should let your emotions rule first before anything.”

Dally sighed heavily. “Okay. That kid is a troubled one, he doesn’t have any friends back in his previous school. So that would make sense as to why he is like that.”

“We can’t take that risk, Dally. What if he’s working with them?” Officer Hemlock said.

“No, he’s not. He’s just another troubled kid that needs attention not to be detained. We are not the law. We’re part of the constitution that helps nurture students,” Dally replied.

The three stumbled at the fact of their positions

“Don’t you guys ever do that again, alright?” Dally warned

When the rest left, Dally talked to Enrick.

“I know that you’re afraid that they will come back, but there’s no need to be afraid anymore. We defeated them.

“But at what cost? We didn’t defeat them, Dally. We just managed to screw them out of this city.”

“I know. But it doesn’t need to be like this. Not to him, not to everyone.”

At that moment, she knew that Van’s course would flow more than what she and Mick envisioned for him.

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A stuttering bulb woke her up. Her eyes popped open, and she stared at the source before looking outside the window. Dawn was approaching fast, and beyond the orange rays, birds flew in the northeastern direction.

In another flicker of the bulb, Kate rose from her bed and turned off the switch. In the right corner, there was a table. Her notes were a mess from studying late. Pages of the book were folded, sheets of paper lay on the ground, and even the lamp remained on. She could already tell that the bill would be high.

When Kate walked out of the room, she saw Mia carrying a handful of clothes. Even though Mia was downstairs, Kate could hear her heavy footsteps. Kate followed her to the bathroom, where clothes were sprawled on the floor, and others hung on the washing machine.

“Are you up early?” Kate asked, glancing at her clothes on the ground. She seemed disconcerted as she spoke but regained her composure as she continued to do her work.

“Uhm, yeah. Just need to make sure that there won’t be any heavy chores greeting me when I come home.”

“Alright then.”

After washing her face and staring at herself in the mirror, Kate took a deep breath and continued. For a second, her reflection became distorted into a twisted smile before she left.

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The moonlight pierced through the clouds and illuminated the cold air. The leaves rustled as a breeze swept through the area. Van adjusted his leather jacket, watching over Timothy and the others as they traded nasty jokes.

As they entered the mansion, a throng of people crowded the stage. Cups filled with alcohol were passed around, some busy making out while others danced to the music. Van felt a sense of anxiety as his gang began to disappear.

He reached for a cup, but Jane intervened, greeting him with a chuckle. He could smell the strong scent of alcohol on her breath.

“Hey there, handsome,” she said. “Why are you so late? I was expecting you to be here earlier.”

Van hesitated, eyeing her with concern. “I’m new here, and I don’t want to cause any trouble that might land me behind bars.”

Jane laughed, her face flushing. “You’re joking, right?”

“No,” Van replied, shaking his head. “I’m not talking about you, of course.”

Jane offered him a drink, and Van took a beer, drinking it down in one go. Jane looked surprised.

“You’re a heavy drinker,” she said.

Van slammed the empty can on the table. “Is that a problem?”

Jane shook her head, laughing. “No, no, of course not. So, what about you and Kate?”

Van shrugged. “We’re just friends.”

“You two seem pretty close,” Jane said, taking a sip of her drink. “Are you sure nothing is going on?”

Van frowned. “Positive. We’re just friends.”

Jane’s eyes widened when she spotted Kate. “Oh, there she is. What do you think of her?”

“She’s a good person, but she seems desperate for attention,” Van said, taking another beer.

Jane frowned. “That’s harsh. Why do you say that?”

“The first time I met her, she seemed lonely, like she didn’t know what to do with her life. And when she started hitting on me, it didn’t feel genuine. Something seemed off.”

Jane nodded. “I see what you mean. But if you think she’s desperate, why bother with her?”

Van shrugged. “I can’t just ignore her. People who seek attention like that usually have some underlying issues they’re dealing with. I don’t want to leave her hanging.”

Jane raised an eyebrow. “That’s very noble of you. I don’t think I could do the same.”

Van chuckled. “Well, we all have our ways of dealing with things, I guess.”

Jane smiled. “You’re an interesting guy, Van. I like that you’re compassionate and thoughtful, especially to lonely girls. But be patient with Kate. She may seem tough, but she’s a bit of a drama queen.”

Van nodded, watching as Jane walked away. He couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something more going on, something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. But for now, he would focus on being there for Kate, whatever that might entail. He finally noticed Kate, staring blankly at him. He felt a little bit uneasy knowing that she might hear the entire conversation. She got down from the stairs and walked towards him.

“What did she tell you?” She straightly asked.

Van took a sip before sitting down, facing her.

“She said something about you being a good person.”

“Is that all? It seems that the two of you are enjoying it. Sorry if I make you feel uncomfortable.”

“No need to apologize. She was about to leave anyway. So, is it true that you're a drama queen?”

Kate coughed midway when she drank the beer. She grimaced.

“Excuse me? I'm a drama queen? Obviously, No. If anyone's a drama queen that's gotta be her.”

“Okay if you say so.”

“Why does it sound like you don't believe me?”

“Well, it's okay to be in denial. No judgment, I understand.”

“Wow. You believe every word that comes out of her mouth, eh? Did she charm you?”

“Believe me if any woman would charm me, the chances would be slim except for you.”

“Do you know the term for a medical condition to those men who tend to praise women when their objective is to get in their pants but can't be easily detected?”

“What?”

“ASS-SIMP-TOMATIC.” She playfully accused him.

“Oohhh, ouch. Now that’s a different level of burn.”

“That's what you get for being a liar.”

“Hey, in my defense, I was trying to be nice. Secondly, your friendliness aura is being appreciated.”

“Oh? It still sounds simple to me.” Kate insisted.

“Will you stop roasting me?”

“Will you drop the pretentious flattering?”

Kate smiled. When she turned around, she saw a familiar face around the corridor hanging with others.

“Is that your friend?”

Van tilted his head and saw Raymond and Lester exchanging beer bongs.

“Have you ever tried to use those?”

Kate shook her head. “Beer bong? No. Cause no one knows how many people put their mouths, remnants of saliva, and the amount of mucus stuck on that this.”

“Yeah, I couldn't agree more.”

Raymond looked at them and used his finger to point at the funnel they use.

“You wanna try?!” Raymond shouted.

“Gross, no! Dude, do you have any idea how many mouths were put in that thing?”

Raymond stopped in motion as if he realized something, then he began to sprint to the bathroom, and he vomited. The mood of the music changed, it was something soothing, and romantic yet it was only filled with pure instruments.

“Princess, will you give me the honor to take you on a dance?” he bent a little, his head slowly lifted with his right hand presented to her, inviting her to a dance.

“Oohhh, charming. I'll bite.”

He placed her hand on his neck, wrapping it and his hands crawl to her waist. He slid his foot backward, smoothly in motion across the floor. She moved her right foot forward chasing him but her flat shoes slipped, and she nearly tripped but he held her tight enough to regain their balance. It seems that they were not sensuous enough, so they started again, but this time she caught up.

As she moved forward, he guided their movements to turn around. She gripped harder, and their faces come closer. He could smell the perfume along with the stench of alcohol.

“Weird,” Van muttered.

“Huh?”

“I mean look at everyone. They seem to be hooked on the music. As if they’re under a spell of some sort.”

“Yeah, totally weird. Maybe, they're drunk enough to slip this music.”

The two pursue, their movements flail like dancing leaves, and they rock for a few moments. Their eyes tell the same, both are caught in the atmosphere she was about to press forward but the music abruptly changes and turns back to the previous music.

“I'm so sorry to interrupt, but uhm, can I borrow your girlfriend for a minute?” An odd-looking guy wearing a broken hat interrupted them.

Van exchanged glances with Kate, then at the man then back to her.

“Uhm, he's a friend of mine. Can you leave us for a moment?”

“Alright.” Van once again looks at him, his voice seems familiar but no matter how he jogged his memory there was still no clue to identify him. Finally, with Van left, he begins to speak to Kate.

His lips slightly trembled as he drank another beer, gulping it down. He puts his hat down on the table. She noticed that Laswell smelled weird, awfully strange, as if he came from a sanitary place, like a hospital or an office.

“Can we cut off to the chase?” Kate prompted.

“Sure, sure.” Laswell said, “Sorry, I kinda phase out, I need a breather, okay. It’s not quite invigorating when you have to sneak in the morgue and check out a live dead body.”

“You said what?”

“I snuck on a, uhm, morgue.”

“As in were dead bodies—”

“Yes, yes that’s the place.”

“Wait, what?”

“I know it’s a little weird, okay, but I had to.”

“What did you find out?”

“Do you want me to explain the gory parts?”

“Ew, please no.” Kate groaned and went for another drink. Her face was a long and thoughtful one.

“Okay. I sneak on the morgue lately and investigate, there was no any kind of altercation, except this.”

Laswell showed Kate a picture of one of the victims, its back has a baleful tattoo of three rings of snakes.

“Do you know what this means?” Laswell asked.

“Witchcraft.”

Even in this distance, she couldn’t shrug off these ominous feelings. A sensation that kept crawling back, her instincts telling her to be careful.

“I’m gonna research this. For now, don’t do anything stupid.”

“I know.” Laswell scoffed. “No need to tell me.”

Kate noticed that Jane was coming on their way. Her face was stern and disappointed.

“Why did you blow your chance off?”

“First of all, I didn’t screw up. Second, I’m just greeting my cousin here. He just came back from a long trip.”

“Cousin?” Jane looked suspiciously at him. Laswell smiled from ear to ear.

“I don’t see the resemblance,” Jane said.

Laswell’s mood quickly turned sour.

“Uhm. You don’t need to worry about it. Everything went well.” Kate winked at Jane.

“Oh. I see. Well, I won’t bother you anymore.”

Even when Jane went away, Laswell still followed her until Kate snapped at him. With a cautious glance, Kate inquired of Laswell.

“What is *that*?”

“What is what?”

“That look.”

“Oh. It’s nothing.” Laswell chuckled. “Women like you and her drives men crazy.”

Then Laswell conjured a spell, a white hue enveloped him until he disappeared.

“What do you mean?” Kate asked, but was left hanging.

A man came running inside the house. The way he walked implied that he was drunk.

“We’ve been made! ‘Cops are coming!” he shouted.

Everyone in the room snapped out. The majority went running behind the house, others carried their drunk buddies. Cups, beers, and a bottle of scotch were left. Only Kate and several drunk people sleeping in bizarre positions were the only ones left.

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When Kate rose, she felt dizzy and her surroundings twisted, the backdrop changed, and darkness crept everywhere. She lifted her gaze, but soon the darkness engulfed the light embedded in her retinas.

Kate juddered her head to return to reality, turning her attention from right to left to inspect if there was someone who put her under a spell, but she saw no one except for the people who were drunk and sleeping.

She shivered and glanced through the window, noticing something beyond the woods. Kate dashed towards the forest behind the house, and the adrenaline pulsated in her veins. A mixed frisson of worry and histrionic frustration pulped her heart and mind. It was a sensation she had never felt before, the fear of not making it on time to stop the unknown entity strolling in the forest.

Her pulse skipped, and she saw Van. There was a monster, a knife, and a man. The hard gasping created a white puff during the chilly night, and the light from the full moon made its way to the masquerading shadow of the man.

Blood was dripping off the smeared knife as it fell to the ground. Kate gathered her courage to withstand the impending rampage, and the bluish mana in her palm was swelling. She stood in front of Van in awe as he turned his direction towards her. His eyes were moping, and his gaze was like a void that was going to engulf her. Until now, a chill struck her spine, an exaggerated feeling she never felt before—fear.

Kate noticed that those undead monsters dragged the dead body of a man her age, and she took the liberty of their divided attention and went behind, trudging against the large chunks of rocks and gliding down in the mud. She hid behind the rock and saw a small space between two giant rocks below them became a pile of dead bodies. The lifeless body emitted light into their eyes and gaping mouth as the devil itself breathed into them. It was something she didn’t expect to be possible; the monster could become a giver of life to the dead. It was loathsome to think that someone would ever do this to gain their desires, not sparing the dead who were resting in peace.

Van lifted his gaze as he drew the undead monsters back to the darkness, and he saw the giant devilish monster landing in front of him. Its flapping wings pushed the dust out of his range, and it glowered at Van, but his composure remained untethered and readied himself. The monster kicked the ground and grabbed him hard with its hand, and Van winced as the monster crushed his bones. Then, Van did what she wouldn’t expect. Exerting strength, Van’s arm freed itself from the monster’s brick-red hands and landed on his feet. Without hesitation, his fist broke its knees and yelled. It roared wistfully. The undead demon’s mouth began to blaze towards Van, but Kate saw it miles away.

Climbing, Kate hurriedly chanted a spell. “Graviga Pulsatio.” An invincible force threw the monster away from his victim. Van quickly got up and charged at it. The monster grew angry and called out for reinforcement. The undead flooded towards them, and they encircled them. Kate tried to tap Van, but he violently retaliated by aiming to twist her wrist. She punched him, and he staggered.

“What’s wrong with you?!” she yelled.

Van once again fortified his ground and bashed the oncoming enemy. Even though Kate didn’t want to do it, he gave her no choice by chanting a spell, “Sleepia Porosis.”

Van glowered at her and quickly grabbed her neck. Kate was caught by surprise and repeatedly cast the spell until Van’s eyes finally drifted closed, and he stumbled. Kate caught him and allowed him to rest on her lap, muttering, ‘Negas Olfiora.’ They teleported away, leaving only a trail of smoke behind.

The monster howled under the moonlight, its eyes flashing red as the undead pulled back into the darkness. Its wings spread wide, and it flew high into the gloomy sky.

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“Yoo-hoo. Wake up, buddy. Am I allowed to suck his neck?”

A putrid smell of alcohol came to Van’s nose, and he recognized it was one of the many smells that his nose perceived. This place reeked of a different unwanted and annoying smell.

“Get off the hippie, you dumb-ass,” another strange male voice said.

Van’s head kept spinning from the moment his eyes wearily opened. He grunted as he tried to keep his head up to steal a gaze on a woman mixing herbs. In the far corner, a man wearing a flat hat sat and drank wine.

 “Looks like our mystery hippie is awake,” Gilt stated. He watched Van groaning back to the world of the living.

Van felt their glances strike at him. “Who… are… you guys? Why am… Why am I here?” Van could finally speak, although he couldn’t make it more comprehensive.

“And… he can use his mouth too,” Gilt replied. Van found them all too weird, especially the one who yanked him earlier. He had pale skin and unbelievably perfect stature.

The man wearing a flat hat replied, “Put another word and we’re good at torturing you.”

“Torture… what?” Van asked. It was all too sudden for him. He has no clue what kind of people they were or what they would do to him, even though he had no idea what he had done to incur such determination on harrowing him.

“No one is going to get tortured, okay?” Kate was the only voice he recognized within the room. “You just need to tell us the truth.”

“She made a compelling argument. Skip the torture and listen to his lies,” Laswell said.

“I already told you guys, he’s not like any other person I’ve met. He can be trusted,” Kate insisted.

“Easy for you to say, princess. You don’t even know what he is,” Laswell replied.

Gilt broke off the two. “Geez, I’m gonna handle this,” he said. He stepped closer and stared into Van’s eyes. “Listen, who are you? What are you doing here in Maryvale? And what are you?”

Van tried to put his thoughts into words. “Are you trying to do a Jedi mind trick on me?” Gilt fell in silence, astonished. “This has never happened before,” Gilt said.

Laswell jested, “What? ‘Guy didn’t fall in gayness?’”

“What I mean is my mind is compulsive,” Gilt replied. A hint of annoyance began to rise.

Kate came closer to him and made him drink the mixed herbs. Van did not like what it tasted like. The taste made him slowly vomit.

“What?” Van asked.

“This is a medicinal herb. This will heal your wound,” Kate replied.

“Wound? What are you talking about?” Van asked.

Gilt reluctantly lifted the mirror to Van, and he saw the reflection of his burned flesh on his stomach. The unimaginable scenery made Van vomit again.

“Gilt! I told you we’ll take it slow,” Kate glowered at him. She never liked the use of force to get something she wanted, but she was willing if there was no other possible way. She glanced at Van. She only knew a little about his identity. She could neither trust his words nor what the records could offer him. She trusted her companions rather than the words of other people.

“Look. There’s no use in keeping secrets now.” Gilt said. “We want to know what you are.”

“I thought he had a connection to the killing events?” Laswell asked.

“I don’t think that would be necessary,” Kate said. “But we do need your help, Van. We can’t fight this thing on our own.”

Van looked at each of them skeptically. “Why me?”

“Because you have abilities that could help us defeat it,” Kate said. “And we want to help you figure out what those abilities are.”

Van sighed. “Fine. But I’m not making any promises.”

“Fair enough,” Laswell said. “Now, let’s start with your past. Can you tell us anything about your family history?”

Van hesitated for a moment before speaking. “My parents died when I was young. I don’t remember them.”

“I see,” Laswell said. “And have you ever experienced anything… unusual?”

Van thought back to the times when he’d felt a strange power coursing through his veins. The times when he’d seen things that nobody else could see. He’d always thought he was just imagining things, but now he wasn’t so sure.

“Maybe,” he said. “Sometimes I feel like I can do things that other people can’t.”

“Interesting,” Laswell said. “We’ll have to look into that further.”

They continued to ask Van questions about his past, trying to piece together the puzzle of his abilities. Van was reluctant to share at first, but as they talked, he began to feel like he could trust them. Maybe, just maybe, they could help him understand what he was capable of. And in the process, maybe they could help him defeat the monster that had been terrorizing the town.

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Under the pale moonlight, Kate and Van strolled home, the chilly breeze nipping at their noses. Kate worried they might get caught since it was already past curfew, but Van appeared too stoned to care. He swayed as they walked, still processing what happened. His hangover didn’t help either, but he insisted he’d be fine for school.

Kate offered him her shoulder to lean on. “You sure you can make it to school tomorrow?”

Van chuckled. “Been to school stoned plenty of times. I’ll be good.”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you at least a little freaked out by the fact that I’m a witch and my friends are supernaturally weird?”

Van shrugged. “Nah, I belong with the weirdos. And honestly, my hangover makes it easier to accept. I was more worried you guys would sell my kidneys than about the supernatural stuff.”

Kate laughed, the sound echoing through the quiet street. Van let out a deep sigh.

“I don’t know what’s going on with me, Kate. Lately, I keep twitching, and I’ve had some blackouts. Sometimes I wake up in strange places, like abandoned buildings or garages. The only place I haven’t slept is a dumpster.”

Kate furrowed her brows, contemplating Van’s words.

“Don’t worry about it too much,” Van said, interrupting her thoughts. “I’m not.”

“So are you into me?” Van suddenly asked, making Kate’s cheeks flush.

“What? Why would you even ask that?” she sputtered.

“Come on, Kate, you’ve been acting all soft and flirty with me. It’s obvious you’re into me.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “I’m just trying to be friendly.”

Van took a swig from his hip flask. “Admit it, I’m hot. It wouldn’t hurt to say you’re into me too.”

Kate laughed. “You’re drunk, Van. And you’re not my type.”

“What do you mean I’m not your type?” Van protested. “I’m hot, and I’m into you.”

Kate shook her head, amused. “Let’s just be friends, okay? We can get to know each other better.”

Van’s face fell. “Am I being friend-zoned?”

Kate smirked. “No, silly. It’s a stepping stone. First base.”

Van’s face lit up. “So you’re saying there’s a chance?”

Kate laughed. “Yes, Van, there’s a chance. But let’s get to know each other better first, okay?”

Van grinned, taking another swig from his flask. “You got it, pretty blonde hot stud sexy bombshell.”

Kate’s eyes widened in shock. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me,” Van said, his words slurring. “You’re a pretty blonde hot stud sexy bombshell.”

Kate couldn’t help but laugh. “You’re so confident, even when you’re drunk. I wonder how you’ll react tomorrow if you remember any of this.”

Van chuckled. “I doubt I’ll remember anything. But who knows? Maybe I’ll surprise you.”

\*\*\*

It was 4 p.m. when Van finished his last class and headed to the faculty to talk to Mr. Spotsman. He was invited before by Mr. Spotsman to join sports and school clubs. Finally, he set his mind on a specific track where he had a natural talent and was comfortable with it.

“Hey, Van, how can I help you today?” Mr. Spotsman asked as Van entered his office.

“I knew I had been avoiding deciding on the presented options, but now I know what I want,” Van replied, taking a seat.

“What is it?” Mr. Spotsman asked, leaning forward in his chair.

“I want to be a sprinter,” Van said confidently.

Mr. Spotsman frowned slightly, “I see. I have you down for basketball, but if that’s what you want, we can certainly give it a try. Come here to school tomorrow, and we’ll have a trial.”

“Thanks, Mr. Spotsman,” Van said, feeling relieved that he had finally made a decision.

As Van left the office, he saw the sun starting to set, casting a golden glow over the campus. He couldn’t wait to start training and see where this new path would take him.

The next day, Van arrived at the track early, eager to prove himself. Mr. Spotsman greeted him and took him through some warm-up exercises before getting him to run a short distance.

“How did that feel?” Mr. Spotsman asked as Van caught his breath.

“Great. I feel like I could go even faster,” Van replied, feeling exhilarated.

Mr. Spotsman nodded, “I think you could be a real asset to our team. We have a regional competition coming up, and I think you have the potential to help us win.”

Van felt a surge of pride at the thought of representing his school in a competition. As he walked outside, Van saw his Aunt Dally waiting for him outside the faculty building.

“Van, how did it go?” she asked, smiling.

“Really well. Mr. Spotsman thinks I have potential,” Van replied, feeling pleased with himself.

“I knew you could do it,” Dally said, giving him a hug.

Van smiled, feeling grateful for his aunt’s support.

Later that evening, Dally went to see Mr. Spotsman to thank him for encouraging Van to join the sports track.

“I appreciate what you’ve done for Van,” Dally said, smiling warmly.

“It was my pleasure. I think he has real talent,” Mr. Spotsman replied, feeling pleased that he was able to make a difference.

As Dally left, Mr. Spotsman couldn’t help but feel a sense of satisfaction. Helping young people find their way in life was what made his job so rewarding.

“Well, what can I say? I’m great with kids,” Waldon boasted.

Dally replied, “At first, I didn’t think he would make any progress, but after hearing that he willingly joined. I’m happy to see he’s taking a step towards becoming much better. I’m very thankful that you gave him a thought. Thank you for being such a good friend, Waldon.”

“Anything for you, Dally.”

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Van finally made it to the school gate. He staggered as he pushed his way through the crowd and turned around. Across the street, he saw Kate leaning her back against the wall in the side lane. She waved her hand, beckoning him to come.

“I want to talk about what happened last night. I know you have a lot of questions.”

“Yeah, about that. Your friends, they’re not going to show up at your house, would they?”

“No, no. They have some business to take care of.”

“Alright. You lead the way,” Van said.

They stopped in front of her house. Van observed it for a little while. Their house was simple, yet beautiful. The outside was made of a white picket fence, and primroses were planted in the garden.

“Wow. Your house is so pretty,” Van complimented.

“You think?” Kate asked.

“Yes. It feels like home—homey,” Van replied.

She chuckled. “Come on in.”

As they entered, Kate asked Van to remove his shoes inside the house. He almost forgot that he was a visitor and there were certain house rules that must be followed.

The living room was cozy and inviting with warm beige walls and plush, deep-brown carpeting. A large, comfortable L-shaped couch dominated the space, facing a wall-mounted TV.

Two leather armchairs with matching ottomans sat in the corners, with a wooden coffee table between them. The room was filled with soft lighting from the numerous table lamps placed strategically around the room.

A large bay window covered in white, gauzy curtains let in a generous amount of natural light and provided a beautiful view of the garden outside.

The walls were decorated with tasteful art pieces and family photos in matching frames, giving the room a personal touch. A bookshelf stood against one wall, packed full of books of every genre and size.

The air was scented with the sweet aroma of vanilla candles burning on the mantle above the fireplace, which was currently unlit. Overall, the living room exuded an atmosphere of comfort, relaxation, and hominess. “Coffee or juice?” she asked.

“Water will do fine,” Van replied.

Kate left for a brief moment and then came back with a glass of water.

“About this unexpected meeting, what’s this all about?”

“You said that you don’t know what you are, but we both know you’re also supernatural, which we don’t know yet. So, maybe we can do some digging if we look at your past.”

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Van said.

Kate quickly took his hand and attached it to the orb. “Don’t worry, this will be quick.”

Suddenly, their vision changed. Van’s memories flooded back as he shared them with Kate. His memories took him back to the moment when his parents died. He immediately pulled his hand off the orb. Van stared blankly.

There were no words that expressed how Van felt. She could see the way he looked at her with judging and strict eyes. She knew she was on his bad side now. Her heart pounded hard as if it were going to explode.

Van’s eyes were under the spell of a void as he took off without saying a word. She should have seen it. Her only goal was to help him understand who he was. She scowled for a moment before coming after him. As he was about to close the door, Kate held his hand.

“Look, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“I know you want to help, but please respect the boundary line. I thought being with you would make me feel better, not alone. Turns out it was another disappointment.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to overstep. I just wanted to be there for you,” she replied, looking apologetic.

He let out a sigh, “I know, I appreciate it. It’s just been a tough day.”

“Is there anything I can do?” she asked, reaching out to touch his hand.

He pulled his hand back, “No, it’s fine. I just need some space right now,” he said to her.

She nodded, “Okay, I understand. Just know that I’m here for you whenever you’re ready to talk.”

Van made his way straight to his room, ignoring his brother who was watching basketball on television. Timothy knew something was up. Knowing Van’s uncanny mood, he waited for a minute before knocking on Van’s door.

“You can’t come in,” Van’s voice was steely, but Timothy already opened the door, cutting off the protest of the young man. Van was in bed in a fetal position with his back against the wall. The moment he saw his brother get inside, he turned his back on Timothy.

“Did something happen again?” Timothy asked, concerned.

“Nothing,” Van coldly replied.

“C’mon, you can always tell me everything. Except for anything related to puberty. That’s beyond me,” Timothy joked, trying to lighten the mood.

Van let out a small laugh, “No, it’s nothing like that. We just had a fight, but not like a big fight.”

“Oh, you and her?” Timothy asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah, I know she’s just trying to help me, but she got on my bad side,” Van explained.

“Well, if you think she’s no good for you, then maybe you should leave her. But let’s be honest, no one is perfect. If there is, name one,” Timothy replied, trying to give some brotherly advice.

“Truthfully, it was just an honest mistake. I don’t know why I’m being so overdramatic,” Van admitted.

“Why don’t you give her another chance?” Timothy suggested. “I mean, she didn’t rat you out when you destroyed my Millennium Falcon. So, why couldn’t you give her a chance too?”

Van thought about it for a moment before nodding, “You’re right. I’ll talk to her.”

As Van quickly got up from his bed, his mood seemed to lighten up, at least for now. He looked down the staircase outside, and visual details of the stairs with some carpet on it and family pictures on the wall were visible.

“Before I go, do I look like a nerd or a doofus in this outfit?” Van asked, showing off his black and white polo shirt tucked into his pants.

Timothy’s eyes narrowed as he examined his brother’s outfit, “Both. You are definitely both.”

Van rolled his eyes, “I’m heading out.”

Timothy’s face turned sour when he saw how their talk led to Van’s decision, “You can do it tomorrow, you know.”

“This is an emergency. I don’t even know if she will talk to me after the awkward things she’s done,” Van replied.

“You can’t skip dinner. I finally figured out how to make one of those ridiculous marinated burgers,” Timothy’s voice grew irritated.

“Really, well, just put it in the fridge,” Van said.

“You can’t enjoy delicate food that has been frozen,” Timothy argued.

Before he could do anything to stop Van, he already made his way outside the window. As Van jumped off the window sill, the visual of their front yard and the busy street with a few people walking on the sidewalk were noticeable.

Timothy shouted after him, “You’re forgetting one thing. We don’t have a microwave!”

Timothy retired to the kitchen and put his ramblings into cooking.

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10 o’clock was already considered late for a girl like her. Although she might get detained for not following the curfew. Luckily, she knew the sheriff. She granted her an exception. Sheriff Bella always looked out for her at night. She kept checking if any pervert was lurking around the corner and preying on innocent girls. She was glad about the concern, even though she might do more harm to anybody.

Kate made it clear to herself that she would never talk about Van’s past. One mistake was enough.

Her colleague made sure that everything in the kitchen was in order. While Kate prepped the tables before going to the dressing room. She picked up the two coffees wrapped in the package before leaving the café.

The sky was clear but the breeze was not gone. She shuddered as the gentle wind blew over her. If she expected that it would come to this, she might have brought her sweater. She won’t have to endure the biting coldness of the evening. Yet, she found this confounding, Kate never felt so much coldness before, not physically, but she hasn’t felt elated by the raw emotions, because all this time, all she felt was the seeming burst of feeling. It was good that there was a part of her humanity left.

She endured the cold and embraced herself as she walked out of the alley. Kate lifted her palm, conjuring flame, and leaned it closer to feel the warmth. Her hair fluttered and her eyes trembled as the chilly wind blasted over her face. At that moment, she glimpsed at his eyes. The last person she was expecting to meet tonight, after the mistake she had made to him.

Kate released the fire magic.

Shuddering over the biting cold wind, Kate sneezed. Van noticed, then took his jacket off and coated it on Kate. She stared at him.

“I was wondering if we can talk.” Van’s voice was shushed, unclear to hear, but she was able to form the words with the movement of his mouth.

The awkwardness hasn’t gone away yet, but he was willing to open up.

“Yeah, yeah, sure.”

“I’ve brought some doughnuts in case you’re hungry.”

“I actually have a regimen to follow. So, it’s a no.”

“Oh, sorry.”

*Bad move Kate.*

She realized she’d said the wrong words yet again. Her wide blue eyes lifted to see his semi-disappointed face. His confidence that he’d mastered waned and he couldn’t seem to put a sense of how he would be able to react to her.

Unable to come up, Van was about to put it away when Kate held his hand out of reflex. She stole the package of doughnuts away from his hands. The sudden approach startled Van.

“But a grumpy tummy must not be left ignored.” She beamed. “I’ve been starving this whole night. I had to work a five hour shift. And honestly, I’ve been craving sweets nowadays.” She then asked. “Well, how about we go over to the park? There’s a bench over there where we can share these doughnuts. Oh, and look, I have coffee here. Isn’t that a nice pair?”

Seeing how she reacted, all those worries dissolved in his mind.

“Yes, that’s nice. How convenient.”

Van’s pace decelerated to just keep up with Kate’s pace of walking, savoring the moment of the silent night as the long road stretched before them. The truth was, Van was tired. He ran across the road opposite Kate’s café where she was working and had to rest, eat, and wait for her shift to end. He had to endure all that to ask her out.

*Maybe it’s a bad decision to go out early.*

He spent most of the rest of the hours playing video games in a net shop. The last hour before the end of her shift, he mastered his courage, even though he was not the one who was wronged.

They sat on the bench with the doughnuts and coffee in between them. The noise of crickets filled the silence between them as they drank the coffee. *Kate needs to say something.* It took her four doughnuts to master the courage to begin.

“Look, about earlier, I’m very sorry if I am so insistent. I didn’t even give any thought about what you feel.”

“Don’t sweat. I get it. We all make mistakes sometimes.”

“So, you forgive me?”

“Yes. We paid our debts now.”

“Honestly, I’ve screwed up my entire life also. My parents were killed during a wildfire five years ago.”

“That’s gruesome.”

“So, I spent nearly the entire five years numbing my feelings and have to live in distrust. Maybe, that part of me is also the reason why I am so determined to know about you and had to use that object to confirm. But I learned my lesson.”

“I can see that. It seems that we have something in common.”

“I hope that’s not sensual.”

He chuckled. “No, no.”

“What is it?”

“We’re chaotically proportional.”

“Is that so?” Kate lifted her eyes.

“Yeah, I mean. We have a screwed-up childhood. We don’t have many friends. And we have a thing.”

“Speak for yourself, I have friends.”

“Ok, does *one* include as many? And I don’t think those supposed to be associates of yours are your friends.”

“All right, I get your point.”

“You’re also forgetting me. I can also be your friend.”

“Am I being friend zone here?”

“I assure you; you are not.” She chuckled.

Her creamy skin reminded him of the cumulus clouds. Although she never wears make-up, the blush on her cheeks flushed. Her eyes were like the sky when she smiled and bluer than the ocean whenever the sunlight touched her.

Gazing at her fixed smile, he looked down, and a realization snapped. She resembled the girl he saw the first morning he woke up in the apartment he lived in. It seems that fate was kind to him, another reason why he must treasure his new profound relationship.

She was glad that it worked out in the end, even though she didn’t do anything to make up for him. She glanced at him. He tried his best to hide the smile on his face.

He kept telling himself to stop, but it wasn’t as if a spirit took his reasoning.

“So,” Kate broke off the silence, “it is past 11, I think we should go.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll walk you home.”

They walked together back to her home. They didn’t rush to get home but enjoyed the moment in silence as they held each other’s hands.

They made it home. Kate held his hands, making sure that he wouldn’t turn his back on her.

“Thank you, for giving me a chance.” She softly said, “I didn’t even do anything to make it up for what I’ve done to you. I promise I will trust you. I won’t use magic just to make sure you’re not a monster.”

“Don’t sweat it. I said that we’re fine now. This is also my way of making it up to you.” Van whispered, “I stole a peek, remember?”

“Yeah, I kinda do.”

“Good night.”

“Good night, be safe.”

Kate kept her gaze on him as he carried on.

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Over the past 400+ years, he has seen every conflict that this family has faced. Nothing was new to him. The family drama and the conflict they’d face. He witnessed it all. He experienced the darkest times and the good times they spent with each other, and yet, he didn’t feel part of it. Despite being supposed to be dead, he had to protect his family generation after generation against the malevolent group of people haunting them to guard the secrets his family needed to keep.

But five years ago, he made a decision that would save his family that he longed to protect from the people who wanted their secrets. It was something that he will not allow to slip through *their* hands. That was why he chose to stay and allow the rest of the family to escape.

Gilt inspected the cellar, looking for his favorite wine, and had to run back and forth to find it. He ran to the library before plucking out the wine cork with his bare finger. The bubbles sprayed and he didn’t waste any of it as he reluctantly drank it straight into his mouth.

“You seem to be troubled.” A familiar voice rang out.

Gilt put the wine at once and heard the string loosen and the arrow left the crossbow, back to its quiver.

“I had an epiphany.” Gilt whispered, he looked over his shoulder as he continued to drink his wine. “And it bothers me.”

Rick Mavenhart, his supposed nephew in the papers, put down his crossbow and hung it. A relieving sigh was expelled and left his lungs. He was aware of what was happening in the city. There have been reports of missing students and killings that defy explanations by the police. It appeared that he was ready to fight any monster that enters this mansion.

Rick has sleek black hair and the signature fair skin that a Mavenhart possessed with his masculine cheekbones. His broody dark eyes hint at trouble, but they’re soft, most of the time. His uncanny face was enough to be wary of. He may have an angelic face, but there’s a hint of a devil within his eyes.

He straightened his posture as he sat and picked up a glass. He stole the wine bottle that Gilt held.

“Remind me again why have I not used my mind-compulsion on you?” Gilt asked.

Rick poured his glass of wine. “Because you hate being alone and I need help on keeping the secrets within this mansion.”

“You are right. I hate being alone, but that’s not the reason why you’re so pesky to stay here. Let’s get real here, there’s nothing really you can do if something knocks on the door and try to take the treasure that our family that’s hidden within the chambers of this house. You’re just a human, Rick. You have limitations.”

“Don’t underestimate my capabilities. You remember I’ve killed a vampire once.”

He couldn’t help but throw a grin over his shoulder. “I know and I’ve been telling you since, that’s nothing but luck.”

“I’ve been training.” There was a hint of pride in his voice.

“Uh-huh. Sounds stupid.”

“Or smart.” Rick said it as though it was something that was the biggest accomplishment he had.

Gilt doesn't blame him though. There was nothing he could do to dissuade him from furthering his training given that it was not the first time a vampire tried to murder him. He wished there was something he could do to make things easy. At least, discourage Rick to focus on his studies like any others.

“It is stupid,” Gilt shot back. “You weren’t supposed to do those things yet. In fact, you’re not supposed to act like that.” Gilt continued. “Kid, you’re young. There’s a life waiting for you. Don’t waste it.”

“I am not.”

“You should’ve gone with them.” Gilt’s voice was rough. The wine hit hard on his throat.

“But – But they didn’t treat me like one.”

He hated to admit it, but Rick was right on that one. The reason behind his unfortunate existence was that his parents died early. He only had a nanny who looked after him and guided him to the man he was now. But the preceding event put him into a grave decision. He lost his mother during the Purge and the family didn’t even show any kind of affection over her death.

“So, this is your life plan, eh? Make sure that no one will ever get their hands laid on the treasure this family has hidden for hundreds of years.”

“Or more like a curse, and I doubt that they will come over here anytime soon. Until then.”

“Until then, we must enjoy the time that we had.”

They enjoy each other’s company even though it’s seldom. Gilt was the only one who could bear his sight, but they rarely talked.

“Speaking of which.” Rick broke off the silence. “You seem to be busy nowadays.”

“I’ve been dealing with the monster attacks. You know, the one who’s been munching with kids, like you.”

“Does that involve a witch?”

“Where’d you hear that?”

Gilt raised his brow. Supposedly, the news stated that the witches in this town were down to none – all of them were annihilated during the Purge. Of course, Kate’s and her sister’s abilities have remained secret. He had told them about this and made it his responsibility to keep them in check. He can’t afford another death on his hands.

“A hunch.”

“And do you know who that witch might be?”

“No.”

“Good.”

“Don’t worry, I have no intention of getting mixed up in your quarrels either. Just make sure that no one will find out about us.”

Rick’s face was struck. His uptight approach brings an endearing agony to Gilt. Rick has a terrible habit of quickly changing his mood whenever something serious comes up. Gilt may have gotten used to it, but sometimes it can’t help that he might get into his skin.

“You’re just a teenager kid. Loose up.”

“Ah-huh.”

“I’m serious. You’ve been acting like a nagging old man ever since. Don’t you think that you’re missing something?”

“Not really.” He said while observing the wine and drinking it.

“C’mon, I’m pretty sure you have someone that you’re eyeing. Mavenhart’s genes are strong in you. I’m sure you’ll get one.”

“And then what?”

“You would lay on them. You’re a high school student, how come no one thought about you?”

“Because I’m not a perv.”

“When I was your age, I hit all the girls as I saw fit, ‘didn’t even spare the senior girls.”

Rick glanced at him with disgust on his face. The fact that he had gone to school despite his age is what made him detestable.

“You’re disgusting.”

“I know,” he said without a shadow of shame.

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A shadow fell over the crypt as the hooded man entered and closed it. In his hands, he held the torch that showed him the way through the darkness. He made his way as he cleared away the cobwebs on the path.

He walked inattentively to the right and saw the room illuminated by white light. Cautiously, he opened the door and saw the fellow friars speaking in a drastic tone. The other three hooded figures were chatting about the failures. They kept pointing at each other as if they had done nothing wrong.

They sat crisscrossed at a round table. One of them slammed his hands on the table and yelled at them. He continued to watch them as he sat down at the empty table.

The light emitted by the crystalline sputtered as the witches’ presence grew stronger and they intimidated each other.

“Children, please, let us stop bantering. Gibbering nonsense wouldn’t bear a single fruit. Don’t rile up your mana or else this crypt would break down over our head.” Jay’s voice faintly hinted at annoyance, but he did not let his voice wavered and delivered a clarity amidst the soft breeze passing above the glassed rooftop. His porcelain skin, radiating a subtle luminescence. The eyes of a deductive, cold quiet man wearily suspended his gaze down the table, his thoughts navigating the right words. His cold demeanor reminded them of the reasons why he was in that position, except for one.

One of his comrades barked at him. “And you! Where could you have been?! While the monster was on the loose, where were you?!”

“I was busy.” The gentleman said.

“Busy or are you getting comfortable in your new life?!”

“Enrick.” His voice was insistent as he spoke the name. “I have not yet forgotten our cause. We came here to make sure that our power in this city will remain and prepare for the incoming conflict.”

“Then why aren’t you doing something?!”

“I am doing something.” His face looked stricken as he met his gaze. “Must I remind you that we have to fit in this city for us not to become suspicious or does the steak have not melted on your stomach and gravely stuck on your head?”

“You, ingrate!”

His mana began to surge and riled up, but the man at whom intended by the coercion remained unfettered by his threatening expression. He stared at him with a blank expression.

“I suggest you should carefully think about what you should do next. You wouldn’t like the outcome of it.”

His cold gaze sent a shiver down Enrick’s spine. The mana calmed down and the ground stopped shaking. He turned his attention to the floor, intensified. The gentleman’s sullen mood quickly changed. He decided to respond to his comrades’ appeal.

“Very well. What seems to be the problem?” Jay asked.

“While you were away, the monster that you put on the leash, escaped.” The feminine voice echoed throughout the crypt.

“When did this happen?”

“Last month. The monster was busy preying on young kids and the souls of the dead.”

He covered his face with his palm and collected his thoughts before expelling the air.

“Why am I hearing this now?” he asked. “You should have called me the moment this happened.”

The young man next to him said, “Because we have no means of contact.”

“We’re in the 21st century. We lived in an era where a screen can contact people directly. Have you not heard of Messenger?”

“Spare us with the mockery, Jay.” She spoke. “Not all of us are quick learners. Besides, there is a more pressing business that we’ve attended.”

“Like what, Suzy?” Enrick asked.

The chestnut-haired Suzy Megan defiantly gaze at him. Her strict red eyes revealed resilience. She announced, feigning ignorance to his uncanny attitude. “We’re making sure that the Satrican is working properly because the Gap coincidentally has been acting odd these past few months. Mana was oozing out from it and we’re using our power to close it. We had to check it every day just to make sure that it’s not going to cause any kind of aberration.”

Jay understood the reason. The Satrican was a mystical item that can be used to seal and unseal any type of object, including people, objects, or a gateway. Without it, the Gap’s activities wouldn’t be stable and there was a great chance that the monsters would crawl their way out. The usage of the artifact came with a great price with such prestige.

“I understand your reason. I admit the Satrican might be approaching the end of its term – probably this year. Hence, I also took a precaution about this and I brought another Satrican to replace the old one.”

A magenta sphere materialized from his palm and placed it on the table.

“Please, see to it that the problem will be taken care of.”

“You heard the man. It would be better if you’d do it as soon as possible.” Enrick said.

“And what about you Enrick?” Suzy asked. “You seem to be seasoned.”

Enrick gave her a dirty look.

“Don’t spit such blasphemy, Suzy. Our friend here is sensitive when it comes to his age.” Jay said.

“One day, your paltry flesh will spread across the crypt if you don’t shut your smart mouth, Suzy.”

“Oops.” She made a spooked face.

Enrick grunted. “I’ve been eyeing the newly formed council.”

“And what about them? Do they pose a threat?”

“No. I don’t think they will ever harm us.”

“Good. Then I suggest you keep an eye on them.”

“But that’s not all.”

The three of them made grave faces.

“What is it?”

“The Demonic Effigy has taken damage and it seems that the cause of it was from a fight.”

“Oh?” He fell into his thoughts.

“I know. There shouldn’t be anyone capable of facing it, ‘because everyone that belongs in the previous council is dead. We killed all of them during the Purge.”

“We may have killed all of them.” Jay intercepted and added. “But still susceptible to outside interference.”

“What are you implying? Witches from other cities are scared to come here.”

“But not to a certain kind.” Jay rose. His eyes met their questioning face. “I believe there’s a Hunter in the city.”

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Two weeks passed and Van was able to prove himself and join the track field. Though the instructor gave him a warm welcome the others are awfully distant. He felt no contempt either. There were five members, but there are only three of them who are training so far. The others were seniors that are going to graduate next year. They were given such an exemption to focus on their academics.

The first time Van entered the field he was surprised that Raymond was part of it. He was a 1st year senior high, in other words, he was their senior. The other one was brooding. You may say that his brooding gaze was a plus point to his fair skin and his well-endowed face. His name was Rick Mavenhart.

Rick was also popular in the school, mostly among the girls, but even so, he doesn’t take a liking to women. *Perhaps he’s bi?* Van thought. Looks can be deceiving sometimes, but in fairness, he was not just all that good-looking but he also excelled in academics.

It was early in the morning when Van woke up. The sun has not risen yet. He immediately went to the bathroom and showered. The splash had woken up Timothy. Timothy went out of his room after he heard the footsteps.

“Dude, what’s the matter with you? It’s 4:30 in the morning.”

Van stammered, “Uhm, I have training.”

“Early in the morning? For real?”

“Didn’t I tell you that I joined the sports track?”

“You just told me now,” Timothy grunted and slumped back. “When did this happen?”

“I was invited by mister Spotsman two weeks ago.”

“Ah-huh. Okay. Fine, but you gotta make your own breakfast.” Timothy fell back on his bed.

Van grunted as he went to the kitchen and made his sandwich, before going out and heading to school.

Van wore jogging pants and a white shirt. There, he met Rick who was also ready. The strained face was evident that he had done some exercise in preparations. The toll had him resting.

“I don’t think we have formally met.” Van initiated. “My name is Van.”

“Rick.” He blandly greeted him.

There weren't necessary items he brought, so he started with minor stretches.

“What time did you come here?” Van asked.

“Why do you care?”

“It’s not like I want to stick my nose in, but I’m just curious. You always seem to be always working up, even if it’s too early in the morning.”

“Is there something wrong with it?”

“No. Absolutely no.”

“Aside from school nothing induces my mind to be restless, so yeah, I’m perfectly healthy.”

“Oh, cool.” Van said.

“What about you? You don’t seem to be a morning guy.”

“Kind of.” Van shrugged his shoulders. “These days I have been busy with something else.”

“No wonder you missed some of our routines. I guess it’s related to school projects, isn’t it? You’re in your 4th year now, so the next few days will be tough.”

“Yes, actually it is. I assure you it’s nothing related to dating a girl or a woman.”

Rick shook his head in confusion. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Nothing. As you said, the school is bitchin’.”

Raymond burst through the door. Sweats trickled down to his chin. His nervous face was instilled along his pale lips.

“Hey, guys. I’m sorry, I’m late.” Raymond said.

“Where have you been and what happened to you?” Van asked.

“I was chased by a stray dog.” Raymond huffed. He worked through his locker and started to sort his things before grabbing his clothes and went on to change.

“That’s rough. Does this city have an animal shelter?” Van looked at his senior.

“The shelter here was lacking staff, so sweeping all animals to the shelter is nearly impossible in one year,” Rick explained.

“How can the owners have left them without thinking of any consideration?”

“I would like to think that they’re selfish and ingrate people.”

“May I ask, why did you run? You’re like 5’7 in height. You can just kick it out of the way.” Rick said.

“That is so cruel dude,” Van was stunned and commented on Rick’s statement.

“What’s cruel is getting a bite of something that was dumped by irresponsible owners and having to pay fifty dollars to rinse off the bite.”

When they were about to come out, the instructor walked into the room and whistled out loud.

“What the hell are you slacking off?! Get y’all asses on the field, now!”

“Yes sir!” They said in sync.

And so, they began to run on the track field.

Before going to class after showering, Van noticed that Raymond’s pale lips had not gone yet. He observed him and it gave Raymond a creepy feeling and noticed him.

“Dude,” Raymond backed off. “Just for you to know, I’m not into guys. I’m straight.”

“No, no. That’s not what I’m doing.” Van stammered back to reality. “Have you seen yourself? Your lips are so pale.”

“What?”

Raymond looked at his reflection in the mirror in the hallway.

“Maybe he just needs water,” Jane said. She appeared out of nowhere and startled Van.

“You guys ran like the entire field, you know.” She added.

“Maybe,” Van added.

“You should go and drink a lot of water. You might pass out if you keep yourself dehydrated.” Jane said.

Raymond immediately went outside to buy water at the vending machine.

Van glanced at Jane. She wore a red sleeveless top and cheer briefs.

“Uhm, you’re part of the cheerleader squad?”

“Yes, we will have practice, and then after that, there will be a try-out for the juniors.”

After performing several moves, Jane had to stop and breathed in, then stretched her arms and legs.

“Ok, cool.”

Van turned his back to go to class but Jane held his arm.

“Wait. Actually, uhm.” There was a brief pause but she still queried. “You and Rick, are you guys close?”

“No, I don’t think so. We haven’t talked that much. Why?”

“Nothing.”

Jane immediately took off and turned the other way.

*That’s weird.* He thought.

After that, nothing extraordinary happened that day. Or so he thought.

Van did not see Raymond until early in the morning. It’s nothing he should worry about, but he couldn’t help being curious about what reason he was not replying to his text. Timothy quickly stole the juice Van had when he was distracted by sunlight. Van glanced at the wall clock and saw that he still has 5 minutes before his next class begins.

“Where’s Raymond?” Van asked Timothy.

“He said that he has urgent things to do today. Family’s business. Anyway, I did not meddle in their mess, so, I keep my nose where it’s supposed to be.”

“Ok.”

Timothy knew that there was something more Van to say. He was just waiting for him to cast the words right out of his mouth.

“So, tonight. I think I’m gonna be late.”

“You have practice.”

“Not actually. With Kate.”

“Oh. Ok. You’ve been going a lot these days. Where have you been taking her? I hope it’s not somewhere shabby. I would be embarrassed as your brother.”

“Uh, no. We often hang out in the mall.”

“Mall? What are you, eight?”

“She said that it’s fine.”

“Oh, boy. When a girl says she was fine, she is not fine. That’s the first rule of having a girl. Next, do something that would be exhilarating.”

“Ok. Any recommendations?”

“I don’t know. Go figure it out yourself. Talk about what she likes and formulate your plan.”

“All right.”

Van went on to his next class.

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It has been a while since he went to school. The last time he went was during the 1950s when he was getting a Ph.D. in medicine. Wild and cocky, that was what other people describe Gilt, but it was all in the past and now he was curious about the current trends.

He wore a dark jacket and set his shade to his eyes. He equipped his helmet before kicking off the engine and firing on. In the middle of his journey, he felt that he forgot someone, but he shook off his thoughts and set his mind on the road.

She heard a squeal from a girl who was running inside the campus to her friends. She belongs to those girls who love to gossip. She noticed that the girls inside the room clumped to the window. They gawked outside as if there was a celebrity who came into this dreary town full of uncanny weird things.

It was not something common, but she did not care. She felt that it was different, there was a familiar scent and presence. She glanced back across the hallway and saw Jane talking to someone. Then Jane looked outside, she resisted the urge to beam but she smiled anyway.

Kate was observing them and was compelled by her curiosity to jostle her way to the crowd. When she approached, Kate was the only one that greeted her.

“You’re too late. He already left and please don’t hit on him. You already have Van. Let me have one too.” Jane said. She anticipated the gravity of the precipice of her interest. “Although, I think he’s onto me.”

“Who’s that guy?”

“I don’t know, but I can tell that he’s a transferee.”

“How come?”

“He asked me where the administration office is, that’s what it is.”

“Well, did you get his name?”

“Nope, but one of these days, he’ll be mine.”

Kate rolled her eyes. “Whatever you say. Just be careful, don’t slip on something you can’t handle.”

Kate left the daydreaming Jane.

He was on his way to the admission office but he stopped because he was lost, again. He stopped a girl who was around Kate’s age.

“Excuse me?” He asked.

The girl was shorter than him, around 5’4, but then again, they all are. His deep dark eyes met her deep and wildly luminous dark eyes. He felt a hint of tiredness in her exasperating breath, but even so, her pristine smile illuminated. He let go of her hands and began to speak in a civilized and humble manner.

“I’m sorry. I’m kinda lost. I’m new here, by the way, I came from… no. I’m sorry, what I want to ask is where the administration office is?”

“Go straight and you’ll see the sign of the office when you turn right at the second block.” She said,

“Thanks.”

Gilt went in the direction she said and saw the administration office next to the principal office. He peeked and saw two people talking inside. The necessary files were already in his hands and the only thing he had to do was to register himself as a student. Like a humble child, he knocked twice and waited for a response.

“Come in.” A voice said from inside.

Gilt went on and saw two unfamiliar faces who seemed to be exhausted from removing the boxful of files to the stockroom.

“Hey, since you’re here, would you kinda help us move these?”

“Uhm, absolutely sir.”

With ease, Gilt lifted the box and quickly got the job done.

“This is beyond my pay grade. I’m too old for this. Thanks, by the way.”

“By all means sir.”

“You can go now.”

“Wait. I want to register as a student here. I know that it’s too late, but there’s trouble at my home before transferring here, so…”

“Alright. Mister Spotsman will guide you throughout the process.”

Mister Spotsman beckoned him closer. “Sit down.”

Gilt sat down and handed out the files to Spotsman. Enrick left them out and went to the principal’s office. Gilt stood and stared into his eyes. Spotsman didn’t even blink once and nodded to every word he said.

“You got that?”

“Yes. Tomorrow, you will be officially a student here at Maryvale Pendleton University. Come here tomorrow so you can get your class schedule.”

Before he could come out of the room, principal Enrick burst inside and went to the table next to Spotsman, and pulled the drawer. Enrick wore a necklace that was familiar to him. A ring that’s holding the shape of a half-dark and red spade in the middle of a star.

“Sorry, if I startled you.”

Gilt immediately took his sight off the necklace. He smiled.

“No worries.”

Gilt left and went home.

\*\*\*

Van was courteous enough to spend the rest of his time at Kate’s workplace and did his assignment while waiting for her shift to end. He ordered some food to make sure that he wouldn’t kick out. Kind enough, they didn’t bother him even though he hadn’t chosen anything on the menu for an hour.

His concentration was put to a halt when a plate of caramel cake slid to his table. Kate sat down in front of him. Her dreamy eyes laid on him. Van took the spoon and deliberately ate it with grace.

“You like it?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’m going to pick a few things. You can wait outside and oh, you can leave that over the counter.”

Van nodded. He waited outside as soon as he saw the lights go dark. The other employee had locked the door.

Kate clutched her arms to his and began to stroll on the sidewalk.

“So, what’s it gonna be tonight?” Kate asked. “Oh, you want to check out the karaoke bar that recently opened?”

“No.” His face became serious and calm.

“Wait.” She halted him and sighed. “Are you gonna pull a big stunt to surprise me? Because if that’s the case I’m out.”

“Wait, what?”

“Not permanently, but you get what I mean. You see Van, I don’t want to pressure you, because I understand we’re too young for us to go beyond our limits and it might end up inconvenient for us. I assure you that everything we’ve done is fine. You don’t need to go to such lengths to impress me.”

Van let out a relieved sigh. “Thanks, by the way. I honestly don’t think I can afford to go to the carnival.”

“How about we go to the karaoke bar and have some fun?”

“That would be the least bad idea.”

They came past a local bar and turned right. Van’s instinct suddenly went off the mark and glanced around the corner. His senses heightened. His mind fell into a deep abyss and tapped into an unknown place in his head.

“What is it?” Kate asked.

Van ignored her and sprinted across the road and went inside the alleyway. Kate was profoundly disturbed at his sudden change of behavior and followed him.

“Why does it always have to be an alleyway?” She said out of annoyance.

He turned right and came out to an empty street. From above he saw a ghastly figure chasing a guy. Kate caught up to him.

“What is it?”

She followed his glance and saw the ghastly figure begin to materialize its hand and reach the estranged man.

“Polaris defecto!”

Her magic began to deform the enemy’s physique and was pulled back by an unknown force. It saw the two of them and decided to do them harm. A piece of its form detached and went straight to Van.

Kate stepped forward. “Inquesto de forma mia pulso.”

The enemy’s attack was deflected by a wall of energy and her attack managed to catch the enemy, pushing it back. Van leaped to the enemy and got a hold of it before it could go. His right hand pierced through the smoke. He grabbed out a small pearl and crushed it with his bare hands.

Kate was astonished at what Van did. The enemy was supposed to be untouchable. It was in a state of gas that would be considered lethal to get close to it. Yet, he killed it without breaking a sweat.

Van looked back at her. “What is happening to me, Kate?”

She stared down. She was forced to form the words.

“I don’t know.”

## Chapter 3

Van drank the offered glass of water since he felt dizzy from his recent transition, but at least he was able to keep his consciousness this time.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” Kate asked as she went back from the kitchen. She sat at the sofa opposite of Van.

“Tipsy, but I’ll do fine,” Van said. “In fairness this time I didn’t end up in the garbage. What about that guy? Is he fine?”

“Yes, and Gilt already made him forget what happened that night.”

“That’s the least you should worry about.”

Gilt made himself feel at home. He grabbed a glass and poured it with wine.

“That’s vintage,” Kate said. Almost her voice implied him to refrain from making himself feel at home any further.

“And you’re a teenager.” Gilt jested. “Care to explain why you have beverages hidden in your flat?”

“For a vampire, you’re pretty good at sucking people.” Van returned.

Gilt lifted his brow. Kate was effaced by the awkwardness. And Van realized his mistake, then closed his eyes in dismay at his words.

“Bad pun.” Van apologized. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Gilt replied with no detest in his voice. He drank the wine bit at first, stirred, and then finished it in one gulp. “I’m glad that there’s someone here who knows how to throw a pun, unlike this uptight witch and the other weirdo witch who can’t even set his mind straight.”

“What are you doing here exactly? I thought you were going to leave the town?” Kate asked, raising an eyebrow. And her hands on her hips.

“I changed my mind. You do know I have a great-great grandnephew living here, right? I thought I should look after him and enroll myself in that school. Otherwise, he would become a munchkin for the other monsters that are taking a liking to live as residents here.”

“You have a relative here?” Van asked, carefully turning his head around.

“Yeah,” Gilt responded. “Tall, good-looking as me. You may hear of him…”

“Enough,” Kate interjected. “Tell us what you are doing here.”

Gilt drank. “I want to inform you that Principal Enrick is one of a fishy guy.”

“Do you think I will believe you with no evidence?”

“Nope. That is why I want you to look at him.”

“I don’t think so. And why do you think he’s a suspect?”

“Because I saw a familiar relic, he held it right in front of me this afternoon.”

Kate’s eyes squinted before claiming back a peck of hatred that’s been slumbering for many years. Ever since the accident, she was eager to catch the perpetrators, but there was no luck. Even so, it would be foolish to tackle them head-on without knowing their identities.

“Alright then, let’s see if your hunch is right.”

“Uhm.” Van cut in. “Am I part of this?”

“Part of what?” Gilt asked.

“The Team.”

Kate’s stiffened expression turned soft and she held Van’s hand gently.

“No,” She said softly. “I can’t let you be part of a problem that you have nothing to do in the first place.” She sighed. “I know you are something, but until we are sure what you can exactly do, I need you to stay put and keep yourself safe. Do you understand?”

“Well, I know that.”

“Then why did you say that?”

“I guess I want to look cool.” Van smiled at her and scratched his head and her worried face lightened.

“You know you don’t have to do that. I like the way –”

“Urgh.” Gilt interrupted with a disgusted expression. “You do know that you lovebirds are cringy, right? Get a room.”

\*\*\*

It happened again. The nightmare sprung and plucked out its roots in her mind and seized her to gain control. She has been dreaming this lately and remains a mystery as to why her dreams keep drawing her back to the moment when her parents died. The woods, a cabin, and the wildfire, those images keep rolling back and forth. She does not know what these dreams are trying to tell her. The only thing that made sense to her was the need to go back, but she can’t bring herself to that place, no matter what happens.

Kate finally woke up from being terrorized by that dream.

She immediately picked up her notes and started to write everything that her subconscious memory could offer from her dreams. The same thing. Vivid dreams, but do not mean anything to her.

After her usual routine, she went down to the chamber of their house. Books float out from their respective places on the bookshelves. The books floated in front of her as Kate floated and read with her magic.

“And now you’re doing what?” Van asked.

“Studying.” She replied, snapped out from daydreaming. She looked up to him. Van went to the nearest seat and studied the book he picked from the shelves. “Don’t you have practice today?”

“Uhm, yeah, but it’s not mandatory.” Van said. “So, I guess it is okay to slack off for once.”

“Hmm. I see.” Her eyes brought back to her reading. “What brought you here, then?”

“Am I not allowed to see you?”

“No. Just curious.” He said.

Van flipped through the pages, seemingly skimming the book, but she knew that he had no interest in it.

“Curious about what?”

“You saw an example of horror last night and yet you’re still eager to get involved.”

“Knowing that supernatural creatures are threatening pretty much, I know that I must do something and help you.”

“But—”

‘No more buts. Besides, you owe me.”

“Owe you?”

“You said that you will help me find out what I am, I know this may sound overcompensating, but we’re friends, right?”

Kate fell into silence and usurped her concentration with the books.

“Earth to Kate?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m still right here.”

Kate sighed and sharply turned on him. “You wanted to help, right? Do you know anything about Mephitic Ghosts and Ghouls?”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“Then you won’t have any use.”

Van finally closed the book with a loud thump and walked past in front of her, observing her intently.

“Is there anything wrong?”

He knew from the look on her ghastly face, that there was something different inside of her mind.

“Nothing.”

Van sat and waited for her. “Just tell me, what’s wrong. Did I do something that upset you?”

Kate let the books fell. The sound of several thuds had a daunting signal for Van that his spine was licked by a jolt. She looked straight in his eyes.

“Look, I have a bad habit of keeping promises and I don’t think that I would be able to protect myself from any of this. You should stay put where you are. In that way, you won’t get hurt.”

Van remained stern in his position and shook his head. “I get that you’re worried for me, but I’m not any other regular person. I can kick some ass.”

“Van, we don’t even know what you are and what you can do. What happened that night is the tip of the iceberg. There’s no way to know how those powers of yours will manifest if so, you face danger again. I can’t allow that. You shouldn’t be part of this. You can even hold your consciousness after you use that power.” Kate said, putting on a tense tone.

Words fumbled in his mouth. He has never seen Kate so intense until now.

“Sorry if I’ve been so nosy.”

“It’s fine.” Her voice softened after she saw his apologetic eyes. “Look, I don’t want you to get hurt.” She held his hand and then looked up at him. “This is not a game, okay? This is bigger than you are and you are not ready for it. I don’t think any of us are ready for it.”

“I understand, but if you need help or from someone, I will not stop myself from doing what is right.”

“And, I will make sure that you won’t need to.”

Van stood up and left her flat. She made her point and desist his desire before he would come to nonsensical fruition. She was glad that he did listen to her. Guilt and pain, which was something that she was avoiding. She doesn’t want to set herself on fire again for letting someone close to her go. She felt the wind pierce for a moment and saw Gilt out of the corner of her eyes sitting on the couch with wine and burgers. The vampire was cozy and was judging.

“And here I thought I was the only martyr here. Turns out, we have a candidate here too. I, too, am famished by the drama.”

“Didn’t your mom tell you that it’s bad to snoop into other people’s conversation?” Kate asked while picking up the books.

“Too bad, my mum died when I was born, so there’s no telling me to stop.”

Kate rose and stole a burger away from him.

“How long have you been listening to us?” She asked.

“The last minute before he left. It’s been a hoot hearing you nagging about saving his ass before he burns himself.”

“I’m wondering, how you were able to live for over centuries with that smart mouth of yours?”

“Simple, I’m sexy, I’m hot, and I have everything that girls want.”

“You forgot ‘delusional’ on your list.”

He glared at her.

“Something tells me you didn’t run over a mile from your mansion to let me steal this burger from you.”

“You are right,” Gilt blew a lock of hair to get a view of the thief. Kate was returning the books from the shelf. “I came here for something less involved whatsoever in school.”

“Oh, did the seniors reject you?”

“You’re wrong. My charm is the real deal. The only thing that made me untethered to my position is that old fart back at school.”

“Principal Enrick.” He nodded.

“That’s right. He wore the same symbol from that night. It’s the mark of their coven.”

“If you want us to do something stupid, I don’t intend to cross the line, yet.”

“You’re scared, aren’t you?”

She gasped. “I am not.”

She pressed towards the door, but Gilt blocked her way.

“Ever since that day, I know that something is bugging you, something holding you back. Is it the nightmares?”

She pushed him out of her way. “It’s none of your concern and why do you care if I don’t want to fight?”

“We are talking about the murderer of your parents here Kate. You cannot let them slip out on your fingertips. If we were able to get their names, then consider us close enough to solve the case. You have me, I promise you, and I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“Easy for you to say, you have no one to leave behind. And what about my sister? What if something happens to me, who is going to take care of her? My uncle? We don’t even know where he is or if he even cares about us.”

“I won’t stop you. You made your point, but you know what kind of people they are. You know what they are capable of. You know we must put an end to them.”

“I … can’t.” She held herself from somber.

Gilt took a deep breath and said to her in a solemn tone. “I may be a jackass, but I know when to stand up. You know what I didn’t like about Kate? You are inconsistent, Kate. You wanted to fight the monsters, but did not want to confront the perpetrators. And then when I had a lead, you agreed I would take a look, and then now you hesitate.”

“Have I told you that we met the monster you fought before? You know the funny thing is – I was expecting I can handle it, make some sense with the use of magic, but that thing is beyond me. And it reminded me that I made a vow to my sister that I won’t leave her.”

“I know, in fact, I already knew about your resolution. I hope that you would be kind enough to lend me a hand.”

Kate did not reply. But he took it as an opportunity that she would reconsider.

In a single second, Gilt turned around and the speck of dust was pushed in the gust of wind. Kate brought a stone with a strange marking. She placed it on the ground and the rune began to lighten.

“Profectus Omnioura.”

A faint white light began to float out of the rune and dance around the wind.

“So, you’re going to make a move now, huh?” Laswell asked, closing the door behind. “Don’t ask how I’ve found you. I’ve been observing you for a while.”

“Oh yeah? Is that the reason Uncle Ben sent you here?”

“Nope. You know that I have a bad term with my father. I came here of my own volition. Do not worry; I will not bother whatever spell you are going to do. You’re going to take them on, right?”

“Yes.” Kate responded, she was busy with manipulating the rune.

“Have you figured out how these Mephitic Ghosts manifested?”

“One thing for sure, the demonic effigy is the reason for this.” Kate began to explain. “The ghosts feed on human energy, but they do not use it on their own and prudently conserve their mana, which tells me that they must be feeding it to that monster.”

“Impressive.” Laswell complimented and walked around, six feet away just enough to observe the spell. “I could not even get the gist of what they were doing but you were able to predict the cause. So, what’s it gonna be?”

“Ever since Van fought that monster, it does not go out anymore. We should not miss this opportunity. I’m going to give that demon a piece of its own medicine.”

Kate began to command the lights as she began to chant.

“Profectus Omnioura deceptum.”

Kate chanted the magic until a ghost came and was caught by the light she made. The ghastly figure did not struggle and absorbed the light from the rune.

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Somewhere in the forest.

The Mephitic Ghosts transferred their energies to the monster lying on the ground. It was pleasured by the energy and created more Mephitic Ghosts to fetch him more food. When the last of the Ghosts arrived and fed the collected energy, it felt that its stomach rumbled and spit out the energy from its victims out of its body. The monster crawled and felt an intense pain that put it to sleep. The remaining Mephitic Ghost disappeared when the sun rose.

\*\*\*

It has been five years since their plan came to fruition and enabled them to live a new life here. They never felt liberated ever since they became slaves by those oppressing authorities that used them for their leisure. Especially him, he never felt freer before. He became an outstanding figure in Maryvale City, a dream that he would not be able to reach without the ingenious plan of his collaborators.

Enrick and others were able to maintain their positions here in the city and live among the people. After the Purge, Enrick was able to make his way as principal of the school. Should he be given a chance, he would be able to grasp the trust of the newly formed council. Lucky he was and fortunate of them, the council proved to be truthful enough to share their personal information. That includes the snake on their cause.

“Do they prove to be liable on our ends?” Jay asked.

Enrick’s hands traveled to the beer and drank it, relishing his thirst. He answered. “No, they do not prove to be any threat, for now. But we should dispose of them, while they do not prove too inconvenient to us.”

“Enrick, do not lay your hands on them,” Jay warned him. His eyes did not remain in that strict manner for too long as he laid his eyes down on his food.

Enrick’s mana began to rile up again and the flowers outside the store began to shake.

“Enrick, please stop it. Your recklessness will be your undoing.”

“And so, will we.” Enrick returned as a reply. “Those imbeciles will grow and will become a threat to us. I wouldn’t be so sure that allowing their existence to continue won’t harm us.”

“Enrick, listen to my plea. If we are going to destroy them now, then we will have no cover for our identity. It is best to track their actions rather than to despite our appearances.”

Enrick’s aura gradually returned to normal. “Are you not afraid that they will make a move against us?”

“I am sure that they are not capable enough.”

“You do know that I will not hesitate to make my move against those pests, right?”

“They are speck compared to our existence. Do you think they are any threat to our prowess?”

Enrick grunted. “You are right. They are nothing but insignificant beings to us but I cannot deny that they have potential.”

“I assure you that they will not prove anything against us. They are speck compared to us. We destroyed the previous council and we will do it again if we must, but now is not the right time for them to end. They will prove to be useful, that I will assure you, or do you intend to use them for your blood magic?”

“Would you mind?”

“Yes. That magic taxes your well-being. *Those* changes will put us in a disadvantageous position. Circumstances aside, the Ordinals made their move to New Jersey that is the closest activity they have done now. We do not want to do something that will catch their interest.” He continued after a pause. “Now those monsters from the world of limbo manage to cross the border. We have to maintain our neutrality until the Satrican will finally heal the gap. Does my logic sound correct, Enrick?”

“If they become a hindrance to our goal, I wouldn’t hesitate to kill them.”

“Yes, yes. Only if… but, the precedence requires us to be adamant about our identity. There are many risks if they know our presence. I am doing this for the best of all of us.”

“I am sure you are.” Jay nodded. “Until they haven’t done anything to damage our product, I reckon you will monitor if the new council knows anything about our mysterious hunter.”

“That I will do,” Enrick said. “I wonder, what keeps bothering you these days?”

Jay’s face was stricken as he put down the coffee. “That is none of your concern.”

“Please, we’ve been together for a couple of years and we know your capabilities. Surely you can tell me what you’ve been up to.”

Jay gazed at him. “Mind your own business, Enrick.”

“Am I getting too personal?” Enrick chuckled. “I never get to see this side of you, but I will never cross that line. I promise I’m going to stick my nose where it belongs.”

“Very well. So much for luncheon. I will see you next time. Do relay this information to the others as well. I don’t want to keep them in the dark.”

Jay left the unattended mind of Enrick. He has thought of himself as an adamant and resilient person. Never to show any kind of blind spot. Enrick went across the street and to his car. He felt a familiar presence behind his seat.

“How long have you been waiting?”

The curtain fell and the invisible magic was done.

“What did the two of you speak of?”

Enrick sighed. “Something, something, something does not murder people, specifically *them*. Jay has been watching my back ever since he heard about the hunter, which is all but a suspicion, no concrete proof whatsoever.”

“And you concede on his regulation?” He asked.

Enrick stared through the front mirror. “Of course not. But what can I do when that man frequently comes and checks me up?” He asked him a question. “And what about you Hive? What is your position on all of this? You have been so silent ever since. You barely talk and call.”

“Let’s just say, I’ve been enjoying the taste of freedom that I earned.” The six feet tall, pockmarked man returned a reply.

“Hm.” Enrick gave him a look.

“Now-now. Do not give me that look. I promised you, I’m on my best behavior.”

“I wonder, do you not feel any guilt about your brother that has been left behind among the Ordinals?”

Hive’s expression was stricken for a moment.

“It must’ve been hard for you to watch him taken by your not-so-benevolent father away from your grasp. Oh well, judging from the way you handle it, I guess you must have gotten over it quickly. But who am I to judge?”

“You speak so low of me but ironic it is, you’re the reason why the love of your life fell into peril because of what so-called blood magic.” Hive grinned. “I wonder, does a monster like you feel remorse? Or are you pathetically shallow that are comparable to an undead?”

Enrick looked down. He was pale as cold and then returned to his usual gesture. He glared at him with murderous intention. “Your misgivings will be your undoing boy.”

“Oh, do not indulge in that expression. I do not intend to engage in combat with you. Insults aside, I came here because of your contemplation during our meeting.”

“You mean the Hunter?”

“Yes.”

“And how will this benefit you?”

“*Us*Enrick, *us*. I am well aware of Jay’s misplaced confidence regarding our position when there is a threat out there that might end us and all of our accomplishments. I know it may sound strange coming from me but even I know when to step or when not to step in the boundaries.”

“A brave soul you are. You sure you don’t have doubts that you might slight him?”

“Please, he’s not our leader. We are on our own; if he does not have the cojones to take action then we will get rid of the problem ourselves.” Hive replied with a calm demeanor.

“I like the idea,” Enrick said. “It may be demeaning to them but at least we have done what they couldn’t do. So, tell me, what’s the plan?”

Hive grinned and began to discuss with Enrick what he should do.

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“Earth to Kate.”

Van’s soft voice snapped Kate from spacing out. It seemed that Van was in the middle of the discussion, he was explaining about the Romans. Books and textiles were neatly arranged side by side. They were in the library, somewhere around the corner where very few students

“What is it?”

“Um, I was in the middle of discussing how five good Roman emperors differ from their predecessors when you suddenly space out. I mean you’ve been acting like this for the past few days.”

He gazed at her pale blue eyes. Her hair does not compliment her usual mood and her eyes were soulless, as it seemed than it usually was.

“Look, you made it clear to me that you want me to stay out of it. I did it. But could you become more attentive to this, especially with me? I get it, you’re a badass witch, but you also have responsibilities.”

“Excuse me!” She snapped but halted for a brief moment, and then she sighed. Van was aghast and glanced away. “Look, I just don’t feel well these days. It has been hectic and everything I’ve been doing seems to be exhausting anymore... I just can’t do this anymore.”

Van lifted his gaze but did not meet her. “I’m sorry if I were so nagging...” “Persistent.” They said in sync.

She jerked her head. “It’s fine. It is also my fault; I should not have come along with you. Now, you’re going to flunk history.”

“Hey, don’t underestimate my intellectual capacity,”

“Really? Did you hit your head this morning?”

“Uh, no...” He paused. “I didn’t.”

“All right. I hate to break it to you but I do not want to disturb you any longer. So, I will take my leave.”

Van immediately blocked her.

“And why are you getting in my way?”

“Look, I’ve been there before.”

“Been what?”

“The dark side.”

“Is this a movie reference?”

“I mean it, literally. I know what will happen if you keep bottling up your emotions. Eventually, it will consume you and you’ll become more…” Kate interjected, “Bitchier?” she asked.

“I was gonna go with grumpier, but if you think that’ll do then... fine.”

She stared blankly at him.

“Alright, to be serious here, I offer you a quality time of relieving the tension and stress that you’ve endured.”

“And what would this ‘Quality Time’ you so suggested for me?”

10 minutes later.

“Welcome to my fort, well, me and my brother’s fort.”

She remembered back then about coming into this house, it was quite late. Therefore, she did not see much of its features, but she can take a hint that these two boys could hardly be construed as lazy to let their house unclean over the day. Although they showed quite remarkable neatness, their garniture was not what she expected. All of their furniture lies around video games, Legos, and collective items.

“Um, what is this? Do you want me to become a nerd?” Kate asked. “Do I get a membership card?”

“Ha-ha, very funny.”

Van scoured and found the disc of a game. He opened the console and slid it inside.

“This is my favorite video game.”

“Ah-huh.”

“Come on now, sit down. I hate to play alone.”

As hours passed by, Kate was able to grasp and master the game and after a few rounds, she managed to destroy Van. Knowing that it was past 12, he decided to head to the kitchen and prepare something for them. She glanced at Van who was cooking something for lunch. She grew tired of watching, playing and decided to turn off the console. She joined him in the kitchen.

“What is it you’re cooking?” She asked, peering from behind.

Van immediately blocked her line of vision. She turned away, but her nose could not evade the smell of burned and toasted food.

“Why are you here? You should be playing back there.”

“Uh, no. I don’t think so, not that I can smell that your little experimentation is on the verge of chaos. So, let me do the cooking.”

“But –”

“No more buts.” She insisted and had him out of her way. She glanced at toasted fried eggs before throwing them away in a garbage can. “Err. No wonder why you always eat junk food.”

It was not hard and all, but most of the time Van observed her cooking like a child to his mother. It was past one in the afternoon and she served the meals. Meatloaf, Macaroni and cheese. Last was Risotto.

“And voila.” Kate said as she presented the foods. “Sorry if some of it did not match your taste.”

“No-no. You have done enough.” Van looked precisely as she wanted him to. “I am grateful that you did this all. I am famished.”

“Don’t think about it. What kind of a guest am I if I don’t know how to cook?”

He blankly stared at her.

“Now, now, don’t give me that look. Chow-chow now before the food goes cold.”

Van altered his thoughts and his stomach to the presented meal and grabbed a spoon and fork.

“What do you think of it?” Kate asked.

She observed Van enjoying eating her cook. The meatloaf crunching in his teeth.

“This is the most delicious food I have ever tasted for a while. I swear this is tastier than my brother.”

“That’s right, praise me more.” She smiled as she saw the sight before her.

Kate reluctantly allowed herself to be taken away with Van to wherever he will show her. They entered the forest, followed the path of the tracks, and then turned left to an unknown route.

“Where are you taking me by the way?”

“Somewhere calm and less populated.”

She lifted her brow. “I don’t know what you were thinking but I would suggest that do not push your luck. Don’t do anything funny.”

Van looked confused but got what she was saying.

“You’re wrong, missy. I am not going to do anything with an all-powerful witch. I wanted to show you this place.”

They stopped in front of a lake. The sunset mirrored the still water as the swans swam and created a slow ripple effect.

“Why did you take me here anyway?” She asked him. “You could have just continued doing your own thing. Do remember, we cut class.”

“It’s nothing like there’s an important thing to do. The school was preparing for the Commonwealth’s day after all.”

“But we still have a history exam next week and I hate to break it to you, but we’re gonna flunk.”

“Hey, no need to think and worry about the future. Just enjoy the sunset.”

They let the hour pass and sat down enjoying the view.

“Tell me.” Kate started. “What was going on inside that head of yours?”

“You seem to be stressed, not from work, I assume, but something that made you anxious. I don’t know what it is, but you need to be distracted from all of it.”

She hid her smile from his sight before looking back at him.

“Now, would you mind telling me what’s on your mind?” He asked. “It’s been eating you all this week and it’s not a good thing to bottle it.”

She took a deep breath and exhaled. “Have I told you about the tragic incident with my parents?”

“I heard some, but I don’t fully know what it is.”

“Well, it’s not an accident after all.”

Van looked perplexed.

“They were murdered, Van. They died in front of me and there is nothing I can do about it. And now, I found that there’s one of the perpetrators in here.”

“And?”

“Gilt convinced me to go after him, but I- I.” She stuttered.

“You’re scared.” He continued. “I get it, you’re scared and it’s okay.”

“I’m not scared for myself, not for me, but for my sister. What will I do if they come after us? I don’t even know if I can protect her, less if I win if I go after him. Every time I remember the picture of them, burning along in our cabin, I’m afraid. It suffocates me to imagine over and over what they have done to destroy my family. Mia, she is the only family I have, I cannot let her down or put her in danger. Now, tell me, Van, what should I do?”

“I’m not going to pretend that I know which is better for you, but you’ve to choose yourself, choose what is right for you and your sister. And if the odds are against you, I will stand beside you.”

“Look—”

“I know that I am not all-powerful like you, the only power that I can offer to you is support and you are not alone, you have friends that will help you. You think you have to do it all alone because if you let someone get in, they’re eventually bound to die, but it is not. I thought at first, that I’m different, but recently I found out that I have these amazing abilities and understand that I am not as weird as I think I am. I’m special, like you.” He smiled bitterly at that fact. “Knowing that there are other creatures and a world that has so much to be discovered, I thought maybe it isn’t bad after all to be different. I decided to keep your secret and stick with you because you are the only person who I can turn to. So, whatever you think that is dragging you to this, don’t worry, some people are going to help you get through this. I am one of those.”

“Thank you.” Kate beamed.

“Whatever decision you make, I will always be with you.”

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Van waited for her to fall asleep in her room. Van explained to Mia that her sister was having a hard time, but obviously, it was all a lie. He can’t bring himself to tell the truth about what was happening to Kate. The truth was not for him to tell. It was too much for him to talk about the existence of the supernatural world, but he accepted it and understood that he had a place in it and he was part of it.

Mia expressed a slight suspicion about his words, but he guaranteed her ear to shut off when he gave her ten bucks. Unlike Kate, Mia was a bit mischievous. He heard stories from Kate, specifically how she was capable of knocking out four boys that bullied her without using magic. After she expressed her delight, Mia left him with the dishes.

Cleaning the last of the plates, he heard the front door creak but saw no one.

“It must be the wind.”

“Or a sexy hot stud vampire.”

Van went to grab the knife and face the trespasser.

“Hey, no need to get spooked.”

Van finally recognized the face. Gilt stood from the cushion, went to the cabinet, and plucked the cork of the wine with his nail.

“Oh, you…” Van muttered.

Gilt deliberately drank it all.

“So, what have you been up to today?” Van asked.

“It’s none of your business.”

“And here I am thinking we could be best buddies.”

“Due to the present circumstances, I doubt that’s possible.”

“Circumstances? Like what? Being a vampire?”

“It’s more than that.”

In haste, Gilt turned the conversation to another topic. “Need I have to remind you that there’s a worrisome number of monsters out there? We don’t know who controls them or allows them to walk freely on this earth.”

“What do you want?”

“I need to see Kate. Where is she?”

“Upstairs, fast asleep.”

“Good, thank you for the honesty. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to wake her up.”

Van instantly held his shoulder and blocked his way.

“Wait, what exactly do you want from her?”

Gilt’s grin grew wide. “None of your concern.”

“You want her to do the dirty job, don’t you?” Van’s voice was beginning to tense. Gilt visibly didn’t like his approach.

“Kid, we’ve been in this business a long time before you came here.”

“Have you considered what she feels about this? I take that as a hint that you truly don’t know about her or you just don’t care about her and you only want her for your goals.”

“If I were you, I would be very careful about what you’re going to say next,” Gilt warned.

“Or what?” Van cocked his head.

“What do you know about her, Van? Besides being a waitress?”

“I know enough that she’s not as strong as you think she is.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Jesus, it’s like talking to a wall. She’s under stress; she is worried about what might happen to her and her sister!” Van paused and lowered his voice. “She is traumatized by what they did to her family and clearly, she doesn’t have the same cojones as you.”

“I don’t believe you. She has been planning this a long time ago and I know that she does not want to miss this opportunity if I could convince her. Until I hear it from her mouth, I won’t believe you.”

Van didn’t back down and still blocked his way. “Well, since you can’t take a hint. Back off.”

His charming grin was gone and replaced by a more annoyed expression.

“Trust me, kid, you don’t want to cross that line.”

Gilt’s eyes grew brighter in red. The tension grew but was halted when Laswell interrupted them. Gilt separated them with the force of his magic.

“Please, if you want to fight, do it outside. Otherwise, this place would be a wreck. Oh, and feel free to thank me, I put a barrier spell so that the two sisters won’t hear that the two of you are getting heated up and ready to waste this place.” Laswell said. “Stand down,” he called to Gilt. “Or I’ll kick your ass.”

“I have no time for your jest, Laswell. There are important matters that need to be discussed. I will talk to Kate whether you like it or not.” Gilt shoved Van out of his way.

“Looks like I have no choice. *Biendo.*” Laswell conjured magic to bind Gilt with blue wires of energy, disabling him to motion.

“You have had enough arguments this day. We will meet tomorrow. For now, cool your head, and please try to restrain yourselves from killing each other.”

It was the quick and effective spell that parted them away from the house. The two were teleported back into their own houses.

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For thousands of years, he was trapped in the luminous limbo. Over and over again, he was tortured by being trapped in the labyrinth with no hope for his soul finding peace. He endured the countless deaths caused by the monster in the labyrinth, the Minotaur.

His mind was shut down from reality. He gave up trying to break free for the thousandth time. He accepted his fate and drowned in the bottomless and unforgiving sea. His soul found resolution at last but all were at the pinnacle of drowsiness when he felt that something pulled him out of that world.

It was the unfamiliar feeling that disturbed his slumber. The light of the moon streaking down to his face woke him up. The chilling wind disrupted his senses and shivered.

He felt the cold ground stung on his back where his wings were attached, but now the remnants. With his bare damaged feet and legs, he stood and saw the signs of spells arching and encircling his position. He tried to get out but he was blocked and got stung by some sort of red lightning.

“What kind of blasphemy is this?!” he shouted. Not even a soul replied. The place was dark and only the light of the moon from above the pit hole shone on him. “King Minos! Is this what you are doing?! How long must I suffer from your greediness?! Come out and show yourself!”

“Oh, there is no need for such a dramatic interlude.” A man came out in the darkness by the veil of the flame that erupted and streaked over circular. “Those days are in the past. Thousands of years ago. His time is long gone.”

“Who are you?! Speak!”

“Do not speak so insolent to your savior boy!” Enrick hollered back. “You should be grateful to us. We have saved you from that eternal suffering.”

He was once a naïve boy, but now he will not be swayed by such words. “If you are what you claimed you are, then what say all of this? Putting a seal on a broken man? Or are you mischievous enough to make me submit unwillingly to do your objectives?”

“Perceptive.” Hive complimented. “You told me specifically to look for this man, but I can’t see that there’s a warrior in him. Isn’t there any other you can choose, Enrick?”

“I prefer something intelligible rather than monsters that are bound to break loose, besides we can’t be picky. It’s either him or that ogre I saw walking around the border of the island.”

Hive sighed. “Who is this man?”

“Icarus.” Enrick replied. “Straight out from the legend.”

“You know about me? How come?” Icarus asked, his eyes sharped at their necks.

“Your tragic story is one of a kind. Your story spread across the century but was forgotten and the greatness of your family was expelled throughout history. But do not worry, everyone knows what King Minos did to you.”

“What about my father? What of him?”

“He lives the rest of his life somewhere else. We don’t know what happened to him. But you can guess he lives his life. You, on the other hand…”

“What do you intend to do with me? Make me your slave?”

Hive scratched his head. “Ugh, yes. You will be doing this on behalf of ours, but rest assured, a reward awaits your loyalty if you do as we asked.”

“You will still do it even if I say otherwise?” Icarus asked.

“Yes.” Hive nodded. “You don’t have a choice after all.”

Icarus felt something pierce his chest. He glanced at Enrick and saw the man engraving something on the ground that was from the blood.

“You sorcerer! What blasphemy you intend to do?!” Icarus felt a coursed pain jolting through his system. It was different from before, but the feeling does not numb even now.

“A gift,” Enrick replied. “If you’re going to do your job, you must do it right.”

Icarus back stung and felt his flesh burn on his back. A horrid scream rang out when a fountain of blood came to spring when his flesh shredded and his wings grew out from it. Icarus kneeled profoundly astounded by the relief after his wings came out, feeling rejuvenated as though he was reborn.

“Now, for the final cut.” Hive threw salts on him and markings began to traverse Icarus’s body and eventually faded on his skin.

In a desperate attempt, Icarus flew but was blocked by the force field.

“Not now, birdie. There’s a lot for us to catch up on before you head out and ruin paradise.”

A chain appeared on Icarus’s neck and subdued him back to the ground.

Hive pulled up Icarus’s chin. “It’s too early for you to take a flight. For now, we will teach you some things that you have to know.”

\*\*\*

Inside the lavish mansion, Jane was walking like a fashion model on top of the red carpet from her wardrobe toward Kate. She wore a tank top with a brown vest, a mini skirt, and heel boots.

“Kate, what do you think?” Jane asked.

“Uhm, I think that’s way overkill. Try something less revealing.”

“What does that supposed to mean? It looks good on me.”

“No offense, but the only people who will think of that are the ones who are thirsty and who knows what those frat boys think of ladies in skirts.” She said after a pause. “Listen to me; they will flood you when you wear those clothes.”

Jane groaned. “Not too narcissistic to say, but you are kinda right. It’s kinda creepy to imagine them flooding and getting under my skin.”

“I don’t know why you need to wear those. I mean, it’s only a music fest.”

“I know, but once in a while, I want to dress in something that I’m comfortable with.” Jane pouted. Her thought of reverie shattered. “You’re such a buzzkill you know.”

“Hey, don’t put it out on me.” Kate sharply said. “Blame those creeps out there.”

“I know, I know. It sucks to be a woman.”

“Do you prefer to be a smelly ass man?”

“No. Of course not.” She shivered in disgust. “How come we are talking about this again?” Jane asked.

“Uhm, because of the frat boys.”

Jane sat down and removed the boots, next was her vest then proceeded to the bathroom. She picked up another set of clothes. “Enough with the frat boys. How’s it going between the two of you?”

“Us?”

Jane went out in a different outfit, one that was less revealing. “You know the greasy hair, hipster.”

 This time she wore white top, black pants, and heel boots. She picked up the dark jacket and wore it. Even Kate was in awe seeing her in that.

“First of all, he’s not a hipster, he’s weird and damn, you look damn fine in those clothes.” Kate said after a while.

Jane wilted with an uncertain, perplexed expression. “Really? Honestly, are you just saying that because you don’t want me to make me feel bad or it’s a legitimate compliment?”

Kate hesitated in lifting her gaze to her while Jane was drinking her with her stare. “Both.” She softly said and looked away.

Jane grunted and drilled her way to the bathroom. She looked at the clothes and gawked. It has been forever since she had gone to the mall; she was tempted but inflexible to her hectic schedule as a student and as a cheerleader.

Jane moved on. “I know that you don’t know him well, but, hey, the more the merrier, am I right? I know you want us to spend time together, but would you kindly consider other people joining us? Isn’t that what we are after? To have fun? Come on, it’s the music fest, it would be boring if it were just the two of us.”

She brushed her hair and beckoned Kate to braid her. Kate willingly went behind her back and began to do her business.

\*\*\*

Van exuded effort in pushing the new table inside his room while Timothy was in the living room playing video games with his headphones on.

“It would be great if you help me here.” Van called out.

“I’m sorry, what?” Timothy asked and removed his headphones.

Van sighed and ignored the brazen brother. The fact that he lived here alone for a year was still a mystery for Van. Most of the time Van was the one who cleaned their house. He rarely sees Timothy doing a house chore.

“Never mind.” Van answered back.

“Hey, it’s a music fest tonight. You will come, right?”

“Music fest?”

“It’s an annual event, you know from the name itself.” His face suddenly turned to a smile and excitedly explained to him. “There will be bands, music, beverages everywhere – oh and there will be a carnival tonight.”

Van arranged the tablecloth and the books on the shelves then went out to the kitchen.

“It’s a hard pass.” Van replied.

Van grabbed a cup and poured it with hot water from the kettle pot. Then mixed it with two spoons of sugar and coffee powder. Van prepared the pan as he went to the fridge, picking out two slices of ham, cheese, and bread. Then, he placed it in the pan then onto the oven, heating it and setting it to go off within ten minutes. He enjoyed the coffee while sitting down as he witnessed the enemy kicking his brother’s character’s butt.

“What’s the name of the game again?” Van asked as he sat beside Timothy.

“Mortal Comeback, I think something like that.” Timothy paused and looked at him. “You sure you don’t want to come? There will be booze and jazz there. I’m pretty sure Kate will show up too.”

Van paused. The oven was alarmed and automatically shut down. He quickly drew out the pan and put it in the bread. He poured it with mustard and hot chili ketchup on it before revering the homemade sandwich in his seat.

Before Van could put his thoughts together, Timothy interrupted him. “Don’t think about it and go. This was a perfect opportunity for you to socialize, and make some friends, aside from Kate or Raymond and the others.”

“What’s wrong with Raymond, Lester, and the others?” Van replied and frowned over the thought while still clutching and eating the sandwich. “They seem to be cool about me.”

“What’s wrong? What kind of question is that? You met those dudes because of me, I wanted you to go out there and make some of your own, not just hitchhike. Eventually, you will be tired of them. You need to find people that you can vibe with… make the most of your time.”

“What about Kate?”

Timothy kept his neutral face and observed Van.

“She’s different.”

He shook his head. Mostly, his brother was on the right point, but some things Van cannot comprehend. “Please, explain properly.”

“I’m saying she’s a girl, there are things that you can’t share with a girl… you know guy stuff, hence the need to find yourself a guy friend.” Van waited for more, but it seemed that he was done.

“What’s up with the stereotype? It is okay to tell her whatever I want because she is my friend. I don’t see there’s any problem with that.”

“Trust me, Van. You’ll need a friend of the same gender. Not all women can sympathize with you.” Timothy turned his attention back to the screen.

Van corrected his posture and stood up then walked to the bathroom. While still clutching the towel, a person came to his mind.

“Tim!” He shouted.

“What?!”

“Do you know anything about Rick?”

“Nope. Not an inch. Oddly enough, he is popular with girls. I don’t get how he’s alone and not bothered by how handsome he is. I mean look, he can use his looks for a greater purpose.”

“Greater purpose? Like what? Getting laid?”

“Isn’t that what a person with a handsome face was supposed to do?”

Van ignored his brother’s uncanny remark. Sometimes, Timothy can be mature, but to the bones, there was a perversion that does not bode well for his character.

He was not the only one who noticed about Rick. He has always been alone most of the time, if not, then he might be with someone who was a partner in a certain project.

After a long thoughtful shower, Van concluded. It was rather ill advised not to attend such revels after self-pitying and loathing over the last year in high school. He should at least have some fun. He has forgotten a promise he made to himself to not miss anything and should enjoy whatever free time he had. His thoughts are only onerously dismayed by his desire to attend revelries.

He always disliked talking to people; he felt that there was a burden on his chest that made him always want to run. The reason might lie back to the times he was bullied by his classmates. They always had him do that even though he does not like it. The bullying only comes to a stop when he fights back and luckily allows his brother to fend off the bullies.

His cynical thoughts are like a cockroach, so easy to purge yet they always come back with an evil surprise. Timothy was right, he should go out more. Now he has a chance to start anew, he might as well enjoy it before the end of the school year.

\*\*\*

It was late afternoon when Van came. He took right and heard a moan at the side of the alleyway; he ignored it and came past the pedestrian lane. He certainly remembered the place; at least he already has an idea about the layout of this part of the city.

Trembling in the cold, he jammed his hands into his pocket. A bugger diminished his line of sight. Then accidentally bumped into a man. Van bowed and apologized. At last, he reached the park.

He strode and cautiously examined the joyful faces of the people. Several people his age were dancing in an open space over the band in the stadium where they drank just like what he had expected and what he would be doing in this time of events.

A certain person had caught his attention. Rick Mavenhart brought a keg over to the nearby booth and it seems the owner of it requested it. When he received the payment for his service, Van casually walked beside him.

“I take that you’re not a partygoer.” Van started.

Rick’s black eyes blinked for a moment. “Oh it’s you.” He was counting the money and replied without looking back “You alone?”

“Yeah, well a moment ago, but yes. How about you? Are you working extra shifts?”

By then Rick was finished counting and sorting the money. He was hesitant at first but answered anyway, “Uh yes. I need money, for you know… school and kinds of stuff, cannot keep relying on someone else’s pockets. Had to make my own.”

“I see,” Van replied. “By the way you look, you don’t intend to miss the party, right?”

Rick shook his head. “I’m afraid I don’t have time for that.”

“For real? Don’t you have any friends to hang around with?”

“I don’t think anyone is willing to be with me. I could be pretty weird and all.”

“Lucky for you, I’m weird and I don’t have that kind of plucky attitude that might bore you or kill the mood.”

Rick raised his wrist and looked at his watch.

“Uhm, I appreciate it but uhm I need to go now. Sorry.”

“Hey, don’t be. Maybe we can play games next time?”

“Yes, we can, if you have a play station, do you?”

“Yes, I do.”

Rick took off and hurried. He kept his distance from the people’s path and felt the effects of the adrenaline from the rushed order of his boss.

\*\*\*

Van noticed the quite stunning duo from picking stuffed toys after they had won in some sort of gun booth. He smiled as he saw her face, ignoring her companion who was also attracting many men within the vicinity. He traipsed behind Kate and took her by surprise. She squealed and touched her purse before slapping his arm.

“Don’t you ever do that again or else I will turn you upside down.” Kate warned.

As gullible as he was, he ignored her warning. “Is this for real?” With suspicious eyes, he glanced at the pink hippopotamus stuffed toy she was holding at.

“What? This?” Kate waved the stuffed toy.

“Yes.”

Feeling ignored Jane went to the nearest keg material and began to take a stride wherever her eyes led her to find worth keeping like a girl scout on a hunt. Except for this time, it was a man thing she was gawking and she will not fail at hunting one. On the other hand, Kate, who felt mocked, probed his pompous remark.

“What are you implying?” She flatly asked.

“I guess I never thought that you could do it. I find it hard that you’re doing it,” He came close to whisper in her ears. “Without using any kind of magic.”

“Are you implying that I’m cheating?”

Van pretended to look around as if he were innocent.

“Did I say that?”

“You sound like it.”

“Do I?”

“Van, is this your way of challenging me?”

His lips quivered. “Maybe.”

Kate’s eyes returned to the owner of the machine with her stricken face, picked up the two guns, and gave one of them to Van.

“It’s on then.”

It did not take a while for Van to have an utter taste of defeat from Kate. There was a muted ting when the metal bullet hit the target. The owner dictated her prize and slid the gun back to the counter.

“You’re good. You are too good for this.” Van said while gasping for air.

“Told ya.” Kate grinned and chose another one of the stuffed toys. It was an orange tiger this time. Like a child, she giggled and raised her palm to his face.

Van's shoulders shuddered knowing what it meant behind that wayward smile that cannot be denied by some masking words. Yet he still chose to do so.

“What now?”

Kate shook her palm. “Gimme the money.”

“Give you what now?” Feeling tense, he couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable.

“I won. So, I think it is right for me to get compensated.”

“Wow. Compensated?”

“You’re the one who gambled first.”

“You’re the one who accepted my challenge.” He retorted.

He pushed his thoughts away this time. “Come on; let’s go grab something to eat.”

“Then what about my money?” She asked.

“Hey, we never agreed on how I should repay you. This-this is my way of getting back at you, so, don’t be so picky.”

There are string lights outside and there are a few ornaments of lanterns hung in different colors, seats, and tables, all said. The lake’s view from the café was perfect for a view to enjoy while sitting and enjoying the brew of coffee that Van treated her. The best part of the café was the festoon with ornamental plants such as marigold, thyme, the string of pearls, aloe vera, and croton.

“To be fair, you have magic.” Van said.

“Oh, no, no. Don’t use that on me. I never cheated.” Kate returned with a distasteful look.

A chuckle escaped his mouth.

“To be honest, you are a good sharpshooter.”

“I know. It’s really hard to be a pro.”

\*\*\*

It was gray and the magenta sky was overcast by the approaching night. Van stood and came closer to the river. Kate stood beside him. Ever since Van activated his unknown powers, he felt an anxious feeling. For some time, this anxiety subsided, but whenever he thought of it, he could not stop thinking what if his powers were not for good. As he gleaned over his thoughts, Kate snapped her fingers and interrupted his thoughts.

“Why the gloomy face?” She asked out of concern.

Van waved his hand dismissively, “It’s nothing serious.”

Kate looked at the sky and the twinkling orange lights gleamed like torches before finally disappearing from their sight. The moon ascended and lorded the stars, but even still, the cloud gloomed over. Its light fell upon and reflected on the lake, perfectly still.

Van warily observed the lake. Somehow, it felt familiar, but he has no recollection of where or when he had seen such exact scenery, on another similar occasion. A few couples can be seen finally leaving the café. Some of them hastened to go to the music festival, while some went the other way.

She placed her hand on his shoulder and asked, “Is something bothering you?”

“I was thinking that maybe I was mistaken. Most of my childhood I spent doing mischievous acts, all of that because I hated being part of Mick’s family. I did my best to act on my best behavior, but even still I have no control over myself. Now that I know that I am something more than a human, it keeps me thinking, what if I was born that way? Maybe I’m just a mistake. Maybe that is the reason why my parents died on me.”

Van spoke as if it was nothing but a nonchalant expression. Just as she turned to survey his face, he glanced away to gaze at the lake.

“No child was born as a mistake, Van.”

“How come? If I were to say, I haven’t been able to change for the past years. I am still that ungrateful child who never makes his foster parents proud. My brother must’ve hated me for being a pain in the ass.”

“I don’t think so. Your brother seems pretty cool to me. Tim doesn’t look like holds any grudge on you. Look, no matter what you are before, it doesn’t define what you will become. You can choose whatever path you want, for better or for worse.”

“You know, I’ve always imagined that being a young adult would change everything I am, that I would be able to make myself feel better and think as a better version of myself.”

“I wish that were easy, but not everything goes according to what we want. Will it make you feel better if I tell you what I found out about your heritage?”

His attention returned to her with hiding concern and allowed her to continue.

“There are similar symptoms of your drastic change to aggressive behavior that includes your blackouts. At first, I thought that you were a werewolf. You see werewolves have traits of being aggressive, but the thing is that I never saw you transform into a werewolf during a full moon. Plus, you don’t have the mark of a crescent.”

“Crescent?”

“Yes, the crescent mark indicates if you’re a werewolf or not. Thus, connecting to my explanation, the werewolf is off the list. The next thing is that you’re probably an impagnia. A creature born with magic that uses life force but at the expense of one’s consciousness.”

“I- look, you saw me in action. I never use magic or any other voodoo stuff.” He immediately denies his connection to the creature she mentioned.

“I know. Believe me, I know. That is why your case is perfect for the last one.”

“What is it?”

“A Jaeger, a Hunter.”

“Jaeger? What are you saying?”

“I’ve stumbled on this old textbook. There I read their lore that they first appeared and are considered to have existed in Persia during the 6th century. It was after the Persian Empire lasted and they moved out and spread in Asia to Europe and Western America.”

Van interrupted her, “I get it that they’re a bunch of nomads. How come I am related to them?”

“It indicates that in their younger years, the young hunters are bound to lose themselves and to be subjugated to their aggressive nature until they reach late adulthood. Their monstrous strength gives them an advantage against some powerful monsters. They hunt monsters most of their life.”

“Are you saying that I’m a what? A freaking belligerent supernatural creature?”

“Well, simply to say yes, but look at the bright side,” Kate held his hand and tried to reassure him with her weak smile. “The process may be gruesome but at least there’s still time for us to sort this out. I promised you; I will help you get through this.”

“All this time I thought that I could control this, but this power might end up hurting other people. I’m a freak of nature, Kate.” His eyes reflected disgust over himself.

“No, no.” Kate moved her hand and held his shoulder. “No one thinks of you like that.”

His soulless eyes are narrowed and sullen; it barred her from saying anything further.

“I need some time to think. I don’t know what to do or to believe right now.”

Tolled under the pressure, Van walked away, and into his cycle of thoughts, he spiraled.

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When he was back in the street, out of the people’s sight, and got her stories out of his head, his mind betrayed him again. He fell under the gesture of the very being that Kate had told him about earlier.

His eyes shone in dim yellow and onto the woods, he ran.

When he finally reached the peak of the foul smell of blood in the deep part of the forest. His eyes were restless just as his feet climbed with ease and effort leaping from boulder to boulder. He stopped and surveyed the area. His eyes were like hawks as he could see every part of the forest. The bird’s nest on the tree. Squirrels strolled and hopped between trees to catch the nuts.

In some parts of the forest, where the animals flee away. Van sprinted and leaped making a soft noise against the rocky and grassy ground. The putrid and rusty smell of blood still lingered in his nose. He saw the trail of blood. He followed it and at the end of the track, he saw the bleeding woman, a young and beautiful woman in her 20s. The woman coughed blood and struggled to mouth the words, and in the end, she took her last breath and rested.

Something had taken over Van’s mind. He looked at the butchered belly of the woman. While her lower body was still intact, her belly was ravaged. The murderer apparently was not interested in the other part of the body. It only took pleasure from gutting out her organs, eating the flesh, and savoring it until it lasted.

A faint cry caught his ears. He did not know where it came from but he was sure that it resembled a woman. The cry became louder until an eerie flashback plunged into his mind. He saw the vicious fate from the woman’s perspective.

Van heard every breath she took and felt an extreme tremor of fear. He felt warmth radiating to her skin and sensed her heart pulsating. He imagined everything, every heavy breath she took, every time she begged the man. That time she was groveling caused by an impalement over her ankle. The moment her flesh was pulled out from her stomach.

Van's face was stone but smiled inside. He had an idea of what kind of ability the creature does possess. He finally looked back and followed the reeking smell of blood. He smiled faintly over the fact that the enemy was somewhat clumsy. It left trails of blood. Judging from the way, the blood made its mark on the ground he can tell that it left a puke on some of his victim’s blood. The bloody monster tainted the trees nearby before fleeing up to the sky. That was right; the enemy was capable of flight. He noticed blood and other branches that were dragged along the very smeared leaves.

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By the time Kate was distracted by Van, Jane left with one objective and that was to eye every person on the field. As dull as everybody else, no guys pass her test; maybe she sets her bar too high.

Jane turned to look out on the serving table for beer. She paid and sat on the wooden stool. Through the distorted vision of the glass, her eyes trailed it to wherever it landed.

“What are you doing?” A man spoke to her.

Jane was startled by his sly presence. He drank what seemed to be a Pale Ale. As soon as the bartender handed him the Ale, he quickly drank it, but fast as it was, he could not take all of it. He croaked and coughed.

“I don’t get it.” He said in a strangulating voice. “Beer was supposed to be beer. It wasn’t supposed to be sweet or too bitter.”

She hesitated for a second, but his dark beauty and grace made it possible for her to be alluded to. It was like a blow of luck. This man caught her attention. She looked up to him, he was like the moon that rose: mysterious, cunning, daring, and yet dangerous. Even still, it enthralled her.

Jane beamed. “That’s an English Pale Ale right there, brother. It was meant to be bitter. It has a strong hop flavor but is balanced by sweet malt. At first, you wouldn’t like it.” She replied. She gawked for a moment at his bitter face that was covered by the locks of his dark hair. “You shouldn’t drink what you can’t handle.”

“I was just trying new kinds of stuff. It has been months since the last time I drank.”

“Well at least do some research first.”

He grunted and turned his head sharply on the beer. He thumped the table with his tankard. He rose from sitting and leaned over the serving table watching the revelries. “I was more of a take-what-you-want kind of person.”

“Sounds like you're egocentric.”

“Does that make me less handsome?” Gilt asked.

A glint of confidence was known in his dark eyes.

“W-What?” she stuttered.

“You were gawking at me earlier.”

Jane raised a brow. “Excuse me?” Yet her voice suggested she was guilty as charged.

He moved on. “Never mind.”

“Unbelievable.” She said.

“My name’s Gilt.”

“Jane.” She returned and paused a while. “You know, you kinda remind me of someone I used to know.”

“Please, don’t tell me it’s your ex.” He said without any hesitation.

She gazed at him with an unpleasant expression but then continued. “I have a friend whose boyfriend is –”

Gilt interjected. “A dumbass cheater who never gives a damn to anyone’s feelings and even still shows caring and compassion, he’s still the man who never gives a damn yada-yada-yada.”

She stared at him.

Gilt continued. “Honey, that’s nothing new. I think everyone I know would be bored with your story.”

“What is wrong with you?”

“Nothing.” Gilt drank once more. The air briefly became cold and still. The wind passed and the heat returned. “It’s that I’m built this way.”

She cannot help but laugh.

“Laugh all you want.” Gilt said, not at all disturbed.

“That’s kind of unbelievable.”

“Darling if you see enough, you’ll be able to learn to laugh it off. Trust me; everything will be easier as time passes by.”

She felt disgusted by the man. Therefore, she chose to stay away, but he had something else on his mind that needed to be spoken of.

“Wait.” He called.

“What?” She asked, irritated. She was still not looking at him.

“I know I’m a dick and I’m sorry.”

“But you don’t look like it.” When she turned over to see him, she froze. It was rather the familiar face that struck her.

“I’ve had a bad day.”

“That’s not an excuse.”

“I know, I know.”

She felt sincere. “Well, I guess its fine. I was overreacting anyway.”

“Jane.” She introduced herself.

“Gilt.”

“I know who you are.” He grinned but she quickly dismissed his thoughts. “It’s not like I’m a stalker but I just happened to know who you are. That’s all.”

“Really?”

“Really. We attend the same school. You’re the new transferee, right? I remember you.”

“Oh, so that’s how it goes.” Gilt rolled his eyes. “You’re one of *those*girls. Okay.”

Jane whispered. “You’re impossible.”

Gilt smiled but did not comment. He postured straight and drank whatever was left on his tankard. He ordered another more.

He was tall, probably two to three inches taller than she was. Therefore, it was inevitable for Jane to smell his breath. Jane let out a cough.

“About earlier. What exactly are you doing?”

“Dilly-dallying-ho.”

He paused and drank in silence, continuing, “Ah-huh. Whatever distorted face you have chosen behind those glasses, you would hit on ‘em without regarding their appearance.”

“Yeah.” She said softly and drank.

Gilt turned his eyes away.

“Less judge-e, more thrilling.” Gilt commented. “So, no one has captivated your eyes yet?”

“None.”

“And why is that?”

“Let’s just say, I set my bar too high.”

“For real?” Gilt squinted his eyes.

“Yeah.” Jane nodded.

“There’s a lot of guys out there and you couldn’t choose one? How inimical can you be?”

She frowned and glanced.

“Look.” Jane pointed at someone. He was a tall, blonde-haired person, probably around 6’2. Wearing a long-sleeve under the varsity.

A question came almost instantly. “And? What about that guy?”

“Well, if you look at him, it makes you think, why would someone wear a long sleeve with a varsity jacket under 32 degrees Celsius? Anyone would be barbecued over the heat. And look, if he were just trying to look cool, would it sound right for him to remove his jacket or at least bring a t-shirt, but no.”

“I see nothing wrong with that.”

“Not yet.” Jane shook her head. “You see, when he was busy fiddling with his phone I managed to peek at his shirt. And you know what I saw?

“Dad Bod?”

“No.” She let out a breath. “He has hickeys. Not only one but five.”

“Aren’t we all bound to have more than one?”

“That means he has many strings. And I don’t like going out with someone that has many strings.”

“Why? I doubt that you have so much to offer.”

Jane’s hand moved like she had the reflexes of a cat and slapped his shoulder over his statement. Gilt just shook it off.

“I may not look like it,” Jane stared at him. She did not struggle to find some self-complementary words. “But I am a sophisticated woman.”

“Sophisticated?”

“Yes. I am a bachelorette. Aside from coming from a wealthy family, I’m smart, beautiful, and cute.”

“There’s something more about it.”

“What else would best describe me?”

Gilt wanted to restrain himself from saying any further. He does not want to offend her, but his interest was piqued.

“Why are you trying so hard to find the right guy?”

She fumbled over his question. “What do you mean? This is what every girl would want.”

“To find a prince charming and carry out like any other princesses in the fairy tales?”

“What are you – Hold on. This sounds like one of your casual insults again. Is that the reason why you’re alone here tonight?”

“No, no. This is not an insult, just a mere curiosity. You said it to yourself. You’re a bachelorette. A prestigious woman who has everything that any other girl lacks. Now tell me, why are you so desperate to throw yourself over other people? I don’t think that you’re just doing it for fun.”

She was speechless. The question got through her. Even she couldn’t explain why she acted so irrationally.

“Hey, don’t overthink it too much. I’m having a hard time understanding what I’m doing in my life. I have a cousin here. His name is Rick. I don’t know if you guys are friends, but the guy doesn’t give a damn about everything I said. I was worried about him, he’s stuck here for over – I don’t know, most of his childhood. And here I am, taking care of his ass, and what do I get? A punk attitude. Our relatives don’t give a damn about us here. But hey, on the bright side, we’re free from the nagging parents. So, don’t feel bad about what I said earlier.”

“That doesn’t validate the fact of how you insulted me.”

“Well, at least you heard my plight.”

“I never said I was interested in it.”

Gilt did offend her, but she didn’t take it so hard, rather, she was confused and concerned about Gilt’s mental faculties. Even if he ridiculed himself just to make her feel better, she couldn’t help but feel disturbed by the notion of being a mindless gal who only wants to find a wine that will pour her empty cup. She never saw herself like that, but now she felt fit for the embarrassment of her previous actions. Only for a moment, there is nothing wrong with wanting someone.

“Is that how you think of me?” She asked, with no expression, but not mad at all.

Gilt glanced at her.

“Do I look like a girl who is desperate for attention?” Jane asked again.

Gilt knew it. Behind those raven-sharp eyes, she was hurting.

“Oh boy,” Gilt muttered under his breath. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. I haven't been much myself lately.”

Gilt has not been himself lately. He felt this thing of guilt over the past few days. He may have hated Van for butting in without knowing much of the context, but he was right, Gilt has been putting too much stress on Kate.

“It’s ok. I get it.” She sighed and a leaden fell on her face. “I’ve been looking for attention all over the wrong places.”

“It’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

She shook her head. “Yes, it is.”

“Do you think it’s your fault?” He questioned her.

“I think so.” Jane appeared to believe it. “I know I am not good enough, that’s why my parents dumped me back in this place.”

“Do you think so? Have you ever given it a thought that there could be another reason why you’re here?”

She didn’t reply. They were silent for a while.

“Why does every person I like always turn me down?”

“You’re not being fair to yourself.”

“I-I don’t think there could be any other reason why they don’t like me. They left me here, alone.”

“For whatever reason it is, it is still unfair to you, but torturing yourself, thrusting a character that is not you is something you shouldn’t allow to do.”

Jane smiled. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He said raspingly.

A moment passed when Gilt smelled a familiar odor. It was something he was used to smelling especially when he was hungry. Blood. A fresh smell of blood.

Jane was about to give him her number, but Gilt disappeared from her sight.

Gilt’s speed declined as he found the source of the strong smell. A horrifying scenery greeted him. He heard not too far away from the wailing sirens from the police car. Seeing the raptured body of the woman was enough for him to move on.

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As Van followed the trace of blood, he found himself baffled. The blood completely melted in the air. He cannot follow the lingering mist of blood. Whatever it was, it blended amongst the crowd. He frantically observes the place, looking for any suspicious people, until he finds Kate’s sister, Mia. She appeared to have a date. It was a tall man, his skin was tan, taller than him, and has more muscles.

Mia gave a delightful impression, but there was something quite off with that man. Mia was even odder, her face was blank, smiling ghastly, and her eyes devoid of emotion. That concluded his suspicion. He sent Kate a voice message.

“Kate? I’m pretty sure the new monster is with your sister. You should come back.”

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Something black whizzed in front of her. Her hands immediately emitted mana and raised it. It’s an offensive spell that she prepared to onset if she felt that there was danger nearby. Another whizzing came, then stopped in the middle. She recognized who it was when he turned around. It was Gilt.

“What are you doing here?” Gilt questioned her.

“Strolling.” Kate replied. Her heart sank in relief.

“Strolling? All by yourself? I went to the forest and there was a dead body there. Look, it seems that we have a new monster, and it’s gruesome.”

“I already know. Van saw it with my sister.” She paused. “My sister! We need to go back, now!”

Gilt carried Kate back to the park where the music fest was held. The music grew much louder than before and the audience was going along with it.

“Where’s Van?” Kate asked.

“Don’t worry. I will find him.”

Gilt accepted every sound and noise within the vicinity. He filtered out the unnecessary and nasty noises from the people until he heard a familiar voice. Someone has been following them with effortless footsteps.

*Probably Van*. Gilt thought.

He carried Kate to a much closer scene and his sharp eyes caught the two going behind to an uncharted route.

“Uh-oh,” Gilt muttered.

“What do you mean with ‘Uh-oh’?” Kate questioned.

“It seems that our monster is getting laid on your sister.”

Kate’s eyes widened. “I’m sorry what?!”

“I said, there’s a monster that was luring your sister.”

Kate’s phone suddenly rang and heard the thing she feared the most. After hearing his brief words, Kate immediately went out of the café.

Kate ran ahead and Gilt followed her. It was better to walk to avoid being detected by the enemy, but they have to run faster to catch on to them. Even though Van was strong, he had no control over his power. Hence, he would probably become a deadweight for them if they were going to slay the monster. Just ahead, Van followed them in the alleyway between two buildings. Mia was taken by the suspected monster there and they took a wide turn before doing their business.

Van stopped at the corner with his head peeking. The man held Mia and began to kiss her neck. Her eyes were seemingly all-black by now. The man had finally shown his true nature. His fangs appeared and grew. Instantly, Van felt something snap inside him again. His flesh and organs begin to twitch and finally, the Hunter emerges.

The monster felt something disturbing the wind and a presence hiding a few steps away from them. When his sharp nails were about to reach to kill Mia, something plowed him to the ground. As Icarus rose, coughing the dust and blood that blocked his throat, yellow eyes flash under the shade of his face. It’s calm but threatening. He had never felt this much hostility before.

“So, finally, I have found you, hunter.” Icarus said, feeling the pain at the back of his head.

“Look, I don’t know who or what you are, but you’d better back off.”

Van stepped forward, leaving no space for him to attack Mia.

“Do not worry for the girl’s life. I have only come to kill you.”

“Me?” Van asked. He was unable to feel fear which has become the motivation for him to face the monster. “What do you want from me?”

“I’ve been summoned to kill you.”

There’s no lie in his words, he can tell it. This man in front of him had arranged the murders to lure him out.

“Those bodies, those innocent people, you killed them just to lure me out?”

“Well, it’s not personal.”

“For me, it is.”

With great speed, Van lunged. He threw punches from left to right. Icarus lurched back and jerked sideways to confuse Van with effort to avoid the attacks. Icarus went to Van’s stomach and another right swing stunned him.

“I thought you were strong. It seems their worries are in the wrong place.”

“Who are they?”

Van was sent ahead as Icarus delivered a blow on his chin. He coughed blood and got up.

“Them who hide in the shadows and manipulate the strings in this town.”

Van managed to block his left swing and returned the favor with rapid jabs right into his face. Icarus’s dark wings spread as he stepped back and drew back. The wings slapped against Van’s face. The hunter did not bother to chase.

“They deemed you to be dangerous, which is quite the opposite of what they claim is. It seems that the hunter became the hunted.” Icarus beamed a grin. “For quite some time now I have had difficulty adjusting to this modern era’s technology, but I managed to memorize a lot of stuff within such a short time and even familiarized some faces including now. I don’t know what this is but this is a blessing from those people who saved me from that eternal suffering.”

“You… You talk too much.” Van sprang and rolled over. He kicked him in front and spun around, his fist slapping at Icarus’s face. Then another kick came from spinning on the other side. A fist flew and hit Icarus' chest and lastly, Van sprang and hit his face with his left knee. With every hit, Icarus felt the warmth of his fist.

Icarus floated away.

“I got all those moves from the video games,” Van said.

Icarus felt everything from his attacks, but it appeared that it wasn’t enough to hurt him. He leaned closer and chuckled, wiping off the blood on his mouth.

“You’re quite a fighter, hunter. Though your strength is not ripe, it is for the best to take you down while you’re not as dangerous as they say.”

Icarus claws sprung out and intended to move forward.

That was until someone seized his movements. He struggled to move and flap his wings but to no use. Kate was already ahead of him.

“Perfectus controlos.”

When Kate saw what the monster had done to his sister, she tightened the grip and slammed Icarus to the ground. Then to the wall back and forth. His capabilities had been completely ceased by her spell. His body strained with its nerves bursting against the spell.

“You have 10 seconds to tell me what you did to my sister or else I’ll burn you.”

“Kate, calm down.” Van said as he rushed to her side. Gilt turned his attention to Mia and carried her back to their house.

“The killing was intended to bait me and lure me out.”

Kate began choking the life out of Icarus. She ignored Van’s words.

“You’ve wasted 7 seconds of your life.” She said, harshly and hard.

A croaking snap reverberated as his neck became weary and awkwardly bent. Kate finally let go and laid the dead body of Icarus.

“Kate! Why?!” Van yelled.

“He tried to kill my sister! Murdered people and nearly had his hands on you! What are we supposed to do with him? Take him alive?”

“Yes,” Van protested. “For whatever reason it is, he’s working for some people who wanted me dead. It probably has a connection to what happened to this city years ago.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t.” Van spat the words vehemently. “Killing is not the solution to everything. Whatever he is, we don’t know if he deserves to get killed. We’re not the executioners. We can’t kill people just because we deemed that they’re dangerous.”

Kate was silent all the time. It didn’t appear that his argument would yield a satisfying result for now. He was terrified. Van didn’t think that she could just snap someone’s neck just like that. Surely, he felt some sense of hypocrisy ever since he killed some monsters and allowed Kate to do so. But all of those times, he was mindless and didn’t have the right mental faculty to reason. Most of the monsters he killed did not have a sense of intelligence. This time, it was a person that can be reason with and might turn to the good side if we’re given a chance.

Van came to pass her, but stopped motioning and stared at the body for a moment. There was a jerky movement. Bones began to croak from his neck and rearrange themselves back to normal. Icarus levitated and limbered every inch of his body. He stared into Van’s eyes for a long while. Then, he turned to Kate.

“That is quite an impressive magic you have, little witch.” Icarus grimaced. “That felt good.”

“How come you’re still alive?” Van said after being silent for a moment.

“What’s with the dreadful expression? You’re the one who said that killing is a bad idea, am I right? Aren’t you supposed to be glad that your witch right there is wrong?”

Icarus smiled and clenched his jaw before turning his attention to Kate. Mana began to gather around Kate again. Icarus felt it and instead of moving on his mission, he withdrew. His wing flapped and went up to the sky.

*“Crawlus!”*Kate shouted.

An eagle claw made of white light took hold over Icarus’s wing, but with an effortless move, Icarus allowed a part of his wing to be ripped off.

Before he can finally get away, something pierces his stomach and his wings. He was still able to fly despite that his balance was off. It was the other man who saved the little girl. Gilt’s red eyes remained stuck to Icarus with such hostility.

Icarus groaned as he took off to the sky. A part of the bone in his wing was torn off. His throat tightened again. It seemed that it was not properly healed.

“I’ll get back to you, little witch, but first, I must find a way to fight the hunter all by himself and kill him. I will not allow anyone to stop me from gaining my freedom.”

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Thankfully, Mia wasn’t hurt. It appeared that she was unconscious because of that monster’s doing. However, Mia remembered him. After that, words quickly fumbled in her mouth trying to explain to Kate and she cried.

Kate can only hug her tight. This very moment reminded Kate of the time when Mia was a fussy toddler. She’s always going here and there free of worries about the world. After moments of what seemed like hours of tears and whimpering, Mia finally fell to sleep.

She placed her head on the pillow and got out as silently as possible. Descending with a hastened pace, they felt her beckoning fury. Laswell came over from sitting. His face was worried.

“How is she?” Laswell asked.

Once she heard Laswell's sober voice, all of her vicious thoughts calmed down. Kate’s eyes casted to him.

“Fine. Mia’s sleeping right now.”

“What was she doing at the festival?”

“I don’t know. She wasn’t supposed to be there.”

Kate slipped her way into the kitchen. She drank a glass of water and sat down. Her hands clenched as she looked down, closing her eyes. She was suppressing the animosity swelling inside her. Right now, she can’t lose control.

Laswell got to the chair in front of her. Van and Gilt were silent the whole time. Gilt most of all understands what’s going on with her right now.

Kate’s normal childhood and teenage years were completely robbed of her. Regardless, she was the kind of woman who wouldn’t back down simply because she has no one to lean against her back. She had Mia, she was her strength, a family to protect.

“W-why? I always do my best to keep her away from this and yet t-they they were able to get their hands on my sister.” Droplets of tears escaped from her eyes.

Laswell peered over her face, flushing in red.

“I’m so sorry.”

Laswell held her hands. He looked straight into her eyes.

“I know that you’re thinking that you could do better, but sometimes there are things we can’t control. Don’t beat yourself up just because something misfortune happens to you.” Laswell let go of her hands.

Kate took a breather and went to the kitchen sink. She washed her face and erased her thoughts. They gathered in the lounge and reassessed the situation.

“Van, since you were the first one to arrive.” Laswell shot straight away. “What does it want?”

“I don’t know.” Van shrugged his shoulders and observed Kate for a brief moment before he turned to others. “But one thing for sure, he’s working with those people who were responsible for the city’s wreckage years ago.”

Laswell poured himself and Gilt a glass of wine.

“That’s first.” Gilt started. He shook the wine glass as if stirring it. “It appears that they’re making their move.”

“Obviously. They want me.” Van said. His arm hunched on one another.

“How come? I doubt that you have value for them.” Gilt replied. He blew a lock of his hair. “No offense.”

“Did I skip the part where that guy said he killed those people to lure me out?” Van sat and stole the wine, then poured a glass. He drank it.

There was silence. The room was instantly filled with heavy air.

“Well damn.” Gilt finally broke the tension. “And yet you deliberately came despite being alone.”

“Gilt,” Kate said with a monotonous tone. “My sister was the victim. If it weren’t for Van, Mia would be dead by now.”

Gilt shut his mouth. His personality had settled in awe. Of course, he did notice. He felt Kate’s slight annoyance over his words and was stuck in silence. Van strode forward to their conversation to break the heavy silence.

“What now?” Van asked.

“There’s nothing we can do for now,” Kate said firmly. “I hate to break it to you but would you restrain yourself from going out late at night?”

“Why?”

“Well, considering you’re the target for some reason, you should mind keeping your guard. I won’t be able to help you if I don’t know where you are.”

“Why not stay here for a few nights?” Laswell asked. His suggestion rationally sound, for Kate and Gilt at least. Kate’s face brightened of the suggestion, but Van, would likely won’t consider this as an option.

“He’s right.” Kate said and leaned forward. “Why don’t you stay here for a couple of days until we sort this out?”

Van shook his head. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing right now. They felt his silent protest. It was all too sudden. Just last year, he was just living a normal year as a teenager, well, not all normal. But now he has to face problems such as monsters. Although, his brother might be in danger if he continued to live with him.

“Van,” Kate called out, pulling his attention back to her.

“No, and that’s it.”

They could only sigh and hoped for the best.

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Van decided to stay behind. He wanted to make sure that Kate was fine. He made himself dinner while Kate was upstairs observing Mia’s condition. She was still unconscious, but despite the trouble being finally away, Kate couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling which was understandable. Even if she told herself that Mia’s condition was stable, she couldn’t find herself settling idly by watching her younger sister’s state.

Observing one step outside the door, Van couldn’t help to remember one time he got himself into an accident. He was eager to learn how to bike. The only one he can count on was Timothy. They were young so they tend to be reckless, especially Timothy and his ridiculous way of teaching Van how to ride a bike. The perfect time he could learn how to bike was summer. It wasn’t pretty when Van knew how they would proceed.

They were camping at that time and it would take no less than four hours to ride in the cabin. There was a perfect spot, a downslope road, and that’s when Timothy got his idea. He pushed Van down to it and soon followed at his back. He tried so hard to reel the bike away, but they soon crashed into a wood. Their parents were so worried at that time, but they weren’t exempt from getting scolded. Remembering that time, he saw Kate cared for her sister just as his foster parents cared for them.

“Hey.” Van said softly. “I prepared some dinner for you. You should eat.”

She turned around. Her eyes were hollowed. “I’m not hungry.”

“Don’t do that. You should eat something. You’ve been through a lot this day. Please, eat something. Think about her, she’ll be the one who’s going to worry about you if you get sick.”

“I doubt that.” She continued, trying to put some enthusiasm in her voice. “She would roast me hard for being careless.” Her voice trailed off in dismay, and she laughed nervously.

“That’s what siblings do.” Van commented.

She nodded. “Yeah. That’s what we normally do.”

Kate opened her mouth savoring jalapeno cornbread. She also had a taste of soup in her mouth and melted the cornbread. Van’s eyes struck her sloppy way of eating. How could she not? She hasn’t eaten anything he served for a few years.

“You like it?” Van asked. Even he was unsure if his cooking was her liking.

Kate had to drink water before responding.

“Yeah. It’s good.”

“You know, I was looking forward to the music festival.” Van said after a pause. His sound of disappointment softened her.

“Why?”

“I was looking forward to a dance.”

Kate stopped. Her eyes measured him, but he looked down. He felt a tremendous amount of shame from saying those words. But she didn’t say anything until they were done eating. It was not like he doesn’t want to, but it was not the right time to talk about it considering Mia’s condition.

Mia woke up moments after they ate. She had been calling Kate in her dreams and got up. Kate responded quickly the moment she heard her name. She was pale and far from recovering. She didn’t finish eating her food and Kate made her drink some vitamins to help her recover from her sickness.

Van was downstairs, he volunteered to clean the dishes when he saw her get up again to check on Mia.

“You don’t have to do the dishes. You can leave. I’m so embarrassed, I’m making you do this.” Kate said.

“Don’t be. I’m glad I can be anything of use to you. You saved my ass more than once.” Van said after he washed his hands. He was already done washing the plates. “At least let me do this to return the favor.”

After he dried his hands with a towel, Van walked.

“Where are you going?” Kate asked.

“I’m going to go home now. It seems that there’s nothing I have to do.”

Turning around, Van once halted again when the chandelier began to change its colors, like from a ballroom dance. The chandelier gave out a magnificent glow to the dimly lit room and her honey-glinted hair sparkled along her pair of deep blue eyes.

Kate reached for his arm.

“You said you were looking forward to dance?”

She didn’t need to spell it out just to know what he meant when he said *those* words.

“Would you like to dance?” she asked.

“I-I’m not sure if this is the right time.”

“You’ve been considerate and helpful. Let me do this to you.” He did not reply. She continued. “This is not our first dance. Why are you hesitant now?”

She reached out, pulled him closer, and wrapped her arms around his neck, playing with the few strings of hair at the nape of his neck. Van’s fear drained away in an instant as their skin touched and he let himself beam in her care.

Van held her waist carefully. He heard something click. It was the record player disc. Curtains were drawn and the soothing jazz started just right. They started a slow dance.

“Crazy day, huh.” Van started.

“Crazy day it is,” Kate murmured and burrowed her head in his chest.

“You alright?” Van asked. He had to make sure that she wasn’t pretending to be fine.

“I am now,” Kate replied. Her eyes brightened.

Van didn’t need to ask. He could see the way she stared at him, luring him in with her wide ocean eyes as they flashed, staring up at him. Her lips curved into a taunting smile – brilliant under the glittering chandelier.

“What happened to that confidence of yours?” she raised her eyebrow. “I remember the first time you invited me. You were so confident.”

“I had this thing.”

“What thing?”

Kate held his face to see his eyes. Embarrassment stirred in him.

“I only appeared to be confident at the start,” he took it all in. “when we’re still strangers.”

“Aren’t we now?”

*I felt I’d known you my entire life.* He didn’t say it, but she knew there was a deeper meaning in his words.

“You know, you’re cute when you’re flummoxed.” Kate smiled widely. His face flushed. “You don’t need to hesitate with me.”

Van beamed. “It kinda reminded me of William Blake’s poem.”

“You like poetry?” she asked. A curious glance landed on him.

Van nodded. “Yes,” he explained further. “It was William Blake’s Infant Joy,” Van recited. “I have no name. I am but two days old.—what shall I call thee? I happy am. Joy is my name,—Sweet joy befall thee. Pretty joy. Sweet joy but two days old, Sweet joy I call thee; Thou dost smile. I sing the while Sweet joy befalls thee.”

“What does it mean?”

“Well, I understand that the rare opportunity of finding happiness only comes by in the briefest and shortest moment and that one must embrace it and make the most of it. This is one of the rare opportunities I couldn’t let slip through.”

Kate smiled at the thought.

“Have you written any poems?”

Van dismissively shook his head. “No. I’m not good at it.”

“I think you should try,” she looked up to him. “I think you’d become a great poet if you try.”

“No. I do not think so. I’m only looking at observing things.” He continued. “Do you know what I like about poetry?”

She shook her head.

Van answered his own question. “Poetry is like art. It takes time to form the words. It conveys a delicate part of the profound meaning of life. It’s universal which means we understand it on different scales. Some would agree that art is superficial and obsolete,”

“But it was meant to be like that.” She conferred.

“Art is a mystery that derives from the deepest part of our soul. We might see it differently, but we can still appreciate its beauty,” his eyes glinted upon landing on hers, gleaming in a bluish wave. “No matter the angle.”

“I was wondering,” Van stated in curiosity. “You’re a witch, right?”

She nodded in response.

“What can you guys do aside from magic? Like can you guys also do voodoo stuff?”

Kate ticked an eyebrow, chuckled, and replied. “Yes, but I don’t do voodoo. I can do a lot of things.”

“What things?”

“I can make things appear and disappear.”

Van’s eyes widened.

Kate held back her laughter. “Not like that!” she continued. “I mean this.”

Kate snapped her fingers. On top of the living room, the chandelier scattered into tiny pieces, stars scattered all over and the lights illuminated the dark sky.

Van’s head hung high as she gazed with wonder. Then he looked down at her.

“Cool.” That was all he could say.

She was still staring at him. Those alluring dark eyes pulled her closer to desire. And she looked at his lips. She wanted to jerk him and kiss him hard.

Van moved a bit faster. She followed his lead like from those leaves dancing around the wind outside, she let him carry over her. He spun her away from his body and then back in. A perfect ambiance.

They’re drunk with boldness and passion. Her heart pounded hard. He came closer, one inch away from her breath. She did not resist and waited. Van wanted her tantalizing lips. Her forbidden rose. But he knew his limits – *they*knew their limits.

He won’t kiss her or maybe he will.

Their eyes spoke of desires. They wanted to drink with each other as if they had longed for it. Boldly, Van took control and gently pushed her head against him. Their faces were two inches away. The moment their lips were one centimeter away, someone groaned and cried loudly upstairs. Kate quickly took off and checked on her sister. Mia was having a nightmare. Her condition was not different from the others.

Snickering over the missed chance, Van brought himself out of the house and walked home with the trail of tease lingering on his head.

## Interlude

*Where… was I? Hm.*

He found himself in the depths of the woods. He can tell that it was night. The ceaseless amounts of stars continued to bask the earth and stretched infinitely.

M-my… My name is…? What? My head… urghh! I’m not quite sure what happened to me, but my head felt like it got hit by something hard.

He began to wander in this lonesome forest. Not too long, he came to a treehouse. Below it, there’s a small house, abandoned. He hastily, with tottering movements, walked inside. He sat and gathered his thoughts. Lost at words in the moment of clarity.

The memories briefly became clear to him. A man in his 30s appeared in his visions—calling him by his name.

Alastor?

“What kind of name is that?”

Then another flash of images came by, disrupting his mind. A battle that likely took over before this time. Several pictures were engraved in his mind. A man in metal armor, him and others were being chased by enemies, then the bronze-eyed woman came to him. She has an angelic face.

“Caroline.” He muttered. “I’m a mercenary. I was tasked to protect her, but…”

An incident came in, the hunters conjured a huge spell that opened up a portal and sucked him in. Then he woke up in this foreign world. Alastor began to look around if there was any portal, but no less than a single structure was in the desolated ground. He realized by now he may not be in his world but in the other. He had no other choice but to move forward.

“This is going to be a doozy week.”

Alastor was sure of it. If he was in a different world there was a huge possibility that their culture, norms, and everything might be different. Alastor let out a huge sigh as he ventured through the forest, letting the dimmed light of the future pave his path.

## Chapter 4

Alastor slept in the abandoned house last night.

After resting, Alastor started to observe around and he busied himself by tidying everything. It was quick but messy work. Most of his time was spent cleaning the ground. The place was thoroughly cleansed, except for the dirty sofa laying in the living room. Then there was the roof. Last night he had to endure the dripping sounds as he tried to sleep.

After fixing the rooftop and cleaning the house, Alastor had to look for a source of water, therefore, he walked over the forest. Not too far, behind his backyard was a river. The only thing that bothered him was how to get water without a container. He lifted his head and gazed at the sky. The clouds gathered into a sullen and gray sobering raincloud. He needs to hurry.

Alastor used his magic to conjure a squared figure that trapped a large amount of water. As soon as he tried to levitate the box, he found it hard to lift. He could barely move. It was harder than he thought. So, he decided that he should just bring the items he wanted to wash. There was a lot of work after that. He had to wash the cushions of the sofa, and the cover sheets, including his clothes, leaving only his underwear. He decided to retire on the swing on top of the tree, relaxing. The gloomy cloud right now was out of his sight, which was good. He needed his clothes to be dried by this afternoon.

Alastor woke up not too long but was because of his grumbling stomach. Rising from the fetal position, Alastor grabbed his sword resting against the log. He jumped down and came outside to get his clothes and to his surprise, they were already dried. Maybe it was because of magic. He went out into the woods, and soon enough, a deer caught his eyes, drinking water from the river. Alastor was watchful of his prey. His knife slowly came off its sheath. He held the tip of the blade, aligned his sight on the deer.

He held his breath and his knife was flung into the air. It was a hit.

A gash opened, the blood pouring out from its neck. The knife swooped into the neck and killed the deer. Alastor thereafter enjoyed his meal by roasting it. He already decided to move on and find relative living beings. He had no idea where he was, but he hoped that the portal teleported him to Earth, or better back to his world, Radiya.

Alastor took a deep sigh, kicked a stone, and started to run. He leaped over the ledges and boulders, then at the end of the woods, he found a huge fence. He cut it open and walked outside and a wide street greeted him. Alastor checked himself figuring out if he forgot something. It appeared that he had nothing to worry about and instead, he found sunglasses. He walked to the street with his sunglasses on.

As he walked by, all people were staring at him with confused looks. Alastor walked hastily out of the crowded place. Turning over the alley, he heard a scream from a lady. He dashed, breaking another two rights and one left. He found two thieves harassing an old lady, fighting for her bag.

“Listen to me, old hag! If you value what little life you had, you better give us what we want!” The thief yelled.

The other thief finally noticed Alastor and gave him a smug look.

“What are you looking at?!” the thief vociferated.

“Let… the… lady… go.” Alastor said, his words were filled with malicious intent.

“Or what?”

The thief pulled out a knife. Alastor walked forward, heavily and calculatingly.

“Looks like we have a hero here.”

The thief pulled closer and swung his knife vertically. He was sure it was fast, but Alastor saw as much. He jink and slipped, caught the thief’s hand, then punched his elbow, snapping it like a twig. The thief screamed and fell on his knees.

“My arm!” the fallen thief cried in pain.

“Buy a new one.” Alastor dismissed him.

The fear was clearly expressed on the remaining thief’s face.

“Look, man. We’re broke.”

“And all you could think of the solution is robbing an old lady? Get a job.” The mercenary said.

The thief who was pretending to surrender went for his knife from behind. What he failed to comprehend was that Alastor was aware how scumbag like him think. He saw how the robber smiles cheekily. Before he could make a move, Alastor gutted him and delivered another uppercut that knocked him down. The pain jolted throughout his body. The thief’s face burrowed first on the ground.

Alastor turned to the old lady and helped her get up.

“Thank you for helping me. If you didn’t come, my precious belongings would be gone forever.”

She took out the money from her pocket. Two hundred dollars in total. Alastor wasn’t familiar with the currency in this world, he’d assumed it might be even more than what he thought it was, but he wasn’t going to reject her kindness.

Alastor felt guilty for taking her money, but he can live with it. He tied the thieves and said his goodbye, then left while the old lady was waiting for the cop.

He went back to the alley, thinking about what he should do next. He was looking around when a mirror caught his attention. Staring at his reflection, he does look weird at least for the citizens in this world. He turned around and allowed himself a moment to think. As he thought of invisibility, his armor, and his sword faded into thin light.

“I never knew I had that kind of spell.”

Alastor continued on his journey. He made his way into the busy town, staring mindlessly at the stores. Along the way, he stopped at a café. Smelling the delightful scent of food, he entered the store. A lady, younger than him, accommodated him. He glanced at her uniform then to her chest where her name was displayed ‘Kate’.

“Good morning, sir.” She greeted him with politeness. “Please sit over there. Sorry, our place is a bit crampy. We’ve been doing some renovations.”

No wonder. The café was full of people, with too little space to walk through. Alastor only nodded and walked hastily on the single stool in front of the table. The system of service was very like his world, in that, he assumed that he could adjust at a normal pace. Alastor opened the menu. That language caught him by surprise. All the while, Kate was observing him quietly. Alastor might not notice it, but Kate heard the loud rumbling of his stomach. She let out a faint chuckle and that caught his attention.

“What?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing.”

Alastor turned his head around.

*Does she know I’m having trouble reading?* He thought.

Alastor learned so very little about their language, only the basics, but some of the menus seem to be foreign.

“Any suggestions?” Alastor asked.

“How about you try our pie?”

His brow ticked before conferring of her choice.

“Very well then.”

Kate left him and went to the kitchen. Moments later, the lady brought a hot and delicious smell of pie.

As soon as she served the pie in front of him, Alastor grabbed a fork in his right hand and his left-hand a knife. He started to slice the pie. Struck by the fork, he ate it with satisfaction on his face. He could feel the pie melting in his mouth.

The moment he finished eating, he saw the bill under the menu. As he looked at the paper, he was charged with eight dollars. He doesn’t know what dollars mean, but he knew what the number eight was.

After drinking the water, he went to the counter. He took out a 100-dollar bill.

“You have anything other than one hundred dollars? Maybe 50 or 10?” Kate asked him as she accepted the payment.

“Uhm, no. Sorry.” Alastor shook his head.

She nodded. She took out the change and gave it to him.

“So, are you new here?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Where did you come from?”

Alastor slowly shook his head.

“It’s far away. I doubt you heard of it. Anyways, thanks for your service.”

Alastor went out with haste. He intentionally left the waitress hanging. He has no cover for that part and she might get suspicious. His stroll had led him to a park where there was a gathering of people who wore foreign, more normal than what he saw in the other people before. They wore different guises. Some wore armor that was unlike what he was familiar with and then some women dyed their hair different colors. What was more questionable was how those women manage to attach their tails on their bodies.

Contemplating over the thought, he didn’t notice that his armor and sword already resurfaced. He walked across the pedestrian lane. As he got closer, he saw a poster, ‘Maryvale’s cosplay convention’.

The word ‘Cosplay’ didn’t register in his head. He had some ideas, one that includes an orgy. It may sound horrible to think, but the way some of them wear luscious attires was deemed to be so.

Alastor was eager to go to the said convention, but his attention was altered by a blaring sound of a store one block away. He saw the robbers get out of the bank. Their faces were hidden by the balaclava. They came on foot and gave a warning shot to the passing cars to cross the road.

“Move!” the robber shouted as they ran.

Alastor was in his thoughts, thinking deeply about how this town managed to live many years with these types of people living among them. It wasn’t different from the towns in his world, but there were only a little too few men who dared to amok. This city, however, doesn’t have a proper security system.

He may be derailed by his thoughts, but his instincts are sharper than ever. The moment the robber pulled the trigger, Alastor withdrew his sword, slashing vertically in the air. The bullets snap in two and flash as it hits the ground.

Alastor moved in, waving his sword from one robber to another until he hit the end of the line. Their weapons, the sacks of money, and even their ammo were cut and fell to the ground. They were lucky enough that he wasn’t eager to kill them, otherwise, they would be dead which would be inconvenient for him if he made any loud noise, judging that he was in a different world.

The robbers kneeled on the ground, begging not to end their life. Alastor heard loud applause from the convention. Moments after, police sirens can be heard not too far. This was the part where he was worried about. Authority tends to privy personal information. Given that he did not come from this world, his origins would be questioned. Alastor was stuck in his position and didn’t have an idea what he should do until someone’s hand held his arm.

A lady, a few years older than him, appeared out of nowhere. Her stature texture was somewhat different from any others he has seen around. She must be a foreigner, but still from this world.

“You weren’t supposed to be here.” She said, almost making herself sound in a huff.

“Who are you?”

“I’m like you.” She claimed, “Look, I have no time to explain but you need to come with me.”

Before Alastor can retort, the lady teleports them out of the scene.

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Alastor barely processed the course of events that flashed in his eyes. One second, he was told that she and he are alike, and the next thing was that he was teleported away to an unknown place.

Unlike many others, this one has the semblance of a familiar place. A prison, in a chamber. It was dim and cold. The only thing that provided him with the security of warmth was the light piercing through the window.

Alastor closed his eyes, feeling the alikeness of his situation before in the Vesoga Plain as he touched the wall made of cobblestones. He was tortured days and nights for information. He didn’t break, but it left him scarred.

Contrary to his thoughts, this prison was more of a room for someone. It has a bed, larger than what a prisoner could have. A bathroom, lights, and so many things that could never be thought possible to exist in this kind of place.

Alastor immediately gripped his sword when he heard a loud screech from the rusty metallic door. It was the woman, the same lady who pulled him out of the park. She stood confidently, unarmed, judging him thoroughly with her sharp, dark eyes, and with furrowing brows. Her face was partially illuminated by the light from the sealed window. Her brown hair was pulled back and fashioned into a bun top that hung loose.

“I get that this is new for you, but I assure you that I mean no harm.”

She came closer without hesitation. He wished he could share the same sentiment with her, but he was inclined to his suspicious nature.

“Is that the reason why you put me in prison?” He asked coldly. His sword waved in front of her as a warning.

She shook her head. “You’re right and wrong at the same time. This place is indeed a prison… once, but that was 70 years ago. This entire chamber was reformed into something better.”

“Like what? A Parlor?”

She chuckled. “No. A place where supernatural beings can live with rent of course. But we are willing to give some exemption to those who came to the other world.”

Alastor blinked. “And what do you know about my world?”

“Because I came from there too.”

The moment he heard those words, his grip on the sword loosened.

“Really? What country?” Alastor asked. He sounded and looked curious. The sword sheathed back to its scabbard.

“You wouldn’t know.”

“Try me.”

“Viscati.”

Alastor gulped. “That’s impossible.”

“During the War of Blights, our country became the battleground between the Great Generals of the Gahoda Kingdom and the Arbiters. Their battle shook the entire country and the consequence of their battle taxed the land until it crumbles and drowned at the bottom of the ocean.”

Alastor sensed no lie in her words, but that does not mean she was clear of suspicion. He lay still, quiet, turning his focus inward. This was the time when he had to clear his mind and carefully decide. A sense of calm settled on him, washing away all irrational claims. His eyes snapped open. Alastor returned with a reformed and calmed attitude.

“All right, I’ll listen. What is it you want?”

She didn’t answer right away and she began to walk outside. He followed her silently in the long corridor. His eyes traveled from one person to another, but his eyes avoided when their eyes settled. It was nothing but a glance, seeing that there was someone new.

“This place was reformed so that people like us, outcasts, can live in harmony, and be able to blend with the people in this world. For that reason, we assembled a small council.” She continued. He’ll keep that in mind. “I know you’re distrustful. That’s what keeps you alive all this time. In a world full of monsters, you can never be sure when they’ll attack. But here… in this world, they rarely appear.”

“Rarely?”

“Unlike our world, Earth’s monsters mostly live in the depths of the woods and some rural, unknown places.”

“What about here? Wherever this is? Does this place have monsters for you?”

“This place’s name is Maryvale. A city we considered home.” She added. “We consist of three members. Jay, Hive, and me, Layla.”

They stopped in front of the elevator. She pressed her thumb on the screen, reading her fingerprint. The elevator lifted them. He was unsure how tall the place was as there was no list of numbers on the panel. There are only names and levels in it. As the door opened, Layla went out first. It was then Alastor saw where they were in right then. It was a compound, composed of apartments, row by row.

“It’s crampy, but we managed to live, despite some unwanted noises sometimes.” Layla walked ahead of him. He obediently followed.

“How many years have you lived here?” Alastor asked.

As they talk, Alastor’s instinct commanded his thoughts, and felt the flow of mana, from the city, but the people who lived in this complex apartment possessed an abnormal level of mana, but most importantly, something below the complex baffled him. He shook his head and ran his fingers to briefly massage his forehead before turning his attention back to Layla.

“4 years,” she replied sharply, “but I’ve been here ever since I was 10 or 11. The first year of my life here wasn’t smooth. There are birth certificates that are needed, identification, and people who despise the existence of the supernatural that include us otherworlders.” She continued. “I’ve been in this show for years. I knew that the system here does not favor everybody.”

“I can see the similarity from ours.”

“That’s true.” She nodded lightly. “Your world is brutal. This one… err, more of, a sleeping dragon.”

“I couldn’t say the same thing.”

“You asked me what I want from you.”

“Yeah.”

“I think the proper paraphrase is – what do you want from us?”

“Excuse me?” Alastor darted his sharp eyes. “Before you snatched me, I was doing fine. I didn’t ask for your help.”

She rolled her eyes. “This again. You’re way too confident. How many weeks have passed since you came here?”

Alastor didn’t answer. Layla was getting impatient.

“Answer me.” she waved her hand in front of him.

He sighed. “Just last night.” He replied to her question.

She paused, winked once, surprised.

“Is something wrong?” Alastor asked.

She snapped and shook her head. “Nothing. It’s just that, your bravado amazes me. Going out in the city with no knowledge and… getting in trouble the second day you arrive. That already tells that troubles follow you everywhere.”

“First, technically it’s my first day. Second, I won’t be provoked if someone won’t provoke me.” Alastor corrected her. “And how would I know what kind of the world is this if I haven’t emerged myself to the kind neighborhood?” He spoke with confidence. “What can I say? I’m adaptable.”

“Certainly, that would add to another lineup of reasons why I should keep my eyes on you.” Layla stared at him.

“Is charming part of the list?”

“And witty too.”

“Normally, I don’t talk too much, but I will make consideration for you.”

“You don’t seem to be bothered or fazed, why is that?”

“As I said, I’m adaptable.”

“I get it. But, don’t you feel fear, perhaps worried?”

Alastor slightly nodded. “I don’t usually express it, but it bothers me. But what good is it for me if I panic? The only thing I could do is to move forward. I don’t feel, I adapt.”

“Ok. Enough of that.” She looked at Alastor, mentally judging him.

Layla led him to the stairway down the exit. Alastor settled his eyes on her, judging her narration. He was not exactly thrilled to be part of her little community. Impressed, but still hesitant.

“Will you join us?” she asked. “We can provide you with necessities, and teach you things about this world.”

Alastor flashed a smile. “I’ll have to pass.”

“Why?” Her brows wrinkled.

“Various reasons,” he stated.

“What is it then?”

“You’re not telling me something.”

“What part?”

“You and these people who live here, armed with magic.” Alastor nodded over the people who walked past them, almost lifeless. “C’mon, you can’t tell me you don’t have an objective, a plan perhaps.”

“I see. So, you still doubt us.” She stated.

“Everyone has their agenda, even if they don’t appear to be so.” Alastor started to walk to the exit, “Thanks anyway.”

“Wait.”

Alastor turned back. Layla offered him a card. “This will lead you to a place. A gathering of mercenaries. I supposed that you’re a hunter or at least an adventurer back in Radiya. So, I was hoping you might be able to find a job there, at least before you decide what to do next.”

Alastor was silent. Despite the rudeness of declining her offer, Layla still pertained to kindness. Perhaps, her actions are just out of kindness, maybe he was too quick to judge, but he had to play safe.

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Alastor departed from the apartment complex. Her offer continued to ring in his thoughts like a loop from a broken track record. Nevertheless, it was the right call to decline her offer.

Alastor was eating at a hotdog stand. He made his payment and walked over to the alley away from the crowd. He didn't get mixed into trouble again.

He sighed sharply. Moments after, his foot had led him to a bar. He hesitated at first as he saw the bar sign ‘closed’. Maybe he picked the wrong time to barge in.

Alastor turned his heels around when he heard a soft groan coming from behind. The door itself moved and gave a huge berth when he came close to inspect.

Alastor peered inside, yet the bar was empty. No one was there to be seen, not even the owner. Before closing in, Alastor made sure there was no trap on the door or any other part of the bar. It was bad enough that there’s no one for him to talk to, let alone the stuttering bulb that was keeping his attention away.

Although perspiration was not part of his agency, he couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something amiss in this eerie place in which had his heart skip a beat. No matter what place was, Alastor would still recognize the bottles of wine and other beverages lining the back of the counter. His eyes swept behind the counter and slipped in.

He poured the expensive wine into the glass. He enjoyed being alone with his alcohol, but those fleeting moments will soon give way to the breach of dementia by some unknown force. Alastor’s vision had betrayed him as he lethargically sat on a stool before passing out.

A few minutes had passed, and Alastor felt his consciousness return and had a better grasp on his situation. Some people are having a revelry and he can smell the familiar smell of blood and disdain.

He rose, bearing the aftereffects of whatever that struck him. Hub-hub of noises finally came clear in his ears as Alastor pulled himself up and handheld the red handle of the sword.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

Alastor turned to the stranger’s voice. It was an old man in his fifties. His rotund body reminded him of someone, but less scummy and this one has a benevolent aura. Alastor listened and laid down back in his seat. He held his head, hung, and faced the table. Alastor only bothered looking up when beer was served in front of him.

“It’s on the house.” The old man greeted Alastor. “My name’s Gregory, but most of the people who know me very well call me Greg.”

“All right, Greg.”

“Do you know me very well?” Gregory intercepted his inquiry without looking back to him. He continued to clean the counter with a wide swipe of his cotton cloth.

“Um, Gregory,” Alastor corrected. His pupils dilated. “I was sent here by Layla.”

“Ah, that woman.” Gregory paused his doing and looked up to him. “You know her?”

“We’re not close.” He shook his head. “She called me and…”

Gregory continued the narration, “… and invited you to live in the apartment complex?”

Alastor nodded. “But I declined.”

Gregory put down the wipe and cleaned his hands with disinfectant. He rubbed his nose as he turned around. “You came from another world, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s your name?”

“Alastor.”

“All right, Alastor. Are you in trouble?”

Alastor shook his head and shrugged. “No. But I can’t promise to you that I won’t be provoked, so…”

“At least you’re honest. I’ll give you that.” The barkeep nodded. He continued with what he was doing. This time, he was sorting out the bottles.

Alastor began to look around. There were only a few mercenaries inside the pub, but not surprising. Only a few people in this world knew about the supernatural world. He felt sorry for the people of this world.

“I heard this place is a den of mercenaries?”

“You heard that right. That must be the reason why Layla sent you here.”

“Actually, yes. I was wondering if there’s any request I can take. Monster slaying, that’s my area of expertise.”

The barkeep went to the back as he finished cleaning the mug, which didn’t even bid Alastor. For a brief moment, Gregory returned with a poster and a pen. Alastor accepted the paper and read it. It details a monster that has been spotted outside the town. There are no photographic images, but the description evoked images within his mind. It was depicted as a wolf-like creature with overgrown claws, dark skin, and possessed four eyes.

“Why’s this?” Alastor asked.

“Because it’s the closest one.” Gregory expounded. “You are new in this town, so you don’t know very well about our world. You should accept jobs that are within near areas.” Gregory suggested with a stern look.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Alastor answered, raising his head. “I should be more careful.”

“Our world is an unknown territory of yours. There are a lot of things you should learn about how things work here. Like that sword of yours or that outfit.” Gregory continued. “What’s wrong with it? It looks straight out of a comic book.” Gregory sighed. He pulled out his pocket and took out 500 dollars. “Here,” Gregory offered. “Buy yourself some clothes.”

Alastor hesitated. Despite the fact he has financial needs, he can’t just accept something that he didn’t earn. He shook his head.

“I can’t accept that,” Alastor answered, waving his hand dismissively. “I’m not familiar with the currency, but I know that’s too much.”

“Prideful, eh.” Gregory conceded with his thoughts. “How about this, you’ll accept this as a debt, as soon as you get the job done or have a better position, you’d pay me back?”

Alastor blinked inwardly. “All right. Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me, kid. Work and earn.” Gregory said.

Alastor bade respectfully to him.

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Alastor followed the map to the location of the monster where it was supposedly said the sighting. It was a rather long walk. Alastor gasped as he leaped over the bridge down the riverside. He came into the forest, hastening his pace.

Moments after, Alastor felt his head become heavy. He held onto the tree to maintain his balance. A surge of pain traveled in his organs and the rest of his body.

Even his attention was on his surroundings, the life of the forest had never left his ears. Alastor felt the minor tremors through the land. And whatever it was, he felt that it was getting closer.

Alastor shut his eyes, enduring the pain while feeling the monster chasing his scent. He immediately rolled away and briefly saw a dark figure descend nearby. The black-furred wolf-like creature snarled. Its teeth sharpened as his blade, and he observed the saliva dissolve the grass. Alastor held his sword tightly, surmounting the uneasiness in his heart. He did not faze nor showed any expression. He nonchalantly observes the enemy in front of him. During his time in the Glade, Alastor was taught a very important lesson in combat; if unsure, do not engage, let the enemy stride in, and maneuver only to defend and counter.

“Come at me you disgusting hag.”

The monster lurched forward, bearing his claws and fangs on its prey. Alastor consequently conjured a transcendent wall, blocking the monster and therefore, bouncing back. When he saw it quickly jerk sideways, Alastor switched the position of his sword to the back blade. Alastor circled at his right, almost calculatingly well-timed as the monster reached in his rear. His sword hissed and pierced the air, to the expected destination of the monster. The blade impaled the temple of the monster to the other end of its skull.

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Alastor came earlier than Gregory had expected. Alastor’s face hung over while he walked the bar counter. He resisted the spell and showed Gregory the head of the monster.

“Jesus.” Gregory muttered.

Anyone could say the same thing as Gregory. It would be an acceptable standard in Alastor’s world to compensate the head of the monster as evidence that the deed has been completed, but here on Earth, it was a different case.

“You don’t have to cut off the head of a monster or in particular drag it back here.”

Alastor raised a brow. “Why? Isn’t it customary to, you know, show evidence?”

“We have phones. You could have just taken a picture of it.”

“Oh. Uhm, I didn’t expect that’s the case.”

Gregory took the head and head at the back of the bar. He threw it on the fireplace and burned the head. When he came back, Alastor already made himself at home. He was making himself a drink, familiarizing himself with the alcohol.

“Who said that you can just waltz in and steal my job?” Gregory strictly inquired.

Alastor flashed a smirk. He knew that it was one of his quips. “You know, I can work myself in this world, after all.”

“You think so?”

Alastor nodded. “Yeah.

Gregory offered him cash worth 5,000 dollars, some papers, birth certificates, a driver’s license, and a national ID.

“What is this?” Alastor asked. He was reading the documents.

“Necessary documents.” Gregory answered. “If you’re going to live here, you might need an identity so that cops won’t just pull you out in the streets and ask you mortifying questions.”

Another debt it was.

“Why are you helping me?”

“I’m just looking out for potential assets, kid. Nothing more.”

“All right.” He replied with a sigh and started to count the money. He offered half of his earnings. “Here, keep it.”

Gregory chuckled. “No. You need it, even still. Pay me back when you have more. I suggest you open a bank account.”

“That word seems familiar. I’m good. I’ll see my way out.”

Alastor bade courteously. Whether Gregory’s actions are for his benefit, he couldn’t care less about it. On his first day, Alastor was already familiar with the city’s map, he even secured his position and had a fixer to provide his resources. He couldn’t wish more than the blessing bestowed at his doorstep.

As he predicted, it was a doozy week. Alastor spent the entire week hunting and killing monsters. Though tiring, he was paid handsomely by his fixer. He was ensued by financial stability, for the time being.

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Alastor spent the rest of his weekend studying different cultures, cuisines, beverages, and everything he could find in the public library. Alastor had thoroughly enjoyed what this world can offer to him. Alastor slipped out from the space that he cut on the fence. He strolled on the road, enjoying the view and the ice cream melting in his mouth.

A man across the street just outside the flower sells magazines and newspapers. He held out his voice at the top of his lungs to convince people to buy his products. Only Alastor came and bothered to look at his products. He observed the magazine. Then, he picked out a newspaper. The title entails the recent murder of a man who appeared to die in loss of blood, but no evidence suggests that he was stabbed or needles were used to drain his blood. But to Alastor, it could only mean one thing.

“Bloodsuckers.” He muttered.

“I know, freaky right.”

Alastor looked up to the seller. Not younger than him and not older.

He continued. “There have been recent sightings of supernatural beings all over the world. People are panicking over it and the government won’t tell us anything about it. It would be a matter of time until we would know the truth about them.”

That settled it. The people in this world are oblivious to the other side of the history of this planet. They have yet to know the existence of the supernatural world. Alastor could only offer a half-smile before paying and went back on his way.

When Alastor came to the bar, Layla was waiting outside. Her back was against the wall. He wasn’t keen on meeting her again, so he chose to ignore her, leaving her in her thoughts. Alastor walked straight towards the door hoping she wouldn’t notice him. But Layla already grabbed his jacket out of instinct. Alastor threw her a confused glance.

“We need to talk.” She started before looking at him.

Their conversation continued inside the bar.

It was still a question for Alastor as to why Layla would bother to talk to him, even though she knew very well he had no intention to join her secret band. Perhaps it was not about asking to join at all.

“Why didn’t you accept my offer, Al?” she asked as she drank her beer.

“I had a daunting experience with people who wouldn’t hesitate to stab their colleagues in the back.”

“But that’s not always the case, is it?” Layla queried.

Alastor agreed and shook his head. “Not every time. Sometimes I have to compromise my belief when it comes to extreme measures.”

“Did that get you into trouble?”

“If I were, do you think I’d be still here talking to you, alive?”

She grinned. “I guess not.”

“Now, tell me and please be honest,” Alastor pleaded. “Why? What is it this time?” He was pensive as always. “I thought I made it clear to you that I’m not going to move in with you. Although flattering, I must decline.”

She made a light chuckle. Her chromatic color of blood glistened against the light above. “No. That’s not the reason why I came here. I was hoping you can help get rid of someone.”

Alastor almost choked on his beer. He paused and had to cough before analyzing her angle. “I’m sorry, what? You want me to kill someone?”

“I heard you’re a damn good mercenary, so, here I am.”

“I wanted to say to you that I don’t kill people, not this time, not in this world. Only monsters. So, you, asking me to slit someone’s throat is a bit of overboard.”

“What if I tell you this is a bad guy?” She exaggerated. “A bad guy who kills people for fun. And there will be a lot of money as a reward.”

“That’s an exception. I’d love to provide my assistance if it’s the bad guys we’re talking about.”

“So?”

“I’m in.” Alastor quickly replied.

She finally beamed in victory.

“But,” That word would immediately derail her gladden thoughts. Alastor continued. “Tell me the entire story and be honest. I don’t want to get caught up on strings that I have no idea what is happening.”

In her mind, she was disappointed. As much as possible she wanted to allude to him on the mission and not to mention anything about his target.

“Let’s just say the guy I wanted for you to take out is an enhanced individual.”

“Enhanced?”

“Have you ever felt vulnerable? The feeling where every time you get out of your house, your world will fall apart? That’s what happens to all of us, well, mostly. We all had different scenarios but the same predicament. Our life was changed because of the supernatural world. Abed and I are one of the victims of it.”

“Abed?”

Layla nodded. “It was June 2014 when he was abducted by a group of vampires along with the others. For 2 years, they were kept under the basement as livestock and it wasn’t pretty. They were treated horribly. Almost unrecognizable from the people they once were.”

“Then you came and rescued them.” Alastor drank and put down the glass of beer with a thud. Alastor concluded too early.

“No. It wasn’t me. It was the Ordinus.”

“Excuse me?” He raised his eyes, leveling to her.

“They’re a group of supernatural beings that are committed to preventing any supernatural beings from interfering with the lives of normal people. They located where they were held. They killed those who were responsible for their suffering. Eventually, they took them back to their homes, but it wasn’t as easy as riding a roller coaster. It was a disaster. They have developed psychological issues. Some were left traumatized, few recovered and those who retained a small amount of sanity were invited to our organization.”

“I thought you were part of a cult.”

“Rude, but partly, you’re right.”

“Really? Did you just agree with me?” Alastor sardonically beamed.

“That I did.” She chuckled, but then her smile faded.” Listen to me, I’m not supposed to say this to anyone, do you understand me?”

Alastor understood her words. Despite his critics of her, Alastor understood well the root of her actions. Somehow, he developed cordial regard for his client, to some extent, at least. Layla inwardly sighed before spilling the whole truth on Alastor.

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Alastor was adamant about this mission and at the same time uneasy.

He wasn’t sure if he was doing the right thing, for Abed at least. When she dropped the bomb, all Alastor could think of was to help Abed, but that was beyond his control. He wasn’t going to help whatever the end of the means of Ordinus, but he can’t let a monster on the spree.

Alastor was contemplative on his trip to New York. If there’s the only thing that could surmise his learnings through the years was that failure itself was a slap of reality, but effective as a waking call. Those words were the starting investment of his beliefs.

“When we desire more than what we deserve, we are bound to lose a part of ourselves. Sympathy with no border is self-destruction.” Alastor chanted those words like a mantra, “I don’t feel, I adapt.”

He inhaled and exhaled.

Alastor reminded himself again. He had to, after hearing her story. He kept reminding himself over and over again that he shouldn’t get involved in this matter disregarding his codes. More importantly, he was bothered by these new feelings and thought processes. He was stuck in this dilemma for hours until he dozed off to sleep.

Alastor would follow Abed’s tracks by skip tracing. It turned out, Layla was able to track him when he was to withdraw money from his bank account. For some time, Abed went off the trail, only recently, in this club. Layla pinpointed his location when he used his credit card as a way payment method for a taxi.

He jostled his way through the crowded line and he only halted the moment he saw that it required an invitation card to enter. But being Alastor, he was not having that. He had learned how to control his invisibility. So, he snuck through the crowd to an empty road where he performed the spell and went in.

After the successful attempt, Alastor started to search for his traces. The only reasonable thing he could do was to stay on the sideline and observe for minutes before he decided that Abed was somewhere else.

He went to the other side of the room where the party extended. His eyes traveled to the ladder and saw a glimpse of Abed’s face as he turned behind to kiss a woman. He pressed against and her back leaned against the wall. Their sensual intercourse lasted for a minute before they went to the back, to another part of the building where couples would make out.

Alastor followed them, keeping his distance from behind. It was a splendid stalk. His discovery of his new magic was proving to be useful and he can’t wait to polish this ability.

Immediately, Abed and his girl took a sharp right. Alastor knew he had to hasten. Whatever Abed’s planning to do with the girl, it mustn’t be good. As soon as he swooped in with his hand at his sword his mind was washed by a revelation. It was all but a trap. The two of them were waiting for him. It was not at all that bad, his cover hasn’t been blown yet.

“I can see you,” Abed announced.

Alastor was stunned. His cloaking spell was still in effect.

“There’s no use hiding anymore. You must be wondering how I can see you.”

Alastor took a deep breath and cast off the spell. He remained vigilant.

“That’s a neat trick.” Abed commended. “You could’ve killed me if you weren’t being too obvious.”

Alastor smirked. “I assume it’s not the girl who tipped you off.”

The lady beamed. “No.” She replied. “It was all him.”

“Did Layla send you?” Abed shot a question.

Alastor did not reply.

“Poor little guy. Did she brief you about my abilities? That woman always managed to hook people into doing her dirty work. How much did she promise you?”

“Worth more than the reason you betrayed her.”

Abed burst out laughing. “Is that what she has told you?”

Alastor knew to himself that he was on the other side of righteousness, but Abed wasn’t that virtuous either. Layla told him at the bar about what the Ordinus are up to. They were recruiting people across the continent to join their organization as their soldiers, bestowing them with powers.

It was the recent events that shook them over and had them thrown off the edge. The power that was bestowed on them appeared to have a curse. One that made them submissive to their demands. It took Abed a month to figure out how to escape that place and spread the word to the others and when he broke out to tell them the truth, they didn’t believe him and they turned to him. It was a long fight, but he managed to take down most of them and killed eight people on the spot. He then knew he had to make a run for his life, which he did. It took him a while to stand on his feet and soon after, the prey became the hunter. They sent people to silence Abed but to no avail. He became attenuated with his ability and was able to improve himself. Right now, Alastor is the current string that needs to be cut. The ensuing silence made Abed realize what situation Alastor was in.

“Or did he tell you the truth? Maybe some part of it?” Abed continued to ask.

Alastor’s confident aptitude was shaken by his words of insinuation. He knew very well that he was on the wrong side of the story. He only hunts monsters and bad people. Sometimes collateral damage was unavoidable, but he told himself not to kill unnecessarily. In the end, Alastor swallowed his thoughts down to the bottom.

“I knew some part of it,” Alastor stated. That’s a half-lie. Currently, he has no idea how the masterminds operate but after learning about their misdoings, he already has enough information to conclude that they’re up to no good.

Alastor prepared. He hasn’t revealed his armor and his sword yet. It was fair to say that Abed has not shown his card on his sleeves yet. The lady had gone out of his sight the moment he stepped forward. In an instant, Alastor found himself hurling in the air. A strong force had him reeled over the concrete wall. The mercenary took the pain in and grunted, pulling himself up. The plate protected his bones from fracture, but his flesh absorbed some of the momenta. The lady suddenly appeared in front of him. She held his neck, lifted him, and pinned him to the corner.

“You are so dead.” She said in a monotone voice.

The lady effortlessly threw him over to a pillar. It was then Alastor confirmed that the lady doesn’t have invisibility nor the ability to camouflage. It was her enhanced agility and strength. Alastor did not prepare for this. He coughed as she rose.

Alastor regained his stance. By that time, he had already noticed that he was not holding his blade anymore. He threw a right hook, but moved back with haste. His fist swished in front of her. She circled and countered with a left hook. Alastor gasped for air as he felt his head ringing.

Alastor took it all in and steeled himself. The mercenary had enough. Gathering mana in his palm, he pushed her back with his transcendent wall, crashing onto the pillar. He felt a twitch in his gut. His vision betrayed him, twisting everything around for a brief moment before returning to normal, but along with it, his senses were heightened. He felt the sudden change in atmosphere, the wind that whizzed around him.

He closed his eyes and traced it. Instinctively, he caught her fist with his left hand with his right hand at the back of her head, redirecting her into slamming to the ground. The lady had recovered quickly and gained distance away from him.

“Lucky shot.” She said.

“You are nothing.” He replied. “I’m just testing your abilities.”

At that moment, the lady zoomed in. But the more she got closer, the more she noticed that the mercenary’s eyes were locked on her as if he already traced her. Anxiety struck her. She felt that this was not normal. And she was right, it was not normal. Alastor quickly raised his hand as if reaching into the air. He was aiming his spell at the lady. The mana swelled in his palm and screeched, then there was a hum that exploded. The force of the impact blasted her out of the building and crashed on the street.

“I can feel it.” Abed started. “Your conscience is in a spiral. You knew very well that you were on the wrong side of history. Yet, here you are.”

Alastor turned around. “I can’t turn away my commitment that easily.”

“Why is that? Is it because of her offer?”

“No. You killed people for money. You could have turned over a new leaf and used your abilities to punish bad people, but you didn’t. Look where that leads you. Right here.”

“Good or bad, doesn’t make any difference as long as you survive. That’s what that place has taught me.” Abed said.

“Enough of this.” Alastor crunched his fingers.

“You’re right. This is getting annoying really. Just die.”

Abed conjured several lightning strikes. The crackling was like a rung on the ladder to Alastor. The mercenary shielded himself. The electricity had washed over his transcended wall. In the beginning, there was only a minor crack, then the force made his efforts on healing it unamendable.

Alastor extended the transcendent wall and used the hovering electricity to cover his tracks as he slipped through the other side. It was risky, but he had to make a decisive move. Sooner or later, Abed’s going to reveal more abilities unto him and he was going to run out of options.

The mercenary made his way around and sprung towards Abed. His sword beamed, reflecting the moon’s light. It was a split second when Abed reacted, and when he did notice, the stature had dissipated in the air.

“What the –?”

Abed blinked behind him. He focused the lightning at the tip of his finger and like a grenade, the lightning exploded and dispersed in the air in the form of waves. He lay flat on the ground, contended by the lightning that seeped into his system. Alastor was seemingly stunned and couldn’t move an inch of his body.

“What was that?” Alastor queried, struggling to put the words together as the muscle movements in his mouth were also affected by the lightning paralysis.

“I attack your neuromotor system, disrupting your locomotors movements. It took me a while to learn it. Once I’ve mastered it, hunting becomes easy.”

“What are you going to do now?”

“Yeah. See, I was expecting more of you, well, minutes when you blasted my girl out of the building. But here we are, you kneeling, just like any others.”

“Would you consider not killing me, please?”

“Let me think about it. Layla sent me more than a dozen assassins and you see, I’ve had enough. So, what I am about to say is that I’m going to chop off your head and send it back to that infuriating woman to make a solid statement that they should leave… ALONE!”

Abed’s eyes traverse away with his body emitting lightning. He wiped his sweating forehead with his hand.

“I understand what you’ve been through.”

“What do you understand? You’re not the one whose life got ripped. I had to go through hell just to get out and when I did, I was put in a position again. I’m done with that. I’m not gonna die here.”

“Neither do I. And trust me, you’re not that guy, pal.” Alastor replied.

Unbeknownst to Abed, Alastor had already diminished the foreign substance that entered his body. He played possum for a moment and waited for the right opportunity. Abed looked down at him, his finger pointed at him. He concentrated his energy on a single point. He learned that concentrated energy was just as effective as a bullet. The moment Alastor heard the soft groan of a spark, that’s when he windmills his feet staggered against Abed’s legs to drop him and to redirect his sight.

In mid-fall, the mercenary blasted Abed, but at the same time, the concentrated energy grazed his cheek.

They got up.

Alastor saw him not too far away. All the while, Abed threw a bolt of lightning at him which Alastor evaded quickly. He ran while hiding from the pillar to avoid the lightning strike. He rolled over and got a grip on his sword. Alastor turned his heels to Abed, charging while shifting from right to left to avoid the lightning, barely touching his skin.

He swung his sword with might at the conjurer of lightning, only to get tricked by a lightning remnant and hit the air as Abed teleported again. But that wasn’t enough to halt the fury of the mercenary.

He charged again. Harmonizing with the momentum of the enhanced person’s lightning. It was his instincts that guided him. Whenever a bolt of lightning gets closer, he’d automatically conjure a protective spell for a brief moment to deflect and conserve his mana. Hassle but effective.

Alastor drew air in his mouth in the briefest of moments before laying his plan. He held his sword lightly and threw wheeling in the air.

Dazed, Abed jerked aside to evade. What he did not expect was that Alastor would emerge in front of him. The mercenary conjured a wall at his feet to boost his leap. His knife hidden behind him, flash in the air. And as they crossed each other, Alastor proceeded and regained his balance. While Abed fell to the ground.

The mercenary hung his head and looked at his knife which appeared to have been stained with blood. He picked up the sword and put it back on his scabbard. He turned around, walked, and saw a trail of blood leading to the man sprawled on the ground.

Abed’s body stayed flat, croaking for his dear life. The blood had sprayed over his clothes. Alastor could feel his heart rate palpitating, struggling to pump blood. That was twenty seconds ago. Now, it is gradually slowing down. Abed croaked as his blood spilled over his slit throat. His dazzled eyes gazed at him. Still shocked at his defeat.

“I told you, you’re not the guy.”

Alastor’s cold expressionless face was the only thing that he had seen until everything had become dark. The mercenary heard the sirens, most likely coming from the police car. At that moment, the mercenary knew he had to leave. He climbed to the rooftop. He hopped apartments to another establishment, avoiding the barks of the dogs. He was glad that he had his identity concealed with his mask on. His identity would’ve been discovered by the security cameras.

Everything went well until he bumped a certain length he couldn't leap on. Alastor calmly reassessed the situation and thought. He wasn’t the panic type of person, but with the sounds of whistles and barks nearing behind, the mercenary couldn’t help but feel anxious.

He hung his head, watching the lifeless road. He raised his hand, slightly trembling, and began visualizing. The transparent walls began to emerge flatly in the air to the other side as a road. The mercenary hopped on and sprinted to the other side of the road.

The mercenary got inside an abandoned apartment. The place was more of a skeleton of its former shell rather than a residence. Sooner he would notice that the apartment next to it was also abandoned. He’d wonder why waste materials if it’s going to get abandoned.

A tinge of hostility had come to his senses. He looked around, unsure where it was coming from. It was familiar, like what he’d feel when the twitch began to take over, yet this felt strange.

It was too late for the mercenary to detect the specific foreign figure. The walls behind him crumbled and a man emerged. The stranger gazed at the mercenary, sizing him. He was no older than 20 years old. Possibly teenager. But who knows, looks can be deceiving sometimes.

“Who are you?” the mercenary asked, but the stranger didn’t reply and received a death stare.

The mercenary felt something odd on the stranger’s side. The young boy appeared to be not himself. For some reason, he felt that the stranger was in a transition, which would mean he has no control over himself. Only his instincts as a hunter dominate his rational mind. Something flashed in his mind reminding a certain condition of hunters when he was studying his case back then. They all have the same thing in common, the urge to be in the wild, to be in instinct, and to emerge.

The mercenary’s reaction was maybe delayed but the grip on his sword was not. As the stranger came, so the mercenary’s sword hissed diagonally. To his surprise, the stranger quickly caught his sword midway with only his single hand.

The mercenary attempted to break free his weapon from the stranger’s grasp, but it wouldn’t budge. The mere grip of the stranger was robust enough to withhold the mercenary’s attack. The stranger took hold of the weapon and threw it aside. The mercenary wasn’t going to wait to find out what the stranger was next up and he initiated by swinging his fist right to the face. The stranger felt his jaw break and he spat blood while on his knees, but as soon as the stranger looked back, unfazed and determined, the mercenary knew he was in for a wild ride.

The stranger hit back followed by a kneecap on the mercenary’s jaw. The mercenary took a breath and assessed the situation. The moment he felt the tremor on the stranger’s right arm, the mercenary raised his elbow, blocking the fist. The stranger had to step back, shaking his hand and going in for feinting a left hook. Then his right fist attempted to sweep in from below.

*You need to do better than that.* The mercenary thought. He managed to catch it and the mercenary placed his left hand on the back of the stranger’s head, forcing him to crash his face into the wall. The stranger grunted. The second time the mercenary attempted to slam his head on the concrete partition, the stranger kicked the wall, and the wall ran, flipping in the air and completely freeing from the mercenary’s grasp.

The mercenary quickly threw a hook, but blocked, then another on the left which hit the temple of the stranger, stunning him. In the next ten seconds, the mercenary would thrash the stranger with punches. It was at the last second when the stranger hit his back on the wall that he felt a strange sensation. The stranger caught his arm. The mercenary would assume that it was a lucky shot, but things get stranger. The stranger preceded by hitting his neck, disrupting his breath, then jabbing at the nose, and lastly, a sucker punch in his stomach. The stranger pushed the mercenary back, circled, and his heel crashed into the mercenary’s temple.

At that moment, the mercenary had to roll over and find support to stand up, struggling to breathe normally as he wheezed while the stranger slowly walked towards him. He felt the need to use magic despite the objective to avoid unwanted attention from outside. But the situation deemed him to do so.

The mercenary concentrated the mana in his palm, gathering energy and the force of light exploded in the air. The ceiling, the floor, and the wall cracked. It wasn’t enough to destroy the room, no, he didn’t intend to use the full force of the spell. The mercenary dusted off his clothes. But as soon as the smoke settled, a tall figure stood firm. The stranger was unscathed.

The mercenary swore. He rasped and clenched his teeth. The pain searing and coursing through his body.

The mercenary tried to maintain his balance, concealing his trembling legs. He came with a bare, steady gait. The mercenary had blocked the stranger’s punches, then returned with even greater force. Each time, he pulled his punches to block. He could feel the stranger’s attack becoming sharper and his response faster.

By the time the two had coincidently been stunned by each attack, they stumbled back, stunned, then they gauged and locked again. Their instinctual reactions might be on par right now and would prove to be fatalistic if the mercenary won't be able to stop him.

The mercenary’s rear hook shot to the stranger’s face then the stranger returned with an uppercut. As time passed by, the mercenary noticed that the force he would exert more power and returned doubled on him. As seconds passed, the mercenary would realize he wasn’t outmatched in terms of skills, he was being overwhelmed by the strength of the stranger, but everyone has a limit and the two had hit the edge of their stamina.

They pulled each other back. Cuts and bruises were all over the mercenary’s face, but internally, he felt his ribs were broken. The mercenary ground his teeth. The stranger on the other hand doesn’t appear to have any wounds, only minor bruises on his face. He didn’t look exhausted. The stranger was finally coming to his senses.

The mercenary had enough. There’s no point fighting anymore.

“Wait.” The mercenary pleaded. “We don’t need to fight. I can help you.”

The stranger’s expression seemed to be perplexed, dazed. A gesture of sanity was the only thing that gave him a sigh of relief despite the abrupt assault. The mercenary doesn’t want to do any drastic action as the stranger appears to be unable to grasp his words. He knew this case very well. Certain hunters are unable to be in their senses while they’re in transition. They tend to be violent, coiled by their hostile nature.

The mercenary was willing to help him, but the moment he heard the wailing sirens. He knew he had to go and so did the stranger too. The stranger jumped out on the balcony and began to sprint outside the abandoned apartment.

Knowing very well that the people alarmed the police of the disturbance, Alastor reclaimed his sword and concealed his presence by using an invisibility spell.

## Chapter 5

It has been a month since Icarus attacked. Everything was going great so far. Mia recovered, but she has no recollection of what happened. Another end that works well. They don’t want to burden her with that memory.

Van has done great so far in his school. He was paying close attention to the class. He did not notice that Kate had rolled a paper and thrown it underneath his desk. And until the end of the class, he did know it. Kate wanted to convey a message to him since she’d be busy for the next few days but to no luck. She’ll try next time.

Kate went to the canteen with some members of the student council. She was elected as one of the representatives of the class and had to meet with the others to discuss the school events for the next few weeks. For quite some time, Van and Kate have been hanging out. Most of the time in her house together with Mia from time to time, but recently had become busier than usual. As per se, Van would like to ask her out once in a while, but his oh-so-wise brother had given him a piece of advice about space. Like a job or school, a person needs a space on his own to rest, enjoy the weekend, and have a quality for himself instead of immersing himself further which could stress a person. He couldn’t believe it himself. His brother did make a point. He should let Kate do her things for a while, instead of pestering her with her busy schedule.

Van was enjoying his lunch when Rick sat on the other side of the table. He seemed uneasy as he pulled on his hood.

“Hello?” Van queried. He thought he didn’t like him, but Rick didn’t shoo him away with his strict gaze.

“Hey,” Rick replied, caught off guard, and hurriedly took out his lunch box. “W-what are you doing here?” Rick lifted with a dubious look.

“This is the canteen. Do I need permission to ask to sit here?”

“Uh, no. I just thought you don’t like it, that’s all.”

“I never said I don’t like you either. If I were given a choice I’d prefer to stay away from people, but this place could get bustly sometimes.”

“Okay.” Van continued. “You seem to be tense. Did something happen?”

Rick sighed. “I’d prefer not to disclose any personal information about you. So, please, mind your own business.”

Van was taken aback and winced. “Okay.”

Not long after, a group of men, no more than five, sat down. There seemed to be the leader who sat down near Rick. Six foot tall, not good-looking, and appeared to be the least benevolent in this place.

“Hey, Rick!” He greeted. “I’ve been wondering where you have been.”

Rick rolled his eyes. “What is it you want, Kent?”

Rick appeared to be disinterested in this Kent.

“I was hoping maybe we could use your mansion for the party.”

“You mean your party.” Rick professed.

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s my house.”

“C’mon. You live alone. It wouldn’t hurt just to lend it to us for one night.”

Rick shrugged. “Still no.”

Rick’s appetite was already distasteful. He attempted to proceed back to his next class but Kent got a grip on his shoulder to put him down on his seat.

“You know, I’ve been trying to be nice, but you just won’t cut it.”

Van, who felt disgusted, had already seen enough.

“Rick says no,” Van interjected. “Why can’t you just get over it?”

“I’m sorry, who are you? Wait, you’re that city boy, right? Please, be reasonable and mind your own business.”

How ironic.

“I’m not the one who can’t handle dismissal. The guy said, no. What part of that you didn’t understand? You can’t just handle rejection, can’t you?”

At this time, Kent’s jaw clenched, but in the end, he smirked.

“Your friend here, Rick, he’s funny.”

“No, I am not being funny. I’m not a clown, that’s your job. This is the opposite of being funny. This is me telling you that you’re a sissy.”

Kent had a chuckle. “I was wondering, what does it feel like to be with the school’s charity case? Does it feel good to take money that’s not yours? Did you even know where that money came from?”

“There’s a reason why it’s called charity and scholarship, dickhead. Maybe, if you didn’t skip class or at least read some books, you won’t be spouting accusations and perhaps you can have some humor.” Van shrugged dismissively. “Or maybe you’re right, maybe we took some money and spent it elsewhere, I don’t know. You could perchance look at your mother’s ass, you’ll enjoy looking at that dark place.”

Kent slammed his fist on the desk. Van could sense that he was suppressing a lot of anger right now, all directed at him. He wasn’t fazed by it. Kent stood, it was his way to show dominance over Van and an invitation. By now, the people have buzzing words. Van did not hesitate to stand up. He was too measuring for him and the others who seemed to be prepared to back their boss.

“You got something to say to me?”

Kent probably thought that Van was intimidated, but in reality, Van fought this type of person back in his previous school and outside the premises.

“Yes, I do,” Van replied with confidence. “Being six foot tall won’t assure you’re not going to get your ass handed. That includes your bitches right there.”

“I didn’t think that you could act like a bad boy, huh.”

“Oh no. I am not a bad boy, I’m the worst kind.” Van corrected.

“I am going to shove those words right back at your mouth.”

Without any warning, Kent swings his fist and hits Van’s cheek.

Van recovered fast just as he lifted his chin. It appeared that there was a cut on his lips.

“You called that a punch?” Van goaded. Not even annoyed, but mockingly told him.

Van, without caring if Kent had raised his arm, jabs his nose staggering the tall man. He went at the back of his head and slammed it down the table for five seconds. It was clear that the other students were terrified. They weren’t expecting that this fight would be dirty. Van pulled Kent’s head. His face was squirming with blood.

Rick uneasily held his arm. “Dude, that’s enough.”

Van listened and let Kent go. The rest of his goons got him and left the cafeteria.

By the time his eyes caught Kate standing outside, Van snapped out of his brief moment of rage.

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After school hours, Van was about to head out when something pulled him out of the main corridor that leads to the exit. Kate shushed him and made him follow her the other way.

The two got out of the school at the entrance. Van felt a tension swelling in her presence. She was quiet until they stopped in a quiet alley where no people would swoop in and listen to their conversation.

“What was that?” Kate asked, her arms crossed one another.

He already expected this.

“I was trying to help Rick from his bullies.”

“By smashing their head on the table?”

“It’s in our hormones.” He jested.

Kate’s face forcefully stretched into a smile. She began to laugh as her bright, enamel-white teeth peeked from behind her small lips. “You don’t get to use the word ‘Hormones’, only women are allowed to do that.” As quickly as her temporary joy passed, her disconcerted attitude came to light. “Also, that is not a valid reason to incite a fight.”

Van blinked. “Uh, yes, it is. If you saw what happened, you would know he punched me first. I was only forced to resort to violence when he assaulted me.”

“He won’t do that if you didn’t provoke him.”

“Why do you care by the way? You’re not my girlfriend.”

She was stammered by those words. Kate gulped her saliva. “Now? The only reason why I’m willing to befriend you all this time is that your brother told me that you were having trouble back at your school and I can see now why.”

“You were keeping in contact with my brother?” his brows furrowed.

“Your aunt too.” There was a hesitation when she utter the last word.

“What?!”

“We’re only in touch just for them to know how you’re doing.”

“I can’t believe this. Who else are you in contact with? My father?”

“No. Just your brother and your aunt. They’re worried about you.”

Kate attempted to step closer, but Van turned away.

“I don’t know if I can trust you, Kate.”

“I’m just looking out for you. What happened earlier was one reason why they want me to keep my eyes closed on you.”

“You know, what? Maybe we shouldn’t see each other for a while.” Van added. “Just give me some time.”

“Van.” She muttered.

“Do you know the reason why I’m so pissed at them? They called you a charity case. I saw how you do well at school and you deserved it. So, when he insulted you, I-I just snapped. I’m sorry if I felt bad for you, okay.”

Van didn’t even let her give him a chance to explain or to reciprocate his feelings towards her, but she couldn’t let herself come forward bearing guilt on her shoulders. Maybe he was right, he needed some time. Given that she has been watching his back and talking to her aunt and brother for quite some time now, it wasn’t far-fetched to believe that he was not going to talk to her.

In the end, Kate chose to watch his back as Van vanished into the crowd.

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It was 2am when his brother, Timothy, got home. By that time, Van was waiting, while playing a video game and eating chicken nuggets. He grabbed another can of beer and drank.

When he heard the door creaking open, Van instantly turned his head. He grabbed a pillow and threw it over Timothy. The bulb wasn’t turn on, but the light from the flat screen was enough to illuminate the statue of his brother.

“Ow!” Timothy growled.

Van knew very well what it sounded like when someone’s playfully wording sentences, but in this one, he felt Timothy got hurt. Despite that, he doesn’t care.

“You keep tabs on me with Kate?!”

“Well...” Timothy replied. His voice was tired. “We, Aunt Dally just worried for you, okay? We only did it so we can monitor you and protect you.”

“Monitor me?! How does it make it right using the only friend I have to monitor me?! Do I look like I’m gonna break any moment for you?”

“Yes.” Timothy replied after hesitating. “You remembered what you did back in Manhattan and now this to Kent.”

“In my defense, Kent was being an asshole. I’m just protecting myself and Rick from getting bullied.”

“You went overboard. The nurse had to stitch his nose. Lucky for you, he didn’t press charges. Aunt Dally managed everything, so you have to thank her later.”

“Why would she defend a grunt like him?”

“Because we’re in high school, Van. We’re not some goons on the street.” He added. “If Dad’s here, he would be disappointed to see you like this.”

Van glowered at him. “Is that the reason why he shoves me off like that?”

“You know that’s not true. That place is bad for you.” Timothy went and threw the pillow back onto the sofa. “You know your condition, Van. It’s not easy to live with…” Timothy paused. He doesn’t know how to put his thoughts into words. And that was that.

“That I’m a train wrecked?” Van decided to put the words together.

Timothy sighed sharply. Still, in the dark part of the room, he reached for a glass of water.

“A ticking bomb.” Timothy corrected. “But that’s not the point. I’m sorry if it had to go this way.”

“You don’t sound like one.” Van looked down.

“Van,” Timothy paused a second. “Kate is a good friend. I can see that. But you know your condition.”

“I know. I hate to admit it myself that I have to live like this every day.” Van said. “So, what’s going to happen now?”

“Probably you’d attend detention. But there’s a huge possibility that Kent is going to receive more punishment for bullying and inciting a fight. Rick testified that you were just defending him from Kent.” Timothy responded. “But you need to avoid this kind of confrontation from now on. Do you understand?”

“What happened to you?” Van asked after a pause.

The entire time, Timothy was hiding in the dark corner of the room. He thought that Van wouldn’t notice him.

“We were hanging out with Raymond and the others. Why?”

“It is so unlike you to come home late.”

“Tomorrow is Saturday. No school, no pesky assignments.”

It seemed not clear, but Van heard a grunt and a hiss that won’t normally come from standing up. Something must’ve happened to him.

“Are you sure you’re fine?” Van asked again. This time around, he was about to rise, until Timothy moved hastily at the front door of his room.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Where were you with the others?”

“Just the usual, we went to the other city, had some party. You know how it goes.” Timothy did not look back and went inside.

“Weird,” Van muttered.

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Her shift ended early.

Kate immediately came to the bathroom, took her clothes off, and went straight to the shower. She felt the need to wash and refresh herself over the long weekdays. The cold water pouring through her face had her replenish her energy as if the negative thoughts had washed along the water. The bath had proved itself to be useful, but only for a brief moment. Kate still remembered his face, the expression that has been betrayed. She couldn’t bring herself to look at him again after what she said to him.

“I am so dumb.” She muttered to herself.

Kate slightly bumped her head on the wall. When she found a guy that didn’t seem to be interested in getting laid, she blew it over. She learned before that men have the same traits that cannot extirpate, being a pig, but Van, he was different, he did not come with malicious intent, he came wholly with himself, yet, her actions denied him and she doesn’t know how to fix it. She knew what it felt like when things go south and no one was there to help her, abandoned and broken. Mia was the only one she could cling to and the reason why she should strive forward.

Kate sighed sharply. She attempted to draw the towel on its hangar outside, but when she tried to reach it, there was nothing, until she felt the towel.

“Your boyfriend is not half-bad.” Mia commented outside the blinders.

Kate immediately wiped it off and saw Mia, doing her usual night skincare.

“So, you heard about it,” Kate stated.

“Yeah.” She replied. “Did something happen between you two?”

Kate shrugged her shoulders. “Not that it matters to you.”

“Kate, of course, it doesn’t matter to me, but if you have any problems, at least you could talk to me.”

Kate turned curtly, “Are you being serious right now?”

“What?”

“You? Talk to me? As if you’re ready to listen even emotionally?”

“I mean, yes. I don’t usually care about Van for what matter he’s been, but I can’t deny he’s good to us… and to you.”

For that reason, Kate smiled.

It was late at eight when Kate had finally cooked their meal for the night. It was unlike what she had made since she didn’t go shopping because of the busy pace and whatever it was that they were ramping and fighting for. She hoped it was all worth it.

“I’ve been wondering, what’s up between the two of you?”

Kate took a sip from the water before answering. “Well, we uhm… kinda hit the wall.”

“Hmm. What kind of wall?” Mia queried.

“Excuse me?”

“There are a lot of walls, Kate. There’s a wall where you hit the peak of your beauty, then there’s a wall where you’re having a hard time finding a relationship, and then there’s another where you have a friend zone. So, which one is it?”

“The one I spill the beans about contacting his brother and aunt if ever he went nuts again.”

Mia stared, judging her intently.

“Are you an idiot?” Mia gasped. “You’re way smarter than me, but I can’t believe you’re this dumb.”

Kate whimpered. “I know. I shouldn’t have done that, but his aunt was very convincing that I should look after him and report if he did something rebellious again.”

“I understand why he would distance himself from you. I would feel betrayed too.”

“I know, I know. I didn’t mean to hurt him.”

“But did you tell them about what Van’s doing these past few weeks?”

Kate shook her head. “No.”

Kate remembered his condition. Van was not a normal human being. He inherited the capabilities of a supernatural bloodline. At least, by reminding her that, she believed that he was not as bad as she thought he was.

“Then I think you should come clean to him. Make up for your mistakes.”

“How?”

“Do the right thing. You remember what our dad and mum used to say?”

“It doesn’t matter how rough and steep the road is as long as you’re following the right one.” Kate recited.

“Right.”

“I hope you’re like this every day.” Kate beamed widely. “It’d be nice if you’re available like this always.”

Mia smirked. “You’d wish.” She continued. “Speaking of which, Uncle Benny sent us money.”

“I told him not to worry about us. We don’t need his help.”

“I know but,” Mia hesitated for a second before continuing. “It won’t hurt just to use his money a little. The budget is tight in our house and I’m worried about you. You seem like you haven’t slept properly for a while. Maybe, I should get a job.”

“Mia, we’ve talked about this. Your focus is on your study.”

“And what about you? It’s unfair that you’re carrying this alone.”

“Shut up.” Kate shushed Mia. “We’re not going to talk about this anymore. As long as I’m breathing and running, you stay out of the job line.”

“Fine.”

After washing their plates and having a brief conversation, Kate made a phone call. She was attempting to reach her uncle Ben. It took her time before she reached him.

“Hello?”

She was expecting she would receive an endearing welcome, but for the rest of fifteen seconds, she heard nothing. Kate decided to put the phone down.

“Kate, hello?”

It was Ben’s voice that had her attention returned.

“Hello, Uncle Ben?” she asked.

“Why are you calling me this late at night?” he replied.

“I’m just concerned about you. You don’t need to send us every month. You should spend it more on your son, not on us.”

“Kate. Don’t worry about the money. There’s a lot of it in this world and you should less worry about Laswell. I heard he’s doing well at his school.”

Compared to the two of them, Laswell came from a prestigious boarding school next to Maryvale, Daletown, and like most of the rich parents, Laswell was well spoiled, but he wasn’t a bad breed, unlike the others, although he was a snarky one.

“I got a job, you know that, right?”

“Yes, I know. Bella told me. But if you’re in a tight spot, you can use the money you saved in the bank.”

Kate froze. “You know about that?”

“Oh yeah,” Ben replied. “Given that you’re too stubborn to use my money, I can guess that you’re not using it, instead, you put it in the bank.”

“I’m sorry,” Kate muttered. Kate did not want him to know about it.

“No, you’re not,” Ben replied. “Listen to me, you and Mia are the closest thing I have to Troy and Penny. Let me do this, even by supporting you at least financially. How is Laswell by the way?”

“Still a jerk.”

She heard a faint scoff on the other line.

“I see.”

“You’re well aware that your son is using magic to ditch his dorm even in late hours, right?”

“Yeah, uhm, I talked to him before about it and that kid admitted to me that he nearly got caught using magic to cast an illusion of himself. We had a long conversation that night.”

“We had a chat last week. Laswell told me you’re fine staying here for the weekend.”

“Yes. Did he tell you about their washing machine being broken?”

“Yeah, and I’m not fine with him staying here.”

“I know Laswell has his shortcomings.”

“It’s not that I don’t like him. I’m worried about his laundry. The guy can’t even differentiate detergent from chlorine.”

“Trust me, he changed and for the better. I’ve taught him a few things about doing his laundry.”

Kate groaned heavily. “Fine. But he’s going to help fix the sink.”

“Okay, I’ll tell him.”

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The once-abandoned house was filled with decoration. He painted the wall in aquamarine, he always liked it, and the color helped his mind clear. He also fixed the bathtub, including the generator powered by solar panels, refrigerator, electrical kitchen induction, and the water connection from the river. His budget was tight for now.

Alastor requested Gregory to buy him new weapons. The last time he attempted to assassinate someone, he nearly failed and died. But, the currency in this world was ridiculous, he must use it wisely and only necessarily.

This time around, he fought monsters more than the last time and was stronger. Rumors had circulated in the underground community about monsters nesting over the forest. So far, he hasn’t met one close to his home despite him living at the border part of the forest.

He made it to the kitchen, washed his face, and then used the electrical kitchen induction. He had a fair breakfast, bacon, and egg. After finishing his meal, Alastor inspected his light breastplate. There was a small crack in it. It must be because of that woman back then. Alastor sighed and wore it. Invoking the invisible spell to the armours and alike, he strolled outside. It was nice weather like any other.

Watching how people clamored in laughing and in relief made him feel envious. How lucky they are so oblivious about the supernatural world. It would only be natural for him to envy them, after all, his world was much rougher than this one. Radiya was a world constantly being threatened by monsters and people alike.

They have people from the underground community do the cleaning for them. He won’t be surprised if some people are defending them against the weirder world, like this bar. The bar was made by Gregory. The barkeep made a brief explanation, everything around here was made of magic. He confessed that he was a warlock.

He made this place where people from around the world gather no matter where they are as long as they have the card that was given to them. The card itself was the person to the original bar itself and served as a beacon for them.

“You took your time.” Gregory greeted him with a dry remark as he entered the bar. “I was wondering when you will come back.”

Alastor was on the side-line for the entire week. In the previous weeks, he took a lot of jobs, mostly dealing with monsters spawning in some areas outside the city together with other mercenaries.

“I wasn’t planning to, but I need more money and information.”

“Information about what?” Gregory raised a brow.

“How to return to my world,” Alastor said as he sat down.

Gregory grunted. He sharply turned to sort the drinks. “Well, I don’t know anything about that.”

“I guess so. Hmm. Do you know anyone who is like me?”

“Not that I’m aware of. You’re the only otherworlder I knew and Layla of course. You might try your luck by looking at another mercenary guild.”

“There are others?”

“Yes,” Gregory replied. “There are other 4 mercenary guilds I know of, but they’re very hard to approach.”

“Not friendly like yours?”

Gregory smirked. “No. There’s no mercenary guild which is nice. Mine was bearable.”

“Then why let me in?”

“Because Layla vetted you.”

“And you didn’t consider that I may be the other way around?”

“You see those people?”

No need for clarification. Gregory already made it clear what would happen if he was an adversary.

“Fair enough.” That was all Alastor could offer to respond. “You made it sound bad if there’s someone who’s not trustworthy enough. Why is that?”

Gregory coughed. “Because it is.”

Alastor furrowed his brows.

Gregory continued. “There are people who don’t share the same sentiment as us.”

“You think a mercenary guild has sentiment?”

Gregory nodded. “Point taken.” He continued. “Those people I’m referring to are very dangerous.”

“How so?”

“They ran an independent military organization.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“They called themselves GEMS.”

“GEMS?”

“Geotactical Espionage Military Sect. Supposed to be, when there’s a monster on the loose, threatening enough, they’re the ones who wipe them off the map.”

“If they’re supposed to protect the people, I think they should do better. Pretty sloppy, don’t you think?” Alastor commented.

“The world is a big place, Al. They can’t cover every area and nook of this world looking for every monster.” Gregory clarified.

“And the government?”

“Only a few knew about their existence.”

“That’s reassuring.” Alastor sighed.

“Listen, you should avoid those kinds of people. They’re up to no good.”

“Maybe not. You said they’re an independent military organization. I can guess the government is on their asses.”

Gregory nodded. “If you want to learn about going back to your world, I think you should ask Layla. She may offer knowledge about that particular matter.”

Alastor paid for the beer he chugged in and proceeded out of the pub.

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Sometimes, Alastor questions their sense of security, because every time he walks by the apartment complex, he can’t see a single security guard. Disregarding his thoughts, Alastor strolled inside. Alastor stalled outside her home. He banged the door twice to make his presence known. The woman harshly opened the door, her face flushed red.

“What happened to you?” Alastor queried.

“You don’t want to know.” She replied, panting. “What do you want?”

“I would like to ask how to return to my homeworld.”

She tilted her head to the side.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“I thought you knew.”

“I won’t be here if I already have the answer to that question.”

She sighed. “Well, you never told me how you came here.”

“Save it.” He interrupted strictly. “You don’t have to know about it.”

The tired woman straightened from her back and slackened. “Is that how you asked a favor of someone, Al? I remember you were having a hard time gathering resources and when I gave you one source of income, did you even bother to thank me?”

“I’m not the one who performed a lobotomy on people here and in turn went rogue because of abuse. I don’t, however, kill people just because they piss me off.”

“But you did.”

“You hired me, remember?”

“That doesn’t matter. You still take orders from us knowing what we have done.”

“Just what are you pointing at, Layla?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps if you’re less of an asshole I won’t be acting like bitch and maybe we can save your tantrums in this conversation.”

“Me? Throwing tantrums?” Alastor scoffed. Yet, despite her provocative words, his mind calmed down for a moment. He inhaled deeply. “Sorry. I-I’m on the edge.”

“No wonder.”

“Can we talk?”

Layla sighed. “Only if you promise not to act like a douche.”

“Fine. I swear.”

“Then come on in.”

Her apartment was bigger than his house. She had a particular taste in furniture, most were more traditional, and he guessed this apartment was built similarly to a Japanese house.

“You live here alone?” Alastor asked.

“No. I own the entire place.” Layla walked on the kitchen counter and drank water.

“You must be crazy rich.”

“I am.” She responded.

Alastor sat down on the couch in her living room while Layla herself served them tea. While waiting, Alastor was observing. She had a collection of swords, most from Asian countries.

“You love swords?”

“Yeah. My grandfather was Japanese. He lives in Hokkaido.”

That explained her distinct features.

“What about now?”

“Now, he’s old and retired. My mother was in Japan taking care of the household while my father took over the business.”

“You didn’t tell me your parents are still alive.” Alastor had stated.

“I forgot the part where that’s your concern.”

“Rude.” Alastor said and smiled.

“My mum was a botanist back in Radiya.” Layla grabbed a pair of teacups from the shelf. She poured some powder, three cubes of sugar, and mixed it well with boiled water. “Some of her time, she would help in the camp and tend to the wounded soldiers during the war.”

Layla came back with a cup of coffee for him and her. Alastor sternly watched the coffee before picking up.

“Where does this father fit in?” Alastor asked and drank.

“It was the end of summer and the dawn of winter when they met. My mum’s medical team found themselves stranded in the middle of their journey back to Viscati when they heard a loud ringing. An expulsion of wind followed. That was when Mum saw my father toss in the air and land on them. Some friends of Mum, who had contacted people from this world, managed to understand what he was saying. Soon they would learn about the existence of gaps.”

Alastor raised a brow. He was suspicious of her words.

“Gaps? What does that mean? Something that might help me return home?”

“Yes and no.”

“With this again?” he sounded disappointed.

She beamed. “These gaps are bridges between two worlds, but they only exist for a brief period of time. That is the reason why my father wasn’t able to return home for many years. Naturally, they developed feelings for each other and there’s me.”

There was a brief pause.

“Don’t go silent on me, woman.” He stated.

She snapped. “It all started when my father just graduated and was on his way to apply, but on his way home, he got blipped out of his world.”

“Blip?”

“He fell on one of the gaps. It wasn’t a fun trip, he told me. It felt like his body stretching, his perception distorted. The transference between two worlds builds an immense force that shoots him to the sky.”

“So, if I find one gap, there’s a huge possibility that it might lead me back to my home.”

“I won’t be so sure about that.” She shrugged.

“Why not?”

“The existence of gaps is random. The probability of you surviving it is 1 out of 100. Do you get what I’m saying here? If you enter a gap, it might lead you to your death. A cesspool of lava, a territorial forest of a monster or you’ll get teleported a thousand miles up to the sky.”

“I’ll take the odds.”

“Desperate asshat. Would you listen to me just once? There is no way to know where a gap will lead you to. W-Why? Why are you so eager?” Layla had given it a thought for quite some time. “Is there anyone or someone waiting for you back there? To the other side?”

Alastor avoided her glance. He inhaled deeply. “There is.”

Alastor took a sip.

“Is it a woman?”

“Yes.”

“It’s always about a woman. So, who is this young lady?”

“My client.”

She smirked. “You’re lying. No sane man would desperately go back after an exhausting venture. You are either a man who’s sick in love or someone who’s just purely insane.”

“I’m neither. I have my honor and loyalty.”

“Then I take you as a fool. You can live here and have a peaceful life. Begin anew.”

“I wished too, but this is the only way I know how to live. This way of living is the reason why I survive so far. I wasn’t given the privilege to live a normal life. I haven’t been normal since I was born.” He continued. “That woman, her particular upbringing, is my concern. Nothing more, nothing less.”

After finishing the entire cup of coffee, Alastor stood. He was about to go out when he saw two swords, one-sided blades to be exact. They were encased with glass and perched on top of what seemed to be woods that locked them.

Layla noticed his keen interest.

“That right there is what we call a katana.”

“I know.”

“You like it?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Too bad, I can’t give that one to you.”

“Which one?”

“The one that has a bundle of knots, black and white stitched at the butt of the handle.”

“I understand.”

“It’s a memento from my grandfather. That other one, though, I can give it to you.”

Alastor turned, surprised.

Layla came to unlock the glass case and lifted the katana and its scabbard. She carefully raised it, wary and with caution.

“This katana is state of the art. You see at the back of the handle, under the hilt, there’s a switch.” When she pressed it, the blade suddenly hisses, slid, and came out on the other end. “This is deadly just like any other katana, but you have to be smart enough when using its features. Just like a magician, you should reveal your tricks when the time is right.”

Layla put the katana back in the scabbard and handed it to him. Alastor reluctantly accepted it, dazzled.

“Why would you give this to me?” he asked.

“You did a good job last time. I’m just giving you a souvenir, a personal thank you if you’d say.”

Layla was right. There is no way to predict the location on the other end of a gap. That information alone would decrease the chances of survival. In turn, he had to look and rely on different information. Maybe, if he made himself known to other guilds, one or two otherworlders may appear, but that’s only wishful thinking.

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Van was called by Kate in the evening.

They sneaked into the basement and she locked it. Before turning around, she muttered a spell. “Silens locus.”

“What did you just do?” Van asked.

“It’s a silent spell. No sound would be able to penetrate outside for now. That means…”

With one wave of her hand, she beckoned a pair of bastons to Van. He accepted it, still with questionable eyes laid on her as she got herself with another pair.

“I’m guessing you already know what these are supposed to do.” She said.

He looked down at the canes and then at her. “You want to train me?”

Kate nodded. “I just want to make sure you can protect yourself if you’re going to be part of this.”

“Okay.”

Kate went to the center with Van behind her.

“Let’s start with the basics.”

It has been hours since the start of their training. Van managed to grasp the basic form of Arnis, but she wasn’t sure of where the mind took him. There were learnings, but no power in each form he recites.

“Come here.” She called, waving the baston in her grasp.

Van stood straight. “What now?”

“I want you to show me what you got.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Don’t you think it’s a little too early for that? I mean –”

“No excuse.” She interpolated.

Kate whipped her baton and walloped on his left. Van blocked and missed the other one on his right. The cane hit his face.

“Ow!”

“I’m sorry if I have to be rough, but you do know how dangerous those creatures are and if you can’t protect yourself, then one day you’ll be one of the victims.” She continued. “When you try to do less, the harder it is to take down the challenge. Get up.”

Van was silent. He stood. And they continued.

At least, this time he was putting up effort. Kate beamed at that thought.

After minutes of trying to outmatch Kate, Van gave up. He was too tired to continue and let his bank sink against the ground. Kate walked through the corner and on the table was a bottle of water. She drank and took a deep breath, cooling her lungs. Van stared at her. It was almost surreal that he was with Kate for a short amount of time and in those briefest moments, he wondered if she ever truly wanted to live like this, because all he could see was bitterness and ferocity masquerading as loneliness.

He saw her move back to the seat and noticed his contemptuous gaze.

Kate ticked an eyebrow. “What is it?” her voice was stagnant.

Van rose and sat down beside her. He looked down, searching for the right words, then he brought his eyes up to her.

“If you were allowed to have a wish, just one wish, what would it be?” he asked her.

Kate stooped her elbow on her leg and her chin on top of her palm, thinking deeply. “Well, I’d wish that my parents were still alive. Have the perfect family, and live a boring life. Why did you ask?”

Van just wanted to hear her say it and her answer confirmed it. He thought that Kate was just doing all of this to stop the monsters around her or at least bring justice.

“I was wondering if you can…” he almost trailed off his words. He sighed. “You know, live differently?”

Kate scrutinized him. “Are you trying to say I should give up?”

Van was silent. He knew that there was no way this conversation would end in a good way.

“I’m not trying to say that you should give up.”

Kate blinked away in his tenuous response. “It doesn’t sound like it.”

“Mia got hurt and nearly got killed. Don’t you think that’s a sign that you should give up your search and live normally, maybe away from this city?”

“You don’t have a say about this.” She replied, impassively.

“What about Gilt and Laswell? What if something might happen to them?”

“I got their backs.”

“Who got yours?” he returned. Kate did not reply, she stood and walked around. “Vengeance is loneliness, Kate. You let that take over you and it’ll eat you until there’s nothing left.”

“That’s easy for you to say, because your parents didn’t get murdered, they died in an accident.”

Van was taken aback. He ignored her. “That’s quite a low blow, Kate. I only want you to be sure of what you’re going to do. Because there is no way at the end of this, you’re not going to be a monster like them.”

“Well, I’m not and you shouldn’t be worried about that. I am not going to turn like them, but I am not going to promise that I would take this lightly. Sometimes, to make things better you have to become the worst.”

“All right.” Van nodded wistfully. “If that’s what you want.”

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“Why all of sudden you enrolled in my school?” Rick threw another pillow over Gilt, sitting on the other side of the couch. “Just as your name, please be guilty, just this once.”

Gilt, sighing, turned his head to him and turned off his phone.

“I swear if you threw another one, it would all come back to you in an instant and it would be satisfying to watch.” Gilt threatened.

“Please, what is it you want? Why my school? Go somewhere away from my school.”

“Don’t be so paranoid, it’s not like I am going to snack on any of them. I want to expand my horizons.”

“You mean diagonals?”

“Is that how it is?”

Rick nodded. “Yep.”

Gilt stared at him. “If you’re lying, I am going to cut off your allowance by half.”

“On the other hand, I could be wrong.” Rick immediately replied. “You’re a half-ass, you know that right?”

“Damn well, I am.”

“Is it the girls?” Rick reeled to another question. “Cause there are plenty of girls outside of my school.”

“Do I look that petty for you?”

“For Pete’s sake, Gilt.”

“What? Fine. It’s the girls I’m looking for.”

Rick scrutinized him with a look of disgust.

“You are the absolute scum of the earth.”

Rick finally gave up. He stood and went to his room, leaving Gilt on his phone. But actually, he was sending messages to Kate and Laswell about what had happened last week.

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It was the usual day. The students are camping in the hallway, some are having the best day of their life, and others well they’re waiting for their next class.

Gilt saw Rick in his school as they have different schedules. Despite the age difference, Gilt managed to adjust to the new age of education, but he barely made friends. Most of the males saw him as a competition because the girls in the room were flocking over him.

Gilt knew Rick's concern about his involvement in his school. He was a vampire and a handsome one. People’s attention tends to draw on him and this might cause them. Especially Rick the hassle and it was finally showing.

When Gilt came to turn to the stairs, he heard several footsteps running on the 2nd floor, and a distinct panting sound came to his realization. Rick took a huge leap and jumped straight down to the 1st floor. Gilt had to move aside and let the man slip in. Gilt wanted Rick to ignore him, but that wasn’t the case. Their gaze met for the moment and quick as it was, Rick grabbed him by his shoulder and hurriedly hid in the janitors’ room.

“Rick?”

Rick shushed him. He slightly opened the door and looked at the girls sweeping through the corridor. When they were gone, Rick released a sigh of relief.

“Why were you running?” Gilt queried again.

“I was being chased by women.” He puffed.

“Isn’t that a good thing?”

“What good thing?”

“My charms are washing over you.”

Rick backed away, disgusted. “Your confidence is way off the charts. I wonder how many women’s hearts you’ve broken.”

“Just a few.”

“Man, your skull must be like a helmet, even a bullet of shame won’t penetrate.”

Gilt sighed dismissively. “Now tell me, why were you being followed by those girls?”

“They wanted to invite us to their silly karaoke night,” Rick replied.

“What’s wrong with that? You should go and have some fun.” Gilt stated.

“I won’t be so sure about that. The guys are being angsts because of the shortage of women.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.” Gilt withdrew his eyes and peered over. After a few moment, he got out, and so was Rick. “You’ve been hogging all the girls in this school.”

“Don’t blame me. They’re the ones who are throwing themselves over me. I’m innocent.”

Rick snorted. “Damn it. You need to make yourself inconspicuous. You’re a vampire, remember?”

“I know. Don’t worry about it. I already promised to be on my best behavior.”

“Good. Remember, we’re cousins. Okay?”

“Alright.”

Truth be told, it was never part of Gilt’s plan to get enrolled in this school. It was his way of getting close to the principal and to know the people behind the incident 5 years ago. Considering how the monster tried to kill Mia and a few more appearing out of nowhere, Gilt can’t let himself be lax even though there may be more out there.

Currently, Gilt was trying his best not to fall behind and be attentive as much as possible, he even did some favors for the school teachers such as helping them with delivering modules, organizing events, and many more.

At this point, he earned their trust.

“I’m coming in.”

Gilt didn’t bother to knock himself in as he was carrying a pile of papers. He went straight to the teacher’s desk carefully.

The teacher, who was in his 50’s greeted him with a delighted expression.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this, Gilt? I hope we’re not bothering you.”

Gilt beamed. “It’s okay, sir. It’s very fun to help you all.”

“Why are you doing this by the way?”

Gilt replied. “I guess I wanted to have a glimpse of what a teacher is supposed to be like.”

“You know, I was like you before. Full of passion and life.” The teacher sighed. “Until adult life came in. I hope you’ll find the right path, kid. Here.”

The teacher gave him 10 dollars.

“You shouldn’t have,” Gilt said. He returned the money but the teacher didn’t accept.

“Don’t argue with me, kid. Just take it.”

Defeated, Gilt was on his way outside when his ears caught something behind the walls.

“Everything seems to be going as planned.” The strange female voice said.

“Good, good. It seems that wench Layla managed to hold her leash.” The distinct voice confirmed that it was Principal Enrick himself. “How did she do it?”

“I’ve heard from Hive that she hired a person from the underground mercenary community to deal with our little problem.” The woman replied.

“I see. So, about the negotiation with the 5 circles, is it going well?”

“Our relationship with them isn’t going that well.”

“What do you mean?”

“There are people who are making our transaction rougher.” Her jaw thickened.

“Do you know who those people are begging us to make their lives miserable?”

“I think it’s the opposite one, Enrick. This is the same people that intercepted their people back in Texas.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“We’ve yet to identify them, but we believe they’re private military organizations.”

“That’s absurd. H-how do these people manage to slip through our web of information?”

“They’re underground. There’s no way we can predict them, let alone inform the 5 five circles about this.”

The lady was unable to continue her words when she felt a piercing gaze behind them. Compared to them, she was sensitive to her surroundings. She conjured a protective spell, putting a curtain on their voices.

The sudden change of expression baffled Enrick.

“What was it?”

“Someone’s been listening to us.”

But there was no presence left when she looked back.

“It’s gone.”

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Gilt quickly moved hastily outside the moment he heard the silence. Their conversation was brief and different than what he had expected, so it was unlikely he can make something out of it. Currently, Gilt was immediately able to hide around without making his presence known.

He went to the stairs, to the second floor, and went straight. Gilt suddenly bumped into another student. The girl immediately stood. When the girl looked up, he realized who this was.

“Gilt?” Jane said. “I didn’t know we had a new janitor here.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. The clothes and all. It gives away.”

Gilt blinked twice when he heard her pompous remark. “I sense some self-inflated ego here and the unrelenting force is coming out from you.”

Her brows snapped. “I’m sorry what?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m just going to my next class. See ya.”

Gilt came past her and ignored her words.

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It was cold and numbing, like a needle penetrating through her flesh as she made her way inside the room. It was empty except for the mirror hanging on the gray wall.

Darkness crept in that even the light couldn’t penetrate. She walked, not knowing what led her here, stood in front of it, and saw her wicked reflection. *This can’t be happening again.* She thought.

She tried to run, but her body wouldn’t budge. Her gaze was stuck on her wicked smile and brooding eyes. She couldn’t avert it.

Once the darkness skulked into her body. She began to shake—attempting to free herself of her other half’s doing. She kept shouting and shouting, but her voice wouldn’t recede. It was as if her voice got consumed by the darkness until it covered the entirety of her body. It turned out that it was just another nightmare.

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Kate jumped out of her bed. Her heart beating harder than ever. Despite the blaring alarm clock, Kate chose to still lie down on the bed trying to steer her mind from her fear of her dreams. She laid down on the bed again and closed her eyes to fall asleep once more. She feels crappy right now and doesn’t want to face the world.

“Kate! Wake up. Please, make me breakfast!” Mia banged at the door. “I told you yesterday we have to record for our video presentation.”

It was still 5 am when Mia woke up. She was wrapped in her towel, wet and cool.

Kate groaned. She sat down, clapping. “Coming.”

It was when she heard the light footsteps Kate had reeled over the sheets and got up.

Tough luck. When she thought that she could have a peaceful morning, she had to wake up early for Mia. She came down hurrying. Kate immediately set the ingredients. She cooked eggs with furikake, grilled fish, and miso soup. The plates and forks have already been served. Mia who already wore her uniform came down rushing. Her eyes gleamed in fascination.

“It’s been a while since we had a Japanese-style breakfast. Wow.”

“Remind me why I’m doing this for you?”

Mia turned her eyes to her. “Because I’m cute and adowable.” As high as her pitch can reach, Mia made herself sound like an anime girl.

“Shut up and eat.”

Mia grabbed the spoon and glanced at Kate before taking a bite.

“I assume that you guys haven’t talked yet,” Mia stated.

Kate looked back in a daze. “I’m not in a mood right now, Mia.”

“Okay,” Mia grumbled.

Kate sighed and then focused on her food. She was still not over what had happened these days. She was elected as one of the representatives, and because of that, she had a lot of tasks on her plate. Most of all, she hasn’t talked to him since then and she was dying inside.

Her connection with Dally and Timothy has been severed since the incident. They even apologized to her. That wasn’t enough to wear off the weight she was carrying. She needs to talk to him.

She came to school at 6 in the morning. There was nothing to do. Her task as representative was going as well, the assignments are already done. She came into the library to refresh the lessons. So far, she was doing well. Kate couldn’t wish for more than this, she has a monthly income, and she was doing well in school, but she was a sucker when it comes to relationships.

“What are you doing here?”

Jane made her presence known and sat in the loft.

“Studying. Didn’t you read the poster outside ‘Library’?”

“Looks like someone is not in a good mood. Does it have to do anything with what happened last week?”

Kate sternly stared at her. “What does it look like?”

Jane observed, mentally judging her. “You have eye bags, a sour mood, and a bitchy attitude. Yep. You lose your mind over that boy.” She conjectured.

Kate shook her head. “What do you think is wrong with me, Jane?”

“You’re doing it so much.”

Kate raised a brow. “Pardon?”

“I think the reason why you’re screwing up is that you’re too conscientious. Not about yourself, but for him.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Tell me, why did you agree to watch over him?”

“Tim told me that he’s quite a troublemaker.”

Jane nodded, auspiciously. “Really? Is that the reason why?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“That you’re keen on him. You like him.”

“Oh, c’mon.”

“If you don’t like him, why are you beating yourself up? You can just toss him over like you always do. Like Brandon, may you rest in peace, buddy.”

“He is nothing like Brandon.”

Jane beamed at her reply.

“What are you smiling at?” Kate asked.

“Oh, nothing. It’s just that you’re so clueless you haven’t figured out that you like him.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.” Jane opposed. “Why did you think you accepted Miss Dally and Timothy’s request if it isn’t for knowing him and to learn what kind of person he is? You wanted to find a reason if you should believe him or not. To take him from his words on the current him, not from his past actions.” She added. “You’re afraid you might end up with the wrong guy again, but you can’t bring yourself to a conclusion because you feel something for him. Am I wrong?”

Kate was silent, unsure what to say.

“I think you should talk to him. Because if you don’t, then I doubt that you’d know the answer to the question.” Jane said.

Kate has considered Jane’s idea. She hated to admit herself. Her avoidance won’t go anywhere if she does not talk to him sooner or later. She did herself a favor though. Kate waited for Van outside the men’s locker room. He took his time. Kate had to wait for him for 30 minutes.

Kate rested her back against the wall, still expecting him to see her. After the non-eventful time, Van got out of the room, not in his uniform, but wearing casual attire. She remembered that it was Friday, so it was fine to wear one.

“Hey.” She wobbly said. “C-can we talk?”

Van looked up at her. There’s no tinge of anger. She felt a slight relief seeing how calm he was. Maybe she was wrong after all.

“About time,” Van said. “I was wondering when you will talk to me.”

“S-sorry.”

Van sighed. “You wanna talk about this while we’re in the Burger Crash?”

They came to a local food shop just one block away from the café where Kate worked. The two stopped at the park. They sat down, watching the afternoon sky.

Van bought burgers, fries, and soda for them. Kate reluctantly accepted his offer. Again, she had waited for almost 3 awkward minutes before he would start to talk.

“Have I told you that I wasn’t like this?” Van asked, munching over his burger.

She shook her head.

“No. I don’t think so.”

“My parents died when I was six years old. Though I don’t remember much of the past, I can recall what had taken over before that day. It was summer in the afternoon, just like now. I keep complaining about them. They’re too busy with their work and I always have to wait in the car before my mum closes the store. It took some time, but I managed to convince them even though I forcibly had done it. I would later then regret doing it. Since then, I have become more hateful and angrier. My brother Timothy always takes me out and invites me to play with others, but I don’t get along with other kids. I often get in trouble. I stayed cool for a while, but in high school, I was tested and got involved with the wrong crowd. No one lasted with me. No matter how hard I try, I can never be like any other, until there’s you.” He continued. “I remembered these words from my mother, ‘If a person came wholly to you, accept them and protect their heart, at all cost.’ When you came to me when no one seemed to bother to befriend a guy like me, I was very happy.”

The more she listened, the more she understood that there was a kid in him that hadn’t grown up. The desire continued to linger on him until this point in his life.

“Thank you and I’m sorry for breaking your trust.”

“I know. Don’t worry about it. I’m understanding more than you know. But this time, no more secrets and you need to make up for it.”

Kate had been thinking for a moment by the time he said those words. An idea came to her mind.

“You know, I have something that I can do for you.”

To say that he was anxious right now would be an oversimplification, no, he was terrified that Kate brought him to the amusement park. Right now, Van was screaming at the top of his lungs and the rest of the people are as the roller coaster swishes up and down. It wasn’t the end of their venture, they also had a barbecue, and lastly, they visited a karaoke bar, rented a room, and sang.

They came back to the park. They seemed to be happy and content, especially Van.

“Have I been a good girl?” Kate asked.

Van blinked and beamed widely. “It’s been fun. Thank you.”

“Don’t sweat it. I-I’m willing to do anything to make it up to you.”

“You know, I’m not the usually trusting type of person. I’ve been guarded ever since I was reminded that I have a sister. Before all of this, I always look for people who I can cling to, maybe that’s the reason why I got myself involved with Brandon, but I never let him go his way on me.” She continued. “I’m sorry, Van. I only wanted to get to know you. I know it’s wrong. I had my issues. I wasn’t sure if you are what you truly say you are. The only thing that I could think of getting the information about you is your aunt and your brother. I sound like a stalker.”

“Then maybe this time, you – we can start over again, and this time with respect and mutual trust. That’s good?”

She beamed. “Yeah.”

Van sighed. “By the way, I’ve been meaning to ask you this. Did you tell them about my condition? My other condition?”

Kate shook her head. “No. I did not. Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone. I promised you before that I am going to help you find out about your history. About the history of hunters.”

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Timothy groaned as he took another step up the ladder. He finally made it to the second floor. The timing of his arrival was impeccable as people within the apartment must not notice him. Though he only received minor cuts, the damage to his ribs and his solar plexus proved to be persistent throughout the night.

He resisted the urge to groan when he felt his insides twitch once more. He saw the window outside, open. Behind it was stairs from the back of their apartment. He motioned outside and walked up to his room. Eventually, Timothy would reach his room. As he came inaudibly, Timothy laid down on his bed.

“Looks like someone has been busy,” Van said.

Timothy shrilled. Van turned on the lamp his face was illuminated in the dark corner where he sat.

“Tim, you better be honest.” Van threatened.

“Or what? You gonna snitch?” Timothy replied.

Timothy wasn’t the kind of one who’d back down. He straightened up and faced him with a firm stance.

“Oh, yeah.” Van immediately replied. “You’ve been throwing me lessons about not getting caught in trouble and here you are. What kind of brother would you be if you were the leading model of the younger one?”

“Don’t use my own words against me or I’ll hit you.”

Timothy attempted to smack but Van moved away.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. But I need you to answer me honestly. Where have you been?”

Timothy sighed as he started to tell Van about the case he was in. When things get south, Timothy already had an excuse. He told Van that Boston has been in trouble because of this girl he met. It happens to be that he was being two-timed by the girl he likes with a mobster. And in return, they got caught in a mob fight.

“I’m sorry, what?!”

“It doesn’t sound so bad.”

“No, it isn’t. This is terrible. How long have you been fighting with them?”

“Not too long. 2 weeks.”

“Does Father know about this?”

“No.”

Van sighed. “You need to stay away from them.”

“Who? My friends or the mobs?”

“Both. You’re going to get yourself killed.”

“No.”

“Ass.”

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping at this point?”

Timothy stopped in his mid-sentence when he noticed that Van was in his uniform.

“You just got home? Where have you been for the past 5 hours?” Timothy looked suspiciously at Van.

“None of your business. If you can make your troubles remain secret that long, why couldn’t I do the same?”

“Van,” Timothy said. “Are you on drugs?”

“No.”

“Then why do you look so stoked right now?”

“I’ve been doing some things.”

“Things? Like what?”

Van beamed at himself, looking away from Timothy. That simple turn away from looks was enough for Timothy to deduce a conclusion.

“The two of you made out, didn’t you?”

“No,” Van replied, annoyed.

They exchanged glances, Timothy was still suspicious while Van sighed, giving up.

“Fine,” Van said. “Kate took me out.”

Timothy grinned. “That’s good news.”

“But it doesn’t mean you and I are on good terms. You made a secret pact with her and Aunt Dally behind my back.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, just wait.”

## Chapter 6

Timothy and the others went the other way and decided to go to the mall and play arcade games after the eventful stalking. Kate saw them gawking at the new bakery shop. Van was called out by Kate. The others were invited too, but they chose to go their way. Gilt figured out that there are some people inside the campus who he deemed to be part of a cult. Van chose to stay and sat in the outside seating area and waited for Kate to finish her shift. The outside area was still nice. They had considered redecorating the outside with flowers hung at the side of the wall. They also provided a wooden chair, table, and small parasol.

“You know we also serve cake in our café, right? You could have come to us if you wanted one.” Kate sat down in front of him. She put down the coffee, her expression vaguely irritated. He almost felt sorry for the spilled coffee.

“You alright?” Van asked. He was unsure what he should say. Kate doesn’t seem to be in a good mood.

“How’s the lady?”

“Excuse me?”

“Let me rephrase that, how’s the owner of the bakery shop? Did you get a good look at her?”

Van shrugged and used his towel to remove the beads of sweat. He forgot that their shop was just across the street.

“Just to be clear, Timothy called me to get this cake. I think he was being nice after what he did to me.” Van wished her death stare would go away with this lame excuse of his. He wasn’t particularly interested in the owner of the bakery shop. He got dragged into their mess.

Kate did not blink. “Ok.” She said. Kate looked to be willing to let go of it.

There was something Van didn’t get between the two of them. He doesn’t know what lines shouldn’t be crossed. In this weirder world, she found someone who he can rely on. But what stopped him? Was it the fear of rejection? Van was never rejected before since he was never interested in girls. As long as he knew her, she has been the sole provider of her family and she was fighting this supernatural scenario since before his arrival. His meddling would only open a disastrous opportunity for her. The more he knew about her, the more he felt that he has nothing to offer.

“So, what’s this all about?” Van broke the silence between them.

“Um. Gilt has something to say about *them*.”

“Them?”

She nodded. “That cult, whoever they are, it appears that they were hiding something. He knew the location. I think it would be better if we let him explain all of this.”

Kate altered her eyes behind Van. Gilt dragged a wooden chair sat between them. Gilt threw a glance at Van. It wasn’t hostile, but judging as if he was having doubts about him.

“Are you sure it’s okay to bring him?” Gilt asked Kate.

“It’s ok.” She replied. “I told you, he’s stronger than you think.”

“Are you a snitch?” Gilt asked Van.

He shook his head. “No.”

“Prove it.”

Van looked at Kate, his eyes asking what he should do.

“How?”

“Have you told anyone about us?”

“No. I’m not going to compromise you guys.”

“Okay,” Gilt said. He continued. “You see, I’ve been snooping around them, watching their movements and I soon learn where they gather. There’s a mausoleum deep in the Maryvale forest. It was coated with invisible magic. There could be traps. Just a heads up. We don’t want someone to get shot or hang or maybe get spiked.” Gilt slowly looked at Van.

“What is with this passive-aggression?” Van continued to ask. “Am I not that trustworthy? Do you want me to stay away? What do you want me to do?”

“What I’m just trying to say is that you’re not trained for this.”

“And neither do I, Gilt.” Kate replied to him.

“You have magic, I have strength and speed, and what does a kid have?”

“He has the blood of a hunter.” Kate responded.

“But that doesn’t make him qualified to come with us.”

“I know he may not seem like it,” Kate said. “But I think I can bring it out during the battle. Don’t worry, I’ll cover for him.”

“All right. If you say so.” Gilt continued. “Where’s Laswell by the way? I thought you called everyone.”

“He texted me he can’t go. Apparently, my uncle busted him sneaking out of his dorm during curfew. So now, he’s grounded.”

“The fight didn’t even start and now we’re down with one man. Great.”

“How do we proceed?” Van asked. “I mean, we can’t just waltz in and kick some ass. Right?”

Kate and Gilt looked at each other.

“No, we are not.” Kate said, almost sounding hesitant.

“Do you actually take us as a fool?” Gilt queried.

“No,” Van replied. “I’m just figuring out what I am supposed to do.”

Kate has given Gilt’s words a thought. She was confident of what she read about the hunters, but this was risky. He might not be able to reveal his latent potential.

“I know that this is your first rodeo, but I am not going to force you into this. Which is why you’re going to stay on the side-line. You will be our backup when we need it.”

“But I thought –” Gilt’s words were cut off when Kate stabbed him with a glare.

“But why?” Van asked.

“Gilt is right.” She elaborated. “I don’t think you’ll be helpful with us.” She returned her attention to Van. “We will keep in touch with you, but in the meantime, would you please take care of my sister?”

As much as Van wanted to join but he didn’t want to become a burden. This frustrates him even more. He was given a chance to prove himself, but his lack of strength held him back.

“You want me to babysit Mia?”

“In the meantime.”

He blinked. “Sure.” there was a brief pause. Van glided her hand to hers. “If you get caught in trouble, don’t hesitate to call me.”

“Sure.”

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Every part of this sanctum was like walking on sacred and religious ground. It has been said that this was one of the sanctuaries that the ancient ones live in. Only it has been desecrated into a crypt. The road was long. Room by room, it was interconnected by different parts of the chambers. The torches illuminated the huge gap, row by row of pillars. The wind had died the moment she came inside. There’s only the dead silence extending over the place.

She mentally reviewed the structure of the complex. She pushed ahead, past another dead light, and into the next section of the hallway. Layla saw the round door, the symbols were pulsing red, came to it, and began to mutter the spells that activated the door. The door softly groaned and saw what lies ahead. Every familiar face she knew from the Ordinus was here, well not everyone. The others, who were outside the inner circle only casted projection spells and sat around on the long, oblong table.

He examined each member. All had long faces. Hive and Suzy shot her a look. Layla raised a brow.

“What’s with the look of you people? Did someone die?” she asked.

“No.” Jay shook his head. “It’s just that, there are numerous aberrations that our transactions have faced. One in particular, we had a brief encounter with those *people*.”

“Tell me what happened.”

“3 weeks ago, our men were attacked in an ambush.”

“Are the other parties involved with this?”

“No,” Hive replied. “They made it clear to us that it wasn’t them. We’re lucky enough though that they’re honorable as we are in our agreement.”

“Who’re we putting responsible then? You mean *them*?”

“Could be,” Enrick said. “They’re the only people we knew who could do something like this. Despite the effort to cover our trails, they managed to catch the gist of our transactions. I do not think it is advisable to make contact with others for now.”

“We invested so much into this. Why not make ourselves clear to them?” Hive asked, his eyes slowly scanning a document.

“If we do, we would risk everything we build here.” Suzy returned as a reply. “We all know that they work on larger scales. Let’s just hope that they won’t pursue us any longer than we already suffer the loss.”

“Great.” Hive commented. “For now, we will discuss the new biological *slash* supernatural weapon we developed.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Layla queried.

“You see,” Jay started. “Hive and I have considered that we should step up our game and make something new aside from those enhanced humans.”

Hive cast a holographic spell. Almost realistic, the intricate human-model design was also the new type of *weapon* displayed in the middle of the table. Layla turned her attention to it. It was nothing like she had ever seen before. The monster itself was similar to a human. It was very human-like even though it was pale in comparison.

“We call this T3-7B.” Hive stated. “These creatures are fast, superior in strength, and are loyal to the master beholden by it.”

“Wait. Wait. Let me get this straight, these creatures are based on humans, not artificial beings, Am I correct?”

Jay nodded. “Yes.”

“And the others?” Layla looked at them.

“We already ask for their opinion about this. And they’re fine with it.”

“Guys, haven’t we talked about this? Using humans as laboratory experiments will only bring conflict.” Layla stated.

Layla wasn’t suggesting it as a hypothetical. A conflict occurred five years ago when the council of this city found out about their abductions of humans and experiments. They proved to be the winners, but it appeared that a new generation of the council was yet to arrive. Needless to say, they already knew what she was referring to. They exchange some looks.

“Hello? Has anyone forgotten what happened to Abed?” Layla asked.

“Yes, we remembered.” Jay stated. “None of us have forgotten. Which is why the next design is less complacent.” He declared.

“Do elaborate.” Hive demanded. “So, they would understand.”

Jay sighed and rose from his seat. “You see. We have implanted them with a similar spell that we use on Icarus. Only this time, we tweaked the original spell and modified it. The spell grants the owner full control of the subject’s movements, inhibits emotion and shows utmost loyalty.”

“This is… insane.”

“Business is business, Layla.” Enrick replied to her. “We’ve been through enough this week. We can’t receive another huge toll. That would be bad for business.”

There was a pause. Layla held back from saying any further.

She forced herself. “I don’t know what to say.”

“If you don’t like this, Layla, then you can leave it to us. You don’t have to work with this directly and can just focus on whatever you’ve been doing these days.” Jay said.

Layla narrowed her vision. She held her breath as she judged his words. It was simple for him to say. Jay never let her go without letting her do work or monitor her other movements.

“And why is that?” Layla asked. “I wonder.”

“It’s simple.” Suzy commented on her query. “You’re one of our biggest contributors to our project. Letting you go on with moral complications would be fatal to us.”

“We will let you know time by time about our progress.”

Layla nodded.

Once outside, Layla quickly jumped in her car, turned it to life, and dialed someone.

Layla knew sooner or later this would’ve happened. She was only compliant when they made themselves aware of her parents. Given they managed to dig up her past, they must have known her background, how rich and resourceful her family was, and how she was capable of providing for them in finance.

*It’s either you’ll willingly join us or we’ll make your life miserable. I hope you’re prepared for the consequences.* Those were the exact words Jay told to her before.

“Please pick up.” She mentally told the other person.

The time was at hand. *These* people are going to cause a huge ruckus in the mortal world. And he was the only one who can tell *them* what they’re up to.

She was on a downslope path that leads back to the city. The lamppost lining row by row came into view. That at least calmed her mind. She has been driving through the mist of the dark with only her car lit on. But before she could at least enter, her car breaks down. The tires seemingly lost their air. She dropped her phone and came out to check what happened to her car. It wasn’t much but spikes came and plucked out from the tires as she pulled it.

“Car trouble?” The gentleman’s voice came behind her.

Layla gulped her liquid as she slowly turned and rose.

It was Jay. The gentleman grew broody. His measuring eyes – a common conception she remembered.

“Jay, what are you doing here? How—”

“Spare us the trouble.” Hive came out of the car.

“What is the meaning of this?” Layla questioned.

She managed to keep her straight face.

“Spare us the trouble.” Hive shot back. “All this time we were wondering how our transactions always get screwed. Turns out, someone has been sneaking out from us. Would you care to enlighten us, Layla?”

“Since when?” Jay queried.

“What –?” she was at a loss for words. Layla stumbled behind. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Please, don’t make a fool out of us. You were about to call someone on your phone.”

“Are you accusing me of being a traitor?”

There was a brief pause.

“While it is true that we have no concrete evidence, you’re the only one who’ll likely turn against us.”

“Really guys? I know what you are capable of. Of course, I won’t do anything stupid.” Layla further elaborated. Her eyes shifted uneasily. “I’m just calling a friend from work.”

“If I have known you for long, you’re afraid to make connections because they’re bound to die. I understand you have work to do, it could be your co-workers, or someone you met at the park, or maybe, someone who’s working in blue-collar.”

She felt the hands of death had come to reach for her as though her luck in life has run out. Layla brought her eyes down, held her necklace, and prayed.

“I’m not as forgiving as Enrick, but if you come clean to us now, maybe we can work something out.” Jay whispered in her ears. “But if you continue to oppose us, well, just as how you were created out of darkness, we will send you back to it.”

“Only if you guys can catch me.” Layla spoke.

Her necklace had glowed so bright that it blinded Hive and Jay. They had to double back. It was safe to say that the spell was not an offensive one.

The light dimly ceased. Layla has gone.

The pendant she had worn had a spell engraved in it, an instant teleportation spell. She has the ability of teleportation, but when it comes to distant locations, she needed to mark it and had to anchor it elsewhere, in this case, the pendant and the mark are the anchors.

Layla immediately locked every door and window in her house. Now was not the time to rest assured. She grabbed a pair of blades and drank a few potions that enhanced her strength. Right now, it shouldn’t be the Ordinus she should worry about, it’s what the storm was brewing outside. The tenants that live here, are not most of all, normal. If her assumption was correct, they should already mark them as their slaves.

Layla opened the door. She peered outside. There was no one.

Layla got out. She brought her eyes down and saw the people, slowly walking upstairs as if they were making sure that their footsteps won’t be heard. Their eyes lit up under the dimmed surface. She gasped. By that time, she knew she was not going to get out that easily.

“Layla, yoo-hoo!” Hive’s voice echoed through the apartment complex to her. “If you can hear me, I just want you to know, you’re dead. There will be no mercy for traitors. You should regret what you’ve done.”

“The only regret I have is not standing up against the likes of you! You blackmailed me and threatened my family.”

“We all have our motives, Layla. You should understand that we’re not going to let you do things your own way should we find out about your little play.” Hive added. “Oh, and we should have told you about this. We’re going to use this city as our experiment ground. Let’s see how well our supernatural soldiers fare against the police in this city.”

“You’re insane!” Layla bared her teeth. “I am not going to allow you assholes to do whatever you want.”

“You can whine all day, but there’s nothing you can do to stop us.”

She heard his traces of footsteps, walking away until they finally faded. Hive made their goals clear to her. And she was not going to allow that to happen.

There’s only one way to prevent that. The woman gritted as she teleported behind the monster who was once a human. Her blade plunged against its chest, instantly killing it.

Another one came through the flock. This one has the power to phase through. Layla teleported down away from it crash against the flood of Inhumans. She leaped, cutting off another head. Her blade whined in the air and struck down another enemy.

She wasn’t supposed to be flaunting this hard, but, regardless, the number of enemies are enough to overwhelm her. Their numbers are seemingly unfathomable. There was a moment when she thought she was gonna die. She had already glimpsed it. Despite the attempt to stop all of them from coming out, some of them still got out.

All hell breaks loose.

The lady had to step down and cover herself with a protection spell.

“Omnes carceres per lunam! Omnes carceres per lunam! Omnes carceres per lunam!”

The mage repeatedly chanted the spell. The moonlight grew stronger and each and one of the monsters basked under it. The building lit up for a few seconds until it ceased. Layla teleported outside the premises. This time, she got out in the park. Now she had departed away from them, she felt thoroughly the cuts and wounds she received earlier. Layla sprinted on the road and towards the forest.

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Alastor enjoyed his dinner. He could eat another mac and cheese. Considering the number of carbs, he might want to reconsider his health first. Nothing was more important than taking care of oneself. Alastor had a large burp as he went to the kitchen and washed the plates. He was about to leave and moved upstairs with one phone in his hand when someone knocked on his door. He summoned his sword and coated himself with protection magic. He paced towards the door.

Another knock came through.

“Who’s there?” he asked.

Alastor drew his sword back to its scabbard and opened the door.

What received him was a bloody Layla. The blades in her hands lost a grip as she stumbled forward only to be caught in his arms. She was bleached by weariness and the cut and wounds had seeped out too much blood.

He carried her over to the empty table and ran to his room where he grabbed a first aid kit, needle, and all. As much as he wanted to ask her what happened, he wouldn't be able to gather the answers if she was dead. He brought back water and also a towel. He cleaned her wounds and tacked the cuts with bandages and white linen cloth. For the open flesh wound, he had to carefully remove the bacteria first and sew it. All the while, Layla was screaming.

“What happened to you?” he asked while tending her wounds.

“Nggh.” She grunted and hissed over her fresh wounds. “Ha! Ha! You have to stop them!”

“Who’s *them*?” he asked. “They’re going to what?”

“The purge,” she gasped. “They’re planning to use their weapons in this city as the testing ground. You have to stop them. Go to the apartment complex. Right now, the police are holding *their*little experiments on 2nd Avenue. It's perfect timing. You have to kill the monsters underneath the compound.”

*Damn it.* ”Why does every time I try to make contact, it always ends up disturbing my peace?”

“Please. You have to stop them. It will be a matter of time before those things will break through the barrier I created. You’ll be able to get through as I only cast the condition of inability to get outside not inside.” With that, Layla’s consciousness declined to fall asleep.

Alastor grabbed every weapon he had. Only the necessary ones. He tacked the sword on his back. His guns hang behind and he wore his mask and sunglasses to protect his identity. Before he left, Alastor cast a protection and invisible spell around the house. She has no one to protect but herself.

As soon as he was one yard away from the fence, a horde of inhumane beings came rushing down at him. He was surrounded in an instant. He wiped a trickle of sweat from his forehead.

The monsters that appeared before him are not like any others he has fought before. They are humanlike, only to be turned into pale, horrid, and mindless monsters. Of all the monsters, one of them stepped forward. Its eyes spoke of hollow and lifeless ground. It stared at him and for a few moments, the pair of holes glowed.

“Ah, I see.” The monster talked.

Someone must’ve relayed their consciousness through this monster. Alastor thought.

The possessed monster continued. “You must be one of her collaborators. Are you not?”

Alastor remained silent.

“A silent type. I see.”

Jay understood his character well. He thought that the pursuit would be easier, Jay had been forced to come after her.

“That wretched woman, where is she?”

“None of your concern.” Alastor coldly replied.

“As you know, I came here with one objective, which is to return her to her proper place. Our side. You see, she has been intentionally leaking information about us. That, I cannot disregard. I always knew that she doesn’t have it in her.” Jay said. “Spare us and yourself with burdensome and hand her over to me. She is our concern.”

“Like she is.”

“Very well. I hope you’re prepared for the consequences of your action.”

The connection between Jay and the monster cut off. He felt the two monsters come from his behind. Alastor fended them off with a transparent wall, pushed, howling in the air, sending them flying through off the course.

Another came to his right. This time, he ducked when the monster threatened to wipe his face off, released the sword, and cut the leg of the monster. Then he plunged the tip of his blade at the other end of its skull. The dark blood slowly dripped over on the ground as he pulled it out. The monster croaked and dropped to the ground.

While the rest marched at his back, Alastor kicked the ground and hurled in the air. He flipped behind them and cut them in their flanks. The monsters aren’t so hard to predict, but they’re fast, and they possess an incredible amount of sheer strength which makes them deadlier than any other average human.

Agile as always, Alastor took no chance and cut them with the sword with no mercy. He held his breath. He continued to dance around and stripped their limbs with effort. He eyed the surroundings. In a short amount of time, the reinforcements came in an onslaught from the air as if it were raining.

Alastor had no choice but to shield himself, waiting for the right time to attack. There’s no natural cover, so he had to come hard. He checked them. There’s more than what he could handle. He has no time for this. He thought.

Facing a single monster ensures a higher chance of survival, but taking alone an entire flock of *them* was much more dangerous. The accountability to predict their behaviors was erratic. Regardless, their movements are too narrow. This allowed him to see through their motives. Alastor could only evade and deflect their attacks with his transcendent transparent wall.

If he had to run away by now, the safety of the people in this town would be at risk. Not that the people aren’t already in danger, but the risk of Layla getting caught would be probable. That was not an option either. She needs to pay him back for the trouble she caught him in.

“Screw it.”

Alastor dashed. He rolled and evaded two swift claws, barely scratching his face. With the boost of his transparent wall, he hurled in the air cutting two of the enemies. Their heads flew two yards away. He protected his back by conjuring the wall and threw the sword at the incoming enemy in front of him. Then undid the wall behind, stabbing the enemy in its head with his knife. Then he threw a knife at the other one.

Alastor reclaimed the sword and blocked two of the enemies while pirouetting to cut off the monster’s head. When the wall broke down, Alastor kicked the other enemy and stabbed the other with sheer strength. Regardless, the enemy was the utmost of all defiant than any others. His sword refused to be claimed by the enemy’s hard grip until it fell, but he was taken aback by the enemy he kicked earlier.

Alastor stepped back twice, evading, and maneuvering away from the enemy. He had to roll back to get back his knife. Well timed, he stabbed the monster’s fist with his blade. He attacked its throat then its nose and stabbed the head twice. He got his weapons back and immediately turned to the road.

He had been trained to drain the fear of darkness. He was never afraid of darkness. He considered it as an ally. For that reason, he was not easily paralyzed by neurotic lassitude, instead, he sees the night as an extension of him. Yet tonight, as he moved on the road, he could only smell the decaying flesh of monsters and the scent of death lingering in this poor city.

He slowed, scanning around what he could amiss. Alastor has never had the time where he settled after successful reclusion. He was always prepared and wary of his surroundings. Relaxing in a dangerous territory could result in a fatalistic result.

The city was in chaos from east to west, police were holding the monsters barely enough to contain them while the media, as always, got themselves caught in the middle of the trouble. They gain little footage, but not sufficient enough as a scoop for the media. The city had to cut them off to prevent widespread panic. They already had enough monster problems at hand. Adding more baggage would only slow them down.

It was until then his attention turned into a baffle when there was an explosion of leaves, the crows cried and soared up, and trails of feces dropped on the road.

The mercenary straightened himself, glanced down, and took a deep breath. How silly it was to be rattled by a flock of crows? He was about to turn the other way, avoiding the sight of the police when something crept into his senses and two individuals appeared ahead of him.

One was blonde and the other was almost 6 foot tall, possessed raven eyes and youthful skin. He may not sense the blonde girl, but the tall man, and he can feel the faint amount of dark mana coming from him.

Alastor had to stop in his pursuit of trailing the monster back from its sword. His hands twitched, but nothing seemed to be incorrect until the man vanished from his sight.

Behind him, Gilt was investigating him.

“Revelate,” Kate muttered.

The weapons had been revealed in a single swing of her hand.

Alastor felt a sliver of pain in his thighs. It might be invisible, but he knew that this was one of her spells. No matter how he struggled to move his legs, it became impossible for him to mobilize, Kate made sure of that.

With both hands held by Gilt, Alastor couldn’t do anything.

She might be calm, but deep down, Kate was tormented by anger and excitement. She has been looking at them for over 5 years. And she was not going to miss any chances that might lead to the other perpetrators of her parent’s death.

“Somnus.”

The witch’s words are the last thing that registered in his mind as he fell asleep. The vampire and the witch carried out the mercenary back to her home.

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Alastor hissed over the static that repeatedly shocked him for the last 20 minutes. He glared at her, cursing her over his thoughts.

“So, are you ready to talk?” the witch asked.

“How many times have I told you that I’m not affiliated with anyone?” Alastor countered in annoyance. He had been convincing her since then that he wasn’t trying to ruin this city or in particular trying to kill someone in his way.

“You have a sword, a knife, and loaded guns,” Kate said. “Tell me, why are we supposed to trust you?” she asked, determined at her hunch.

Gilt rose from his seat. He also had enough of this. He came closer to her and beckoned to talk with her in the corner of the room.

“I know that you’ve been waiting for this day,” Gilt started. “And I’m all for it. But the guy over there, he’s not lying.”

Ever since then, Gilt was also looking for the perpetrators of the huge incident five years ago. The murder of the council includes the head of the family Mavenhart, Augustus Mavenhart – a human who was a powerful witch. That was why when he heard of it, he knew that the rest of the family was in danger. For that reason, they had to move out somewhere far away to keep the children safe, so that the family line wouldn’t be compromised. He volunteered to stay behind to keep their secrets safe at the mansion.

There was no time Gilt didn't want to rip his way to get the names of those people who caused them trouble and pain. But seeing and *hearing*how their captive reacted. He knows they’re on the wrong side of the story, but they’re not too late to fix it.

“How can you be so sure?” Kate asked.

“I listened.”

Kate inwardly blinked. There was a brief pause after.

“That’s what I’ve been telling her!” Alastor replied, overhearing their conversation. “I was hired to take those monsters down, and there will be more if you don’t let me do my job.”

“Who hired you?” Kate inquired.

“Does it matter?”

“It is for us.”

Alastor took a deep breath. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why?”

“Because it would risk the safety of that *person*.” Alastor continued. “She risks everything she has to get their ill doings out.”

“And you’re the solution?”

Alastor nodded. “Yes. I’m pretty good at killing monsters.”

Kate undid the chains and the pliers from his body. She came to the drawer and grabbed a potion. Mixed herbs and several liquid compounds were put inside the capsule.

“Drink this.” She offered. “This will heal you and regain your strength.”

“Thank you.” Alastor accepted her offer and drank it. “Now if you excuse me, I have –”

Alastor’s legs trembled and dropped to his knees.

“What did you do to me?” he gazed up at her.

“Give it a minute, the side effects will wear off soon.”

At that moment, Kate’s phone rang and vibrated. She looked down upon it. It was Timothy, his name flickering. Kate had to answer it, it must be an emergency.

“Kate?” Timothy asked. “Is Van at your home?”

“Uh, yes.” She replied. “He’s upstairs. Do you want me to talk to him?”

“Please do.”

“All right, give me a sec.”

Kate gave Gilt a look to which he responded by moving his head to the door. She mouthed ‘Thank you’ before going out.

She came hurriedly upstairs and in the living room, Van was listening over the radio. He was trying to look for a signal. Somewhat, the signals from the Radio station are cutting off and on.

“Van.” She called out to him.

Van looked back. He rose and came to her.

“What happened?” he asked. “Did you get something out of him?”

She shook her head. “No. Gilt doesn’t think he’s one of them.”

“Then why –”

“It’s your brother.” She handed out her phone. “He’s been trying to reach you.”

Van got her phone and put it in his ears.

“Hello?”

“Van! Thank goodness!” Timothy’s voice raised in joy. “Why aren’t you calling me back? I’ve been looking for you!”

“My phone is upstairs. The battery dried out, so.”

As if exhaling in respite, his brother replied. “You have to stay there. Okay. Don’t go out. There’s news that there’s a terrorist attack. You heard about that loud siren and announcement, right?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Good,” Timothy said. “Stick your ass in there.”

“What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m here in the apartment. Together with the boys. We locked ourselves inside so no one could get to us.” Timothy continued. “In any case, do not attempt to come back unless the police announce that it’s safe to go outside.”

“I-I’ll do that for sure.”

“Good,” Timothy added. “If anything happens, call Dad. He’ll know what to do.”

“Wait, what?”

After the transmission feed died, Van couldn’t help but feel eerie about the last words Timothy left to say to him.

“Van,” Kate softly held his arm, concerned and wanting to know more of his thoughts. “Are you okay?”

Van winced. “Um, yeah. It’s just that –”

She came closer, waiting for an answer.

“Never mind.”

“Are you sure everything is alright?”

“Don’t worry about it. Just do what you have to do.”

“Okay.”

Kate looked up and felt Mia’s presence.

“What’s going on here?”

Kate brought Mia to the room where they usually spar. They sat down, facing each other at the other side of the table.

“There is something that I wanted to tell you.”

She knew she had to tell Mia about this, about what she has been doing for the last 5 years. Kate has been telling herself that she needed to be prepared. To be honest and provide answers because she believed that this was a sin. Kate made a promise to Mia that no matter what, she will always stay by her side. Nevertheless, she broke her vow and lived to this day looking for answers about their parents’ deaths.

“We need to have a serious talk.” Kate started.

“Aren’t our talks always serious?” Mia shot with a boorish remark.

Kate hesitantly looked up at her, guilt washed over her eyes.

“You see, our city is in a state of lockdown.”

“I heard the sirens and the announcement, I’m not deaf,” Mia replied, candid as always.

“That’s not everything.”

By this time, Mia felt a strange sensation from her, like she has something else to say, but cannot, as if it was a secret. She couldn’t quite put a finger on it.

“What are you trying to say?” Mia shot the question. This time, tighter.

Still looking down, Kate replied. “There’s no terrorist. There are monsters in our neighborhood.”

Mia widened her eyes. “I’m sorry. What in the fairy tale are you talking about?”

“Do you remember 5 years ago? Some people were responsible –”

“Oh, not this again!”

“They still live in here –”

“We talked about this before.”

“And they’re responsible for letting those monsters on the loose.”

“Kate, STOP!” Mia shouted. “We are not going to have this conversation again. Period.” Mia continued. “Aren’t you tired of all of this? They died in a fire in our cabin which is miles away from this city.”

“There has to be a connection.”

“It’s what we call coincidence! Nothing more, nothing less. So, please, stop. Let it go before we’ll lose another family.”

Kate held back her tears. She had to.

“I don’t expect you to believe me. Well, at least I tried.”

“Yeah, nice try. Now, whatever you’re planning to do, it has to stop.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Kate, I’m warning you.” “Ad somnum.”

A blue-whitey smoke appeared and washed onto Mia’s face. She fell hard on the ground and fell asleep. Kate quickly held her and carried her back to her room. She made sure that she was comfortable before leaving.

Van came to see her. “Is everything all right? I heard screaming up there.”

“Yes. Um, she didn’t take it too well.”

As she tried to avoid him, Van lifted her cheeks to see her eyes.

“Did the two of you –?”

“As I’ve said,” she interjected. “She didn’t take it too well.”

Van offered his handkerchief. Kate gladly accepted and used it to wipe fragments of tears.

“Please,” her voice pleaded. “Keep her safe.”

Van nodded. “I promise.”

“You know,” Gilt started to talk as soon Kate walked out the door. “Patience is not her strong suit. Since we first met, she has been reluctant to trust a vampire like me. It took me years to gain her trust. I remember she threw a stake on my stomach once.”

“You’re a vampire?” Alastor intently observed Gilt. “You don’t look like one.”

“Oh, I’m flattered. You see, this look is natural.”

*Looks like I’m not the one who has a bigger ego, after all*. Alastor spoke in his thoughts.

“Since you’re going to kill the monsters,” Gilt asked. “I assume you’re after the authors of this mess too?”

“No,” Alastor replied. “My priority is to take out the monsters that my client trapped in the apartment complex just on 2nd Avenue.”

“So, what you’re planning to do is to kill each one of them all by yourself?”

Alastor clumsily nodded. “Yeah.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Like I’ve said. I’m good at killing monsters.”

“With no backup?”

“No.”

“How will you stop them?”

“I have guns and swords and also tons of lethal magic.”

“If you’re good as you say you were, why didn’t you kill us back then?”

“I’m not a murderer,” Alastor rephrased his words, “Not that I haven’t killed anyone before, it’s just that, there’s a fine distinction between good and bad, and I’m inclined to kill bad people.”

“That’s a jack-up notion you have there.”

“Well, thank you.”

“That’s not a compliment,” Gilt replied.

The door creaked open. Kate brought back his weapons. Alastor eyes glistened. The mercenary wrapped his weapons back to their proper places. He couldn’t be more thankful that none of it was damaged.

“Now that we found a common ground.” Alastor enthusiastically said. “Shall we continue?”

“Hold on.” Kate stopped him from moving forward. “What are you supposed to do?”

“As I’ve said, kill some monsters.”

“So, you have no idea who’re the people behind this?”

“Of course not. I was hired to kill the monsters that were trapped in the apartment complex. It would be a matter of time before they break through the barrier.”

“Just you alone?” She had the same reaction as Gilt. “I am not underestimating you but…”

“I can handle this. I’m a pro.”

“Yeah, well, you got your ass handed to you by a 17-year-old witch while wearing baggy pants, I doubt that you can handle an entire army of those nut-suckers,” Kate replied.

“Just to be clear, you took me by surprise, and I’m not going to kill some bystanders just because they got pissed off when they wrongly assumed the wrong person. Wanna try it out again? This time minus the sleeping spell.”

Kate returned with a pretentious smile. She knew better than to pick up a fight with an experienced mercenary like him.

Alastor continued. “I was expecting that we have the same targets, it turns out you have yours. I’ll see you off then.”

“Aren’t you at least interested in the identity of those who cause this?” Gilt queried.

Alastor shook his head. “No. Because that would be dumb. It’s like asking to be a target.”

“You already made yourself a target the moment you took the job. Can’t you get yourself any more clowner?” Kate replied.

Alastor grinned. “Then I’ll be deader than ever. I am not going to risk it.”

The three of them got outside where Van waited at the doorstep with his back leaning against the door.

“I assume you guys settled it?” Van asked.

As Alastor lifted his head to see Van, he was taken aback. The face semble the person he fought back then.

“Who’s the hippie?” Alastor asked.

“Kate’s boyfriend, Van,” Gilt replied.

“We are not!” “We are not!” they said in sync.

“And what about you?” Van asked Alastor.

They all looked at Alastor, waiting for an answer.

“My name is Alastor. You guys can call me Al.”

Something had triggered in Van’s mind, like a flicker of an image. It was blurry, but it felt like Alastor has something to do with it.

Van hastily asked. “Have we met before?”

Alastor, who seemed a bit surprised, shook his head. “No. This is the first time we met.”

Van nodded. “Okay.”

He didn’t ask much further. *Good*. Alastor thought.

There’s so much trouble that a man can handle and Alastor can’t have his brain troubled by it.

As soon as they took off, Kate called Alastor.

“I’m sorry for what I did earlier.”

“I was wondering when you’re going to apologize.”

“Is it too late to take it back?”

Alastor beamed and continued. “That guy,” Alastor referred to Van. “He’s supernatural, isn’t he?”

The two raised a brow. Kate motions forward. “Why?”

Unbeknownst to them, Alastor saw what they did not know a part of Van. He has the mark of a hunter. It was something I learned but from who? The question lingered in his mind as a bee fretted over a bloomed flower. He shook his head. The mercenary evaded their inquisitive gazes.

“Nothing. I – I just um, I don’t know. It just felt like he’s one.” Alastor excused.

“You’re one of them too?” Gilt inquired.

“Can’t say that yet. I don’t even know what I am.”

Kate and Gilt exchanged a look.

“I’ll see myself out.”

“Wait!”

“How are you going to get inside with all the police blocking the intersections?” Kate added. “Unless you can fly, then…”

Alastor grinned.

The mercenary had given it a thought. He already anticipated that there would be police patrolling every corner of the city. One strategy, in particular, Alastor had already come up with a plan. The mercenary winked at them as he started to summon transcendent stairs and he hopped on them. As he ran on top, the stairs below slowly started to fade.

They could only watch in awe at how the mercenary slowly vanished into thin air.

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With the combination of his invisible spell and the transcendent wall, he can hop on top of their heads without even getting noticed. The mercenary had to run around looking for a proper place to land. Despite the effort, the mercenary had not found a single entrance. The rooftop was locked by chains, the windows were shut – there’s only one thing he could think of. Alastor held the grenade. He waited for 2 seconds before throwing it off to the wall at a safe distance.

By the explosion, the police below looked up and saw the trailing smoke. One of them opened a line back to their headquarters and reported the commotion that just happened.

The explosion it caused was enough to open a hole inside.

The mercenary dived through the thick smoke and fire. His arms crossover his head, protecting his entire face from the blazing fire. The fall had taken him down, estimated around the 12th floor. Alastor hurled in the air and conjured a transparent wall in his feet along the way, killing four of the monsters in one stomp. He landed cautiously and observed around. It was then the monsters released a deafening shriek.

The mercenary kicked the ground, ran over, and sliced the head of the monster on its chest while his knife flung in the air and pierced the other monster’s skull. Alastor used another transparent wall to block the monsters from the upper floor and pluck out the sword. The mercenary then consecutively blocked and attacked in return. Whatever was left in the path was the severed parts of humanoid monsters.

One thing in common they have was that they’re all enhanced in terms of strength. Comparing it to their mobility would be another story. The same as he fought before in the forest, they have fatal flaws. They don’t have fully functional movements and always stumble on their feet. Alastor kicked the shin of the enemy, and stunned it down – then the mercenary cut its head off and planted it with a grenade. He threw the decapitating head onto the several monsters as they exploded into pieces.

Alastor used the time to run down while evading several monsters. He snatched back his knife and held the railing then jumped down. On his feet, he conjured another transparent wall that levitated, using it as a boost, and hurled in the air. Next, he unleashed his knife and sword, piercing the monster’s guts.

He shook them off and continued to cut his way through. It was true what they say, within the rules of nature, the role of predators and prey are unavoidable. Perhaps necessary, but it doesn’t mean evolution won’t prove to be folly. Every role can be interchangeable, that’s what Alastor learned back from the Glade – his home. To survive in the harsh environment, you must adapt or else you’ll die.

For every fight, no matter how small or big it was, consider it as your last and treat yourself with desperate measures. Use every means to overpower the enemy no matter what the cost. And Alastor already paid the cost of the skills he earned. It’s his humanity.

The gruesome way of killing doesn’t appall him anymore – the blood, the chunks of flesh, and the rotten smell of their brain are already ingrained in his mind. He trained to ignore needless emotions and such lack of remorse allowed him to continue.

Alastor leaped over the pile of bodies and skidded over the railings down to the 7th floor. He flipped over the air as he evaded the poor attempts of the enemies. Quick as he glided down, Alastor immediately pulled out his guns. His twin pistols named – Aurora and Cristina flashed in a wild cry, pulling the firing pin as the gun expelled the shell casings rapidly as the bullets flared expunging the smoke and together with the flesh of the humanoid monsters. In a rapid fire, he killed seven of them.

Reloaded, Alastor ignited again and shot another two. On top, he saw several humanoid monsters jump off and clung to the railings. The others went straight down and died. Their bodies splattered on the ground. A spark of electricity flickered in the air. He looked up to the trails of spark emitting from a single monster – it has the same ability as Abed.

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A thin breeze came through the forest. The leaves scattered and danced over the wind. Jane Manhattan came to his house in the late afternoon. She was supposed to come by in the afternoon, but she has personal business to settle first.

The road perhaps might prove inconvenient to her. She wasn’t very fond of enclosed locations, specifically, Rick’s location. She could have sworn, she felt strange sensations coming from the deep part of the forest. Regardless, she shook off the strange feeling and persisted in diving deeper until she reached his home.

The palest streak of the sun faded in the view over her rear mirror with the tall oak trees; the only thing that assured her a sense of security over the desolated destination. The road was extensive to no end. She almost felt sorry for him that he has to go through with this every day, almost.

She was given the address but couldn’t quite put the finger on why and how Rick lived in that mansion for so long. He must’ve been so lonely. Not that she doesn’t feel the same way.

His mansion was simpler than she thought. It had no gate when she entered the premises. She saw an open space and parked her red Volkswagen Jetta. She got out and brought the sling bag of her laptop and a few papers for their collaborative project. Then she pressed the smart remote key.

Now that she got a closer look, she noticed that most of it was composed of red bricks and wood as if it was modeled similarly to a colonial-style home. She can barely peer at what’s inside as it was covered by tall and thick blinders. Given that the 2nd and 3rd floor has many windows, she took that as a sign that Rick’s house has many spare rooms to offer.

She also noticed that there were a few windows that cracked and a few cobwebs hung on some corners. She understood the concept of busyness, but still, it could’ve been better. She might be a judge-e type of person, but right now, she felt pity for the poor condition of the house.

She made it to the door. She dusted off her cloth and pants and fastidiously brushed off a few scraps of leaf clung on her heels before she pressed the doorbell.

After a few moments, she heard faint footsteps and a few squeaky noises coming to the door. *She must’ve worn his regular slippers.* She thought and her assumption was right.

The moment the door opened. A pair of fluffy sandals caught her dark eyes. It has the faces of beagles and makes a light squeaky sound when making a final step. She looked up and witnessed Rick scraping the eye gunk off his eyes. He yawned.

“I thought you’d never come.”

She blinked in surprise. “There’s an emergency at home that I have to take care of, but hey, here I am. Let’s get over this.”

“Come inside. Make yourself feel at home.” Rick invited her in.

Before she entered, Rick stopped her. He looked at her heels.

“Strictly no shoes and heels on my property.”

Rick went to the nearest door and when he got out, he brought a pair of rabbit slippers. In a situation like this, she can’t refuse and disregard how cute those slippers are. Polite enough, he kneeled and took off her heels then carefully wore the slippers.

*How old is he?* She mentally smiled.

Judging how it easily went through, Rick nodded in his head.

“It looks right on you.” He said.

Jane nodded. “Should we start? It’s 6 pm. I wanted to end this early.”

“It’s weekend. Chill up.”

“I have something else to do tomorrow. Sorry, if I could be pushy.”

Rick blinked. “All right. If you say so.”

Rick stood and gestured to follow him.

They went through the long corridors. Each wall is carved with different stories. There’s no corner where there’s no painting. Most are abstract, some are still life and historical figures, but what most intrigued her is a portrait of a person, almost realistic, hung on some part of a room just across the study room. The woman wore an expensive red sleeveless dress. What caught her attention is the details. Every inch, every nook and corner of her dress and her body was painted masterfully, yet, she appeared to be sad despite the effort of her smile.

“Your family is seemingly keen on artwork, huh.” She commented.

“Can we start with the assignment so we can get over this?”

She knew that sound very well. Jane always does that. When she feels uncomfortable, she dismisses the person immediately.

Her parents aren’t always there when she needs them the most. They’re off to travel and do business with other people, something that she’s seeing in him right now. The mansion has no adults.

By now, knowing that he has trouble with his parents made her desire to at least share his burdens. She knew very well how destructive it could be if someone’s emotion is bottled up. Her thoughts may be contraindicated with one reason, she hasn’t heard in a while that Rick got himself into trouble, except the time when Van made someone’s life in trouble when they tried to pick on Rick which is understandable.

The moment her laptop turned to life. She gave it to Rick who sat across the table.

“Wi-Fi password please.” She demanded.

“Just turn it on. It’s open Wi-Fi.”

She raised a brow. “Really? Damn, you must be really rich then.”

“Not that rich.” He elaborated. “I’m planning to put in a password. I’m worried about the security of social media. Especially nowadays, people can easily take a look at someone’s private account.”

Jane added. “Yeah. It’s been viral that there’s a malicious message that is messing people’s accounts by sending them a link.”

“I can’t believe that there are still dumb people who willingly click strangers’ sent links.”

“Must be those people who’re dumb enough to believe that they won a phone or money.”

They proceeded by searching the subtopics of their analysis. They were tasked to present an analysis paper about the American Revolution back in the 18th century. They scanned the entire pdf they found.

“What kind of analysis should we present?” Rick asked.

“There’s a lot of events that were covered during that time.”

“We were only limited to 1000 words on our paper.” Rick continued. “I think we should split it into 4 subtopics.”

“We should select subtopics from different events that we will present and analyze.”

“Then highlight the important parts of it.”

“How many subtopics should we present?”

“Hmm. Maybe four?”

“Two each of us then. Ok.”

While writing the distinct events in that particular history, Jane stole a glance. She observed him in silence. She couldn’t help but smile when she saw him wearing pajamas. She thought it was adorable.

Jane looked back at her notes when she saw him lift his head. She’s up to no good if he ever falls for this guy. She just got out of a toxic relationship and now she’s eyeing for a new one. She knew better than that.

“Here I brought you some brownies and lemon juice in case you’re hungry.”

That’s very thoughtful of him. She thought.

Rick put the plate of brownies at a safe distance from their papers and laptop.

“Thanks.”

She clipped one and ate it. Rick chuckled and when he did, Jane pounded her chest. She seemed to be choking on her food. Rick immediately poured a glass of juice for her. She quickly drank it and recovered. She breathed heavily.

“Are you okay?” Rick asked. “You should eat slowly. Please be careful. I don’t want my house to turn into a crime scene.”

She coughed. “Sorry.”

The two continued their study. It took her a while to narrow down the important parts. By the time she put down her pen, she finally noticed that Rick wasn’t in the study room anymore. She peeked at his work and was amazed at how well-organized it was.

She doesn’t want to appear as a nosy brat, but she couldn’t help but wonder. There are so many interesting things about this mansion. Aside from the paintings, there are some medieval armor and souvenirs from other countries. One particular room was filled evenly with more artifacts.

Jane again ventured and this time, she went deeper and found inside the room, a black door. It isn’t creepy at all, except that it wasn’t attached to anything behind. It was only sitting there for some reason.

In her time studying magic, she knew that certain items and figurines are imbued with dark magic and this door is spewing a tremendous amount of dark magic. Despite her warning of herself, Jane found herself allured by the mystery of it. It was as if she was being called from whatever was behind the door.

She came closer, one inch away from the knob. Her hand slowly reached it. She was about to take hold when Rick pulled her away.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Still dazed, it took Jane ten seconds to react. She gasped heavily.

“Um. I was wondering where you are. I wanted to tell you that I’m done with my part. Where were you?”

“I was in the kitchen,” Rick replied.

Rick looked at the door and investigated if it was still intact. So far, the knob remains clean and unhand.

“Look, you could’ve shouted my name. You shouldn’t be wandering alone.”

“Why?”

“Just because...”

The door hinged and groaned. They turned and saw Gilt.

“The two of you, out,” Gilt commanded.

Gilt was not in a particularly good mood at the moment. He was seemingly disturbed by why the two of them were there.

“I just got busy for the evening and you brought someone here?” Gilt scolded Rick.

This is a strange thing for her. Gilt is scolding Rick. Weren’t they supposed to be cousins?

“I’m sorry, I-I’m kinda lost here. Were the two of you supposed to be cousins?” She turned her attention to Gilt. “What is wrong with you? Why are you scolding him?”

“It’s none of your business, Jane.”

Rick elbowed her. “Don’t make this worse. Let me talk to him.” He whispered to her. “Look, I invited Jane here to work with our assignment since their Wi-Fi is broken and I can offer a lot of services, so we made a deal to work here.”

“Spill, what are you guys doing in that room?” Gilt asked Rick.

“Umm.”

“I got lost.” She interjected. “I was looking for the bathroom and wandered off the track. It’s my fault.”

“Ah-huh. Well, consider this a warning. Don’t go in there next time. Capisce?”

They nodded.

And the devil in disguise finally took off.

“Yes sir.”

Jane never took off her glowering eyes on him until he faded out of view.

She couldn’t get over the fact that for once in a while, she was eating homemade food, not a ready meal, but a real one. She munched over the Mac and Cheese and sighted over the Meatloaf in maple syrup as her next target.

“Has anyone ever told you, you’re like a black hole of foods and snacks?” Rick commented.

She paused, minded her manners.

Rick added. “Wait. Don’t take it the other way. I was complimenting you. You look like you could win an eating contest.”

“Am I that of a gobbler?” She burped.

Rick couldn’t stop from chuckling at it. It wasn’t very ladylike behavior, but at least she was being herself.

She continued. “Sorry, it’s been a while since I had a decent dinner and meal.”

“You don’t have anyone in the house to do that for you?”

She shook her head. “No one. I separated from my parents.”

“Really? Why?”

“There are some things we couldn’t agree on.”

“And just like that? Did you choose to go? That’s rather selfish to say.”

“If you’re in my position, you wouldn’t probably say that.”

Rick sighed. “Look, um, I’m sorry I could be nosy with other people’s business, but I couldn’t help seeing you being like that.”

“I wish the circumstances were different. Our family could’ve turned out differently.”

“Most people value a lot of things, money, worldly possessions, their egos, and pride, but most of all, above all else, family matters the most.”

“I won’t be so sure about that.” She replied. Rick gave her a look. “They’re not as good as you think they are.” She continued. “They don’t care about what I want. They only see me as leverage to ensure their business with the other family.”

“You got into an arranged marriage?”

She nodded. “Yes, and I got myself out of a toxic relationship. So, I ran. I ran from all of my problems.”

“Do they know you’re here?”

“I don’t think so. I go to many places. I doubt they would know that I’m here.” She asked. “What about you? I assume your parents aren’t always at home.”

He sighed. “They’re dead.”

She paused eating. She looked up at him. “I-I’m sorry.”

“Nah, it’s okay. They’ve been dead for many years.”

“So, you lived here, by yourself?”

“There’s also Gilt.”

“I mean, who’s your guardian?”

“I have this distant relative of mine, her name is Bella Hemlock.”

“The police officer?”

“Yeah.”

“Isn’t it supposed to be illegal that you’re living here alone?”

“Uh no. I usually come around here during weekends, sometimes during weekdays if no one’s here.” Rick continued. “You’ve been running around, don’t you?”

She nodded. “I don’t know what’s worse, being chased by my own family or not getting enough happiness out of it?” she asked herself. “I’m afraid I won’t get to live my life.”

“We chose what makes us happy. Doesn’t mean you’re in a storm, you have to have to lose hope. It’ll pass.”

“For a young man, you sound like an old book.”

“It’s an experience.”

“Now, tell me, would that experience also include romance?”

Rick smiled. “Why would you ask that?”

“Well, I was wondering if you have a girlfriend. But seeing how evasive you are, I guess not.”

“You’re right,” he replied, “I don’t have one. That stings. I’m deeply hurt.” He laughed.

“Don’t you feel lonely?”

Rick shook his head. “No.” he paused due to clarity. “Maybe, sometimes, but I’m used to it.”

“You seem to be a driven person.”

“Well, I am. You know, it took me a while to move on. As a child, I always cried when I got scolded or shouted at. And when my parents died, it magnified tenfold. I have to go through therapy sessions. It’s always Aunt Bella who comes and aided me when I needed it the most.”

“I heard a similar story from Kate.”

Rick nodded. “She’s *that*person.” He continued. “There’s this one time, I thought that if I die, I might be able to go to heaven and reunite with my mum and dad. I was dumb, I didn’t know attempting to commit suicide wouldn’t be less painful. I didn’t know the concept of agony by that time, so I ended up struggling to swim ashore, but I couldn’t feel anything when I realized my mistake. Thankfully, she came to me and brought me to the hospital. And you knew what was worse than that? She didn’t scold me. She just stayed and held my hand when I’m unconscious. She took me to their home, fed me, and clothed me. I learned something valuable that day. Don’t make a permanent solution for a temporary problem.”

“Life is such a bitch.” She replied. “It’s like sucking our souls into the void of problems. I wish my next life could be better. I’ve always been afraid that one day, they will come for me and I won’t have any time to live for myself. I’d rather die than be locked in a marriage that I didn’t want in the first place.”

“Don’t be afraid of how much time you have, think about what you can do with it. Make the most of it.” Rick softly said.

Jane stared at his dark yet empathetic eyes. She claimed that problems are like voids, sucking the life force of people, but his, it’s all enthralling. He seems not afraid to tackle a problem head-on. He was an old soul that she was not afraid of.

“You are an old book, after all.” Jane gleamed.

“Well, if I’m an old book then you’re a train wreck.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but it’s kinda hard to ignore when you always stand out.”

Jane gasped. “Are you stalking me?”

“No.” Rick laughed. “It’s really hard to ignore someone competitive in class.”

“Really? You’re not gawking at me because of this pretty face?”

He shook his head. “That’s partly the reason.”

“So, you do admit, you like this pretty face?”

“Yeah.” Rick groaned, finally giving up. “And the way you dress. You’re like a model.” He paused. “Yeah, damn. I just admitted it.”

They laughed and silence ensued over.

Jane blinked. She tried not to notice things, but between them, she felt a new connection. A spark. There wasn't a time when she prayed for something like this to happen, she didn’t expect that those prayers would happen sooner than she thought. But, it’s the wrong time to fall in love with the right one.

“Is it just you or the place is hot?” Jane asked.

“Probably global warming,” Rick suggested.

The chance of them working out is as pale as her future.

“Um. Should we continue with our work?”

“I think we should. It’s getting late.”

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It was by 7:30 in the evening Jane and Rick got their collaborative assignment finished. She stopped by at the waiting shed of the bus stop. She got off and went to the vending machine. She picked up the coins in her pocket. Jane had brought extra pennies in case she had to buy something that her eyes were keen on. She was well aware that there are some of her ATM cards that can’t afford to use.

Relishing over the drink, Jane observed around. A curious thought raised in her mind. Jane was quite observant of her surroundings. Every day she always comes by the locations and routes to her house, and she takes notes of the corners and the routes. Considering previous encounters, Jane would probe the questions in her thoughts about where the people were. The building blocks lined the street and the shops were empty – all in deadly silence. After she threw the bottle of lemonade over the trash bin, Jane crossed the road. She felt a bit famished and went to look for open stores. No stores on the other side are open. She felt tired.

Jane went back on her way to her car when a loud explosion resonated in her location. She looked at her six – a huge smoke drifted away to the sky. Fires ablaze and several gunshots and sirens come to her ears somewhere a few blocks away from her. Jane had to run away. Her hands instinctively dialed Kate. She was the only person she was closest to. She clumsily tripped over her feet and with that – her phone fell. She attempted to reach her phone when a foot stepped on it.

“Well, that’s not particularly rude at all.” She commented.

The man did not talk.

Jane picked herself up – cleaned her gray jacket and held closer her taut.

Her eyes were still fixed on her broken phone. It was then it dawned on her. The man who stepped on it bears only his feet. It has overly grown dead nails and pale rotten-dotted skin with a foul smell as if it were a dead animal. She slowly looked up. And observe the rest of its features.

By then, Jane realized what an obscure figure. The baleful face and distorted figure hadn’t already made her creep enough crept – she was deeply disturbed. This was the first time she had seen a despicable monster in her entire life. The image still scarred her mind.

“Repulsus!”

Jane indiscriminately blasted the monster off 3 yards away from her. She could not bear to her mind what it would do to her and she wasn’t particularly keen to stay enough to know what was going on. The answer was already laid in front of her. As curious as frightened she was, she could not linger in this dangerous part of the city. Jane had to run and drove her car to Kate’s house.

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Alastor has been consequently evading the humanoid monster that has a lightning ability. All the while, he effectively decapitated each of the enemies that had gone through him.

The monster itself did not only possess the lightning Abed shared. It was also capable of flight with the electricity generated in its feet.

Felt cornered, Alastor swung wide his arm and conjured transparent wall constructs, and flew down. He landed then leaped onto another following the stairs and evading a few of the desperate enemies, only to fall and meet their demise.

Alastor was erratic and quick. He had to improvise and conjured another set of transparent walls that blocked the monster’s attack while narrowing its escape path. Alastor wasn’t particularly enamored by the ability of the monster. He was afraid that others might surprise him.

The mercenary called upon another construct of a transparent wall. He jumped and evaded another lightning blast on his left. Another whizzed to his right and he came on his feet leaping and hurdling in the air at enemies’ six.

The enemy quickly came to learn his position and blasted another lightning. Alastor protected himself with his construct – defying the lightning as it dispersed on his transparent wall. He had to wait for 5 seconds before the monster stopped.

He hung his sword through the crack of the transparent wall. And he leaped again to the others at his constructs while conjuring walls around the enemy making sure it wouldn’t fly after him. If there’s one thing he learned about them was that they don’t have any conscious thoughts. The monsters are operated by single orders. Mindless soldiers so to speak.

After trying to draw its attention to him, Alastor stopped and conjured another construct to protect him. The mercenary willed his mana onto his hand which fortified the transparent wall from breaking from the lightning strikes.

“Perfect,” Alastor said. “You were right were you supposed to be.”

Alastor waved his hand. In his beckon, the transparent wall behind the sword that got stuck on the cracked transparent wall motioned. It pushed the monster and crashed against the concrete wall, splat between the constructs with his sword plunged at its chest.

When all the smoldering dust and grime had faded into view, Alastor got to see the sight. The monster is portrayed with its back exuding dark liquid at the expense of his sword. Alastor constructed a transparent wall to leap over and reclaimed his sword.

With the blade removed, the dead body fell and tumbled floor by floor and finally onto the ground. Alastor had finished off the rest of the monsters and settled on the ground floor. A tinged disembodied voice rang inside his head.

“Al, can you hear me?”

“Layla?”

“Yeah, it’s me. Uh, do you happen to be in the compound right now?”

“Yes. As you have requested, I killed all the monsters infesting this area.” He continued. “Is there anything else?”

“You see,” she hesitated a second, bit her lips, and continued. “There’s an underground tunnel that leads to a room. Get in there and destroy everything.”

“What?”

“Just do it. Okay?”

“I’m sorry, am I your lackey?”

She exasperatedly sighed. “Just do it! If you destroy everything in there, everything will be over for them.”

“Who’s them?! Who are they, Layla? I’ve been mixed up with your quarrels and I don’t think this is getting any more convenient on my end. By allying with you, I painted myself as a target. So, give me one reason why I should continue to do your bidding?”

“Fine. I’m going to give you five hundred thousand dollars just to clean up my mess.”

“That’s not going to cut it. I want to know who’s coming after you.”

She groaned. “Fine.”

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They went to the northeastern part of the forest.

Gilt wasn’t particularly comfortable with this. The tranquil yet eerie ground reminded him of the monster he fought before. He wished that they wouldn’t encounter it again. From a distance, they heard a loud screech. They automatically guarded up. Their backs were to each other, eyeing every corner in the darkness.

‘Playing safe’ had an awful ring to it, but she found that reality was often disappointing. Gilt was the one who constantly reminded her that they shouldn’t come strong and hard but in plain sight. His sermons were proved to be unnecessary.

The witch felt an erupting force of disdainful beings appear ahead of them. Despite the noises of the whiskers and the chirps of the animals, Gilt was able to filter out the noise. They’re all coming in their direction.

“Kate?” Gilt called her out.

“What is it?” She flatly asked.

“You can feel it, do you?”

“Yes. I can feel the black magic around us. They just appeared out of nowhere.”

“Better be prepared.”

As he said those words, a humanoid monster jumped out of the shadows.

Kate’s hands maneuvered the symbols and conjured a barrier followed by a spell.

“Spiritus ignis.”

Kate blew a tail of fire out from her mouth, incarcerating the monster in an instant. Another came in. This time, Gilt acknowledged the call and came to it with a series of punches, and blocks and ended with an uppercut. He had broken the monster’s shin and legs. Then, he decapitated its head off its body with sheer strength by slapping it. Blood had splashed on his hand as the body spurted with dark liquid and dropped.

“What can I say, I’m all for the head,” Gilt said.

Kate gave him a confused look.

“Wait, that sounds so wrong.” Gilt corrected.

Kate ignored him and looked ahead of her. Then, the irregular rustling sounds of leaves came to her. The witch returned to her senses.

Gilt guarded her back. “Stay with me, Kate.”

She nodded. “Right.” She continued. “You brought weapons, right?”

“No. I was more ripping and decapitating.”

“I thought you were flexible.”

“Yes,” Gilt replied. “Physically.”

“Oh. Well, in that case.” Kate began to chant another spell. “Magica te voco, mucrone munitum sanguine igneo!”

As the spell started to show the effect. Various slits of wounds appeared, blood oozing out and began to form a red blade on her hand. The blade sword was similar to the shape of Leaf Blade Sword, only to note that it has the color of magenta.

Another seven appeared, surrounding Kate and Gilt.

“I thought you guys were no show.” Gilt commented. He shrugged. “Well, what are we waiting for?”

Gilt initiated an assault. He evaded the enemy’s grasp and returned with a punch, crossing over his fist and burrowing the face to the ground. Then he broke its ribs and jammed his fist on the organs, ripping out its heart.

The monsters came rushing toward Kate. She yielded her position – throwing herself into a semi-circular motion. The leaf sword blade spewed balls of fire, disintegrating the four monsters into ashes. Three, in particular, weren’t hit by the magic.

They growled, enraged over the deaths of the others. She wasn’t well aware that these monsters had a conscience. The witch observed their next moves. It appears that they have no other strategy except ganging up on their prey.

“Pulsatio!”

A force blasted the monsters away. She was conserving her mana, but she had no intention of spending the rest of her time with the small fries. She looked back and saw Gilt and how methodologically took down the monsters. He was brutal and effective. With sheer force, the vampire broke the monster’s arm, bit its nose, and spewed it out with a disgusted grunt.

“Your blood isn’t even tasty.”

Gilt snapped its neck and ripped its heart, allowing himself to be soaked in dark blood. He leaped over on his left and kicked the shinned of the stunned monster. With sheer strength, he slapped its head. Then removed every vein, muscle, and occipital bone, decapitating its head off its body.

A monster appeared and tackled him. He responded with the utmost horror by ripping its ears and plucking the eyeballs with his bare hands. She knew he didn’t need her help – that’s why she watched as another monster attacked him. He got hit by the monster and crashed against the tree. Gilt groaned as he stood with a realization. The punch itself was equivalent to a vampire, maybe worse. The monster was gnarled.

Gilt looked at her. “Wanna help me here?”

She sighed. “Ignis.”

The flame bursted into life as she shot it to the monster’s head. The monster growled in despair, jerking due to pain. Gilt took the opportunity to rip its heart out. The body dropped and the rest burned to a crisp.

“Were you watching the whole time?” Gilt asked.

Without untruthful implication, she nodded. “Yeah. I thought you got it.”

Gilt shook his head. “What are we supposed to do now?”

They heard growls all around them. The source may be far but the numbers could be speculated they’re more than dozens.

“Well, screw this. I can hear hundreds of footsteps all coming in this direction.” Gilt said. “I think it’s safe to say that we’re screwed big time. Should we use this opportunity to escape?”

She nodded. “Yes. I think so.”

Gilt carried her on his back and ran.

A human can achieve a top speed of 27 and a half miles per hour – a vampire can run faster than that. Gilt did not hesitate to look back and saw the monsters leaping out from the darkness and chasing them. His feet feel weary. Vampire abilities do not grant him infinite stamina, he had to rejuvenate by feeding with blood. He knew his weaknesses very well, which was why he brought blood bags.

He didn’t bother to tear it open as he immediately bit and instantly the blood inside. *Not enough.*He thought. He was not hungry, but not rejuvenated either. The blood was not enough to fill his thirst. He was afraid that sheer force would not be enough. He saw ahead the huge door.

“Put me down the moment we get there,” Kate said.

Gilt nodded over his shoulder. The monster fell over behind them. It will take some time before they reach them. In the meantime, the witch took a deep breath. Mana began to swell in her hands as she postured.

“Per terram, per coelum, per omne quod vivit, oro, ventorum mera vita, venias!”

The witch repeated to chant the spell and each time her voice grew stronger. Then came after the wind erupted in their ears and the ground shook as she willed the nature of life on her side. Her hands trembled by the immense tax of the spell. When the mana gathered into pure light, everything became dead silent. That was until then, the monsters came into her view. She was waiting for the right moment.

The witch shrieked louder than a banshee. The light of the mana erupted into a blazing cloud of magenta, razing the humanoid monster’s bones and pieces of their flesh. The forest shook by sheer force. The creatures of the night had known the respite of death in their tortured life. Some might consider her ways barbaric, but Gilt and most of all, Kate, saw this as a way to end their suffering. The monsters were crippled and dissolved with the touch of the flames cascading their entirety.

When all things settled, the forest slowly took over back to calmness. Yet the remnants of her strength are still testified by the fallen logs of trees and the animals that died in the process. Most of all, the creatures of the night were not allowed to take their last breath as their body was decimated into ashes.

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The mercenary dived down and landed on his knee. If he were to follow her instructions, there should be a hidden passage down the tunnel through the door. The problem was that the door was covered by huge debris, hindering his venture.

He looked around. His eyes scattered observing should there be a way around it. The only road was supposed to be through the door over the corridor around the elevator. Alastor looked at the elevator. He remembered the time when he first came here. An idea dawned on him. Alastor strolled towards the elevator and pressed a button.

“Layla must have seen this coming.” Alastor guessed as much. “That’s why he registered my DNA on the system.”

The elevator groaned as the suspension ropes screeched against the driver machine. Alastor waited patiently for 30 seconds before the elevator halted. The door opened. He walked through the corridor. Each room was built with the same materials. It was a composite of metal sheeting, reinforced cinder blocks, and a casing of Formsteine. The air surrounding him felt like a mist, cold and decrementing his sanity.

If his hunch was correct, the underground tunnel should be below this floor. He kneeled and touched the ground, feeling the hardness of the cinder blocks.

*‘It’s either you adapt or die.’*Those were the very few words he remembered from his brother Meil. The good thing about being a Mana-Folder was that no one will ever see them as a huge threat.

People like Alastor were trained to use everything they have to gain the upper hand despite their lack of abilities to compete with others. It’s not about their abilities, it was not about what and how they think. All that matters is how they will compensate for what they lack.

The mercenary allowed his mana to travel at the tip of his fingers. Every bit of his strength flowed through the concrete, glowing in size. It didn’t take too long to see the result. There was a crunch deep beneath, then a crack appeared. He beamed. Slowly, but surely, the crack had trailed across the floor, and in respite, he poured his mana in one pulse.

The ground shook and shuddered – gave up and everything within his 5 feet range fell into the hole he created. The mercenary fell over and landed on his feet. He estimated he fell around 24 feet. The smell of the putrid water reservoir reminded him of the time he had to go underground to sneak back to Kayon City before. That thought alone had him raise his guard as he waved his sword.

Only the light from above shone over him. Alastor put on his sunglasses and it turned everything lit to light. He hasn’t remembered where or who he got this black tint sunglass. He thanked whoever left the item. It was indeed handy in situations like this. Aside from night vision, the eyeglass also provides the ability to detect the mana of someone. And from afar, deep on the floor, there was something huge awaiting him.

Alastor paced with care across the cobblestone road. He took a hard right then another left. Layla had told him earlier that their plans were hidden on the underground base. What she didn’t tell him was that there was an item involved in all of this. He saw an altar – ahead of it was an item – a staff to be precise. And he knew in one glance that it was a forbidden one.

Alastor could tell what the staff was. It came from his world. Somewhere 150 years ago, there was a tribe of dark hunters that invented an item, they considered it a sacred relic. It can command the creatures of darkness. The staff also grants the slaves specific abilities that are based on elemental magic. They invented it to match the Tribunal Hunters’ abilities. During their war, the relics, their forbidden weapons, were lost and have never been seen again, until now.

The image of the dark relic as it has a handle of a dead acacia wood, extending upward as it was divided into several branches like a crown. It was encased in a sphere of scriptures floating in purple light. He was sure of it, the image of it was so similar to the one he read before.

The existence of the staff could mean only one thing, this was the one that provides those monsters’ abilities. It became comprehensible by then. Alastor got inside. He scanned around and saw how massive the ground was. It was a chamber of books. A huge collection of knowledge.

Alastor remained oblivious to *something creeping* on top of the ceiling. The *thing* slowly crawled the wall behind him. The *thing*came to him in silence. *It*intently observed and watched him from a certain distance then paced again as curious as it was.

“This is interesting.” The disembodied voice said as if it wanted to be known.

Alastor didn’t hesitate to swing his arm vertically toward the source. The only thing his sword made contact with was the air. He was creeped out and the thought that someone did manage to sneak behind him says a lot of things. Whatever this monster was, it was dangerous. It might be unlike those monsters he fought before.

Alastor postured. He twirled, looking for the source of what could ever be the monster that’s been praying in the corners. His eyes traversed uneasily on top of the bookshelf. He heard a screech similar to a bat.

The monster has wide jet-black wings, and dark long legs that extended to its thighs, and its hands were made of claws after a talon, a perfect tool for a predator. The long hair extended as if it was a spike and the face resembled a woman.

“Who are you?!” The lady asked.

“No one told you about me?” Alastor replied. He mockingly motioned around and lightly tapped his boots on the floor. “I came here as your escort.”

“Escort to where?” she snarled. Her eyes glowered in response.

“I’m the one who will escort you to your funeral, you ugly hag!” Alastor announced.

The monster cried and hissed. “I was tasked by my masters to protect this sacred ground and its context. I will not allow anyone to trespass and disdain this holy ground!”

The monster screeched and flew. It dived in much like a hawk. The calm air became oppressive as soon as her wings resonated into a series of wild flapping. Alastor bellowed. He moved his sword to his left, held by his two hands. He waited patiently as he watched the talons beam in darkness.

No less than five feet away, Alastor swung his arms along with the sword horizontally. A loud crash and wide sparks exploded in the darkness. Alastor felt taken aback by the stinging sparks as a by-product between the clash of his sword and the monster’s talons. Overwhelmed by the crushing force, the pressure was taking over his thoughts, a shudder crept down his spine and words ran back and forth. For whatever reason it was, something felt amiss, the words seemed to slip into his mouth. He couldn’t understand what it meant, but it felt like it was something he should do.

“Biendo.” He muttered.

By his hand, a yellow lasso of light snaked out to the enemy. Even though it only wrapped her belly, the raven-bat like monster felt her strength drained by the spell. The monster shrieked. Alastor moved and doubled back. His eyes are seemingly looking from afar, shallow and distracted.

He was stunned by the images that flickered in his mind. He was trying to make sense of it, a touch of someone who had felt through his thoughts. An image of a woman suddenly came to his mind and a word accompanied.

“Caroline,” Alastor muttered.

The femme fatale shrieked and shook her body in an attempt to free herself. All but a waste as the rope tightened its hold.

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Kate stepped closer to the mausoleum.

It was unkempt, dusty, most of all relics. Kate observed thoroughly the signs that held the door closed. All she could tell, the signs were a mix of Sumerian, Latin, and Sanskrit. It was odd enough that the words were encrypted by many codes and it wasn’t conforming to knowing how hard it was to decrypt a multi-boundary spell.

“Can you open it?” Gilt queried.

Kate did not reply.

She began to wave her hands, decrypting and summoning the symbols. The symbols flew around before she rearranged them. In one last wave, the words form.

“It’s a series of Caesar shifts and transposition cipher.” She shrugged and began to explain. “They jumbled the words into different languages to confuse people, but they all hold the same meaning if you translate the words into English. ‘The blood moon will show the way.’ That’s what it says, at least that’s what I understand of the context.”

The word aligned and a soft groan of expelling air came through as the door came to life.

“By all means,” Gilt said, “lady first.”

She shook her head.

Kate wiped the cobwebs hanging inside the mausoleum. Beneath the thick dust and grime, a door latched open and revealed a staircase leading to what seemed to be an underground room. The darkness pulled in deeply, and she conjured a spell, summoning a ball of flame. The contact between their boots and the dusty ground made a soft thump as they stepped down.

Gilt sighed through his nose, expelling the unwanted dirt in his nasal. The vampire searched through the darkness with his heightened senses, his nose, hearing, and anything that would provide any clue to wherever they are. After seconds of searching, Gilt felt unease by the eerie silence.

It took them a whole minute before they got down. Several fire torches gleamed and flickered to life pillar to pillar. It only took seconds for them to realize how massive the area was. The underground area had become a labyrinth of rooms and chambers.

“I’ll be damned,” Gilt muttered. “How should we proceed? This place is so huge.”

Kate was asking herself the same question too. She felt the urge to run. Whoever built this ruin, she could only assume that they are powerful. But this discovery was once rare enough to be dismissed by a sheer strange feeling. They had risked much by coming so far to the forest and then facing the monsters sent to them.

In the end, Kate gulped down her fears and marched towards the path lit by torches.

Gilt by now eased his senses and focused onward. The dust hung, swirled, dancing around them. Despite his hunger and his thirst for blood, Gilt quieted himself. His persistence remained against his viciousness, one that does not kindly consider others under the indulging state of savagery. He may be suppressed himself, but not likely to last anytime soon. So, he was left admiring the blood pulsing in Kate’s veins, taking in the yellow glint of her hair, magnifying the enticement of her blood. Gilt shook off, ignoring his needs once more. Gilt couldn’t remember when the last time he fed on someone else’s blood was. Thinking about it, maybe it’s fine to dine in on fresh blood just for once.

“Is something wrong?” Kate asked.

As soon as she turned around, Gilt’s vision changed. He remembered that this isn’t anyone. This is Kate. The girl who trusted him with her life. The girl who gave him cakes and souvenirs and who was one of the few people who was kind to him.

“Uhm,” Gilt looked away. “I-I’m fine. Just tired of the fact we had to face a horde of monsters.”

“Huh. Do you need blood?” Kate queried. “You can feed on me.”

“No.” he said with conviction to protect himself and her. An ache began in his mind. “That is not an option.”

He was surprised by her generous offer. But his fear and reasoning outweighed his hunger.

“Why? You don’t like witch’s blood?”

Gilt shook his head, dismissing his thoughts. “I have spare blood bags in my pocket. Don’t worry about it.”

It was a lie, he didn’t have any blood bags left, and he drank it all before they took off. The blood bags weren’t enough to satiate his hunger.

She blinked and replied, “All right then.”

Kate turned around and continued to walk. Gilt continued to resist the hunger, utterly unaware that a person was manipulating him to give in to his predator nature.

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The window in the living room exploded. Cold air blasted inside. The shard of glass sprawled on the ground and Van heard several growls marauding outside. He immediately stood and paced and posed to guard himself.

There’s no need to be frightened. Kate put the entire house under a protective spell. Anyone who’s not human will be expelled. He does not know what expelled means in her terms, but he was sure that the spell would keep *them*away.

He steeled himself. Van tried to remember the feeling of despondency. But he could only muster barely all of his strength. Regardless, there was no need to push himself that far. He has yet to explore his new profound power.

He waited for the whole minute, but no one entered through the window. The howling wind had calmed into a soft sighing. Van did not let his guard down. His heart’s pace returned to normal and he got to the kitchen to get himself a glass of water. When he finished drinking, Van immediately got a broom and swept off the shards of glass to the dustpan, and threw it in the garbage can.

“Where is my dumbass sister?!” Mia’s voice boomed into the entire house.

Mia got out of her room, furious. She went down with heavy footsteps and glowered at Van. Her eyes stabbed him mentally. She stepped closer to him.

“I asked, where is Kate?” Mia continued. “Kate is a woman of many things. Idiot is one of them.”

His fingers trembled. He hasn’t seen Mia get so worked up, in fact, he rarely saw her acting up whenever he was here. Usually, she would mind her own business and lock herself in her room. Van hesitated for a moment. His lips parted. She stepped closer. His words slipped off.

“Uhh…” his eyes were unsettling and his voice wavered.

“Ah-eh-ih-oh-uh?” she returned and filled the gaps. “Get your head straight and answer me! Where is she?!” she shouted at him.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why?”

“She asked me to.”

“She’s going to get herself into trouble. Let me help her!”

“And she told me if you insist, I will still not tell you about their location.”

Mia moved back. She began to wave her hands in a circular motion.

“Globus ignis.”

A ball of flame grew out of life.

“Would you rather get blasted or would you prefer to tell me where my sister is?” she snapped. Mia commanded with an authoritative voice. There was no glint of hesitation in her eyes.

Van gulped and vacuum his fears down. He made a promise and he has no intention to veer from his words. Not even Mia can break his rule of words. They heard a sudden blow of wind that came through the broken window. Mia glanced. She undid her spell and took off to see the damage.

“What happened here?!” she shouted.

“Disaster,” Van can breathe with ease finally. “Someone or *something*tried to break in.”

Mia observed any items that might cause it to break but found nothing.

“What could break the window? Did you see anything, rock, or any objects that could have been used?”

“Use what?” Van queried.

She shook over his statement. “Well, obviously, someone must’ve been pulling pranks on us again. We will call the police to detain whoever the assailants did to our house.”

“No, no.” Van dismissed her suggestion. “We can’t call the police.”

“Why?”

“They’re busy, remember? We were ordered to be in lockdown because there are dangerous people out there and they’re hunting them.”

Mia gave him an eye-to-eye. “Really?” she snapped at him. “Do you still believe my sister’s crap?”

“Whoa, that’s not a colorful word right there, lady.”

“What’re you gonna do? Put me on Santa’s naughty list?” she asked flatly and jeered at him. “If you don’t want to get your ass kicked, you better spill everything. I need to bring my sister back and end her delusion.”

“You do hear what you’re saying now, right? Aren’t you being too mean to your sister?”

“She put me under a sleeping spell. I am not way over that and I’m pissed.”

“What does it take for you to believe a word I say?”

She briefly paused. “Nothing. You know, I was beginning to like you, then this happens and now, I’m starting to hate you.”

“Oh, that’s nothing new. I hate myself too.”

She blankly stared at him.

Van continued. “Do I look like not trustworthy?”

“Yes.” she shot straightaway.

Mia turned away from him in disgust, only to hear a distinctive weeping noise from outside. The sound of a muffled cry seemingly came from a girl. Mia came closer to the door. She might want to spy on who could have been. Van stood in front of the door knowing what could be lurking outside.

“No. Don’t go outside. It’s not safe.”

“What if she needs our help? Get out of my way!”

Mia came past him and attempted to open the door, and once again, Van interrupted.

“Of all people, you have the most effective way to annoy me.”

“I promised your sister that I will watch over you,” Van said. “You go inside and I’ll look.”

Mia let it go. She could tell how sincere he was. Before fully opening the door, Van reminded her.

“Go back to your room and lock. If I haven’t come back within 30 minutes, then call your Aunt Bella.”

She nodded and slipped back to her room.

## Chapter 7

As Alastor was staggered by his thoughts, the monster slowly crawled away from him. She was not going to die in this rotten place, not until they will keep the end of their bargain, and settle the terms in exchange for her freedom. She watched how the mercenary stiffed in pain and could hear his buried memories screaming to get out, but he kept resisting. The pain was too much for him to bear. The Harpy nimbly moved as she crouched to bump the table so that the blade would fall. Alastor hissed in searing pain that the sudden flood of memories caused. His stagnant position remained.

Alastor watched everything pass by, scene by scene was part of him, but some of it, he felt, was not. One play, in particular, included people he didn’t know. It was when he was fifteen years old at that time, they wore all dark spandex, meant for infiltration missions. They came inside a private residence, namely owned by a governor. The next thing panned it was the image of people, soaked in blood, displayed horribly. Some were hung by thin lead, others impaled by stakes, daggers, and javelins. The rest were beginning to assimilate within, but something pulled him out of the sequence.

The Harpy reached the blade and she struggled to sit. The lady slew the rope off her. She rose. The suddenly incapacitated mercenary opened up an advantage to the monster. The Harpy’s claws and talons gleamed as they seemingly sharpened in midair. The mercenary stood dazed.

His memories are in process henceforth. He was trapped in his own mind. But at the same time, something was broiling deep within. The Harpy flew, silently. A smile formed ear to ear and she cackled. He woke up from the fleeting dazed and witnessed the Harpy’s claws enclosing. The mercenary duck, and rolled on his left. The crash against the ground forced smaller chunks to fly at his nape.

Alastor jerked on his left and pirouetted his arm. Then he whipped his sword horizontally, but it clanged against her thick hide and she flew up away from him. He watched the Harpy ascend, reaching the top of the library, and then diving head down. Alastor observed her stature, the curve of her body, her wrinkled face, and her cleavage.

“You know,” Alastor started. He noticed by now, that her beautiful figure is just artificial. He snark. “Wrinkly face, saggy tits, yep, talk about getting older. Oooff.”

The Harpy snarled and her face contorted in red anger. As she rose above, she fell with a driving force. Alastor hastily waved his hand, summoning several platforms of transparent walls hung in midair. He waited for the right moment.

The Harpy rolled, evaded a few of the transparent walls, and she hurled. Her blackened wings pressed forward with the feathers of blades. The mercenary dragged his feet, whirled around, and he leaped to the transparent wall. He came past her.

He felt the sharp wind tailored behind him with a loud whoosh and clang and then an explosion. The ground shook and split open. Alastor looked upon the wreckage. Several books fell and burnt by the candle rolling off their pricket.

“No!” She screeched.

The Harpy immediately took off and ignored Alastor. In the moment of panic and stress, the Harpy used her wings to flap, but instead of reducing the damage, it ended up wounding the other books. The small amount of fire ignited the closest books and started to burn along the wooden shelves.

*What a bonehead.*Alastor commented in his head.

The Harpy threw off the shelves infected by the blaze to stop its further expansion. Then she turned around, glowering at the mercenary with resentful eyes. Alastor played with the sword in his hand and pointed at her.

“Forgive me for the inconvenience,” Alastor commanded with such a jeering tone. “Shall we continue?”

The Harpy screamed and flew. Alastor’s transparent wall was still intact. Despite the obstacles that brought limitations to her mobility, she insisted on attempting once more. He let her ascend. Once the Harpy dived, he hastily ran and leaped to the structure and leaped onto another. The mercenary pushed through from right to left and jumped.

The Harpy saw his attempt through his effort. Then she readied her feathers. The blades sprung out from their respective attachments like bullets. The blades of feathers pierced through the transparent wall. A single feather blade grazed his back. He hissed.

“Hey!” he yelled. “I thought it’s your priority to protect the knowledge that this place holds?”

She was unaware until then, that her attacks would bounce off against the ground and acutely hit the books. So, the Harpy stopped her seamlessly pointless attacks and jerked her direction towards Alastor.

The mercenary knew what was about to happen. Alastor jumped off to another ramp, reassessing her distance against him. He waited and for a split second, then he leaped off the transparent wall. The Harpy whizzed through with her steeled wing protruding forward creating another crack in the ground.

“You got hit on the head or something?” Alastor aggravated. “That move didn’t do anything to me. Why are you expecting that at some point you’d hit me? Your attack may be fatalistic, but it was too narrow and predictable, you made it easier for me which says a lot from the person herself. You’re too abrupt, too quick to decide without assessing the enemy’s ability at first, you made it look like you’re desperate, or aren’t you?”

The Harpy turned, glowering at him with her misty eyes. She hated him for being right. The thought alone made her ponder about her future. She didn’t know if at some point *they*would free her from *their* grasp.

She tore her gaze from the smoldering books and looked at him again, squinted, then rushed onto him. Alastor had to sweep his feet off and shift his weight on his left, rolling aside. The sharp cut of wind whizzed on his left. The blades struck the wall perfectly aligned. Alastor adjusted and stood. The Harpy ran around throwing the blades on her wings. Alastor raised his pistol and pulled the trigger. Under the hail of bullets, the Harpy covered herself with her steeled wings. But that was the moment he was waiting.

It was a risk, sure. But the brief opening it will make was a chance not to be missed. Alastor hastily approached while his gun continued exasperating its bullets. The gun on his left Aurora was put back on its holster and picked up a blade on the ground. He bent, leaped, and arced in the air on top of her, closer enough to see her head. He held his breath, marked the target, and like a bow loosening its grip on its string, Alastor sharply threw the blade. And he landed flauntingly. He turned around to see the blood painted on the ground and his eyes locked on the Harpy.

The monster croaked in blood as she put her wings at ease to breathe. Alastor’s eyes never took away from the point where his knife struck upon. He missed. The knife did not get to the parietal part of her head. Instead, it penetrated deeper into the trapezius. It was not enough for it to fall the monster to its deathbed.

The Harpy turned. Pale, but her eyes flashed in red and anger.

Alastor withdrew his pistol and drew out his sword the moment she rushed onto him. Her speed increased. The Harpy’s moment of enrage boosted her prowess. Alastor wasn’t given the amount of time to react properly only to defend out of instinct.

Upon descending his sword, the steeled wing sparked and the force of the Harpy was even greater than Alastor’s. His grip lost its strength and numbed. The sword repelled and flung back in the air. Alastor threw himself backward. He was twenty steps away from the Harpy. He had to be quick and this was the moment he had to use an element of surprise. He dashed back again to the Harpy.

His hand reached in the thin air at the back of his shoulder. His action led to the Harpy’s confusion. Yet, she did not hesitate to push forward. At first, he was taken aback by the fury of the Harpy, but as soon as he saw how it gave up its wariness and switched to offense, Alastor saw it as a good gesture. The wings protruded forward to him, leaving her defenseless in the lower and upper parts of her body, but only in a narrow manner. There was no way to tackle the Harpy head-on without getting impaled by her wings pointed at him. Although, that doesn’t mean there’s no opening despite the range of her wings. Her head was still wide open.

And that was her fatal mistake.

Alastor pulled the invisible single blade – the katana that Layla gave to him. He conjured an invisible spell on it. He was waiting for an opportunity like this. The blade swung downward. She did not see it coming. Her eyes colored in black and in a split second realized what he had done.

The Harpy’s head was split into two. Blood jetted all over the ground accompanied by its brain entrails as her body crumpled to the ground. Her mind clung to darkness. Alastor slowly walked towards the center section where the dark relic was held. He already knew its purpose, but most importantly, he does not know how it works.

Not that it matters. He thought. Alastor started to walk away from the relic. He pulled out a grenade, removed the pin and he paused in halt.

Alastor threw the bomb aimlessly, somehow, by a stroke of luck – it hit the target. He then went to sprint out of the underground library and moved hastily to the dim path. At five seconds of hasting, the bomb set out and exploded. By the time the roaring blaze came after him, Alastor already leaped to the construct he made back to the bunker where the fire spat out. It reached him, but the fire pulled back, easing into nothingness.

Alastor rose from rolling and saw a black figure spring from below. He looked up and saw the hole it made out of the apartment complex.

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Kate looked one last time at the stair behind, enclosed by the wall that emerged from the ground. Her eyes returned to the dark path. The duo ventured into the dimly lit underground burial chamber. Row by row, the room was filled with deep darkness. There were very few that were lit by the torches. They hesitated to enter at first, but they continued even still. The only way was to march forward. After five minutes of circling, they grew tired of the maze.

“We’ve been hanging around for the last 5 minutes!” Gilt growled at the darkness. “Don’t you think this is quite boring? I was expecting –”

Gilt stopped. His hearing worked up when he heard several footsteps. They’re far from their location, but their speed remains constant. He assumed that it would take them to get here for another three minutes.

“What’s going on?” Kate queried.

She knew by then something was up. He remained stagnant.

“Don’t you go in silent mode on me.” She shook his arm.

He snapped. Gilt held her arm. He pulled her towards the next room and took a sharp left.

“Wait!” she yelled at him. “You need to tell me what’s going on.”

“There’s no time,” he elaborated. “They’re coming!”

Kate shuddered. She looked around out of instinct. Her spells are armed and ready.

“Where?”

They heard growls outside.

“Everywhere.”

Gilt took off while his hand was on Kate’s hand. Hurried and in panic, Gilt turned over to the next room. As soon as they got out from the furthest room away from the monsters’ scope, they reached the right path.

It was a long corridor, and at the end was another stair that leads down to another chamber. The growls and screams of the creatures of the darkness became apparent which says that they were closer than ever. Gilt carried Kate. In an instant, he ran to the end of the road. He was supposed to go through inside but the painful hunger took a toll on his physical abilities. He fell on his knees, rasping for breath by means to lift his mind from the urge to feed in blood. He could hear her heart beating hard. Gilt had to look away.

“Are you okay?” Kate asked. “If that’s bad it is, you should have told me.”

She pulled the cloth off his neck and showed her neck.

“Feed on me.”

He felt the sincerity in her words. Gilt looked up to her perfect clavicle, then to her throat and her neck. He could hear her pulse traversing in her system, the blood rushing from the rising tension they were in. She didn’t need to invite him. He could drink her in by just getting on her head and manipulating her to his bidding. What fun would it be if he could snap her neck and decapitate her head off of her body?

The image of the fountain of blood spewing out of her neck enticed him further astray from his humanity. Suddenly, an image flashed in his mind. It was Alyssa and Brian and the newborn baby, Rick. His humanity flickered once more.

His eyes rose to hers. He chuckled. “As much as I love your clavicle, it’s a big NO.”

Gilt stood and pushed Kate off down the stairs. He had to push her away if he wanted to preserve her life and the quarry of guilt should he ever retain his humanity. She rolled and staggered then her back slammed against the ground. Kate groaned.

“Give them challenge, Kate.” He beamed.

That was the last thing she heard from him as Gilt turned around and moved back to the horde. She struggled to rise on her feet, but when she attempted to get up on stairs, a door emerged and slammed shut before her.

“Gilt! Whatever you’re trying to do, please, don’t!”

She gasped as she ran out of breath. Her vision blurred. She was clouded by the fact that Gilt chose to sacrifice himself. She took it all in, the unnecessary emotions that held her back.

In the end, Kate chose to move forward into the deep unknown.

Gilt waited in the middle corridor. He beamed as an invitation. He does not show fear, amused and excited perhaps. For the first time in a while, he can discard the moral code he loved. He finally can cut loose.

“Bring me back, Kate. Bring me back.” He mentally said to her.

In the long history of vampirism, everyone who just made it through their transition had their phase. Their strength was tripled including their senses, vision, hearing, and smell, all alike. They only have limited consciousness when their humanity is restrained. Then after, they’re enslaved by their animalistic hunger. Their actions were driven to replenish their loss of strength. The prize of their greed was that their humanity was suppressed and all of their repressed thoughts and desires resurface in an ugly way.

It took Gilt everything to suppress his darkest self and retain the small amount of humanity he had. He had to build himself all over again to regain a semblance of his former self. There was a reason why he kept himself in check, why he always sticks to his moral code and has exceedingly humanistic principles. Gilt was never an innocent man. He murdered and committed horrendous crimes before he became known as the current nobleman he was. He was known as the Wicked Beast of St. Lorenzo. The Uninhibited Vampire.

Relishing over his memories of when *he*was that person, Gilt mentally crushed the last chiming humanity straw. And he finally turned it on. The light in his eyes vanished and turned bright red.

His blood boiled. His heart pounded harder than ever. Gilt’s hearing was better than before. He could estimate that they’re more than one hundred within thirty feet of range. He then divided the smell of the enemies.

The wall on his right tore down by the sheer strength of the humanoid monster. Gilt shifted on his feet and sidestep. The monster flung behind, and at the same time, his arm whipped, conceivable, but unavoidable. The vessels and its nerves were impaired from its head as the copper blood poured out with his sheer strength. He didn’t even have to exert himself to try. He threw over the head and rolled on the ground. His face turned grim over the spilled blood.

*What a waste*. He thought.

He turned around to see the monsters queued in line. Gilt wiped off the bloodshed on his face and licked his finger smeared by the blood. His canine teeth sharpened. The Uninhibited Vampire stood tall and spread his arms as if he were welcoming them.

In his eyes they weren’t monsters, they were his desserts. Gilt snapped the neck of the humanoid monster like a twig. He snatched the axe that hung on the wall and then he threw it vertically, pirouetted until it buried in the enemy’s chest. Blood bursted out and the entrails were painted on the ground.

His vamp hearing snapped at him as he heard another come on his back. He dragged his feet around to twirl, almost with no effort, his hand whipped and ripped its head off its body with sheer strength. And he drank the blood of whatever was left inside of the head.

The blood wasn’t satisfactory but barely relieved his hunger. Unlike the others who were fully transitioned into monsters, there were some whose blood wasn’t contaminated by whatever had been done to them. He turned around and zoomed in on the next target. He broke its arm and then decapitated it by simply pulling it. The monster kneeled in pain and Gilt used the humerus to stab another one.

Gilt snatched back the axe burrow from the monster and ended it in one mighty swing. Five minutes, that’s what it all takes to take all of them out. They might be faster than regular humans, but as Uninhibited Vampire, all of his abilities were at their peak. Compared to the previous encounters, this was mere child’s play.

Gilt hung the axe and observed around, admiring what he had done. It felt like he recreated a Bosch Canva but blood and entrails filled the hallway of the underground burial chamber. He felt proud of his creation.

But the fight wasn’t over.

There were 24 more monsters on their way, one, in particular, came late for the party, and bursted out in the darkness. Its’ eyes were most satisfying to see. It’s filled with anger and avarice, but whenever he choked the light off them, he loved how the light in their eyes slowly faded. He relished it.

He beamed. He gestured inviting it.

The monster ran but tripped. It looked behind and saw its leg severed from its limbs. Gilt moved nimbly and silently just as the passing breeze. He came for his axe stuck on the ground and turned around to see the decapitated monster.

It attempted to leap and bite him, but Gilt evasively moved out from its narrow path. Gilt’s hand pierced its back in midair, with the pressure forcing its heart out while the body dropped. He can feel the beating heart slowly go out of life.

He tasted it. Comparing it with the others, this one was not bad. The resemblance was closer to humans, unlike the others. He took a bite of the chewy flesh and ate the whole of it. He burped.

Gilt saw himself in a reflection of a mirror. His entire body was smeared by the blood of his enemies. The bloody, grim face reminded him of before. It was the 1600s, the very situation he was in. He was forced to turn on all of his despicable qualities and murdered those people who had slighted him. He was relentless.

The monsters spitted out from unexpected places, in the walls, on top of the ceiling, and in the chamber he whence before. He threw his axe at the head of the monster. Then whizzed on the two, and his hands jammed into their chest, feeling the beating of their hearts in his fist.

Gilt tore their cores and the bodies dropped. He slowly turned around and t-posed to assert dominance.

Gilt did not say anything.

There’s no use in taunting these creatures.

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Kate marched deeper into the dark path.

Rows of torches from both left and right lit and another hallway appeared before her. She took a deep breath. She felt claustrophobic. Nothing else made her afraid more than the dead silence and the noiseless road.

She dashed.

When she was in the middle of the path, the torches blinked and died away, one by one. She felt a rush of fear chasing after her. She had to run through the blinding darkness. Her pounding heart only had known ease when she saw blue light at the end of the long hallway.

Once she was basked in light, she came to a halt. She rasped on her knees. When she finally caught her breath, she looked around. The entire place was lightened by blue luminescent bugs. A graveyard, that’s what had dawned on her eyes. The burial ground appeared to be dug.

This must be the place where those undead creatures came back to life. She thought. Kate remembered very well the time when Van was chased by an undead creature at night. They must have been using dark magic to evoke them back to life and enslave them.

Suddenly, candles appeared on the road and lit up. She was being led somewhere else, or probably to someone. She came to the destination. It was on a small hill. It oversees the graveyard. A few steps ahead were a woman that sat under the shade of an umbrella while elegantly sipping a cup of tea. The ceiling on top had a perfect hole that illuminated the stranger’s seat. Her long hair was tied into a knot on top of her head. She had brown and doe-eyes. Her blue blazer and black pants were enigmatically attenuated with the luminescent light.

Her joyful tea time was halted when she heard a faint groan on her left. She put down the tea cup and turned her head to the intruder.

“I was wondering when you will show up.” She started. Her forehead furrowed in question. “Jay told me that they will come in a group. He didn’t tell me there will only be the two of you.”

Kate’s right brow lifted.

To enlighten Kate, she explained, “Oh, silly me. I was watching you for quite some time. You and that vampire friend of yours.” She nodded and paused, drinking her tea. “I’ve got to admit, he put up a good fight out there. Poor guy, I hope he retains some of his humanity, well the best quality I hope.” She laughed.

“What did you do to him?”

Kate stepped forward. Mana began to swell in her palm. *She*saw miles away that she was a witch just like her. The woman turned to see her. And that was the time when Kate realized who she was.

She gasped. “I know you. You teach at my school. You’re Suzy Megan.”

Suzy swore under her breath.

“I wasn’t expecting that one of the killers is teaching in my school.”

Suzy laughed for the reason Kate’s face rang a bell as well. “What a small world isn’t it?” she added. “Is there any possibility that you can just turn around and walk back outside? I would feel bad if I accidentally killed one of the students in the school that I worked at.”

“Sorry. Can’t do that.”

“Why is that? You got mad because I didn’t give you the grades you worked for?”

“No. You’re the reason why we’re messed up.” Kate shrugged her shoulders and looked her in the eye. “I came here to kill you. *Globus Ignis*.”

Kate threw a ball of fire. And Suzy did not care. In a single glance, halfway, Suzy mentally flicked the spell and disseminated into thin air.

“Cute.” Suzy mocked. “Young witches nowadays, so arrogant. You learned the basics and then you go hoorah about it.” Suzy was certainly dissatisfied.

Kate was silent.

Suzy queried. “Don’t you think you’re way over your head? You came here alone and clearly, you knew how powerful I am.”

“You know what a normal person would do when she’s grieving. I learned in psychology that a person who lost someone or got hurt needs closure.”

“And I’m the flour you wanted to beat on the floor?”

“More like beating you to death.” Kate shook her head. “But I guess the other way around works too.”

Suzy beamed. “What specifically did I do to earn this hate?”

“Do not pretend you didn’t know whose family you killed.”

“I-I’m sorry, but I killed a lot of people and I hardly remember any of their names. You must understand that the number of people I’ve killed is quite stellar. You have to be more specific.”

“I am the daughter of Troy and Penelope Anderson.”

Suzy delightful expression vanished. Her thoughts spiraled with questions. “I never thought that you’d appear. We assumed you died too.”

“Well, I guess I have some of those devil’s luck. Unfortunately for you,” Kate pulled out something in her back and a blade appeared. “I was training with everything I had for this day.”

Suzy beamed in her thought as she watched Kate play with her blade.

“Riverse Viverra.”

Suzy might have underestimated Kate. The young witch conjured a considerable high-level spell and pulled her by force. She had to resort to the weapon she brought as well. As she came closer to Kate, their blades collided. Sparks illuminated as their swords grounded at each second. Kate had to let her go. Her mana was still at risk of decreasing much further if she continued to use that spell. Suzy pulled back and drew her sword forward. Their eyes trained on each other.

“A witch relying on a sword,” Suzy commented, “how uncanny.”

“I’m not the only one who brought weapons.” Kate shot back. “That makes two of us.”

Suzy smiled. “I don’t know which is more amusing, you thinking that we were responsible for your parent’s death or marching down on your own grave?”

“Don’t pull a trick on me!” she roared. “I saw people out there, watching our house burn.”

“And yet, you didn’t consider that we just let your parents’ burn on their own accord and did not help or do anything that causes their death.”

“What?” Kate stammered in words. “W-what do you mean?”

“Poor little girl. She is so bent on revenge yet she is blinded to the truth.”

“What do you mean?”

Suzy replied. “What I’m saying is we are not responsible for your parent’s death. I admit, your parents were part of our list but when we came, your house was already burning. And we let it happen with the knowledge their life’s slipping away.”

“Liar!”

Kate jumped to her. She whipped her sword which was parried with equal strength by Suzy. Kate attempted another strike, but Suzy kicked her in the front and flicked her sword from her grip.

“We’re witch,” Suzy started. “We weren’t supposed to rely on weapons as such. We relied on magic. Using weapons is so uncivilized.”

Suzy’s sword vanished in thin air. She clasped her hand and beamed at Kate.

“Magna puls.”

Kate knew the spell very well. It was an advanced light spell that used the power of the mana to push away its nearby structures.

“Tuere!” Kate invoked the spell.

An invincible wall parted Suzy’s magic from Kate as her surroundings were pushed by an invincible force.

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Van followed the noise.

He saw at the corner of the street a little girl crouching on her knees, crying. She was no older than seven years old, but he was conspicuous in the surroundings. He could never know when or where those monsters are going to appear.

He pressed forward, carefully watching his rear. But as soon as he set his eyes back on the child, she ran away. Van had to sprint across the street and came across the usual road, then a sharp right. He hesitated for a second – this place was known for being a hotspot for gangsters. Officer Bella warned her not to take this route again.

He remembered Mia’s words. If he doesn’t come back with the child, she will continue to pester him and obviously, will go on her way which would only make things complicated on his end. Van desisted the fear and walked through.

“Hold it right there!”

Someone shouted behind him.

“Please not the police.” He muttered and prayed.

Van doesn’t want to end up on Aunt Dally’s bad side nor desire to sit in the principal office. He slowly turned around.

“I know what it seems to look like –”

“Van?”

“Jane?”

The slinky, dark-clothed friend of Kate, Jane walked to him. Her head held high, her shoulders at the back, and pierced him with a cold gaze. Unlike Kate, Jane was more feminine-like with her daunting looks and curves, she had the face of a model. But this was exactly the type of woman that boys usually avoid. They are usually the crazy ones.

Keeping his thoughts to himself, Van reeled his mind and said, “I-what are you doing here?”

“I was on my way to Kate’s house and then I saw you –? What do you think you’re doing here? You did not hear what the police said? There’s a riot all over the city.”

“Uh, yeah,” he shrugged. “I was well informed about the situation, but you see, Mia heard a child, a little girl crying and I saw her then she ran.” He looked behind and pointed out the dark alley. “There.”

“Are you sure that it’s a little girl? Maybe –” Jane trailed off.

She wasn’t sure if it was a good idea to tell him that maybe it was not a little girl, but a monster luring him into a trap.

“What?” Van inquired.

Jane shook her head. “Nothing. If you think what you saw is a girl, then I think I should come.”

“No.” Van declined. “You should head to Kate’s house. Mia’s alone.”

Jane blinked. She wasn’t expecting that Kate would be alone. “I’m sorry. Did I hear it right? Where is Kate? Why is Mia left all alone? Can you please explain what’s happening?”

Van shook. His head hung back to the alley when he heard the loud squeal from the little girl. He looked back to Jane and took a deep breath. “Long story short, Kate and Gilt were hunting the people who brought monsters into this city.”

“I’m sorry, what?!”

“Yeah, crazy, right?”

“No! Where is she? We need to talk.”

“Can’t do that. As you can see, I made a promise not to tell her.”

Jane’s face turned into a nefarious one. “Van.” She stared menacingly at him. “Kate may be a talented witch, but she can also be dumb and choose wrong decisions in her life.”

“Wait. You know she’s a witch?”

“We’ve been friends since childhood. So, yes. I know her very well. And I’m seeing right now that you’re not one of the right choices she made in her life if you’re not going to tell me where she is.”

“Kyaaahhh!”

A loud shriek came through the building. Van was getting jumpy.

“Look, I understand you’re worried about her, but please, go and protect Mia for now. You can deal with Kate after this.”

“Don’t you dare turn your back on me!”

A huge shadow fell over them. The wings flapped like the sound of a rotor from a helicopter and he grabbed Van by the arm. Van did not anticipate nor saw it coming as it dragged him off the ground. Jane quickly manifested the mana and conjured a spell.

“Infectus Crawlus.”

Several chains of claws flung and snaked in the air in an attempt to claim Van, but the being took hold of him before he could react. He rolled over with its wings closed to denote its velocity off the path from the chains. Then it spread its wings and flew high.

“I’m gonna need to borrow your friend!”

The voice sounded familiar. Van looked up and saw the man he hadn’t seen for a while.

Icarus beamed. “Hello, Hunter.”

Jane was about to follow them, but Van shouted back at her.

“Don’t!” Van demanded. “Go and find Mia! I’ll take care of this.”

That was the last thing she heard as they flew over the horizon and to the forest they faded. It was a trap just as she thought.

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Jane Manhattan kicked the gas pedal and drove her car. She couldn’t care less what would happen to Van. He already told her that Mia was her priority. She locked the transmission to low gear and accelerated, then floor and it, and she started to drift. She throttled less as she came to the corner of the street and turned. She was finally at Kate’s house. She parked hastily and locked the car. Jane strode inside.

“Mia? It’s me, Jane,” she announced.

Jane heard a nudge of an opening door handle. It creaked and opened. Mia did not bother to look down to confirm whether her presence was real or not, she ran downstairs. Mia hugged Jane and Jane hugged her back.

“I thought you were dead.” Mia let her go. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.”

“Is there any chance you saw Van?”

“Yeah,” Jane remembered then. Jane can’t just say that Van got snatched by some birdman and might have dropped him to his death. She shook her head. “Um,” Jane responded. “Yeah, I saw him earlier. He might not be able to get back here.”

“Why?”

“Well, he had to take the girl back to the police station.” Jane continued. “About your sister.”

“I don’t want to talk about her.” Mia dismissively stated. “I’m still mad at her.”

Jane did not inquire further. She can already guess that they were not on good terms and Mia just had recently known about Kate’s secrets. They shared the same discontentment.

“Did Kate teach you any spells? Specifically protective spells?”

Mia thought and nodded. “Yes. I learned a few tricks, but I haven’t used any of them, so I’m not sure if they would do anything well. Why did you ask?”

“There are bad people out there, in the riot and we might consider.”

“Is this you being subtle that there are monsters out there?”

Jane blinked. “Uh. I—”

“Kate was bitching about that earlier. Please, don’t tell me you’re not part of all of her nonsense, because I would be pissed.”

Jane shook her head dismissively. “No. I just recently found out too. Van told me.”

Mia nodded mentally. “Good.” She continued. “Now, about the spell. Why do you ask?”

“Well, we’re going to conjure a barrier spell. A strong one. It might take too much toll if I’m the only one who’s going to chant it. But with you, maybe we can do something more.” Jane explained further. “I want you to repeat after me. *Vim te voco, vi lucis et terrae, qui mala prohibent*.”

The two held each other’s hands and closed their eyes as they muttered the words.

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Kate reflected on her actions.

She was expecting that she might be facing a powerful being, not a witch. And to note, Suzy wasn’t like any other which Kate encountered – she was capable of demolishing on a large scale. The spell that Suzy conjured took a toll on her force field and scattered into shattering lights. She was thrown over the ground two yards away. The wind still aborted her senses.

She grunted and stood slowly.

“For an old hag, you’re pretty good.” Kate mocked.

Suzy glowered at her. “I’m 32, you fag.”

Another series of voluptuous lightning emerged in her palm, crackling as it struck everything it touches.

“*Lerako la lefatshe*!” Kate uttered a spell.

Suzy hands moving forward as the earth itself shuddered and a wall mounted. The loud sparks exploded into pieces behind the earth wall. Kate had to peer around the corner, and she was molding fire.

*“Plures globus ignis.”*

As she left her cover, Kate blotted Suzy with balls of fire. It split into seven balls, much larger as it was compressed. It spewed another set of fireballs. Fourteen hovering wildly in the air. The heat gradually reached Suzy’s skin. Suzy beamed.

Finally, a challenge. Suzy thought.

“*Pulsans negando.”*Suzy casted a spell.

With sheer force of will, Suzy stopped the fireball from diverging through and dissipated in a shockwave. The air became crispy. Dust and rubbles shook. Kate felt the force of the spell as she was pushed behind.

“Quite a trick you have there,” Suzy stated. “I also have one too.”

Suzy spelled chantless and her hands’ breathed purple fire.

Kate flung another fireball. Suzy twirled letting the fireball slip one foot from her and a blaze thrown onto Kate. She was blasted and rolled over the ground and dirt. Her back was flaring in pain. Looking over her intact dark jacket, Kate released a sigh. At the last second, Kate managed to conjure a protection spell, but the spell already exploded. The barrier wasn’t enough to fend herself against it. Kate slowly rose. She felt a rib was broken.

“Bitch.” Kate muttered.

“No need to be roused in anger by small things,” Suzy beamed and blinked. “You’ll survive.”

Kate did not move. She calmed her breath and she opened her hand, her palm concentrating with mana.

“Vignus fatus omnis implantus vegus, daselica!”

She slammed her hand on the ground and roots began to emerge in waves that ram through to debris and blocks. Suzy was unfazed. She saw that her guard was open. Another heat blast was fired upon Kate.

Suzy wasn’t expecting though that the roots would form a wall to stop her attack. Kate commanded the roots reeled towards Suzy and had to leap aside from the attack, she escaped and ran looking for an opening. It’s a matter of time before it catches her. In time she dove and hurled in the air, evading the roots snaking on her. Suzy threw the purple flames on the roots that kept them from her distance and burned them to smithereens.

“I hope your skincare routine will be enough after I burn your pretty face.” Suzy goaded. “Not at that I intend to insult you. That’s what girls do. We look after each other.”

“I’m not insulted at all.” Kate shot back. “I think I should take after you, I should use black magic to keep my face young. Not that I intend to insult you. I’m just looking up to you.” She smirked.

Suzy hissed. She wasn’t expecting she would recover from that. She looked at the spell of Kate faded in ashes. She wasn’t at all amused by Kate’s pesky spell.

“Terra ignis.”

The very land gradually became a scorching ground, burning the roots that Kate conjured. And everything became ablaze. The ground became a molten platform.

“*Gravija*.” Kate conjured herself a spell.

Kate flew and flipped backward in the air, finding an arching cobblestone for her foot to step in. It took only a matter of seconds before the ground’s heat rose into an unbearable sea of scorch. The table and the seat melted and went into a thick lava that was absorbed by the ground.

Two minutes passed, Kate had to rely on evasion before the scorching ground was gone, returning everything to normal. Steamy smoke came out and hung in the air.

Kate landed. She began to look for Suzy.

“*Dete matete, dus kara septam*.” A whispering voice emerged behind her.

Suzy was mouthing the spell with her hands wide open at Kate and the target felt her heart and throat slowly being crushed.

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Jane knew very well that the barrier was not going to last.

Her throat throbbed. The spell was delivered correctly but it cost her throat to roughed and scratchy. But stopping hereby will cost a setback, a huge setback. The spell was too monumentally sensitive. Jane closed her eyes solemnly for a moment. Her mind was bustling with focus. Throughout their session, Jane felt a strange sensation, something disturbing. Her eyes snapped open and saw Mia, her face creased in tears.

“Mia?” Jane said to her. “Is everything alright?”

Mia looked up at her. Tears welled in her eyes. She broke the chanting spell.

“She’s dying.” She said, her voice lowering down to rue.

“What?” Jane shook her head. She knew who Mia was talking about. “That’s not possible.”

There was no way Mia could know. Witches are capable of many things, but sensing foreign life was downright impossible. Perhaps she was panicking over her pessimistic thoughts. The sisters have common attributes, they could be both verbose, but Mia most of all was the one who’s not the outspoken type of person. She always kept that bothers her on herself.

“No,” Mia affirmed. “I can feel her life slipping.” Her breath shook and began to become ragged. “No. No. Ha, ha. This can’t be happening. Not again.”

Jane heard several growls from the monsters outside. She held Mia on her shoulders.

“Hey!” Jane snapped at her. “I understand what you’re feeling right now, but those things are going to get through the barrier. We need to finish the spell.”

Mia nodded and took it all in.

They held each other’s hands again.

“Vim te voco, vi lucis et terrae, qui mala prohibent. Vim te voco, vi lucis et terrae, qui mala prohibent. Vim te voco, vi lucis et terrae, qui mala prohibent.”

The tormenting wind outside lashed around the surroundings mad as thunder. The monsters hesitated and moved back. A wave of mana pulsated out from the witches’ systems and swirled around then gathered in a sphere of light. Jane mentally smiled in victory. As soon as the pool of mana was intact, she poked the sphere like a needle into the balloon.

“Vim te voco, vi lucis et terrae, qui mala prohibent!”

The wave of energy bursted. The barrier that Kate conjured strengthened, and the shockwave it sent out decimated the monsters in one hit of wave. But along came a small amount of dark magic that came from the one who has lingered with malicious thoughts before the outburst. Mia’s negative emotions brought it to life and Jane’s mind was sent out to another place.

Jane’s body dropped with a loud thud.

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Jane found herself in a dark murky river.

The night draped the entire forest. The thicket made it impossible for her to learn the road. Even the enormous oak woods itself provide only shallow light piercing through trunks spread like roots casting a strange cold shadow around her. She walked back to the forest and conjured a sphere of light to illuminate the surroundings. The dark woods splintered her in fear. Jane wasn’t, in particular, fond of tall trees and most of all, trekking deeper all alone.

“Mia!?” she shouted.

No one answered her call.

She strode with terror and took over her face as she saw a familiar figure. A black door.

“Let me out.” A ghastly voice said to her.

She shivered. A chill went through her and her mouth turned dry. There was no valid source to point to and there’s no science behind the sudden voice construed from nothingness.

“Let me out.” It talked to her again.

Jane looked at the black door. She paled. The disembodied voice came through it. Her mind was swaddled by spiraling questions. She moved back instinctively. What darkness lies behind the door tried to reach her with the use of black magic. It was an immense one.

“Terra brede lungsukwo!”

Jane used a sealing spell. A golden chain wrapped the black door, but the spell melted in the darkness. And a thick black smog flew over her.

Jane’s eyes darkened. Her face hardened. Her very core of being simmered into submission by the unknown force. She stepped closer, her hand locked tight in the knob. It groaned and white mist trailed outside as she opened the door.

“Very good, luv.” The mystery man stated. “Now let’s see what we can do in this dire situation. What do you say?”

Jane’s astral body flung back to her body.

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Gilt Strauss Mavenhart threw the axe behind him in a quick shot. It was a clean hit. The axe burrowed deeply onto the abomination’s chest. He swept and evaded a swift strike. His hand whipped in the air and the head decapitated off its neck. Thick dark blood streamed on the ground.

The uninhibited vampire threw a jab, leaving the enemy stunned and he gained distance to retain his axe, then came back, jamming the weapon in its head. This was the last monster of the wave. He sighed in relief yet he was not satisfied. He wanted more. His heart was pounding harder than ever. His sense heightened as his desire to kill.

Gilt stopped in his feeding. Filtering the noises of crickets, monsters, and other things, he heard a faint familiar noise. It was her. Kate was gasping. Her breathing ragged as her heartbeat slowly faded. Out of frustration, Gilt threw the next over the wall that blocked his way. It repelled and stuck on the ground.

The vampire ran to the end of the corridor. And dashed. His fist was the first thing that flung onto the wall. A shockwave repelled him with a loud booming thunder that echoed in the underground chamber.

He was sent hovering in the air and crashed against the concrete ground. Gilt’s contorted in pain. His back flared in red as he felt several bones shattered. When the heartbeat no longer resounded in his ears, he stopped trying.

It was pointless to do so. A single tear escaped from his eye. He was supposed to be in his primal self, but why? Was the tear supposed to be the last straw of his humanity? Nevertheless, his emotions are off right now, shut down.

The vampire left the hollow ground.

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As the death spell took over her life, Kate’s consciousness slowly faded into a deep blackness. A single droplet woke her. Half-dark sky, sparking stars, and indigo-colored horizon indicate the sun has an hour to rise.

She stood.

The leaves crunched against her boots. She slowly turned and saw the cabin burning bright in her eyes, crisp in the air as she breathed in a state of shock. The blaze breathed its fire everywhere. The fire trailed to the trees, one by one being engulfed into a sea of fire.

Her eyes darted to the center of the flames. In the house where the woods creaked and fell, a strange figure emerged. It was her and Mia on her back. Charred in black and clothes were churned in the fire as they ran. Her eyes are dried by the fire, not a single tear remained in her waking to save Mia.

“Quite a sight, isn’t it?” Someone made her presence known. “You could have saved them if you weren’t pussy enough to use your magic. Your real magic.”

It occurred to her that the dark version of herself might be responsible for bringing her here.

“I’m dead, aren’t I?” Kate asked her other half.

“No,” she shrugged her shoulders. “Not yet. You see, a wave of black magic echoed throughout the city and in turn, gave me the juice just enough to bring you here in a split second while you were getting the choke treatment outside. So,” she continued. “What to do? What to do? You were outmatched.”

“How come you even still exist?”

“About that, I don’t exist. I’m a mental representation of what you wanted to be, at least. Your current pathetic state desires to bring me out, so, the underlying questions would be, what do you want me to do? Do you want me to take over? I can make it all go away.”

Kate’s eyes solemnly closed. The times when she was watching over Mia in the state of coma, her discovery of witchcraft, and those times when she was with Van. She was searching for those moments when she thought she could at least ride the tide. Perhaps she was being too optimistic. Maybe that unhealthy over-optimism led her to this situation. And she doesn’t know what to do.

As of this moment, a determined thought dimmed in her head.

She nodded.

The dark half beamed.

And her mind sank into a pool of blackness. As she slowly emerged back to reality, her blood ran cold. Her eyes snapped open deeper than black. She became the nightmare of her dreams.

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Suzy cracked a smile in her victory.

The witch who thought that she could best her fell lifelessly on the ground with a loud thud. She was 50 years early to stand against her. If she could get out by now, she might be able to end the vampire as well. Suzy looked at the tea glass, she thought it couldn’t hurt to break for a while. She strode back to her seat.

“Leaving so soon?” An eerie chilling voice emerged behind her.

Suzy motioned around. There was no one. A cold breath touched her nape.

“Adutaue fritzelie tenrou.”

A freezing force blasted Suzy. She rolled in the dirt and collapsed on the ground and her back was smoldering. She conjured a spell that levitated her and she stood back on her feet. Suzy’s back was burned and cold. Her bronze eyes turned to Kate. And she witnessed a horror that every witch feared. Kate’s being was embodied by dark magic.

“What did you do? Do you realize what you just did to yourself?!”

Kate stepped forward. She broke a smile, ear to ear. “Do you think she’d let me take over if she doesn’t know what she’s doing?”

Kate waved her hand and faint flames emerged in the air.

Suzy had to dodge. The grass, the table, the seat, and her tea have gone frozen. The offensive attack bursted the surrounding area into a frozen field. She steamed with bone chilling freeze.

Suzy was lucky enough that her body reacted instinctively. Despite being all-powerful, she was not capable of recovering if she received her attack. She turned, her breath hitching in her chest. Her hands blazed in blue fire.

“Fiery desente moore.”

The misty blue fire shot at Suzy. She leaped on her left and evaded another shot when she flew.

“You missed.” A smile spread across her face.

“You think so?”

Kate nodded down on her feet. A gentle flower of snow touched her legs and began to crawl over his feet and the upper part of her body.

“The difference between me and Kate is that I have no restrictions. I can give you 10 reasons why I defeated you, but I don’t think you have the luxury of time to listen.”

Kate snapped her fingers and the frozen legs cracked and crippled into pieces. The coldness remained but magnified the pain as she screamed in agony.

Suzy huffed. “You absorbed the black magic earlier, didn’t you?”

“Yes, but to credit whoever sent a wave of black magic, I must say it’s all thanks to her I got just in the nick of time and neutralized your black magic.” She continued. “If you didn’t play like a bitch, you are for a while and kill me, then you wouldn’t find yourself in this situation in the first place, but you have to prove that you’re way superior to me. Your arrogance failed you.” Kate kneeled on her level. “What was that magic again? Ah, yes, *Dete matete, dus kara septam*.”

How fast the situation occurred, Suzy’s iris dilated, and the veins popped under her skin. Lacerations appeared at the back of her hand and her heart beat harder. Her brain melted and there was a brief explosion inside, her insides scrambled as her heart turned into chunks. The last thing she saw was her wicked smile spread on her face, blocking anything her eyes preferred to see.

“Hm.” Kate sighed in satisfaction.

Kate wobbled her hair as she walked up the hill. She brought her eyes up to the hole in the ceiling and she leaped off outside. She got out of the crypt. Her hair was flung by the wind passing by. She was humming and was in a good mood. The black magic still lingered in her mind. She never felt power like this before. It was a good idea indeed to let it take her over.

There are seemingly no monsters around the vicinity. *Good.* She thought. Everything just made it easier for her to get home. She stopped. Something struck her mind. She completely forgot about Gilt.

“Kate?”

She was about to go back when someone called behind her. Kate slowly turned around and saw Mia who was still in her sleeping pajamas.

“What are you doing here?”

All those voices in her head were gone as she saw her sister. Her worried side resurfaced and checked upon her.

“What are you doing here?! Are you hurt?! You shouldn’t have gone here! Do you know how dangerous this place is?!”

Mia did not reply. And Kate saw her eyes puffed in black.

“Did you cry?”

“I thought you were dead.”

“No.” Kate shook her head. “Why would you think that?”

Mia did not reply and hugged her tightly. Mia whimpered.

“Hush now.” She said softly. “We’ll talk about this later.

And Kate carried her back home safely.

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Van crashed down into the woods. The young lad shook as he landed on his feet. He staggered and fell. He looked around, alert. The birds that once lived in the vicinity soared away. A few moments later, Icarus landed in front of him.

“Stand up,” Icarus ordered.

With excruciating slowness, Van rose to his feet. The leaves crunched beneath his boots. The wind erupted on his direction when Icarus flapped his dark metallic wing one last time.

“I’ve been watching you,” Icarus said and paused briefly. “Your heritage is what intrigued me the most.”

“Really?” Van jested at him. “This is the 21st century and the only thing you did is to stalk me? That’s not creepy at all.”

Icarus chuckled. “For quite some time now, I was wondering why the gods let humankind fall in generations of infamy and wars, allowing men who’re thirsty for power and killing millions of people just to get what they want?” His voice was thick, angered. “It was your kind who caused them to leave.”

Van cocked an eyebrow. “Just what did my kind do to them?”

“There was a war between the humans and the gods, demigods, and titans alike. It was the hunters who led it – willed by the universe itself. The hunters drove the Olympian, Egyptian, even the Asgardian gods and demigods out of this realm.”

“I don’t need to be a detective to know what you want to happen. You wanted to kill me.”

Icarus crept a smile. “If I hunt all the hunters, then maybe they will return and punish those who wronged and blessed the ones who are right.”

“Icarus, right?” Van asked. “The legend says that you got unjustly punished by King Minos. Is there any possibility that maybe you’re just lashing out at others?”

It was a poor attempt to steer his thought and utterly failed. Instantaneously, Icarus swept, zooming in. Van flinched when Icarus first made contact with Van’s jaw, sending him five yards away. His back crashed against a tree. Van clenched his jaw, his face wincing in pain. He smelt the moss from behind.

“I am going to erase your malignant bloodline on this planet starting with you and your brother. Maybe, if you’re all gone they will return and punish the people and evil alike.”

Icarus strode forward. Van grunted and spat blood. He stood steadily and turned around.

“Not bad for a monologue,” Van replied. “I just find it hard to believe how this solves everything. I mean, don’t get me wrong. You don’t have anyone left in here and calling the gods will only bring chaos in this world given that they were driven out by the hunters of the past. There must be a good reason why they did it.”

“I doubt that,” Icarus countered. “For all these years, what people did was to kill and invade. They did not care what happened to those who were weak.”

“There are also good times when people lived happily in old age despite the bad parts of this world. Besides, if you read the mythos, you would know that those gods were more tyrant than humans.” Van grunted. He struggled to stand up at first.

“At least we’ll be led under their greatness. That is worth enough.”

Van mentally shook dismissively. Icarus was determined and he knew that. When a man was determined, his conviction was unyielding and when he was unyielding to his beliefs he was prepared to break down any walls. He snapped into action. Van charged forward. He feigned to his right and then swept a left punch, but Icarus blocked him. He felt his fist break. And Icarus caught his arm.

“You’re just a speck,” Icarus said. “You barely grasped the notion of your power and despite the training you underwent, you won’t be able to emerge your power without the proper ritual.” He smirked. “A proper time to pick you out before your horns will grow.”

Icarus twisted Van’s arm and his face writhed. Then, he threw him over the bedrock.

By the time Icarus leaped with his kick thrashing to his face. But Van was already alerted and got out of the way. The young hunter ran deep into the forest. If he can’t win directly, he has to use the surroundings to his advantage. The pain finally subsided.

Icarus flew and followed him, but Van silently melted in the darkness. Icarus landed on the grassy ground. The smell of moss trailed to his nose, his eyes wandering in the darkness. He heard several footsteps. Icarus’ eyes darted around.

The hunter silently watched and moved around him, tree by tree. He swept invisibly behind Icarus. He launched himself in the air and his feet hit Icarus’ back he flipped onto the bough, squatted, and moved away then he dissipated in the dark once more.

Icarus grunted. His eyes were frustrated. The assault wasn’t fatal, but the inconceivable movements brought him distress. The fact that he couldn’t get over his position signaled that the hunter was more than meets the eye.

Icarus heard rustling at two o’clock. The wing entity threw a fireball at the location. The branch of the tree singed in black as the fireball whizzed up to the sky and exploded into tiny pieces. He missed it. The hunter already made its move the moment he left the branch wobbling and arced in the air. Van held two handmade stakes landed on the back. With proper force, he stabbed Icarus in his back.

Icarus gnawed in pain and he shook his wings to stagger him, but Van already took off. Icarus willed his flesh and pulled out the stake and stabbed behind him. Blood poured out until it sealed shut. Icarus gasped. The pain traveled in his heart and his stomach. “You’re a fast runner, huh.” He broke into laughter. “I see then.”

Icarus levitated. “If you’re not going to get out, then I’ll just make you.”

One of the abilities that those witches endowed with him was magic. He heard the existence of it but wasn’t well versed nor interested as it was known as witchcraft in his age, and using one might put him on the hanging bridge. This was a new age and he didn't need to hesitate. The fire magic bestowed upon him will be put to good use.

Icarus muttered the spell. “Viven pulsa fiere.”

His hand clasped together and tails of fire spewed out of its wings. Van, who was two yards away, preparing the wooden stakes saw his attempt to lure him out. As a student, he knew what fire could do if unleashed in the forest, it would cause continuous trails and in turn, cause a forest fire. He can’t let that happen. Somewhere in this part of the forest, Kate and Gilt were fighting against those people. If the fire spreads, they might have a hard time escaping the place or worse.

He jumped on one tree and onto another and flung himself over the air. Van threw the stakes. It was a clean hit. Icarus felt the pain stung on his chest and his wings. The fire died, and his wings ceased their functions and fell hard on the ground.

The broken angel stuttered and the blood soaked the ground. Van landed on top of him. Van watched as he spewed blood.

“You know,” Van said quietly. “It could have been better if you didn’t choose this path. Van was expecting a redeeming word or at least a farewell note. But he smirked, he eerily smirked widely.

“Yes,” Icarus jerked his head. “You’re right.”

A fiery wave of energy sent Van flying away from him. The wingman stood and healed from the wounds. His eyes burn like fire just as his wings burn bright. Van was muted by the fallout.

This was something he can’t deal with. The monster flamed brightly, fiery, calm, and untouchable. The injury in its flesh was seemingly inconceivable from receiving any mortal wounds. Van knew very well there was nothing he could do to stop it. He just did his best to slow him down.

Icarus blinked in front of him. And Van didn’t see his hand move swiftly in his chest. It was when he felt hot and the chest burned the most. Icarus pressed his hand and blasted Van. Van crashed against the trees and onto the mountainside, he drew to a halt. Both his front and back flared in pain and his flesh winced in pain.

Icarus blinked at Van’s location.

“Close,” Icarus said. “You were so close to killing my heart. It was a good plan though using the surroundings to fight in your stead. You’re beginning to think like a hunter. I’ll give you that. You’re not the same as last time we fought. But I have my awakening now. I am magic reborn. You cannot understand how fascinating it is to be granted such power.”

Van was silent, his breath raggedness. Deep inside his head, he was searching. The feeling, the exact feeling when he flipped it on. He was giving his best effort to relive those moments when he was in control of being a hunter, but he could barely scratch the surface.

During the training, Kate brought out his innate potential for a brief moment. It was like not being in control but the hunter was in control. His body movements were synergistically cooperating with his thoughts about what move he wanted to do, almost unnatural and surreal.

He remembered. Van focused on himself. Whispers came to him then after. Voices from those who died. They were furious, filled with hate and fury. Their rage got through with him, he wanted to translate those rage into action. The twitch ran wild in his flesh and he fell through with it. The pain lingered and he embraced it. Then, he felt a strangely tranquil feeling. Everything was sedated. The pain numbed. No turmoil. No lingering human senses. Only desire. Van relaxed his nerves and he surrendered to the flow. The violence in his mind reigned free.

Van’s eyes snapped open, blinking in dim yellow.

“You’re not the only one who has a waking call.”

Van ripped his shirt off. His barely formed abs reflected. The burned skin healed in an instant. He struck Icarus with his hollowed yellow eyes and Icarus moved back in fear.

“They’re screaming.” Van looked perplexed and his tone was embodied by different voices. “Can’t you hear them?”

“W-who?”

Van started to mimic someone else’s voice. “Please, don’t, I’m the breadwinner of my family.” Van continued. “I don’t wanna die, I’m too young –”

Icarus was stunned. “It can’t be –” his words trailed off.

“Don’t you remember them?” Van queried. “They’re the people who you killed. Their souls are screaming at me to free them. Avenge, avenge, avenge. They wanted you to be punished.”

Icarus gulped his saliva and beckoned him. “Come on then.”

Van rushed forward. His moves are more erratic than before. The instantaneous dodge of his fire attacks made Icarus draw back from the fearless hunter. He blinked and kept throwing fireballs. This time, Van slapped the fireballs with a single flick. While Icarus was at it, Van kept dodging quicker and sharper than ever. His will was stronger than Icarus. Icarus will be the one who’d end up at a disadvantage if this continued further. So, he chose to blink at Van’s back catching him off guard. But the hunter dragged his feet around with his arm swinging. Van’s fist hit Icarus’s right side of his face and stunned him, then the hunter followed a series of punches and blows on his stomach. Every plow and blow felt like getting hit by a dumbbell. Icarus ribs cracked, his organs wobbled in pain, his mind was in pain and unclear. Van felt he was in control and at the same time, he was not. It was a fleeting moment in disguise. Van ended it with a one-inch punch right at his gutter. The punch broke his entire rib cage and disrupted his heartbeats. The force threw Icarus off balance, coughing blood and a few feet away.

Icarus clenched his teeth. “How is this possible?” Icarus asked and spat blood. “I was supposed to be at my pinnacle. Physical attacks shouldn’t be effective against me.”

“You’re not the only one who’s powerful then,” Van answered coldly.

Icarus gnawed blood. His annoyance was getting the best of him. But an idea came to him. The rage swept off of his face. “If you’re powerful, then I doubt you’d dodge this one.”

Icarus molded a ball of fire, swirling violently, bigger than any other.

“Catch this!”

Icarus shot the fireball at Van. Van stared, almost with no defiance. He raised his hand, his palm facing the flaring ball. The wind turned to crisp as it got closer. And did not relent. As the fire made contact with his hand, the ball of fire scattered and dissipated into thin air.

Icarus blinked. “That’s not possible.”

Van intercepted his thoughts by leaping off to him. He grabbed his wing and sled Icarus back to the ground. Icarus’ feathers were slowly ripping off and the hunter tore his wings off his body. Regenerating it would take a while.

Icarus blinked.

Van quickly used the tree surface as a footing to shoot himself in an attempt to get Icarus. Van only met dust when he went down. He looked around and found stones laying on the ground. Van’s eyes began to traverse Icarus’s locations, blinking away. He seemed desperate to free himself from his grasp, but Van wasn’t going to allow him to get off easily. The voices simply wouldn’t allow him to. He pulled his arm to his back, his eyes sighted to the target. He watched ahead and flung the stones in the air, hovering at tremendous speed. The stone found the back of Icarus' head and got hit. Icarus felt his skull was broken, cracked and he fell to the ground. It was the brief moment he was waiting for. A relief was written over his face as he sped off. Van leaped over the trees and reached a certain height. Van pulled closer. His fist shadowed Icarus’ fate.

Icarus hopelessly looked up at him. “So, it is revealed. A hunter with no magic, but he can neutralize it. His will is his strength. The indomitable will be brought tremendous power with no need for anything. I thought you were just another simple hunter. You were among the myths. A Pri—”

A huge explosion resounded throughout the forest. The animals shook in fear and the trees wobbled by the sheer will of his fist.

Van’s head jerked up to see the blood moon was no more. The sky was clouded by grayness and filled with heavy rumbles of thunder. There was nothing to see other than the sobering sky, dizzying his consciousness. The stain of blood trailed on his arm and to his body. He stood in the middle of the crater, waiting for the sky to weigh down its bearing. It was a small droplet at first. Then, a series of rain fell on him.

The voices were finally rinsed off by the rain.

## A different kind of monster

Jane was dancing around in her house. She woke up in her usual routine. She prepared the ingredients, cracked the egg, put on some tomatoes, and salt, and fried it in the pan.

It can hardly argue when she woke up on the right side of the bed last night after the succession of killing the monsters away. When she woke up, the monster outside was decimated and melted into thin air. It was a big deal she did not just help destroy the monsters, but she also kept Mia safe.

For once in a while, Jane felt good except for her dream last night. She dreamt of a black door and a man emerged from it. It was the most bizarre thing she had ever imagined.

Speaking of bizarre, she was surprised that Gilt called her earlier, but she did not answer, not out of spite. She was in the bathroom doing her business. She thought their meeting was a one-time thing, she didn’t expect Gilt to want more than that. His concern will be dealt with after everything.

Jane was not at all fine, she needed to talk to Kate about her plans for her future. She can’t just keep killing monsters and hunting those people who did wrong to them which would be unfair to Mia. It may not be her business to butt in her goals, but seeing how self-destructive it was, Jane couldn’t just avert her eyes seeing the only friend she has was walking down that path.

She realized by now that she was too self-consumed that she ignored Kate’s unusual behavior. Jane thought that Kate was only busy with her school and job, it took her to discover Kate’s activities when she saw Van dealing with some monster and getting dragged away. Jane almost felt sorry for the boy, but he was, after all, alright. He told Kate that he managed to defeat that *thing* and got home safely.

Kate on the other hand was shutting her off. Kate just needs some time before she opens up to Jane. And she will listen to her when the time comes.

What made her excited perhaps was Rick. He may not dress decently, but he was at least honest enough for her uptake. But she couldn’t help thinking about Gilt, it would be a lie to say that she was not attracted to him too.

*No, no.* She shook her head. *Gilt is not a good guy. You should avoid him. Rick, on the other hand, was a good choice – he’s the nice guy that every girl should go into.*She giggled.

The second-hand embarrassment was strong on this one.

Jane put the omelet on the plate and was about to dig in when she heard the ring of the doorbell. She stood and strode across the living room. Jane poked the monitor to see who it was. There was no one.

*Weird.* Jane thought.

Jane turned around, but the doorbell rang again and again, there was no one detected on the monitor.

“Is this thing broken?” she asked herself.

Jane decided to see the person behind the door. She untethered the lock but left the chain tied so that she can only peer outside. And when she did, her heart paled, her face shaken.

It was the man in her dream.

Tall, brooding, almond eyes, and black semi-cut hair that was slick back. High cheekbones, straight nose, and strict gaze will keep someone’s attention. The man wore dark sleeves and a jacket that had a spike at its shoulder blade, his fashion darted at the right point. Most of all, his eyes were the most alluring in his physical features and most daunting.

If he were one of the boys in the school, he’d be one of the persons of interest this year aside from Gilt. But not to her.

Jane was about to push the door shut, but *he* snuck a toe and stopped the door. His eyes pulled her closer.

“Do not be afraid. I do not intend to harm you. Open the door and invite me in.”

And as she listened to his words, Jane opened the door.

“You can get inside.” She said with no offering of resistance.

The man clasped his hands at his back, his eyes furtively glancing around the house, watching the fine texture and designs. “Your house is the most intriguing. Hm.” He looked down at her. “Forgive me for my unannounced visit, mademoiselle.” He bowed and kissed the back of her right hand. “You have to understand that I just got out of a deep slumber and found myself in a strange era.” He beamed at her. “All thanks to you, I got myself out of that dimension.”

“What do you want?” Jane asked.

At least, she still has the will to speak.

“I wanted you to be my guide.”

She knew by then that this man is a fire that she couldn’t grasp and understand. In an instant, she found herself frightened.

“Guide to what?”

“This world. I wanted to know more about it, but as you can see, I am a man with a cane. I cannot immerse myself into this world without knowing anything about it.”

“You haven’t told me about yourself and why should I trust you?”

He sighed in relief. “I thought you’d never ask. You see, I was considered to be a horrendous being back in the 13th century. My own family sealed me and my cage was passed down for hundreds of years. To be honest, though, I was misunderstood for being cruel, my actions were justified to do right to others and my family. My actions were unjustly misinterpreted, but all of it was nothing more but a tale of how our brotherhood fell. While my imbecile brother reigned free, me and the others were sealed shut behind that gate, unable to leave.”

Jane shook her head, unable to grasp the information.

He continued. “You see, I’m not a bad person, my lady. My life just did not end well. I was hoping you could help me fix everything again.”

Despite the obscure words, Jane thought of her survival. She was, after all, beholden by his hypnosis. If his will was for her to die, she’ll see the last of her day.

Jane finally nodded. Her heart pounded like her throat. She could smell her fear, disabling her to move. “Alright, I’ll help.” She answered. Her breath withdrew when looked up at him.

He came closer to her. He can feel her heartbeat faster than normal.

“You truly fear me, do you?”

She looked down, her breath ragged.

“Alright then, let’s start at the beginning. What is your name?”

“My name is Jane Manhattan.”

“And I’m Marcus.” He returned. “Marcus Mavenhart. I am the family’s secret.”

Marcus leaned in closer. His eyes allured her to his submission. He felt his teeth extended, then traced her neck.

“You might want to shut your eyes, luv.”

Marcus closed into her face, his desire reflected in his eyes, and her mind was plunged into darkness.

# About the Author

Bort Patgia was born in 2001. He studied psychology for four years. There are numerous things that inspired him to write novels, but the first thing was video games. Also, western literacies and Japanese novels had great influence when he started writing his first novel in late 2017. Bort loves to read fantasy and action novels; they stimulate his mind for creative instances. Sometimes, he chases dogs for thrills, sometimes the opposite. Lastly, he loves to drink coffee before sprint writing.

# Novels by Bort Patgia

**Brigante Ark Series**

The Shadows of Fate

The Strife of Tribunal

**Jaeger Series**

Season of Blood Moon

# Copyright

Season of Blood Moon

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