The Dark Entry

*Book 2 of the Jaeger Series*

Bort Patgia

For God who gave me wisdom and clarity. For my family who supports and understands me. And for those who bothered to read this piece despite the lacking of flavor.

## Uninhibited

Tina was on her way home tonight.

The police from Maryvale pulled her to a halt, which was why she was leaving the city late. Apparently, there were some goons running amok. They were making sure everything was alright. She has some explaining to do when she gets home.

Tina wheeled a hard right, then she made another left. Her phone rang.

If she remembered correctly, the intersection should be 6 yards ahead. With her left hand steady on the wheels, Tina reached for her phone. She struggled to get it from her bag on the passenger seat. When she looked back, the empty road lay, and the light flickered, then a person lying on the road flashed in.

Recognition dawned on her face as the car did not stop and continued. It was already too late. The car wobbled as she passed beneath it, and she kicked the break. The loud screeching noise of the break abruptly came to a halt. She got down and ran over to the man.

She turned on the flashlight on her phone but found no one. Tina was lost for words.

“Oh boy,” Someone said behind her and cracked his neck. “You’re like the 4th person who ran over me. This place is not doing me a favor on hunting.”

Fear crossed Tina’s face as she turned around. She stepped back and got the knife out of her pocket. It was for self-protection in case she got nabbed by some thief.

“Ohh, scary.” He strode forward as if inviting her to do a favor.

“Don’t get close to me.” She swung the knife in front of him. He was not even fazed. “I don’t know who you are but you better back off, pal. I’m not kidding.”

He flashed a smirk. She saw that the man moved at an inconceivable speed and stole her knife. He looked at her and magnetized her eyes to his.

“Do not scream, don’t do any unnecessary attention. I just need someone to talk to. What is your name?”

“Tina.” She shakily breathed. “W-what do you want?” her voice stuttered.

“Look,” He started. “I’m just looking to talk to someone. I’ve been having some soul searching just recently – tonight. You know, I’m not always a good man. When I was turned into a vampire, all my human qualities were swept away. I killed and fed so many people back then. I became vicious and well-known in the supernatural community, but my reign of terror came to a stop. I have friends who helped me bring back the best qualities, at least some small amount of it of my humanity.”

“They sound like very good friends,” Tina replied with a smile. She had no choice but to go along. “They never gave up on you.”

The man smiled. An exceptionally genuine one. “They are.” And his eyes trailed off elsewhere. “I wonder where they are right now.”

“I think you should go and talk to them. Maybe they can help you with whatever you’re going through.”

He shook his head. “No. I don’t even know where they are, and I don’t want them to stop me. Being an uninhibited vampire is the best thing that ever happened to me.” He continued. “A friend found my family back in the 16th century. They encourage me to live my life with them despite the immortality I possess. They said my family is my redemption. And so, I did. I enjoyed their company, hell I even watched some of them born and died. It was a glorious ride.” Gilt came to a pause. He sighed and continued. “Indeed, my presence is on and off, I’ve been traveling to other countries, but I’ve always been with them when shit happens. I let my friend die because of some stupid reason. Van was right about me.” He confessed. “I unknowingly used her just to get back at those people who intended harm to my family. I motivated her to take revenge so that if they were gone, my family would go back and reunite again. As you can see, it’s a failure. In the end, I ask myself, was all my sacrifice worth it? She was the closest one I have to a sister and look what I did to her.”

It was like watching someone lose it. A breaking of mind in the process made Tina more nervous and plunged her into fear.

“But when I needed them the most, where were they? Off to another city, to new life, out of this shithole, and left me and my nephew to protect the family’s treasures and secrets. They didn’t give a shit to my nephew who was 16 years old. He was supposed to be having fun, but instead, they overloaded him with work. I’ve been trying to be a good version of myself. But I don’t think any of this is living or redemption. So, please tell me, what does it mean to live?”

Tina’s entire body shook. She couldn’t lift a finger nor run or shout. She took it all in and answered, “We create the meaning of our life.”

“Really, huh?”

She nodded, whimpering.

“Wow, that’s easy.” He replied nonchalantly.

He walked around tinkering with his thoughts before passing on the judgment of her advice.

“All right then,” He said.

Tina prayed that whatever his response is will allow her to get home safely.

“I am going to define my life with death and misery again. If they won’t give me the life I deserve then I shall reap it away from them.” He looked her in the eyes and said, “I want you to run in the forest as fast as you can.”

Tina’s eyes widened and she sped off. He felt that his orders were too easy so he ran and blocked her from any further.

“No, no. That’s not what I want. Heh.” He professed. “I want you to run and scream as loud as you can,” before he could finish his words Tina already left and ran. “Because the monsters earlier didn’t provide any satisfaction hence my dinner was a bore.”

The lady screamed louder than the birds nearby that were resting–flew away in panic. The view of the path was blocked by tall grasses and she fell on a descending muddy ground down to the riverside. Her thoughts trailed back to her phone, but she couldn’t reach it. The man ordered him not to do anything unnecessary unless he bid her to do so. She cannot resist his orders like it was imprinted in her thoughts that he was her master.

It took him for a while to locate her. Her voice died down as time passed by. Her lungs must’ve been damaged by the incessant screaming. This makes the hunt more exhilarating. He followed her and saw the woman desperately running in the middle of the river. The path she was treading on was about 3 feet, but when going further down the road, it would go further down in 8 feet. It was a wild guess.

Not that it matters. He watched her as she clumsily tripped over the rock. That was when he leaped on the other side of the river.

“Hey.” He waved his hand.

His teeth showed and extended into fangs. The vampire swept in front of her, one inch away from his breath. Tina stopped. It wasn’t that she was willing to stop running – it was her fear of overturning his orders. Her heart died down as soon as Gilt penetrated his fangs on her neck, seeping her blood out of her system to his.

She was slipping into unconsciousness. Her deep, ragged breaths became faint when she was dropped. Her body trembled and took in her last breath. Everything around her faded into a silent blackness.

The vampire left the dead body of the woman and returned on his way.

## Chapter 1

In the beginning, he didn’t expect that his parents’ introduction to the strange supernatural existence would turn his world around. As a child, Timothy was built differently, having been trained at an early age to prepare for the worst. While it was confusing to him at the time, he didn’t complain about learning how to fight and use a gun as a young boy. It wasn’t until he grew up that he realized it was a necessity, given the dangerous world they lived in. This was a secret that was kept from Van.

It all started last year when bizarre homicide cases began to surface, which continued to rise until 2020. Given the number of bad people on Earth, it wasn't surprising. Normally, they would have overlooked such cases, as there were bounty hunters and mercenaries who would fend off monsters. If there was no evidence, the local police would have been responsible for the investigation. However, the hostile events in this city rose to a level worthy of their attention.

They decided to look into this case and sent agents to investigate the city, remaining transparent in their actions. Their goal was to investigate the city, nothing more, nothing less. Over a month, they encountered the monsters in the Maryvale forest.

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It was nighttime when they came prepared with pistols equipped with suppressors. The road was paved with human entrails, guts, severed limbs hung on the trees, and bodies of unrecognizable people lay on the ground.

At the end of the road, by the riverside, the monsters were enjoying their dinner. They have the appearance of human-like, but they were in a state of decay with pale skin, holes, and discernable flesh. Their disarrayed figures and wobbling gait made them distinguishable from humans. Most notably, their faces contorted into altered forms of the undead.

There were dozens of them. They may be outnumbered but not outmatched. They approached tactically, trying to isolate them by throwing stones and sticks to distract them. Soon, they managed to take down four of them. By the time Timothy turned, their attention focused on him. The rational thing he could have done was to lure the enemies towards him while Boston and the others attacked them from behind with pistols.

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As they were trained to do, they set the raft on fire and left the remains buried in the river. From that point on, the mortality rate steadily declined. There were still some cases, but most of it, human involvement. Nothing like that night occurred again.

For the time being, they busied themselves with school. As any normal student would, they immersed themselves in their studies. Unfortunately, it was much harder than they thought, especially for Raymond and Lester, who hadn't been very social.

Around seven months after their arrival, they started hearing about peculiar cases again. Sightings of monsters on the loose were circulating on the internet. They decided to take matters into their own hands. It was always dreadful every time they had another mission, but this one was particularly perilous.

They encountered humans who appeared to be under some sort of mind control. It didn’t take long before the tribunal hunter and archaegean hunter realized that the entire place was rigged with an illusion spell. They tried to break the humans free, but things got a lot worse.

The humans were able to conjure spells, and they fought exasperatingly for a few hours. It took a huge toll on them, who were caught off guard. In the end, they were able to kill seven out of twenty of the humans. To make sure the humans received medical attention and to erase any trace of the incident, they called for assistance. More importantly, they concluded that this series of events was not the work of supernatural monsters, but of someone who was working on a larger scale.

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Mick was gone to visit his wife and Timothy’s mother, Melissa. They were reticent about sharing information about their family with Van. While Timothy didn’t know the reason for this, he understood the importance of protecting Van’s innocence, as he was the only normal one in the family despite their personality issues.

Van was unaware of Timothy’s nighttime activities for months. Although Timothy knew Van well and that he would eventually notice his late-night appearances, he was evasive, often claiming he was hanging out with friends at night. Van, being a sympathetic person, understood their bond and didn’t ask many questions.

Despite reminding himself of the good reason why Van was kept in the dark, Timothy couldn’t avoid feeling guilty. However, he was willing to live with that feeling if it meant seeing Van live a normal life. He found comfort in his bond with his brother, knowing that they could act normally without their secret affecting their family life.

Their nighttime activity increased as the number of cases steadily rose once more. They searched every place relevant to the previous case, even traveling to other cities. However, during one of their searches, they encountered a strange man. The man wore a black robe and was masked by what seemed to be an Oni mask.

Raymond shouted, “Hold it right there!” as the stranger carried someone wrapped in white linen cloth.

Timothy asked the stranger, “What the hell are you doing here?!” but received no response.

As the stranger remained silent, the rest of the gang slowly pulled out their pistols. The stranger’s bloodthirsty intent dropped as soon as he heard the wailing sirens, and he ran deeper into the forest.

Raymond and Timothy chased the stranger into the woods while Lester and Boston took care of the bodies. Their heavy pounding of footsteps was louder than anything else aside from the chirping insects. They leaped over a log of wood and turned right as the stranger turned in the other direction. They were on top of him on an elevated road, but Timothy’s muscles were sore from the earlier fight, and Raymond proved to have more stamina.

Raymond recognized the path of the river ahead and stopped the stranger further in his tracks. As they locked hands on their pistols, the stranger drew first, unleashing a powerful spell that pushed Raymond and Timothy’s back. By the time they shot the stranger, he was already pirouetting in the air toward the side of the river. Although Timothy missed the stranger with his shot, the white linen cloth wrapped around the body fell into the river. The stranger disappeared into the forest, leaving a malicious glare behind his Oni mask.

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Orion infiltrated and spied on people before, but this time, he was with his partner Brix, who just completed training. They were assigned to follow individuals on their watch list. There was no physical evidence of the illegal activity, but information leaked in the underground community. He moved stealthily in the shadows with Brix outside an abandoned warehouse. Together they took cover against the wall. Orion handed Brix his gun, saying, “Here, take this.”

“Why?” she asked.

He sighed deeply. “We’re in the field. There might be a shootout.”

“I have superhuman strength and can withstand a few shots. Why do I need a gun?” Brix replied.

Ignoring her, Orion pointed his gun at her. “Would you rather die? Because I’d prefer to kill you myself. Look, even outside the mission, you don’t know what dangers follow you, so you have to be prepared at all times,” he emphasized. He flipped the gun and offered it to her again. After hesitating, Brix accepted it.

Orion looked at Brix, who was much closer to him than he liked. “What are you doing?”

“Shadowing you,” she replied.

“You’re suffocating me. Please stay five feet away from me,” he said, putting some distance between them.

“No, I’m not. Like you said, what if there’s a shootout? You’ll be my human shield,” Brix retorted.

Orion inhaled deeply. “I shouldn’t have agreed to Mr. Samson taking you out in the field,” he muttered.

“Why does that make me sound so bad?” she glowered at him.

“Because you are. I scored so high in combat and shooting that even Mr. Samson compared me to the elite students back in training. The only thing that makes you different from them is that you didn’t go to school.”

“I’m mildly offended. I’m a college graduate, just so you know. I’m probably the most diligent person you’ll ever meet, and you didn’t even bother to watch my performance. You didn’t even give me an assessment. You just blew me off like some weightless paper,” Brix shot back.

“All paper is weightless,” Orion replied flatly.

“That’s not the point!”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he sighed in contempt and stared indifferently. “The point is, you’re not ready.”

“Really? Is that what you call an assessment? Real mature,” she said.

“Do you have any field experience? Zero.”

“You sound like those companies back in Asia that are looking for a new grad with specific experience and over-the-hill qualifications!”

“You’re acting like a teenager.”

“Did you just insult me?”

Orion, annoyed, inhaled and let out an exasperated breath. “Have you ever been shot, Brix? Because I have, and I’m telling you, it’s not great.”

Brix ran her fingers over her forehead as if thinking. “Oh! Is this the last time? Why does it feel like it’s the last time?”

Orion reminisced. “I was trying to talk some sense into you when you were hallucinating, and suddenly you chased me with a very, very large knife and partially cut my ass cheeks!”

“You know that I wasn’t myself. I couldn’t help it!”

“You could have if you just didn’t hook up with a bad guy.”

“That’s not fair. How could I have known that he was not what I thought he was?!”

“You’ve been with him for two years!” he added. “I have to call my neighbor, who is a doctor, to stitch up my ass. Do you know how hard it was to explain to him how a skateboard cleanly cut my bottom?” Orion said, wincing as he was reminded of the pain in his bottom.

Brix looked at him skeptically. “Look, I wasn’t myself at that time. I think you’re overcompensating.”

“And you know what’s worse?” Orion continued, ignoring her comment. “It’s not like I have anything against bisexuals or homosexuals, but my colleagues thought I had gay sex for the whole month. For the whole freaking month!”

Brix remained silent, not sure what to say.

“You know, every time I sit down, I can still feel the part where you cut my ass.” Orion took a deep breath and reluctantly handed the gun back to Brix. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe you don’t need this gun, after all.”

He pulled her towards him, and the two of them made their way toward the distribution factory where their target was located. As they crept inside the building, the informers hid behind a wall, observing the people moving coffin-sized boxes. They exchanged glances, wondering what these people were up to.

One of the grunts approached his boss and said, “The cargo has been loaded, boss.”

The boss nodded. “Alright.”

The other negotiator brought a briefcase, opened it, and revealed what looked like one million dollars. He closed it back.

“Our community is delighted with your contribution,” the negotiator said.

“I could say the same thing about ours. I hope these weapons will prove to be useful in your cause,” the boss replied.

“I am sure of it. Till the next time, we will meet again.”

The two parties nodded at each other and turned their backs to their vehicles.

“This is informer 829, do you copy?” Orion whispered into his communication device.

“This is Overeye, what’s your status?” Overeye responded.

“We came at the right time. A transaction has already been made. Unknown weapons.”

“We detect multiple bogies around the premises. Do not engage. I repeat, do not engage.”

“They’re on their way. What are we waiting for?” Brix asked, her nerves getting the best of her.

Orion glared at her, mentally warning her not to do something reckless.

“Overeye?” he asked.

The other party finished loading everything inside.

“Overeye?! They’re done. Should we proceed?”

“Let the other party go and try to subdue the other one.”

“Which one?” Brix asked.

“Depends. Which one do you think you could take on?” Overeye inquired.

The two exchanged a look and played rock-paper-scissors to make a quick decision. Brix chose scissors while Orion chose paper. By the time they finished, the other party had already left.

“Yay,” Brix’s voice elevated in high spirits. “Then I’ll take that black van.”

“Seriously? I think we should try to get the other one who has the weapons.”

“Shut up,” Brix interrupted. “I won, remember? Cover me.”

She let out a sigh before zooming in on the enemy. With one swift move of her arm, she sent the enemy flying up to the second floor.

Orion shot one of the grunts and then aimed at the tires of the vehicles. He immediately took cover when he felt a bullet whiz past him. All the while, Brix was flaunting her skills, disarming their opponents. She leaped onto the second floor and took out the shooters.

Orion rolled and fired his weapon, breaking the enemy’s leg before snatching their gun and taking out another foe. Meanwhile, Brix noticed a grenade hurtling towards her and quickly deflected it away, causing it to ricochet down to the boss of the grunts.

It was too late to stop the explosion, which killed two of the boss’s men while throwing him against the wall. Although shrapnel pierced his body, the wounds were non-fatal. All he could hear were the screams of his men as he fell to the ground, unable to determine how much time passed.

When he wearily opened his eyes, he saw Orion and Brix already shadowed his fate.

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Through the other side of the long window, Orion watched as the vehicles passed by. It was a casual day in Detroit. It was a long rainy day and it looked as though the rain was not going to go away any time soon. They came by here to grab a coffee, but with the downpour, it was safe to say that they won’t be coming out for a while.

It was not a bad thing when you look at it. Orion and Brix, they’d been together for quite some time. He was bothered by the recent events that have taken over. There were sightings in a small town in Germany of people who were worshiping a certain figure. Then there were monsters trespassing in the mountains of Alaska. Lastly, a pack of werewolves was camping in the forest in the Philippines. Those are a few examples that caught *their* eyes and ears.

Regardless, watching how calm this day was reassured him that there was still hope despite the bleak future. Thinking back now, he reminisced how he got here at this moment. The moment he became aware of the supernatural world he sought to join *their ranks*despite their rejection. He had to prove himself to win their trust and he did. He was one of the few humans in their faculty. Supernatural creatures dominated the numbers of their ranks, but they were treated equally. Each has their potential and was trained in the same field. He carried out his mission without any failure. But his world would turn upside down when she met this woman.

It all first started with a girl who got tricked by her boyfriend and in turn, she was hunted by an organization known for spreading terror. If it wasn’t for their intervention with the people who work behind the shadows, protecting humanity from the supernatural world, the enemies might have scared the people and the world.

Orion watched outside sullenly. His contemplation was only broken by a cough. Brix sat on the other side of the table. He was served pancakes with syrup and black coffee.

“Did I disturb your retrospection?” Brix asked.

Orion shook his head. “No. No. Not at all. I just didn’t have enough sleep.”

Brix fixed her eyes on him while chewing her pancake. “Mmm. We’ve been together for over six months.”

“To be exact, 4 months as a partner.” Orion corrected.

She continued. “4 months, that is. I can tell which face is which that tells what kind of vibes you’re emitting.”

“You sound like a judgmental person, you know that, right?”

“Damn right, I am,” Brix replied. “So, tell me why?”

Orion expressed a confused and cringed reaction to her sudden change of tone in her question as if she was going to sing.

“Tell me why –”

“Ok, I need you to stop there.”

Orion interjected the moment she started to sync on the music over the radio. Brix sighed as she put down the fork and the knife.

“What the hell dude?” Brix commented. “All this trip you’ve been acting so weird, and don’t tell me that it’s just because you did not have enough sleep. I may not look like it, but I have a knack for reading the vibes of a person.”

Orion stared at her. “Is it instinct?”

She was taken aback by surprise. “How did you know?”

“All women have that.” He apathetically replied.

“Mine is different.”

“And they also say that,” Orion replied.

She blinked twice, suppressing the glint of annoyance. “I have to stop you right there.” She continued. “I’m being serious here. It’s one of my abilities. I can sense what people feel if I focus enough.”

“Really?”

“Really.” She spoke.

“Did you write on the list of your abilities this empathic side of yours?”

Brix nodded and continued to devour a huge piece of pancake. “Uhm. Yes. Yes, I did. Hmm. This pancake is very, very good.”

“You should have told me about this.”

“Why?”

“We could have used this as an advantage during the operation.”

“I know my abilities, dumbass. I would have used it if I saw the right timing. Clearly, all the time.” She shook her head. “Why are we debating about this? We should be talking about what’s been bothering you. Please, do tell me. I’m your partner, after all. Don’t you trust me?”

Orion glanced up with contempt. Brix laughed over herself.

“Please, you need to loosen up. Your thoughts are going to eat you up if you don’t open yourself to anyone.” she pleaded.

Orion sighed. “It’s nothing. I just wanted to enjoy this moment. It’s a rare occasion to see the world intact beyond this window.” He looked outside. “When we cleaned some mess, another would show up and we have to clean it again. There’s no end to it.”

“You’re afraid that all your hard work will go to waste.” She assumed.

“I’m afraid, I won’t have the time for myself.” He added. “You know when I joined this club, my goal was to help eradicate any scums who use their ability to do bad things and I successfully did stop them, well, most of the time.” He exasperatedly breathed. “I need this. A time out.”

“You know the first time I met you; you were a cold-hearted man. You talk like a robot.”

“Shut up.”

Brix chuckled. “You’ve been in this line of service longer than I have and that being cold yet warm and caring, I admire that side of yours.”

Orion reeled his eyesight on her. “Do you?”

“Yeah.” She quickly replied. “I-I thought you were like any other douchebags, but it turns out you’re just fine.”

“I remember when you called me a thug and a scoundrel when we first met.”

“Because you do look like one.”

“Hmm,” Orion grunted. “I’m an agent, you know.”

“Illegal agent. We work in black ops.” Brix continued to the next topic. “Speaking of which, Mr. Samson sent us an analogue. I’m just telling you in case you haven’t read it yet.”

“Mmm. What does it entail?”

Brix blinked. “I don’t know.”

Orion raised a brow. “What do you mean you don’t know? We’ve been through with this.”

“Yes, but I’m not used to reading it. Maybe, you can translate it for the both of us so that we can move to our next mission?”

Orion sighed. “Damn it.”

Orion gazed at his burner phone. Several images and symbols appeared. He cautiously and carefully decrypted the messages.

“It says here that our agents from Maryvale city have encountered the remnants of Ordinals. Their investigation led them to uncover whatever they were doing in there; they were amassing soldiers. The reason is still unknown. They want us to assist them.”

Brix drank her coffee.

“How far is Maryvale?”

“If we can catch a flight this evening, we can land in Oklahoma for 2 hours and then another 13 hours from Oklahoma to Maryvale city, supposedly if we don’t make any pit stops along the road.”

Brix snorted. “What the hell? Another trip again. Please shoot me.”

“I hate traveling too. But we’re the only ones who are available, so suck it up.”

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The incident happened two weeks ago, and Timothy and the others have been vigilant about the mysterious man ever since. Timothy’s focus right now was to keep an eye on Van, who was acting strangely lately. He understood that Van can be rough when pushed enough, but he was not a bad kid - he was just mentally troubled. Timothy sometimes thought that Van’s abrupt mood changes are caused by the hunter’s transition, but he knew that was impossible. He protested the thought to his father, Mick, but he considered that it might be another case that requires psychological attention. The psychologist’s diagnosis sounds correct - Van has a mood disorder. Van’s mood irregularity was persistent for a few months, and with the right therapy and medication, his mood disorder was gradually receding. However, Kent’s provocation must have triggered him.

To ensure that Van remains healthy, Timothy had set some ground rules. Van was not allowed to stay out late at night, and most importantly, he must not get involved in any fights. Timothy also made it clear to Kent that he will not tolerate any bad behavior towards his brother.

It was in the afternoon when Kent went to shower after their basketball routine. He got out and was about to meet his other teammate when Timothy appeared.

“There you are,” Timothy said. “I was wondering when you would come out.”

Kent froze for a brief second, but he collected himself quickly. “Hey, Tim. What brings you here?”

Without warning, Timothy pushed Kent against the locker. “Listen to me, asshat. If you ever mess with other people, especially my brother, I want you to remember that I’m going to personally demolish you and your friends. I know you people have been smoking around the abandoned establishment. So, if you think of hurting me or my brother, I have leverage that can destroy your high school life.”

Kent was taken aback by Timothy’s sudden aggression. “Yes, sir.”

Timothy let him go. “A piece of advice: Don’t act like a victim if you’re the reason why you get your ass kicked.”

The class started at 9:30 a.m. The rest of the students were excited to see the new teacher, but Timothy and the boys were more interested in the new bakery shop across the street from the café where Kate worked. Specifically, they were interested in the owner herself - a beauty in a strange paradise. They would probably spend an hour or two there just to check her out.

The door opened, and in burst a tall man dressed in typical teacher attire. He was supposed to look nerdy with his glasses, but his eyes - the way he looked, judging - suggested that he was more than meets the eye.

The cramped students dispersed and got back to their seats. The new teacher remained silent for a moment, scanning everyone. His sudden entrance, plus the silence, added to the awkwardness in the room.

He put down his book and grabbed a piece of chalk from his bag. He started writing his name.

“My name is Osiris Mendez, as in ‘Ou-sairis.’ Not ‘Oh-see-res,’ not ‘Oh-say-rays,’ but ‘Ou-sairis,’” he continued. “I graduated from Yale University with a bachelor’s degree and a master of arts in history. From now on, I will be your teacher in history and social science. I’m looking forward to teaching you all, and I hope you will not disappoint me.”

Timothy was dissatisfied and antagonized by his first impression of the teacher, which was not surprising given that he seemed like the kind of person who would judge your every move, behavior, and life choice.

“He sounds like a pain in the ass, don’t you think?” Boston whispered to him from Timothy’s right.

“Guys, stop,” Raymond interrupted in a low voice. “He’s going to hear you.”

“Ray’s right,” Timothy interjected. “Guys, we need to be quiet. We don’t want to get in trouble.”

Suddenly, Osiris shouted, “You, back there!”

The group turned to see that Osiris was looking directly at Timothy.

“What’s your name?” Osiris demanded.

Timothy stood up, pointed to himself, and said, “My name is Timothy Koelson, sir.”

Osiris continued, “Let me ask you this: what do you know about Germany during the 1900s?”

Timothy thought for a moment before answering, “There was a cultural divide between conservative and working-class Germans, and Germany and Russia supported the Second Boer War by supplying weapons.”

Osiris seemed satisfied with Timothy’s response and began to write on the board. As he talked, Timothy whispered to the others, “He’s a dick.”

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As they stepped out of campus, the cool autumn breeze swirled around them, bringing with it the earthy scent of fallen leaves. Boston and Lester chatted about the bakery shop they were heading to, but Raymond remained quiet, his mind preoccupied with his commitments. The trio arrived at the shop, its colorful signboard beckoning them in. Inside, the place was bustling with activity, the aroma of freshly baked goods filling the air. Most of the customers were men, jostling for space at the counter to grab their orders. The female staff had her hair tied up in neat buns, she wore exasperated expressions as she scurried around, trying to keep up with the demand.

As they approached the counter, Lester’s eyes scanned the staff, lingering on one of them. “What can I get for you, sir?” she asked with a polite smile.

“Your number,” Lester replied, winking at her.

The staff looked taken aback, but Boston quickly intervened. “What he means is that he wants a chocolate cake. Moist chocolate cake for the four of us. We’ll take it out.”

The staff relaxed, her smile returning. “Will do. Please wait a few moments, sir.”

Meanwhile, Timothy texted Van to meet them at the bakery. Van arrived just as the staff wrapped the vanilla cake. “Hey, just in time,” Timothy said, holding out the cake. “We were about to leave.”

Van eyed Timothy suspiciously. “Why did you call me here?”

“I got this cake for you. I’m just trying to be a good brother for once,” Timothy replied, proffering it.

Van hesitated for a moment before taking the cake. “All right. I’ll bite.”

“I was about to hang out with some friends,” Van said, nodding towards the café across the street.

“Friends?” Timothy asked, curious.

“Yeah,” Van said, pointing. “Right there.”

“Oh, yeah. Kate works there, right?” Timothy asked.

Van nodded. “Ah-huh. So, uhm, I-I need to go.”

“Oh, yeah. We’re also heading that way,” Boston interjected.

Van’s eyes flickered around the shop, noticing the number of boys inside. As they left, he turned to face them. “Were you guys checking out the staff in this shop?”

The four exchanged glances, sensing the accusation in Van’s voice. “No,” Lester quickly replied, his tone defensive.

“Definitely no,” Boston added, trying to sound convincing.

“Only a scum of the earth would do that, and we are far from that,” Raymond interjected, his voice firm.

“I’m your brother. Do you think I’m that scummy?” Timothy asked, looking hurt.

Van jerked his head. “Yes. Yes, you are.”

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Boston saw Osiris’s image through the black window of his car. Osiris parked in the alley and seemed to be meeting someone. Out of curiosity, the four followed Osiris. Van, who was cautious of their childish charade, went with them.

Osiris stopped at the door, seemingly from the newly opened bakery shop itself. The group formed a circle, pretending to hang out as normal students would. The door from the shop in the alley opened. The woman and the owner from before appeared and let him in.

“It’s the owner. What kind of relationship do they have?” Boston whispered to Lester.

“I don’t think it’s any of our business, guys,” Van commented.

“Shh. Why are you still here?” Boston hushed him. “Go and get your girlfriend or something.”

Raymond agreed with Van. “He’s right. This is a breach of privacy. We might get arrested for stalking. Let’s go.”

“Ray is right,” Timothy added. “We’re toast if we get caught snooping around.”

The two grunted. “Fine. Have it your way then.”

They finally decided to leave the place, but curiosity still lingered in their thoughts. What could Osiris possibly have come for?

At the back of the alley, Osiris grinned as he watched their backs walking across the street.

“They’re good at this,” Osiris commented. “Pretending to be a bunch of high school boys who are keen on the new lady in town. They intended to measure and observe you.”

“I thought so. It seems that Mr. Mick Koelson trained those boys very well.”

“I can’t say about the other kid back there.”

“Who?” she asked.

“Timothy’s brother.”

“Ahh, right. Mr. Mick did mention that he adopted another one before.”

Osiris nodded. “Yes, but he’s not part of us.”

“Really? I thought he was. From what I can tell, that boy is curious.”

“We have our instructions here, Brix. Please be wary.”

Brix beamed and picked up the identification card hanging from his neck.

“What is this?”

“Hey!”

“Osiris Mendez?! Haha.” She laughed. “Oh, damn. You have some balls picking up his name as your cover. You’re going to get your ass hunted one of these days, Orion.”

Orion shoved her hand away. “It’s what we call being subtle. Besides, he’s comatose. I’d dare say he wouldn’t mind letting me borrow his name.”

“Hey, don’t forget our mission.”

“I know. I’ve been tailing the two suspects they reported, Enrick Malfis and Suzy Megan. They claimed that they caught them snooping around inside an apartment complex with vehicles at night.”

“Oh, come on. What if he was just helping her move her belongings in there?”

“This continued to occur very often, Brix. So, there’s something on it.”

“If this is just normal high school gossip, I would say that they’re having an affair,” Brix said. Orion looked at her with the utmost judgment.

“What? I’m just speculating. That Enrick guy seems sketchy, nothing out of the ordinary.” She corrected herself. “Cheating is not normal.”

“Consider this an order from your S.O., Brix. Shut up.” Orion dismissed her.

“S.O my ass. We’re equal now, don’t forget that.”

“You just got promoted. You should be listening to me.” Orion paused and continued. “Whatever they have in there might be potentially hazardous, and we need to apprehend them before they run away from us.”

“Is that all?”

Orion sighed. “There are other suspects as well. I did some background checks on the residents of the apartment complex. There is a three-person interest: Layla Nomura, 24 years old, of Japanese descent. Her father came from Japan.”

“And her mother?”

“Otherworlder.”

Brix raised a brow. “Otherworlder?”

He nodded. “It appears that her husband doctored her documents. Lucky for us, they already put her in the index. She was never a threat, but we still keep our eyes on her.” Orion continued. “The second and the last one is out of our depth. According to our informants, they go by the names Hive and Jay Walter.”

“Huh. I wonder about that. What makes them more incognito than the others?”

“I don’t know. When we tried to pull out some data about them from the city council, we couldn’t find any trace of where they lived before or the date of their births. Even the parents are out of the picture as if they’re a ghost.”

“So, what now?”

“Since we don’t have any idea who they are, it’s best to keep minimal distance. We yielded no viable alternatives, so for now, we remain stationary.”

“Whoever they are, they must be really powerful to pull themselves over the shadow,” Brix commented.

“I couldn’t agree more.”

“These are weird times, don’t you agree? There are monsters everywhere.”

“And even among us humans.”

Orion was postured to a more comfortable position. “We’re even stranger days. I don’t think any time soon we would be able to make a move.”

They knew it was a matter of time before *they*made their move and he knew very well that no matter how hard they prepare for every simulated scenario, they won’t be able to predict their exact motives.

It was a quiet night, just like any other. Osiris or his real name, Orion, lit the cigar with his lighter and sat on the bench. It was more of a habit when he felt amiss. Coping with unhealthy instruments was admittedly not fitting his lifestyle. But he had to put it out as soon as he caught Brix who just finished paying at the cashier.

They deemed this mission as priority red. That means that this mission was considered a potential disaster level. He thought at first that they were just overestimating the enemies, but when they knew the organizations that *they* were dealing with. They took the matter at hand with caution.

For the last few weeks, they monitored their movements, where the trucks would go. In the end, they pinpointed six different locations. It wasn’t enough though. They can’t raid them without knowing what kind of item *they*’re delivering.

Orion threw the butt and stomped it. He was just waiting outside of the bakery shop that Brix opened as their cover. The remaining informers/operatives finally came out and each of them walked towards their respective apartments. They still have their assignments.

He was still waiting for her. He could have slept out of boredom when he didn’t hear the door hinge. Brix locked the door and turned to see him.

“Please, pick it up.” She demanded.

Orion looked up. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.” she elaborated. “I saw you smoking earlier through the security camera.”

Orion grunted. He picked up the butt of the cigarette and threw it in the trash bin.

“Happy?”

Brix mockingly smiled. The two walked over to the park. The apartment that they lived in wasn’t that far. But for them, the road they took was long.

“Why can’t we have a separate apartment?” she asked.

“Because we were supposed to be a couple.” He replied. “We already briefed about this. I get that you don’t like living with someone, let alone sharing the same room and house. But hey, I always sleep in the other room. I won’t try to sleep with you. I promise.”

She glanced at him. “You better not. I’m going to destroy your man’s life if you ever do it.”

“Noted,” he replied, nodding his head and adjusting his sunglasses to shield his eyes from the bright sun overhead.

As they walked by the park, Orion noticed that it was still open for another hour. She was about to walk past when she noticed an ice cream stand with various flavors. The sweet aroma of the ice cream filled her nostrils, and the colorful, neatly stacked flavors looked mouth-watering. One, in particular, caught her eye - vanilla, her favorite. She raised her hand and gestured towards the ice cream stand, “Hang on a sec,” she said to Orion.

She returned within the next minute with two vanilla ice creams. Her face lit up like a child who just bought her favorite snack. Orion thought to himself, “I hope she doesn’t get sick from all that ice cream.”

“You want some?” she offered, holding out one of the ice creams.

Orion shook his head and said, “No, thank you.” He watched as Brix licked her ice cream, savoring every bite, her tongue darting out to catch any drops that threatened to fall.

“Okay,” she said, “You know, my foster parents used to bring me to theme parks, carnivals, and arcades.” She gestured with her free hand as if pointing out the direction towards the amusement park.

“You certainly have an eventful childhood,” Orion remarked, nodding his head.

She shook her head. “Not exactly,” she continued. “My real/biological parents didn’t go well.” She shrugged her shoulders, as if it was just a casual tale to tell. Her hands were now clasped behind her back, fingers interlaced.

“What happened?”

“My mother died during childbirth, and my father was involved in a manslaughter case,” she explained and shrugged her shoulders as if it were just another chapter in her life.

“I have no idea. I’m sorry to hear that,” Orion apologized. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied. “It’s all in the past.” She shrugged her shoulders once again, her hands still clasped behind her back.

“Do you still keep in touch with your father?” Orion asked.

She shrugged and said, “No, I have no intention of meeting someone who committed murder.” She paused and then asked, “What about you?” She looked at Orion, raising her eyebrows expectantly.

Orion looked at the other vanilla ice cream and decided to take it. He started to lick it, his tongue darting out to catch any drops that threatened to fall.

“I won’t say it’s normal,” Orion said between licks.

“I bet you were a high school heartthrob back then,” Brix said, chuckling and nudging him playfully with her elbow.

They both laughed.

“No,” he replied. “I got myself drafted into the army.” He shrugged his shoulders, his hand now in his pockets.

“Why did you join the army? You seem like a smart person who could have gone to university without any trouble,” Brix asked, tilting her head.

“Well, it’s not that simple. My family is poor, and my father’s income barely covers our basic needs. My mother works as a housemaid, but her salary isn’t enough to pay for my tuition. As the oldest sibling, I have to take responsibility and help support my family. You know how it goes,”

“There are four of us. The second one is still in college studying engineering. The third is a high school student.” his voice trailed off, his eyes staring blankly ahead.

“And the other one?” Brix asked about the fourth one, noticing his expression.

“He died. We were playing in the sea at that time,” he continued, his eyes distant as he relived the memory. “I thought it was a good time to teach him how to swim. As any brother would do, I thought about the basic part of swimming. And then a huge wave splashed over us. I was confident I could save him, but I couldn’t handle the waves with my small body...” He trailed off, his hands dropping limply to his sides.

The woman reached out and placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry,” she said softly.

“At the end of the day, we found his body floating ashore,” he finished his voice barely above a whisper. He took a deep breath and looked up at her, his expression somber. “I don’t know what’s worse that time,” he said, his hands clenched into fists. “Being an overconfident dumbass or not coming to my parents for help?” He shook his head as if trying to shake off the memory. “It doesn’t matter,” he muttered to himself.

She patted him on the back, a gesture of comfort. “It’s not your fault,” she said firmly.

He looked up at her, his eyes haunted. “I told myself those exact words, but they didn’t make me feel better,” he said, his voice heavy with sadness.

As they sat in silence, enjoying the peaceful sound of the waves crashing against the shore, their relaxation was abruptly disrupted by the limited range of their phones. They both reached for their devices, the sound of their fingers tapping on the screens filling the air.

“Report,” Orion barked into the phone, his expression tense.

“Sir,” the man on the other end greeted. “One of the factories that are under surveillance, it’s under fire.”

The sound of gunfire filled the air, and Orion and Brix turned to see a trail of smoke rising into the sky. “Sir! We’re under attack. They’re everywhere!” The operative’s voice was panicked, and they could hear the screams of their personnel in the background.

Orion tried to reconnect, but the cell phone wouldn’t work. Frustrated, he slammed his phone shut. “What the hell is happening, Orion?” Brix muttered. Her expression was worried.

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Timothy paced back and forth, his hands clenched into fists. “I have so many questions when I hear the distress call of fellow agents,” he said, his gestures mirroring his agitation. “But the most important thing by now is to assure that Van is safe.” He looked towards the door. His expression was determined.

Boston stepped in front of him, blocking his way. “Where do you think you’re going?” he asked.

“I’m going to look for my brother,” Timothy replied, his voice firm.

Raymond grabbed his arm, pulling him back. “We have our orders,” he said.

Timothy shook his head, his frustration was evident. “Right now, this city is infested by unknown monsters, maybe worse than the last time we fought,” he said, his hands gesturing to emphasize his point. “I don’t expect you guys to understand this, but Van is not a fighter.”

“We knew what he did to Kent,” Lester countered.

“Not that kind of fighter,” Timothy said, his tone exasperated. “He may look brave, but deep down, he’s a scaredy-cat, and I don’t think leaving him alone at night is the best.

 With a worried frown, Timothy shook his head and gestured towards the door. “That’s where the noise is coming from,” he said in a low voice, his hand pointing towards the source of the disturbance. The rest of the gang quickly followed his lead, loading their guns with magazines and pulling the slides with crunchy sounds.

As they made their way toward the long corridor, Boston and Timothy moved ahead with determined strides, their eyes scanning the area for any signs of danger. Raymond, keeping a close eye on their rears, walked with his gun at the ready, his fingers twitching nervously on the trigger. Lester, meanwhile, moved cautiously in the middle of the group, his head swiveling back and forth as he checked the nooks and corners of the rooms they passed.

The sound of the shriek came again, louder this time, causing the gang to quicken their pace. They turned left, following the cries for help, and soon found themselves face-to-face with a locked door. The person on the other side of the door was pounding on it with desperate force, their pale and dry skin visible through the cracks in their clothes.

As another blow hit the door, the wooden surface cracked and splintered. The gang exchanged a nervous glance, their senses on high alert as they prepared to face whatever lay beyond the broken door.

“Hold right there!” Timothy commanded. “Put your hands where I can see them!”

The person stopped banging.

“How’s my acting skills?” Timothy asked them.

“Seriously?” Raymond replied. “This isn’t the time for your other shenanigans, Tim.”

“I’ve been looking forward to saying those lines since then,” Timothy replied.

The person did stop.

As he slowly turned around, they recognized the similar pattern from their previous encounters, only this time, and the tone of its body structure changed. It had stitches everywhere, the eyes were white, and its nails were like claws. Then the way it walked was wobbly and clumsy.

“Well, if it isn’t the sorry-face we fought before,” Lester stated.

“It’s a zombie,” Boston commented.

“Don’t be so sure about that,” Raymond replied.

“Shoot only its leg,” Timothy ordered. “I want you guys to remember that there’s a person at the end - behind that door. So, the best thing to do is impale its legs first.”

“Noted,” the rest said in sync.

They raised their guns and trained their sights on the creature’s legs. They waited for the creature to run after them before pulling the trigger. The sound of the bullets pierced through the monster’s flesh and it dropped flat on the ground.

Not too long after, the monster twitched and raised its head, then crawled towards them. Timothy aimed at its head, ending the monster’s life. They immediately went to the door. The others supported Timothy’s back as he knocked to see if anyone was inside.

“Hello? Is anyone hurt? Are you okay?” Timothy asked. “Don’t worry. We’re one of the good guys.”

“Tim?” a familiar woman’s voice came from behind the door, and she opened it. Aunt Dally came out, still stunned by the earlier attempt on her life. “What--?”

“There’s no time to explain. Come with us. We’re going to take you home.”

Timothy and the others guarded Dally back to her apartment, which was a long and tiring hike up the stairs. They encountered some enemies who managed to get inside. The others continued to shoot them as they slowly made their way up to the next floor.

A loud noise echoed down the stairs. Being in the middle, Lester took charge of guarding their rear, while Timothy and Boston focused on their side and Raymond was busy impaling behind them.

“Pulsatio,” Lester chanted the spell, and an invisible force pushed the enemies back, rolling them down the stairs.

While Raymond focused on the foe on their rear, Lester took over his position and took Dally upstairs, while Boston and Timothy moved back. They tapped Raymond and encouraged him to carry on with Lester upstairs.

They moved carefully, and moments later, Dally’s unit was found on the 4th floor of the apartment.

“I now officially hate stairs,” Lester said as he gasped for breath.

Out of all of them, Raymond was the least tired; his lungs were more trained than any of them. Lester joined Boston in guarding the downstairs to stop any intruders.

As Dally came and opened her unit, she slapped Timothy’s arm.

“I didn’t know you were working for them!” Dally said. “Does your father know about this?”

“Of course,” Timothy replied. “That’s the reason why they sent me here in the first place.”

“What about Van?” she asked. “Is he working with you too?”

Timothy shook his head. “No, he’s completely innocent about this.”

“If you were sent here by them, do you have any idea who could be behind all of this?”

It took him a moment of pause before he could provide an answer.

“That’s classified.”

“Seriously? I’m your aunt.”

“You can’t use that card on me, Aunt Dally.”

“Fine. But could you please lock the gate so that none of my tenants get hurt by - whatever those monsters are?”

Timothy nodded. “That, we will do.”

“Thanks.”

The four men pushed through the horde of monsters. Lester and Boston were at the back as they were the ones who were able to conjure magic. With each passing minute, they began to feel the strain on their bodies, but it wasn’t too long for them to catch a break as they reached the gate. They locked the door before any monsters could enter the area.

“The first part is done,” Timothy said. “Next, we have to figure out how to get rid of those dead bodies.”

“We can drag them to the rooftop,” Raymond nodded and recommended.

“What if there’s a tenant who would go up there?” Boston asked.

“Then we put an out-of-order sign,” Lester shot back at him. “That is if no one would dare to break the rule.”

“I have extra chains and a padlock back in my apartment,” Timothy replied.

“Perfect.”

After taking care of the apartment, Timothy called Van to assure his safety and he was safe. Before Van could pry with additional questions, Timothy cut off the feed.

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In the front seat, Boston ignited the engine, revved the car, and pressed the gas pedal. The agents of GEMS went out to follow the signal they heard. It was in the most desolate part of the city, the Maryvale Forest, where the highest accounts of supernatural activity occurred in recent months. They prepared, of course, but knowing that the monsters tended to surprise them with their element, they were not sure if they were going to make it out alive.

The four men cautiously entered the unknown territory. They assumed the usual military position, with Timothy and Boston in front, while Raymond and Lester covered their rear. Guns were carefully aimed, with flashlights guiding their way. The small tracker device that Timothy held pointed to the northwest. They turned over, and Timothy signaled them to move faster, following him.

Timothy remembered this part of the forest. There was a point past the intersection where the boys would hang out, show off their bikes, and compete. Now, the liveliness was gone, and the wary customs that horror brought over the city took hold. The passive, daunting forest was overtaken by darkness. The trees in the forest were malady-brown, huge trunks, and overhanging branches could be seen across the path. Bushes were barely visible under the moon shining through the clumps of leaves on the tall trees. The moonlight influenced the branches by thickening them, and they appeared to be like the tendrils of a monstrous beast.

A shudder skittered up Timothy’s spine when he stepped on a twig with a crunch, and he shoved his distracted thoughts away, focusing on the surroundings. That was what he was trained to do: focus on surviving in every mission given to him. Ignore your emotions if you want a higher chance of survival.

“Halt,” Timothy told them. They were on the precipice of the answers they were looking for. The tracking device beeped strongly and loudly. Another turn, and they would be able to see the survivors who sent the distress signal. While the rest guarded Timothy’s back, he stepped hastily towards the trail of blood. The nose of his tactical light followed it, and the grotesque figures of the people displayed an abstract likeness.

“Well, we’re dead.” Raymond muttered as he stole a peek.

“What do we do now, Tim?” Boston asked.

Timothy sighed. “We look for survivors.”

“I don’t know if you have noticed,” Lester started, “but the city is on fire. We need to figure out who’s doing this and take them out.”

As the leader, Timothy knew that he had to make the hard call. The group expected him to decide. “I was hoping they’d send us back-up. Our mission just became more challenging than expected.”

Since they were already wiped out, Timothy gave up all hope of finding someone. He turned away from the scene. “I don’t care if anyone is alive, but we need to identify them. Check to see if they have anything valuable.”

Timothy stood guard, pistol at ready. They inspected the pockets of the deceased, looking for anything valuable. All they found were IDs and phones. Raymond noticed a familiar tattoo on the neck of one of the dead. Lester and Boston found the same tattoo on their arms and nape.

During their training, their commanding officers have the same tattoo on their bodies. It was an indicator of their unit. The katana was for informants, the eagle for the brains of the operation, and for those who worked at desks analyzing data. One, in particular, was a privilege to be a part of; they were known as the Mobile Task Force Unit. Once you get accepted, they will get a tattoo of a side-face of a bull.

The team quickly took images of the intricate tattoos on the bodies they found and saved them on their phones. They also carefully kept the IDs of the fallen, just in case they were needed later. Suddenly, Raymond’s voice broke the silence, calling out to Timothy. “I think these people were the backup sent from HQ,” he said, his tone urgent. “They’re members of the Mobile Task Force Unit.”

Timothy’s eyes widened in disbelief. “That’s absurd,” he muttered. “They would have called us first.”

“Well, I don’t think they’re going to contact us,” Lester interjected.

Timothy arched a brow, silently questioning Lester’s statement. In response, Lester produced a calling card from a specific bakery they all knew too well. Timothy’s expression immediately shifted to one of realization. “Oh, damn,” he muttered.

A disembodied voice interrupted the tense moment, sending shivers down their spines. A shadow fell over Timothy, and before he could react, the assailant snatched away his gun and jabbed him in the nose. Stunned, Timothy staggered backward as the attacker forced him around by the grip of his arm.

With the nose of the gun pointed directly at Timothy’s head, the attacker announced, “Guys, I don’t need to make a threat. You know what will happen if you try to do something stupid, regardless of how pathetic you all are.”

The others were taken aback by how the situation quickly escalated. “Brix, calm down,” another man’s voice commanded as he stepped into the light. “Put your gun away from the poor guy. These people are not our enemies.”

“I think it’s about time we talked,” the man announced, pulling the taut of his jacket to reveal a katana mark on his arm.

After explaining their mission, the newcomers murmured amongst themselves. They did not question their authority, but there was a lack of urgency in their demeanor.

“So, you’re saying they sent you here to help us and apprehend those people?” Timothy asked, still nursing the pain from Brix’s attack. He massaged his aching shoulder as the others retrieved the IDs of their fallen comrades.

“Yes,” Orion replied calmly.

“I don’t know if you guys know what ‘help’ means, but you should be well aware by now that the entire city is on fire,” Timothy retorted.

Orion smirked dismissively. “Don’t be overdramatic,” he said. “The monsters that were preying on people were already subdued.”

“Subdued?” Timothy repeated, incredulous.

“Yes,” Brix interjected. “The moment our communication was cut off, we sent a signal back to HQ, activating the Cleanse Protocol.”

“Are you saying--” Timothy started.

“They’re already here,” Orion confirmed.

Lester looked up at them, surprised. “How did you convince them?” he asked.

“We didn’t,” Orion replied, exchanging a knowing glance with Brix. “We made a wager. And I believe these are some of the Operatives who were missing in action,” he added.

“Now we’re going to write them down as killed in action,” Brix said sardonically.

Orion shot her a warning look. “What?” she shrugged.

“Nothing,” Orion replied flatly, turning his attention back to the four. “I suppose none of you have collected the items from their remains yet?” he asked.

The four exchanged glances. “No,” Timothy responded to the group.

Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by a loud ringtone. Lester fished out his phone from his pocket and showed the screen, which read ‘Source.’

The four agents turned to face Orion and Brix, instinctively assuming they were in charge. The forest around them was dense, and the darkness was only broken by the occasional shaft of moonlight filtering through the trees.

“Should we answer it?” Timothy’s voice broke the silence, causing the others to turn their attention to the ringing phone.

“I suppose so,” Orion replied, his voice cool and collected.

Lester flicked on the loudspeaker and answered the call. “Ryan, where were you?!” a woman’s voice shouted from the phone, her distress palpable. The sound of huffing and crunching leaves in the background suggested she was on the move.

“Who’s calling?” Brix’s deep voice cut in.

“It’s me, Layla,” she replied. “You hit your head or something?”

“No,” Orion replied firmly. “Ryan is dead.”

“I’m sorry, what?!” The woman’s voice was a mixture of shock and confusion. It took her a few seconds to recover. “Who are you guys?”

“We’re his collaborators,” Orion said crisply. “The rest of his squad was killed in action. We haven’t identified the bodies yet, so we’re not sure if all of them are dead. We were hoping you could provide us with some insight into what’s happening, Ms. Layla.”

“Yeah, well...” She trailed off, sounding uncertain. “You have to save me first. As you can see, I was being chased by monsters and had no means to defend myself. I was wounded.”

“What happened?” Orion’s voice was commanding, and he wasted no time in getting to the heart of the matter.

“News flash, the demonic effigy we thought died at the hands of a hunter was here in the forest, consuming the life of the mind-controlled humans. It would be great if you guys could send me back-up because I’m running out of energy trying to get away from it.”

The group sprang into action, arming themselves with spells and weapons.

“Where are you right now, Ms. Layla?” Timothy asked, his voice calm despite the urgency of the situation.

She didn’t need to reply. A flare shot up into the sky, illuminating the surrounding area with an eerie orange glow. The agents gave each other a brief nod before heading northeast into the forest to retrieve Layla and get to safety.

As they ran deeper into the woods, the sky cleared, revealing the infinite specks of light hovering above them. The moon’s light made the forest appear to stretch out infinitely, fading into darkness.

The agents pushed themselves to the limit, with Orion, Brix, and Timothy leading the way and the others covering each other’s flanks as they proceeded. It didn’t take long to locate Layla’s position when they heard several gunshots.

They stopped in their tracks, listening as the wind whispered and rustled through the tree branches behind them. The crisp air and clear sky indicated that a storm was approaching, but the field was already brewing a wild tempest.

The monsters surrounded Layla and the agents could hear her screaming along with the gunshots and explosions. It was a chaotic scene, but they were determined to rescue her and get out alive.

Layla alternated between using her pistol and spells, swiftly taking out the monsters with fatal blows. Her chant, “Aversa pars, viverra,” pulled a humanoid monster towards her with an invincible force. She aimed her gun and fired a dead shot to its forehead.

There seemed to be no way to get through the horde, but Timothy had an idea. “Lester and Boston, you guys move forward and hit them with all you’ve got. We’ll remain behind and distract the rest of the horde,” he instructed.

Lester and Boston nodded in agreement. Timothy knew their strengths and weaknesses, and he was confident in their abilities. Boston, a Tribunal Hunter, could copy someone else’s ability, including the Archaegian Hunter’s ability. Lester, on the other hand, could conjure light-based spells and a few earth spells but was limited to dark magic.

Their success depended on their codependency, and their teamwork was undoubtedly splendid. Boston followed Lester’s lead as he leaped and hurled himself into the air. Boston monitored Lester’s mana flow and the level of his strength, never taking his eyes off Lester’s back.

“Magna pulsus!” Lester shouted, invoking the spell. With a thundering roar, his fist slammed into the ground, and the monsters around them were blasted away by the powerful shock. Boston followed Lester’s lead and exerted more mana on the spell.

Lester turned to him. “You don’t need to make this competitive, you know.”

“I’m not competing. I’m clearing the road,” Boston shot back.

Lester scoffed as they dashed forward, evading and attacking the monsters as effectively as possible. One monster escaped their line of sight, and Boston didn’t notice it as he was preventing another monster from biting him. Suddenly, a single shot whizzed past, and the monster’s head was blown to bits, with chunks of its brain scattering and hanging on Boston’s jacket.

Boston gave a stern gaze to Timothy, who was behind them. “Sorry,” Timothy apologized.

Lester and Boston continued to charge forward. Lester threw fire at the monsters on his left and right, burning them to a crisp. Boston followed his moves and spells, rolling sideways and using the spell ‘Aversa pars, viverra,’ followed by a point-blank shot.

Lester then pulled the ring of a grenade and threw it on the horde, causing a loud blast that expelled the enemies within a two-radius area, taking out 15 monsters. The clearing made it possible for them to pass through as the monsters were staggered by the explosion.

Layla had been fending off the enemies well, but her rasping breath indicated that she was at the edge of her abilities. They killed the remaining two humanoid monsters, split up, and guarded Layla.

“It’s about time,” Layla huffed. “I’m glad you guys aren’t going to miss much.”

“Would you tell us about these monsters, Ms. Layla?” Timothy asked.

“These monsters are called T3-7B, model homo-sapiens,” Layla replied, catching her breath. “They are modified versions of the previous experiments. They have increased strength and speed, and they can also conjure spells, illusions, and the like. But their power is fueled by a powerful relic; a dark object.”

“So, if we destroy this object, their powers would be greatly reduced, yes?”

“Yes,” Layla confirmed. “My guess is that it’s in the deepest part of the apartment complex, but that’s not our concern right now. I’ve hired a powerful mercenary to deal with it. We must keep them here from rampaging.”

“Why include a mercenary in this mess? Can we trust him?” Timothy asked.

Layla breathed fire toward the enemy, burning it to a crisp. “Do I have a choice?” she snapped.

Out of the corner of his eye, Lester saw the humanoid monster T3-7B nearly bite off his face as he spun around. Quick as his instincts reacted, he chanted the spell ‘Ignis’ and blasted it away from him with a burst of flames.

Orion and the rest shot their way in, carefully threading while covering their flanks. The smell of gunpowder hung thick in the air as they fired their guns. With the moonlight providing only bare decent vision, they relied on the flashes their guns made and to keep track of the enemy’s position as quickly as possible. The seemingly endless number of monsters made Timothy’s knees stiff with unease, and he crouched. Raymond quickly took his place, covering him while shooting at the monsters.

“Reloading!” Raymond shouted. Like how muscles and nerves cooperate, the three immediately swooped in to guard him while shooting the enemies, killing them with deadly accuracy.

As they made their way through the middle of the crater caused by the grenade thrown earlier, Timothy felt a shift in the atmosphere. The number of enemies seemed to be decreasing, and Brix and the hunters felt it too. The monsters slowly drifted away as if their attention were elsewhere. They ran in the same direction, seeming to agree on attacking something ahead in the darkness. Within a minute, the monsters left them, fading into the darkness.

“What the hell?” Brix mumbled.

“They just left,” Lester commented, still panting from the battle.

“I won’t be so sure about that,” Orion replied, ever so pessimistic yet sounding reasonable. It was all too easy to just let them off the hook. They must be up to something.

A sudden thought dawned on Layla. “Oh crap,” she uttered. “They must be onto that Demonic Effigy.”

Timothy cocked an eyebrow. “You told us about that before. What was it?” Her face turned pale. Layla explained. “A mini kaiju monster that the Ordinus summoned from the world of limbo and enslaved it. But it was gone for the whole month; we couldn’t find it. So, the most logical thing we assumed is that a Hunter took it down.”

Boston let out an exasperated sigh. “Now shit just got crazier,” he commented on Layla’s explanation. “Now we have a mini kaiju, limbo, and what? An undiscovered hunter?”

“We have a lot of briefing to do as soon as this is over,” Timothy stated. “But first, you need to tell us –”

A loud, deep, inhuman howl resonated and shook the trees of the forest. What came next to the disturbance were the bodies of the T3-7B – humanoid monsters sent hovering in the air escorted by their guts and greenish blood. Layla stepped forward and cast around them a sphere-shaped white luminescent that bound the bodies on the ground.

“Tuere,” she uttered.

The series of blasts of the humanoid monsters lasted more than 30 seconds. The protective spell began to crack, but it was the last body that crashed into them. They heard rustles of bushes. The forest fell silent the moment the rustling came close.

Anything but the silence was too loud for their hearts to stop throbbing. It was not the lack of visibility they feared, but rather what was hiding behind it. Somewhere in the forest, a loud rustle of bushes emerged again. It was as though whatever was lurking beneath the thick woods was moving as nimbly and quietly as possible between the trees.

Their eyes darted around to the inconsistent whispers and followed the noises. It was not too hard to locate it as the hunters’ hearing was better than any human’s. They heard the press of a branch, and a pair of red eyes illuminated in the darkness, but the worst thing, aside from its unnatural size, was the unnatural stealth.

Any human wouldn’t notice that it was a few feet away, unlike the hunters’ hearing. The unexplainable deep, hoarse sighing, with white smoke, brought the cold wind into their touch, and a shudder skittered down their spines.

The smoke exhaled by the demonic effigy began to extend and became a thick smog that hung in the air. Distracted by the change of atmosphere, they didn’t notice that there was an alteration in the deceased bodies of the humanoid monsters.

Their eyes glowered in response to the demonic effigy’s growl. The people in the back, Brix and Raymond, heard the deep groan as if they just woke up from their deep slumber. They turned to see the dead rise on their feet, and their bones crack. A loud, exasperated breath came out, exhaling green smog. Their eyes burned bright.

As they looked on in horror, the creatures began to advance toward them, their movements jerky and uncoordinated.

“Uh, guys,” Raymond called out, his voice trembling. “It kind of reminds me of the video game Olah. You know, that mission where you have to face the waves of floods.”

“Raymond?” Boston responded. His tone was laced with annoyance. “You don’t have to remind us of that horrific moment.”

Brix blinked in confusion as she turned to face the others. But before she could say anything, the ground beneath them began to shake, and a low growl echoed through the air. The horde was rising, and it was coming for them.

A roar reverberated through the air, and the wind seemed to tremble in response. The sound was so loud that Brix could feel it vibrating through her bones, and she shuddered in fear.

“We have to divide,” Orion stated firmly, his voice cutting through the chaos. “We can’t fight on both sides. The hunters will take care of the demonic effigy. The rest is on me. We will hold off the undead.”

Suddenly, something flew out from the forest, casting a dark shadow upon them as they descended. It was the demonic effigy, its massive body looming over them. Its rough skin, colored in dark blood, perfectly blended into the darkness, making it almost invisible. It has deep red eyes and reversed horns, and its wings were made of bones, a depiction of what a devil could look like.

All of them, including Layla, were in awe of the creature’s terrifying presence. “Shit,” Layla muttered under her breath. “We’re dead. That was completely different from the last time I saw it. It must have been feeding on something since it escaped.”

“Do you have any idea how powerful it is?” Brix asked, her voice shaking with fear.

“It was already powerful before. But this time,” Layla shook her head in disbelief. “I don’t know, it might have already exceeded its former self.”

Brix measured the demonic effigy, her eyes scanning its every move. In every way, the monster had an advantage in terms of mobility. It wouldn’t be advisable to pursue it while it could fly.

“All right, everyone, listen up,” she began to explain, her voice steady despite the fear that gripped her. “There’s nothing we can do much if that thing flies, and engaging in close combat wouldn’t do anything better for us. I suggest we cut its wings first before attempting to kill it.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Lester replied, his voice shaking with excitement.

“All right,” Brix announced, her eyes focused on the creature. “On my mark. Go!”

“Ignis!” Lester cast the spell as the others ran with him. The fire spurted out of his hand, sent hurling in the air, but the demonic effigy shook it off with ease.

It came to meet them, its wings beating furiously as it closed in on them.

As per their usual theatrics, they scattered from the monster as it whizzed in the middle. They ran around, their weapons aimed at it. Upon pulling the firing pin, it evasively rolled and arched. Their bullets were wasted and jetted in the air.

Their feet dug into the ground as they jammed to stop. Their eyes monitored the sky as the monster swirled around them, its wings creating a tornado-like effect.

“We’re not going anywhere if this continues,” Boston commented, his voice laced with frustration.

Suddenly, the monster dived and landed, its wings swinging toward them. The torrent of wind sent them flying all over the place, and they struggled to regain their footing.

The groaning Lester was suddenly confronted by the monstrous figure. “Oh, no!” he exclaimed, as he scrambled to his feet and took off running. The monster easily caught up to him, its enormous hand closing around Lester’s body, squeezing the air out of his lungs.

Brix was the first to react. She gathered mana in her palm, summoning the powerful Hocrocus, and aimed it at the monster. A beam shot out, striking the creature and causing Brix to perceive its abilities. She deftly evaded its fiery blasts, her knees trembling with exertion as she leaped toward the enemy. With a fierce punch, Brix shattered the demonic effigy’s bones, causing it to loosen its grip on Lester and flee into the forest.

Brix quickly went to Lester’s side. “Are you alright?” she asked, as she lifted him to assess his condition.

He groaned before looking up at her. “No,” he responded weakly.

As Brix carried Lester back to the others, Orion, Timothy, and Raymond were off fighting the undead monsters that were under the demonic effigy’s spell. Their guns flashed wildly in the darkness as they battled the creatures. Timothy expertly dispatched one undead by breaking its legs with a swift kick before shooting it in the head. Orion used his knife and gun in tandem, stunning an undead on the ground before stabbing its hand and shooting its head. Raymond was the most enthusiastic, using the undead’s arms as a shield and throwing a bomb to kill a group of them.

Despite the chaos and danger, the group remained focused and determined to protect themselves and each other. When Timothy saw that his companions were knocked out, he immediately turned his attention to Lester.

“Are you alright, buddy?” Timothy asked.

“No,” Lester replied, his breathing rasping. “My ribs are broken.” He winced in pain, noticing that the once-white light was now gradually turning red. As Timothy looked up, he saw that the moon turned magenta.

“Look, guys,” Timothy said, gesturing to the sky. “Blood moon? I didn’t know there would be a total lunar eclipse.”

“Wait,” Lester said through gritted teeth. “If there’s a celestial event, then maybe I can harvest the celestial energy and conjure holy magic.”

“No,” Timothy protested. “You’re injured. There’s no way your body can handle such an immense and powerful spell.”

“If he’s willing to do it, then let him,” Brix interjected.

“This is my team. You don’t get to make decisions in this life-threatening situation.” Timothy snarled at her.

“Look,” Brix explained. “I am not trying to emasculate your position, but you’ve got to understand that he is the only one who can defeat that thing. Even the borrowed power I have is not enough.”

Lester pulled away from Timothy’s arm, and Timothy looked down at him.

“Hey,” Lester began wearily. “Let me do it.”

Timothy hesitated at first before he replied. “You have fractured bones, and using a powerful spell might further damage your internal organs.”

“I’m also an agent of GEMS, okay? It’s my job to protect people from dark forces. Please, let me do this.”

“Do not worry,” Layla interjected. “I’m going to help him chant the magic. I’m also a mage.”

Timothy did not reply but allowed Lester to rise to his feet.

“You need to buy me some time. This will take a while,” Lester said.

“Can you use Hocrocus?” Brix asked Boston.

Boston shook his head wearily. “I haven’t completely mastered it yet. I can barely copy the original strength of someone’s spell. What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to fly with me,” Brix said.

Boston used his ability to copy Brix’s ability. To some extent, he was able to grasp her ability, but at first, he had trouble controlling his flight. Brix ascended into the air, and Boston followed. Lester and Layla held each other’s hands and began to chant the spell. Layla let Lester mutter the spell at first and then kept her ears on.

“Ex luce venit virtus mea, in lucem revertar. Obsecro te, virtus lucis ad exstinguendas tenebras.”

As they ascended, the demonic effigy emerged from the forest. The demon itself snarled, its face contorted in madness, and it shouted in dismay. It flung itself toward them. They exchanged looks and nodded. The two scattered in the sky. The monster stopped in confusion, looking at them and choosing its prey. It growled in dissatisfaction, wanting to prey on both of them. But it could only chase one, and it chose Boston. Brix was the first to see the choice of the demonic effigy and turned around to follow it. Boston flew away as he noticed the monster was on his tail. The monster was gaining distance, and Boston struggled to keep up.

“How long?!” Boston shouted at them. The frustration was evident in his voice.

His question went unanswered as the others were preoccupied with fending off the monsters and protecting Lester. The wind whipped against Brix’s face, making it difficult for her to aim accurately. Her flame flickered, threatening to die out, and she channeled more mana to keep it burning. She shot the flame, and it arced through the air with a loud boom as the wind shook and redirected it.

Brix snickered, feeling a rush of adrenaline as she continued to blast away at the monsters.

“Boston!” she shouted. “Come at me!”

Boston looked up and nodded, descending slightly into the forest and using the trees as leverage for momentum. The leaves crunched beneath his boots as he swiftly changed direction, throwing the monster off his trail. It was having a hard time determining his whereabouts, but the demonic effigy continued to pursue him, following the trail of rustling leaves.

As Boston weaved through the trees, they fell around him like dominoes, slowing the monster’s advance. The demonic effigy fell short in distance, but Boston was already on his way back up. Shortly afterward, the monster emerged from the forest, snarling in rage. Brix and Boston passed each other in the sky, their eyes meeting for a moment before they continued on their separate paths. Her flame blazed, and the demonic effigy was caught off guard as it was hit with her fire magic right in the face, crashing to the ground with a thud. The mage and the archaegian hunter saw the impeccable timing and smiled at each other.

“Sanctus Grail rubri lunae lumen!” they shouted in unison.

A sharp, pointed light appeared in the sky, hurtling toward them in the form of a pillar. The warm, blazing column fell on top of the demonic effigy, obliterating it instantly.

The monsters fell to the ground, and the rest stopped their advance, sensing that the battle was over. The team took a moment to catch their breath and savor the crisp air while the pillar of light shattered, revealing the charred body of the demonic effigy.

## Chapter 2

The city was shrouded in a blanket of silence as the people gathered in the town’s square. Their faces were marked with a sorrowful expression as they paid their respects to the fallen officers on November 7, 2023. It was a day chosen to honor those who died while on duty and those who were victims of a vicious assault by mobs the previous week.

The police officers donned their standard uniform, deep blue with white gloves, as they raised their gloved hands in salute. The sound of their hooves echoed as they marched in unison. They lined up and raised their rifles. Someone shouted in salutation. The sound of the firing echoed three times before they returned to their proper line.

The GEMS operatives knew the gravity of the situation all too well. The number of victims was estimated to be around 600, with hundreds of missing persons in the last 10 years. Orion stole a glance at Officer Bella, who nodded back at him. The operatives already addressed some of the information, but they presented themselves as CIA to avoid revealing the true agency. If they were exposed, it could spell trouble and likely result in increased scrutiny from government agencies.

The tragedy that befell the city could have been prevented if the men posted there were able to gather information sooner. However, it took them a whole year to get a single clue. Finally, things progressed when the GEMS sent out an entire team of operatives to help track down the perpetrators. To say the least, they were lucky that Layla, who leaked the Intel about their operation, came to Orion first.

Orion let out a sigh, reminding himself that Timothy and the others were young and inexperienced in tactical espionage. They spent most of their time blending in and their operations were limited to surveillance. If they crossed the line, they could easily find themselves in trouble. A single loss was a significant blow to the GEMS, and unnecessary deaths were never acceptable. All operatives were treated as part of a single cell in a larger body and were thus treated with dignity and respect.

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After the ceremony, Jane called Kate and brought her to the café where she worked. As soon as they sat down with their cold tea and waffles, Jane’s eyes inspected Kate, who already read her intentions. The silence between them grew until Jane spoke up. “What’s up with you?” she asked.

Kate cocked an eyebrow. “What are you talking about?”

“You, that hipster, and Gilt, the hell are the three of you doing?” Jane replied.

“I don’t expect you to understand what we’re doing,” Kate said, her tone defensive.

“It’s suicide. Don’t you see? That path you’re following will only lead you to suffer, more grief, loss.” Jane’s voice was hard and insistent.

“But I didn’t lose,” Kate countered.

“No, not yet. But what if you fought someone stronger than – whoever you killed back there?”

“Then I’ll keep trying,” Kate said firmly.

“You won’t be able to try anything if you’re dead,” Jane insisted. “That’s unfair to Mia and to others who were expecting a lot from you.”

“What do you expect from me?” Kate snapped. “You want me to step back and let them stroll in this city? Look what they did. They’re the ones who were responsible for those monsters all along and the dead people. Do you think that they’d just sit around and chill? You saw what they were capable of and I’m one of those few people who stood up against them. I remember very clearly that one of them nearly got my sister back in the music fest.”

Jane moved back, blinking in surprise. “I didn’t know.”

“Of course, you don’t,” Kate said bitterly. “You weren’t the one here who lives every day, thinking about what could happen the next day or the day after that, will my sister get home safe while I’m out working?”

“You have your uncle back in Daletown, right? Why not move in with him?” Jane suggested.

Kate shook her head. “That’s not possible. He already has a son, Laswell. I don’t want to be a burden to him.”

“Are you here because of your desire for revenge or your pride?” Jane asked gently.

“You don’t know a single thing about what I’ve gone through,” Kate glowered at her.

“I don’t really. I don’t know who this is, this person I’m talking to right now,” Jane continued. “The last time I remembered, you were this jolly and responsible kid who loved to play in the rain, who I could hang out with and talk to easily when I was in trouble.”

“Well, that girl is long gone,” Kate said, her voice tinged with despair. “That girl died when her parents were murdered in cold blood. She had to grow up and own herself so that she could support herself and her sister.”

Jane looked down, defeated. There was a pause between them, then Jane spoke up again. “You know what, if you want to continue living a life like this, then go, have it your way, but I am not going to sit idly by and let you do some dumb shit that might kill you.”

“Oh great,” Kate muttered, sighing deeply.

“You’re stuck with me and you can’t shove me off,” Jane said firmly.

Jane was ignored by Kate as her eyes were preoccupied with scanning the room for someone who was eyeing them for a while now. Outside the window, across the street, stood a man as tall as Van, wearing a black suit that was covered by a trench coat like any other person in attendance at the ceremony.

“Speaking of business,” Kate abruptly turned her attention to the window. “Looks like I’m not the only one who has matters to attend to.”

Jane followed Kate’s gaze and noticed Marcus parading through the crowd. She gave him a dubious look, as they had a deal - he was supposed to call her when he needed something, not make his presence known to the public.

“Trouble in paradise?” Kate questioned. “Is he your new boyfriend?”

Jane shook her head. “No. He’s a friend from out of town.” She caught Kate mouthing the word ‘Friend, huh?’ under her breath.

“Okay,” Kate nodded. “I think you should go after him. He doesn’t seem like the patient type of guy.” Kate turned to Jane one last time. “By the way, cute scarf.”

Jane’s heartbeat quickened for a moment as she tightened the scarf around her neck. Kate left her share of the payment and got up, the bell from the clock tower was ringing as she left the premises.

Jane watched as Kate walked out the door and onto the street. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off about the entire exchange. As she stood up to follow Marcus, she took one last glance at the man in the black suit across the street, who was still standing there, watching them.

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Jane motioned for Marcus to follow her, leading him towards a dark alley away from the prying eyes of the public. She halted and waited, her heart pounding in her chest as a shadow brushed past her. Marcus stood before her with his shoulders hunched, a mirror image of herself.

Confused and angry, Jane shook her head. “Why are you following me? Didn’t I make it clear that I wouldn’t tell anyone, and that you could continue to be my lackey as long as you followed my instructions?”

Marcus nodded. “Yes, you did. I apologize.”

“Then why are you here? Were you listening to us?” Jane demanded.

Marcus denied it. “No, I was not. I only overheard the end of the conversation. I promise.”

Sighing, Jane turned away. “What do you want this time?”

Marcus pulled a touchscreen phone out of his pocket. “I bought this little screen-mirror thing, and I couldn’t quite grasp how to use it. I was wondering if you could help me set things up.”

Jane was amused. “You bought a phone without knowing how to use it? You should have come to me first. I could have suggested better ones for you.”

“Sorry,” Marcus apologized. “I was a bit excited.”

Despite his proper English accent, Jane couldn’t shake off the feeling that he was a foreigner. Some of Marcus’s pronunciations were a bit odd, and his skin was unusually bright for an American.

After a few minutes of tinkering with the phone, Jane set the proper date and her contact number on the device, and taught Marcus how to use it. It reminded her of the time when her grandmother was struggling with new technology, but that was three years ago. She wished she could bring her nana back; she was the only ally Jane had back home.

“There you go,” she handed him back the phone.

Marcus watched her intently as she swiped the phone and explained its different functions. He was curious about what was going through her mind as her gaze seemed to be far away from where they were.

“I applaud your kind tutoring, but may I ask, what were you thinking just now?” Marcus asked.

“Thinking about what?” Jane replied.

Suddenly, Marcus pushed her against the wall, his face stiff and threatening. “Tell me,” he ordered. “What was inside your head? Were you planning to use sorcery against me?”

Jane struggled to catch her breath, her heart pounding wildly. “No, I was only thinking about my grandmother. You reminded me of her. She was also having a hard time learning the new technology.”

Marcus’s eyes softened as he backed away, giving Jane some space to breathe. “I’m sorry for the outburst,” he said, his voice low. “I think I should go now.”

Without another word, Marcus sped off, leaving Jane alone and confused in the alleyway.

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Kate couldn’t deny it, Jane had a valid point. The path she was on could only lead to more heartache, loss, and grief. It was a painful realization that anyone close to her could die because of her crusade. Nevertheless, she was determined to put the people responsible for her parent’s deaths and those who fell victim to the monster’s outbreak behind bars.

Mia arrived home early, claiming that she was studying for their upcoming test. However, Kate couldn’t help but notice that Mia was avoiding her lately. To clear her mind, she decided to visit Van’s apartment. It was bigger than the last time she was there, and she wondered if he was alone.

Kate wanted to talk to Van about how he managed to defeat Icarus all by himself. She had so many questions, considering Icarus was far stronger than Van. As she stepped onto the doormat, the door opened, revealing a weary and drained Van. Kate understood how he felt; her fight against Suzy took a toll on her too.

“Hi,” Kate greeted Van, trying to sound enthusiastic.

Van brushed past her, almost ignoring her presence. “You want to talk?” he asked.

Kate nodded. “Only if you’re not busy.”

“We can have coffee. We can walk to the place you were working at,” Van suggested.

“I already had a coffee this morning. I was wondering if we could talk inside. My feet are tired,” Kate replied.

Van looked down at her feet, blistering in the heat. He walked her up to his room, remaining silent the entire time.

As Kate sat down on the sofa, Van went to the kitchen to get water, coffee, and donuts. Kate took off her shoes and began to massage her feet. Each press of her fingers was a release of stress and frustration.

Van returned with a glass of water and a cup of coffee for himself. He also brought donuts. “Have some,” he offered.

Kate put down her feet, drank the water, and took a donut.

“You told me you beat Icarus,” Kate said, taking a bite of her donut.

Van’s eyes bulged, and he averted her gaze. “Yeah,” he nodded.

“How –”

“Look, I’m not comfortable talking about it right now,” Van interrupted, groaning.

Kate stopped herself from asking further questions, allowing a blanket of silence to envelop them.

Van began to speak, breaking the silence. “They got Lester.”

Kate raised an eyebrow. “How? Is he okay?”

Van shook his head. “No. The police think he was chased by some goons on his way home last night, but we knew that wasn’t the case.”

“Is there anything I can do?” Kate asked.

He forced a smile. “No, but thanks for asking. I appreciate you checking up on me.”

Kate touched his hand. “Just remember, I’m right here.”

She felt the need to say those words. Even though she wasn’t an empath, she could sense that something was bothering Van. Perhaps something happened when he fought Icarus, or it could be his transcending nature as a Hunter. There were so many mysteries surrounding hunters, and Kate’s books barely scratched the surface of it. They needed someone to explain how one transcended into a hunter and the effects it has, as whatever Van was going through had something to do with his nature.

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Layla wore her regular black tank top, a vibrant red blazer, jeans, and black boots, while she got ready to meet someone for a business deal. As she came down, she picked up a cup of coffee and looked around her apartment, filled with feminine fragrance. Although she didn’t like the change of view initially, she now felt satisfied with it. She knew that Jay might still want her, but it was highly likely that he was dead.

Despite the consequences of her actions, Layla felt secure with the allies she made, which only strengthened her conviction. However, her parents back in Japan were being monitored 24/7 by the GEMS operatives. She took a deep sigh, picked up a glass of water, and drank, feeling her throat tighten.

Before leaving, she activated an alarm that would lock her door and put a defensive barrier to deflect anyone trying to get in. She then locked the knob and went down.

As she took a step further down, her eyes caught people walking, reading, and sipping coffee while wearing casual clothes. But she was halted by two large men blocking her path.

“I doubt you’re gonna serve me fortune telling,” Layla said, shrugging her shoulders. “What the hell?”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Layla,” one of the men spoke. “But we were given instructions not to allow you to go out. It’s for your safety.”

Layla scowled and took a deep breath. “Look, I’m just going to meet someone I know. Nothing else fishy.”

The two exchanged a look and shook their heads, looking back at her. “I’m sorry.”

Exasperated, Layla turned around and walked back to her apartment. She slumped onto the sofa, feeling her mind wandering elsewhere. She picked up a book of spells from her small library and wet her thumb’s tip to scan through the pages.

After a few minutes, she found the spell she was looking for and began chanting, “Astra peste dam onmu.” Something glowed five feet away from her, and a human-like figure appeared in a flash.

Alastor, who was half-naked in his boxers, was puzzled by the sudden summoning. He looked around and finally settled his gaze on Layla, judging her.

“What... the...?” Alastor murmured. “You couldn’t just pick the right time to summon me?”

Layla beamed, looking down at him. Alastor covered his lower part. “That is schedule IV harassment. You know that, right?”

Layla cleared her throat, bringing her eyes up to him. “As you can see, I’m under house arrest.”

“House arrest?” Alastor’s face was perplexed. “Who’s they?”

“Oh, damn,” Layla laughed. “Silly me. I forgot to tell you. I’m a leak. I was the one who leaked information about the organization.”

“That did not answer my question.”

Layla took a deep breath. “I think both of us should know as little as possible about each other. I don’t want to make you a target again.”

“Considering that it’s already an impasse, cutting to the chase and telling me what’s going on would be better,” Alastor grew restless.

Layla remained silent, and Alastor grumbled. “You’re determined not to tell me, aren’t you?”

“I summoned you to pay for your services,” Layla finally spoke, getting her bag and pulling out an envelope of money. “This is worth six-hundred thousand dollars.”

Alastor couldn’t believe his ears when Layla offered him such a huge reward. He blinked in disbelief and asked, “This is huge. Are you sure you’re gonna give this to me? Because I won’t regret taking this from you.”

Layla’s face lit up as she replied, “No. It’s not enough to compensate for your service. If it weren’t for your help, things could have gotten worse than I can imagine.” She released a sigh and added, “Thank you.”

Alastor nodded, feeling grateful for the unexpected reward. “I guess it’s not all bad news. Now I don’t have to work my ass off. I can indulge myself.”

Layla chuckled at Alastor’s remark. “Sure, you do.”

With a flick of her wrist, Layla dismissed the spell and Alastor was sent back to his home in a bright flash of light. As he disappeared, Layla sat down in her loft, her mind swimming with spiraling thoughts.

She couldn’t help but feel relieved that the situation was resolved with Alastor’s help. Her thoughts drifted to the dangerous and precarious position she was in before Alastor intervened. She shuddered at the thought and felt a sense of gratitude towards Alastor.

The room was silent except for the sound of Layla’s breathing. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, savoring the peacefulness of the moment. The scent of lavender filled the air, and Layla found herself lost in its soothing fragrance.

She sat there for a while, lost in thought and taking in the tranquility of her surroundings. The soft light of the setting sun filtered through the window, casting a warm glow on everything around her. The walls were adorned with paintings and photographs, and Layla couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride at the space she created.

Eventually, Layla opened her eyes and stood up. She stretched her arms and let out a contented sigh. As she walked towards the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea, she couldn’t help but feel grateful for the unexpected turn of events.

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Alastor’s invisibility spell held as he got out of his house, his steps measured and cautious. In his pocket, he carried a wad of five thousand dollars. He wore his usual attire; a black jacket, pants, and boots, with his sunglasses hanging around the neck of his white shirt.

Emerging from the woods, he came upon a side road where he saw a cluster of mournful people exiting the town’s square. They hurriedly scattered to their daily lives, but the terror of the previous night was still etched in their minds. The toll of casualties from that fateful night would not be forgotten anytime soon.

Weaving through the crowds, Alastor moved quickly, undetected. The air was cold, and the doors of the mall groaned as he entered, ready to embark on a shopping spree. He had little time to venture into malls, usually occupied with dealing with people and their monster problems. He savored these rare moments of pleasure, indulging his childish curiosity.

He traversed the aisles, crossing rows of stores, and riding the escalator to the second floor where he entered the movie store. He scanned every selection and genre, but only a few captivated his eyes. In the end, he settled on four tapes, all wrapped inside a shopping bag.

As he strolled back to the road, he noticed several people passing by, more than usual. He hesitated, tentatively looking back and forth, but ultimately decided to enter a nearby cafe. It wasn’t as busy as before, with only a few customers coming in. In the early morning, company workers would come here to have their meal, while in the afternoon, it would be a hotspot for youth, leisure, and talk. But now, all was silent except for the rumble of the ceiling fan. The faces of the staff were laden with dread, their movements slow and robotic.

Alastor took a seat on a stool in front of the serving table. A familiar face approached him, Kate, dressed in her usual uniform.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said. “What can I get for you?”

“The usual,” Alastor replied.

Kate scrutinized him before leaving for the kitchen. After ten minutes, she returned with an aromatic pie and black coffee, placing them in front of him.

Alastor held the fork, cutting a portion of the pie, and savored it, the syrup melting in his mouth, rejuvenating him. “I thought you were at school?” he asked.

Kate turned around. “Well, the mayor issued a one-month break, especially since the students were traumatized by the loud fires and deaths.”

She looked around the corner, seeing that the staff were busy with their orders. “So, what are you, a monster hunter?” Kate asked.

Alastor looked up at her. “No, I’m a mercenary.”

“That’s unexpected,” Kate replied. “I was hoping you’re a hunter.”

“I am a hunter,” Alastor said, chuckling. “I think you’re confusing my use of terms. I’m a mercenary for hire, but I also have the blood of a hunter. Why did you ask?”

She paused before continuing. “I was wondering if you can help with a hunter situation.”

Alastor already foresaw this. That night, Van saw the same mark on his chest, blinking in the light. He had the same mark as Alastor, a mark of a hunter, but it recently woke up to his potential. It was shown when they first fought.

Alastor shook his head, snapping back to reality. “Is it about Van?”

Kate jerked her head out of dubiousness. “How did you know?”

Kate leaned in. Her attention was fully focused on Alastor. He beamed with confidence. “I knew since the beginning. I can tell that he’s a hunter. We have this thing that allows us to see a mark, the same mark we hunters bear.”

“And I guess it’s only exclusive to you guys?” Kate inquired.

“Yeah. Probably. I don’t know that much.” Alastor explained. “We have different phases before we reach our potential. But what I can’t tell is what kind of hunter he is.”

“I’m sorry,” Kate shook her head slightly. “I’m at a loss here.”

“Don’t worry. You’ll catch up,” Alastor reassured her with a wink. “Is Van showing any symptoms like anger management issues, sudden bursts of rage, dullness to emotional infliction, or the urge to run into the woods?” he probed.

Kate thought for a moment. There were times when Van acted up in ways that fit Alastor’s description. “There was this time when he was enraged by some bullies in school. Recently, someone picked a fight with him and he snapped,” she confessed. “Van is usually quiet, so we were surprised that he did that.”

Alastor picked up a piece of pie and ate it, nodding. “That’s one of them. We, hunters, undergo different phases and rituals to gain our potential. Nevertheless, we were cut from the same cloth. Our aggressive nature is always bound to surface.”

Kate looked concerned. “Is there any way to stop it?”

He shook his head. “No, not that I’m aware of, but it will recede over time.” Alastor paused for a moment before offering, “If you want, I can train him.”

Kate was surprised. “You sure? Do we have to pay for it?”

Alastor playfully hurt by her question. “Do you think I’m that kind of guy? Who’s only going to work for money?”

Kate nodded, hesitantly. “Yeah.”

“Yeah, you’re kinda right,” Alastor chuckled. “But this is an exception. He’s a hunter like me. To be frank, you guys have no idea what to do with him. Van needs a guide that only I can provide.”

Kate fell into her thoughts. Alastor was right; they had no idea what to do with Van. She briefly considered training him herself and using witchcraft to control his powers. However, she knew that was beyond her jurisdiction as a witch.

Alastor snapped his fingers to bring her back to reality.

“You have customers,” Alastor said.

Kate blinked and rubbed her eyes, the bright sunlight causing her to squint as she glanced up to see a few people begin to fall in line. She inhaled the aroma of freshly brewed coffee and warm pastries wafting from the café, making her stomach grumble. She straightened up and put on a smile, ready to serve the customers.

For the next few minutes, Kate busied herself with taking orders, serving drinks, and chatting with the customers. As she turned her attention back to the table where Alastor sat before, she saw that he was already gone. A piece of paper and payment was left beneath his plate.

Kate quickly picked up the payment and put it away before taking a closer look at the paper. It was written in elegant cursive handwriting, instructing her to send Van to a specific location where Alastor would meet him. “If Van agrees, tell him to go to the intersection across 3rd Avenue at the other side of the road. When he’s there, he’ll know where to find me. The sooner, the better,”

Kate folded the paper carefully and slipped it into her pocket. She decided to give the message to Van later after her shift was over.

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Kate arrived in the afternoon. Her mind was preoccupied with Alastor’s offer. It was an opportunity too good to miss, but she had nothing to offer Van in return for his help with the Hunter situation. She would have to persuade him to talk to Alastor.

She knocked twice on Van’s door and heard quick footsteps hurrying towards the entrance. The lock clicked open and the door swung inside. Van was in the middle of a game session and had to rush back to the living room. He was playing a shooting game, and Kate recognized it as the first game they played together during an all-nighter campaign.

“Come in!” Van barked.

Kate was taken aback by his sudden change in demeanor. Yesterday, he was gloomy and uninterested in socializing with her, but now he was full of energy.

“Sorry,” Van apologized. “I was in the middle of a gaming session. Please wait.”

“It’s okay,” Kate replied, taking a seat and watching him play. After ten minutes, Van groaned and shut down the console. He scurried to the back section of the kitchen and washed his face, letting out a sigh of relief.

“So,” he said after grabbing a pair of bags of chips from the refrigerator and sat beside Kate. “What’s up?”

Van offered her some chips, which she gratefully accepted. She pulled out the letter from her bag that Alastor gave her and Van raised an eyebrow as he read the passage.

“And what is this supposed to be?” he asked.

“It appears that our mystery mercenary friend has the blood of a Hunter,” Kate explained. “Al offered his services to train you if you want. He can teach you one or two things about being a Hunter.”

“Can we trust him? He must have some motives,” Van’s tone was serious. They didn’t know Alastor well enough to trust him blindly, and it would be naive to do so.

Kate slowly shook her head. “I don’t know,” she muttered. “But what we do know is that Alastor may offer you a piece of knowledge about your heritage as a Hunter—something I have no idea about. I’m not saying you should fully trust him, not yet, but we can’t ignore his knowledge about Hunters. It all depends on you, Van, whether to consider him an ally. Accept his offer so that you can have clarification about yourself.”

Kate was right about one thing: Van needed answers about his situation. The blackouts and the violent twitches within him became more apparent over the past months, especially since he fought the monster at the old building at their first encounter. Even Van knew that his power was growing exponentially, but with no control, he was a danger to himself and others. The voices inside his head boosted his desire to hunt, kill, and avenge them. It was like fighting with people in the driver’s seat. He was being held by his own thoughts until he was drowned and into the darkness, watching how he butchered Icarus piece by piece. The power surging within him overwhelmed his mind and acted out of pure killer instinct. He didn’t want that to happen again.

Van didn’t tell Kate yet what transpired when he fought Icarus. He wished she assumed that Icarus escaped or, at least, he allowed him to. That wasn’t the truth, and it would be a lie to say he defeated Icarus all by himself.

After settling his thoughts, Van finally responded, “All right. I’m going to accept his offer.”

Kate nodded. It was for the best of both of them. Whatever Alastor had to say to him, they hoped it would bring them to the light they need to solve the mystery of hunters.

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Jay had an epiphany when he realized that his group, Ordinus, became greedy and arrogant due to their ambition. They had gone from wanting to live quietly and free from oppression to wanting to establish their empire. He obliged their demands, but when the council found out about their existence, everything became hostile. His vision was clouded by the likelihood that they would be discovered. Jay knew he had to kill them, but despite his efforts, the members of Ordinus continued to exploit people in their experiments and sell them as merchandise.

He realized they were highly likely to end up back at the start. They became a big enough threat to draw the attention of the GEMS, a private supernatural military group tasked with containing aberrations and their lifelong nemesis, the Ordinals. Jay would rather end up in the care of GEMS than turn back to the Ordinals, as they were responsible for his family’s mess and the scram of his lineage due to their actions. He swore an oath to take care of his siblings and protect his family line but ended up making an empty promise.

Jay arrived at Mavenhart’s residence at ten in the morning. The wind’s breath outside was distinctive from his breath, which was short and shallow. He stepped out, feeling the cool air. One swerve of the air would be enough to make his tired mind sleep, but he wasn’t here to lax when he had so little time left before anyone sees him. He only wanted to confirm one thing: if that *thing* remained in the depths of the mansion after hundreds of years.

Jay walked with his shoulders hunched back, the thick coating deflecting the coldness off his body. The leaves beneath him crunched against his boots. He arrived at the door and solemnly closed his eyes. Memories flooded back to him and he was reminded of the lively times when they built the house as a villa for vacation. They would come here to take their little brother to the river for fishing. In the summer, they would settle and enjoy reading literary works, hunting animals, and overseeing the harvest.

Every etch of brick and wood was woven by their bare hands. The hard smell of varnish lingered in his nose, just as their clamors of laughter did. Jay shook himself off of his reminiscing. He was sure Rick wasn’t here to bother him; he was supposed to be at his usual workplace. He knew Rick’s recent whereabouts and had taken the liberty of studying his far great-grandnephew.

Jay felt odd as he moved forward like someone was watching him from afar. He looked to his right, where the forest lay, but there was no one. He disregarded the nonsensical thoughts and pushed the door open. The door groaned and he made his way inside.

A note pinned on a board on his left and a placard hung on the wall that read, ‘Please wear slippers.’ Jay snickered, put off his shoes, and wore the slippers at the front door. The inside of the mansion was different from what he had expected, yet it still has the semblance of the home he used to live in. The wall that divided the study room and the art collection remained, but the size was expanded so that the books and art would still have a space to fill in. Due to the previous generation of the family who lived here and ran, no one was able to expand the library of works of literature, arts, and antiques. Jay was the reason why they left. He had to make sure of it even though he had to kill the previous head of the family, Augustus Mavenhart.

Jay continued to walk past by the room artefacts. They always like collecting items, from pieces of literature to antiques. He remembered one of his brothers has a keen interest in mystical objects. He always studied in his room, examining how he can put it to good use. The older brother had a normal habit, he loved to build sculptures. One time he joked that if a master saw and bespectacled his works, they wouldn’t have to worry about money. He truly believed that his creative artistry in sculpts would bring them fortune, and Jay believed it too. Their hopeful words still resonated within the walls.

“If we have enough money, we can build a villa, maybe even a farm, and harvest at the end of the summer,” the older brother said. “Then we can focus on our interests as long as it’s productive.”

The younger brother quipped, “Or we can chase girls of our liking.”

The elder brother snapped at him, “A quiet life, that’s what we all want. Nothing more, nothing less.”

It was a nice dream, only if it came true.

Jay walked quietly, as though he was furtively examining every room. Finally, he found it. He walked past the room full of artifacts, and at the end of the hall, he saw the black door. His jaw fell upon the revelation. The door was open, and the blackness of the void that once kept him was nowhere to be found. Jay could almost feel his heartbeat pulsating harder for him to hear. He was breathing, almost becoming a gasp as his heart pounded tougher and steadier. His vision became hazy.

Jay took a deep breath and expelled the tension from his chest. He turned to investigate the door. There was no sign of struggle, so it was impossible that *he* was the one who broke through. He already anticipated that the door that sealed him became weaker as time passed by, but it did not occur to him that it would early. Too early. His previous estimation foretells that the seal still could buy him enough time to move it elsewhere. Jay preferred to free him in different circumstances where no one would become collateral damage because of his savage nature. He was sealed in it for over six hundred years, so there was no telling how hungry he must have been. Jay collected a pool of blood so he could relish his strength over it whenever the time comes for him to be free.

Jay thought of Rick, who was acting normal, as always. Rick was always aloof and only talked to people when necessary. As for the other offspring from an older generation of Mavenhart, Gilt, the last time he knew, was gone out of town. Neither of them could have been the reason why he was freed from his captivity. Neither of them are likely to be the culprit. Jay needed more answers.

Given the importance of the sealed door to Rick and Gilt, they would most likely contact the headmistress of the Mavenhart household to notify her of the incident. With her coming here, trouble was sure to follow. If she knew about this, she would only be caught in the spiral of conflicts and stirred up to it. Jay was dejected at the thought of it. There was no way he would let his younger kin be part of their ancestral conflicts when they do not know of it.

Layla had already contacted GEMS, and they were on their way to investigate the recent incident. Jay’s identity, including Hive and the other associates, was likely to be known by them. Jay held the knob and pushed the door closed. He prayed that no one would be foolish enough to open the door and knew that the beast was already on the loose.

Jay walked back outside, tied his shoes, and took off. He dialed Hive and notified him that there would be changes in their plans. He didn’t want to sound frantic, but the recent discovery required drastic action. The beast was far more dangerous and unstable to be released into the world. Anyone who contacted him would be in dire danger. Not even Jay could stop him when the carnage started. One thing was for sure: GEMS would notice it. The number of deaths would spring up like mushrooms, blood and flesh would bloom all over the city unless he stepped up his game and did what was necessary.

## Interlude

On what seemed like the final day of autumn, the wind was fierce and biting. Alastor just finished training Caroline and brought her a bottle of water, hoping to keep her focused and alert from being drenched in the sun. However, she fell fast asleep under the shade of a nearby tree. Alastor cleared his throat, but Caroline remained oblivious to his presence. She turned around, but he could see that she was feigning. Frustrated, he lightly trailed his fingers down her back, jolting her awake.

Caroline jolted up, startled by the touch. Her eyes were wide open, and she immediately turned to face Alastor. “What’s the deal?” she demanded, her eyes piercing his.

Alastor sat up straight and offered her the bottle of water. She accepted it with a grunt and a roll of her eyes. “Don’t give me that attitude, young lady. You’re the one who pushed me to train you,” he said.

Caroline drank the entire bottle of water in one go, but the heat from the training still lingered. Her golden hair was wild and unkempt, and the bags under her eyes indicated that she was tired before her nap. “What’s the big deal anyway?” she muttered.

“The big deal is how inconsistent you are,” Alastor replied. “One second, you’re eager to learn how to fight. Now, you’re moping. I am not going to tolerate this kind of behavior.”

The wind rustled through the trees, sending leaves dancing in the air. Caroline brushed a few strands of hair out of her face and began casting spells to conjure painting supplies. She sat down on a stool and carefully held a paintbrush and palette. Alastor watched her, still puzzled by her sudden change in attitude.

“Do you like to live in your little world?” Alastor asked with a slight chuckle.

“Yes, but sadly you are part of it,” Caroline replied, her eyes fixed on her painting.

Alastor sighed and sat down on a nearby log. “Why won’t you tell me what’s wrong?” he asked.

Caroline remained silent for a moment. Her eyes trained on her canvas. “Do you know what more embarrassing than getting stumbled on your own feet?” she finally asked.

“Getting laughed at?” Alastor joked.

Caroline didn’t laugh. She simply continued to paint, the movement of her arm and the colors on her palette bringing the landscape to life. Alastor watched her work, trying to decipher the meaning behind her sudden moodiness.

“Sometimes, I forget that you can be obnoxious,” Caroline said, shooting Alastor a look before returning to her canvas.

“Geez, I wonder why,” Alastor replied with a chuckle.

Caroline hissed in annoyance but then sighed.

“I’m just kidding,” Alastor quickly added. “Will you tell me what’s going on in that head of yours?”

Caroline waved her hand, and the dust of mana spread around her, conjuring a gem. She winced as though the presence of the gem itself brought pain to her.

“This gem is a family heirloom. It has been passed down since the first generation of my family and then to me. Once my dad gave me this gem, I started to have visions. Visions that seem so strange yet familiar,” Caroline explained.

“It sounds bothersome, but given that you’re already used to getting plagued by the vision, I don’t see why it bothers you so much,” Alastor said.

Caroline blinked, and her face turned sour for a brief moment before looking back at him. “Being plagued by visions is precisely the reason why it bothers me so much. For the past years, the visions I receive are irrelevant to my life, but now... everything seems to be connected. And one, in particular, involves my sister. I saw some parts of her current situation. It wasn’t pretty,” Caroline said, her tone heavy with worry.

“There’s a part of me that regrets it, you know. Leaving without bothering to tell when I will be back. I know I shouldn’t leave Mola like that, but being royalty is too much,” Caroline continued.

Alastor sighed. “I know that it may take some time, but we will get there. I promised.”

“I know. I just need to stave off my thoughts... just for a moment. I’m not like you, brooding around the corner just to shrug off your feelings if you ever have one,” Caroline said.

“Ouch, that’s the closest thing to damage you could’ve done to me,” Alastor chuckled, but he swiftly returned to being contemplative. “Does the painting help you with it?” Alastor asked, hoping to relieve her worries.

Caroline smirked. “I know what you’re doing.”

“If you know, then would you allow me to continue?” Alastor asked, and Caroline nodded.

“You’re the one who told me I’m indifferent. I’m just trying to change some perspectives,” Alastor said with a chuckle.

“Now?” Caroline brimmed a smile.

“Would you rather have me be salty again?” Alastor teased.

Caroline shook her head stiffly. “Oh no, please don’t. I’m thrilled to entertain some questions from you.”

They both chuckled.

Caroline’s eyes were on him, so earnestly, so vulnerable. It seemed that she witnessed the Alastor that nobody had ever seen before. He was almost childlike, but this did not discourage her.

“You like painting, don’t you?” Alastor asked. She felt a shuffle and moved behind her, his eyes scoping down to the canvas. The portrait of the forest was almost done.

“I like a lot of things, but painting is the first of them,” Caroline replied.

“Your father taught you?” Alastor asked.

“It was my mum. It was during our childhood when she introduced it to us, but Mola wasn’t keen on arts. Instead, she took a liking to literature,” Caroline explained.

“Huh. Polar opposite. I hardly believe that the two of you managed to get along,” Alastor said with a chuckle.

Caroline chuckled as she fondly recalled their childhood memories. “Oh, we used to get along well. But by the time we turned ten, we drifted apart for a while. However, we still get along if we ever have the time. I just don’t want to be lectured about royalty and whatnot for an entire day.”

Alastor noticed the inches of her face scrunched up as if she was reminded of a painful past. He considered reminding her of happy times to cheer her up, but he realized it only brought her closer to unwanted memories. “You know, I heard there’s going to be an art exhibition in Caufala City. I was wondering if you’d be interested in passing by before we reunite with the others.”

Caroline lifted her eyes on him, her face delighted with wonder. “A painting by someone named Kolonio Despal is going to be part of the exhibition. I heard he was famous back in the 45th century.”

“He’s not just anyone. He’s the father of reverb art. Of course, I would love to come,” Caroline said.

“Great. It’s on, then.” Alastor beamed. “Why do you love painting?”

Caroline returned her attention to the canvas and nodded in response. “Painting is a great way to deal with vagueness. You can choose colors and paint whatever you please. It provides a sense of clarity. It is a metaphor for reflection. I’ve learned that not everything is about control. We must learn how to let go and love, even if we can’t control the situation. You have to surrender to the flow, but you can’t surrender if you’re not willing to be genuine. Be genuine to yourself, to your flaws, and everyone’s eyes. Love can be wistful, but only if you learn to love yourself, you can be your own remedy.”

Alastor paused, taking in her words. For the little time they spent together, he knew that Caroline wasn’t some dimwitted individual. He had never seen her as such. Now and then, he could see her value. A royalty who saw herself as low as any others. Humbled not by her heritage, but by the lens through which she saw life. A desire to do right by her clutched his mind.

“Hm,” Alastor scoffed.

“What’s so funny?” Caroline raised a brow at his derision.

“Nothing,” he shook his head. “I thought it was amusing.”

“You mean?” Caroline pressed.

“You don’t have to know,” Alastor said.

“Try me,” Caroline said. Her head jerked to him.

“You’ve been traveling around this region to help people. You want everything to change even though as little as possible. Whether it’s through words, arts, anything that’s alike, this world will never change.”

“But you did. You did change.”

Alastor blinked. His eyes wavered in a brief moment of suspension. He couldn’t see what would lie ahead should he give in to that thought. Alastor took a deep breath.

“I doubt that. Besides, how can a little girl do something to change the world?”

Caroline felt mocked, that he could tell. She stood up, pulled his face closer to hers, and looked straight into his eyes. Alastor was flabbergasted. He remained stagnant as her bronze eyes dragged his thoughts back to the moment they first met. It was a gentle gaze he witnessed at first sight. The memory was fresh when they first met. He was bewildered when he knew that someone was able to make it inside the Vesoga Plain, the den of monsters. What surprised him, even more, was that there was a place where he could find comfort, but the latter statement might be an understatement for him. It was never that place that gave him comfort. It was her.

Alastor felt a wave of confusion wash over him. When did Caroline become so important to him? It wasn’t just her rebellious nature that drew him in. She was always the opposite of him, challenging his ideas with her quick wit and making sense of things that he thought were once nonsensical. It was frustrating at times, but also exhilarating. Alastor tried to shake off his vexation, but their exchange was clinging still. He never felt so understood, so drawn to anyone before.

Caroline glowered at him. “You shouldn’t underestimate me.”

Alastor snapped back to reality as she pushed him away and returned to her painting. He shook off his thoughts and decided it was time to leave.

## Chapter 3

Gilt’s car abruptly stopped in the middle of the road as he was traveling toward Missouri. He has no other option but to park it on the sideway. As he opened the hood, an explosion of steam moaned and gassed out. He turned away from the smoke and waited for a while. Gilt was accustomed to these kinds of complications. The air cooling was damaged, and the battery was also malfunctioning. It needed to be changed. Only he has spare parts though, but the predicament was expected from a stolen car. He stole his car from a local shop in a small neighborhood on the road. The vehicle was rusty, but he had no other choice.

“What a day,” Gilt mumbled to himself as he looked around at the oppressive weather. Not that it bothered him much as a vampire, but nothing was worse with the air still around the hotness suspended that crawled on his skin and provoked his hunger for blood. Even the birds around five yards away from the center of his position docked under the tree and rested.

Gilt stood at the side of the road, waiting for any passerby. Suddenly, he heard the rumble of an engine coming up behind him, crossing an intersection that led to Kansas. He heard a pair giggling and thought it must be a couple. Then the screech of brakes and the screech of tires came to his ears, and his face squirmed in pain. Gilt held in the pain.

From a distance, he could see a small figure drifting at a perilous speed in the intersection and halting. Then the vehicle sped again towards his direction. A Lamborghini Huracan came into view. Gilt thumbed up to call them out. Fortunately, they decelerated and parked their car under the umbrella of leaves.

A petite, blonde woman who was almost the same stature as Kate walked out from the driver’s seat, followed by another blonde who wore a striped mini-skirt, showing off her skin to him.

“Hi,” the driver greeted, to which Gilt replied, “Hello.”

“I’m Cassandra,” the woman introduced. “And she’s Paula.”

Paula winked at him, and Gilt beamed. “My name’s Gilt,” he said.

The woman turned around to see the damage to the car.

“What seems to be the problem here?” Cassandra asked.

“This old bad boy shut down in the middle of driving. By the look of it, it overheated,” Gilt explained.

“Phew,” Paula said as she went away from the smoke. “You don’t have to say. The cooling system must have failed. When it comes to older models, you should always check their interiors. You don’t know when they’re going to make the pain out of your life.”

“Noted,” Gilt commented.

“There’s nothing we can do about it,” Cassandra said as she waved her hand in the air, cooling the ceaseless perspiration. “I have a tow hitch at the back of my car. There’s supposed to be a small town up ahead. You can ride with us.”

Gilt hesitated for a moment and then said, “Um, is it okay with you guys? I can just be right behind my car. I don’t want to trouble you any further.”

“No. It’s okay,” Paula said. “We don’t mind.”

“She’s right. It’s going to be a long road. At least we can talk and entertain ourselves,”

Cassandra added. A tinge of a smile swept off his face, and Gilt nodded. “If it’s okay with you, then thanks.”

As the women turned their backs, Gilt realized that he marked them as his next course on the menu, unbeknownst to them.

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Van arrived at the intersection that Alastor wrote on the paper, but he was perplexed. He examined a few passing vehicles and waited for ten minutes outside like a fool. After reading the thread again, he realized he had to cross the intersection and head to the sidewalk with a fence that barred him from the forest. When there was no one around, Van crossed the lane, looked around, and finally noticed a fence cut open behind the tall bushes.

Van clicked his tongue, feeling frustrated with Alastor’s vague directions. He thought Alastor could have been more specific and direct with his instructions. Van scanned the area again to make sure no one was watching before pushing the fence to give him enough space to enter. Sighing, Van felt the cold breeze touch his face, and he shuddered.

As he continued on his journey, Van’s mind flashed a brief but vivid image of his fist punching Icarus’s bloodied face. His vision returned to normal, but his muscles contracted as his breathing became ragged and deep. Van had to stop and catch his breath, holding onto a nearby tree to steady himself. He felt like he was losing his mind and needed to regain his composure.

After a minute, Van started walking again, following a steep and rocky path. He was grateful for his tough boots as he navigated the challenging terrain. As he continued, he began to doubt if he was taking Alastor’s instructions seriously or if it was all just a joke. However, he continued, determined to see it through.

Suddenly, Van heard whispers of leaves rustling above him and a loud thud as if something landed. He looked up and saw Alastor, half-naked, sitting on a strong branch. “Welcome to Glade Camp 101, my young padawan,” Alastor said in a familiar voice. “Train you, I will. Tee hee.”

Van felt relieved that it wasn’t a joke, but his instincts heightened as he sensed several objects surrounding him. He looked up to see Alastor grinning at him, and something hovered over him. At first, it wasn’t clear, but the crack of light threaded down from the leaves offered a glint of light on the object. It appeared to be a pristine wall made of glass.

Without hesitation, Van flicked his fist forward, shattering the wall into pieces. He followed up with a series of flips and evasions, breaking down several transparent walls with his rear hook. Van allowed his body to move freely, destroying the constructs one by one.

When it was over, Van breathed in heavily, his eyes tired, his muscles aching. He heard Alastor clapping as he descended from the tree branch. “What the hell, man?!” Van shouted and his voice hoarse. “Are you trying to kill me?!”

“If I wanted to kill you, I would send much heavier and stronger constructs to pummel you to the ground.”

“Great,” Van responded sarcastically, catching his breath. “Just what I needed to hear.”

“Come on, follow me,” Alastor said, chuckling as he turned around. Van rose and walked beside Alastor, ready to continue on their journey.

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Marcus gripped the stemware’s shaft and stirred the wine, knowing from his youth that doing so would dissipate the most volatile compounds, lessen the strong odors, allow the wine to breathe, and activate the ester. He savored the aroma as the liquid poured, reflecting red in his eyes. Taking a small sip, he tasted the sweet yet slightly bitter notes that calmed his pounding heart.

The blood and the wine held the same singularity of every vampire’s desire—the sweet scent that transcended their taste, magnified by their primal hunger. For this reason, Marcus intended to appreciate the small things in life. Regardless, the wines and foods temporarily satiate his hunger for human blood, but he knew deep down that he was not getting any better.

Once skinny, he regained his strength through hunting, feeding on human blood for the first time in hundreds of years at a slaughterhouse where he dragged a few motor raiders. The rosy, thick, copper smell still lingered in his mind. He reveled in the blood as it poured into his body, not discriminating against any of it, as he was too hungry to waste any food.

Admittedly, he knew it was wrong, but he chose not to fight it. Being a vampire erase every trace of humanity, leaving only primal needs. However, Marcus was different from other Uninhibited Vampires because he controlled his primal hunger while remaining true to his uninhibited nature. He retained his sanity over hundreds of years, his strength at its peak, but now, in his current state, he was half the man he once used to be.

Trapped behind a door for over six-hundred years, the extensive darkness drained his power and left him hungry for blood. Only the immense dark magic within him and his pure will against submission to the maddening solitude kept him sane and held his body down to degradation.

As Marcus stirred his wine, his eyes caught the movement of a shadow upstairs. Jane, with her alluring dark beauty, tossed her black coat on the couch and hunched down. He watched as she untied the knot of her raven hair, and for the first time, it occurred to him that she looked like a vampire. If he didn’t read her mind and stolen a peek at her past, he would have assumed as much.

“Hey, what the hell are you looking at?” Jane barked at Marcus as he walked onto her balcony. He looked at her with a dubious expression but quickly looked away.

“Just admiring the view,” Marcus replied, beaming at her.

Jane rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Just don’t touch anything,” she said, turning her attention back to the dishes in the sink.

Marcus poured himself a glass of wine and closed his eyes, savoring the aroma and flavor. The bittersweet liquid melted in his mouth, and he felt the perfect ambiance he was longing for. Suddenly, a breeze blew in from the balcony, carrying with it the scent of lilacs.

Despite his lack of vision, Marcus could hear Jane’s hair ruffling in the wind, and he could smell the lilac scent as her hair bounced back and settled. He watched her back as he sat up in the massage chair, admiring the sunrise fading in her presence. When she turned around, he stared at her with no regard for shame.

“Had a bad day?” he asked, waving the bottle of wine in her direction. “This would be a better alternative to relieve your stress than the milk in your fridge.”

Jane looked at him skeptically. “No, thanks.”

Marcus poured himself another glass of wine. “You sure about that?” he asked, taking a sip.

Jane walked past him to the kitchen and began to stack the dishes. “If you’re going to stay here, can you at least help with the chores?” she demanded.

Marcus grinned. “I’ve been helping. I fixed the broken door in the basement.”

Jane scoffed. “Which you broke in the first place.”

Marcus chuckled. “I also fixed your rooftop and compelled a snake to eat those rats hiding in the attic.”

Jane turned around. Her face contorted in disbelief. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I acquired a snake and ordered it –”

“I know what you said,” Jane interrupted. “What I want to know is what gave you the idea to just...” She trailed off, sighing deeply. “You can’t just do that,” she said softly.

“Do what?” Marcus asked innocently.

“What kind of snake did you bring to my house?” Jane asked, her arms crossed.

“A regular rattlesnake,” Marcus replied. “They do a pretty good job at cleaning infested grounds. You know, my bro –”

Jane cut him off. “I don’t care. Just don’t do anything without asking me first, okay? After it munched over those rats, please put the poor snake back in its habitat.”

Marcus nodded, his lips forming an intriguing smile. He couldn’t wait to see what other surprises he could bring to Jane’s life.

Marcus drank and nodded at her. “Alright. As you say.”

To some extent, Marcus managed to rein in his fiery thoughts. With time, he would be able to return to civilization where he could mingle with people and blend in. For now, he had to limit his interaction with others if he wanted to remain inconspicuous. Despite being able to hold his tongue around a few people, he still hung on to those years of isolation. His accent’s set range was all over the place, fluctuating from Irish to Norwegian, then to British.

Although he admitted to having traveled outside the country before, Marcus was still struggling to control his tumultuous thoughts. He was still vocal, so it wouldn’t be a big problem when talking to others, but it might take some time to adjust his tone. In the meantime, he went up to the attic and picked up the snake. The rattlesnake hissed gleefully as it watched its owner climb down and see the results.

“Well done,” he commented. “But I’m afraid you’ll have to leave.” He clicked his tongue. “The owner of this house is not kind to animals like you.”

The snake hissed as though it could understand him. “Shh, shh.” Marcus hushed the snake. “I’m sure we’ll meet each other again.”

Marcus stepped outside for a couple of minutes, running back and forth to grassy places where the snake might live in peace and away from the harm of human activities. He gave it some thought and settled on the side road where the forest lay. He put the snake on the grassy ground, and it started to crawl away. Once it was behind the fence, it looked back at him and hissed as though saying goodbye. Marcus beamed, turned around, and headed back.

As something caught his nose, his eyes popped open. He knew the smell very well. The rusty flesh hung in the air, captivating his thoughts and leading him astray from his way. The misty smell only made his condition worse. With each new breath he took, the lustful thoughts incessantly drew him towards his desires, retracting him from his humane commitment. Marcus grumbled and shook his head in the hope of steering his thoughts away from his cravings.

But somewhere deep within him, something cracked, and a fleeting feeling drew out. His eyes plunged into a deep red. He was completely absolved from his shackles once more.

The vampire strode; his pace was slow. His eyes clung to the group of young people in between the roads; drunk and in a stupor. His eyes dripped with malevolence as he drew near. The place they turned was in a clearing. “Good,” he thought. “There will be no one, only me to relish.”

When one of them stumbled back, Marcus swept in, hiding around the corner. He threw his arm around the man’s neck and snapped it. Then, his fangs erected in his neck found the nerve and drained his blood in ten seconds. The body became frail and haggard, unrecognizable. Marcus threw the body into the dumpster which was a bare effort to hide the evidence.

Marcus breathed in. His eyes blurred, and with each passing moment, he felt his core being dragged back into the darkness. He knew there was no coming back should he give in. Marcus did what he had to do and drew away back to Jane’s home.

Jane heard a loud crash in the living room. She left her room and ran down to see Marcus writhing on the floor, trembling. Jane came to him, hoping to assess his condition.

“Stay away!” he barked at her.

Jane stepped back. Her eyes were wide as she took in the sight of blood dripping from Marcus’s mouth like frothy saliva. The metallic scent filled the air and made her nose scrunch in disgust. Despite the danger, she felt a wave of pity and anguish wash over her at the sight of Marcus’s heavy demeanor.

“You fed, didn’t you?” Jane asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Marcus remained silent, but his remorseful expression was enough to answer her question. Jane didn’t expect a response; she knew Marcus was struggling to fight against his vicious nature. She untied the scarf around her shoulder and brought it down for him to see. But Marcus looked away.

“Feed on me,” Jane commanded, determined to help him regain control.

“No,” he barked and grunted. “If I do, I won’t be able to stop.”

A faint beam stretched across Jane’s face. “I trust you,” she said softly.

Marcus got up, his dark eyes lured by her neck and perfect clavicle. He could hear her throbbing heart pumping blood through her veins.

“Of all men and women, I’ve met,” he said. “You’re the second bravest to admit yourself to me.”

Jane raised an eyebrow. “And the first one would be?”

“Not that it matters,” he replied, his gaze still fixed on her neck. “It’s all in the past.

Jane took a deep breath, feeling a sharp pain as Marcus’s fangs pierced her skin. She looked up at the ceiling, feeling lethargic and languid as the vampire drank from her. She couldn’t help but moan softly, her eyes briefly filled with regret for offering herself to him. Each breath was filled with distinctive spite that was etched deep into her mind.

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Timothy gazed down at the massive crater before him, his eyes fixed on the deep hole in the middle of the forest. It was a sight that sent shivers down his spine, and he couldn’t help but wonder what could have caused such destruction.

The GEMS agents were scouring the area for any signs of the T3-7B, but all they found was this enormous crater. The size of it alone was awe-inspiring, almost half the size of a football arena. They estimated its depth at around 20 feet, with a shockwave that felt like one ton of dynamite. The surrounding trees were now twisted and mangled, scattered around the edge of the crater-like they were violently thrown aside.

It was obvious to Timothy that this was no ordinary occurrence. This was a priority green situation, meaning the agents were allowed to survey and study the aberration. If it posed no threat, it would be classified as level ‘safe’. If it has the potential to harm others, it would be considered a level ‘spike’. If the aberration was hostile but could be subdued, it would be classified as level ‘rear’. But this, Timothy knew, was something beyond any of those classifications.

As Timothy and his companion, Orion, approached the crater, they both knew that this was far from normal. They had already been informed about a hunter on the loose, but this kind of destruction was on a whole other level. Timothy could see the fear in Orion’s eyes as he inspected the site.

“Do you think this was the doing of another monster?” Orion whispered from behind.

Timothy shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. We haven’t detected any strange energy or any hint of spells. We checked for traces of gas, ammunition, or any canisters, but we found nothing. This wasn’t caused by any sort of explosion.”

Orion nodded, agreeing with Timothy’s conclusion. If it was caused by an exploding device, there would be some trace of it left behind. But there was nothing, except for the massive crater before them.

They both knew that this was no ordinary aberration. Whoever or whatever caused this has an immense amount of strength, it needed to be cataloged, and reassessed for its level of threat.

As they continued to investigate, Timothy couldn’t help but think about the four core members of Ordinus: Hive, Jay, Suzy, and Enrick. They were still on the loose, and they had already been labeled as priority red and level ‘rear’. These individuals are dangerous, and the GEMS agents must find them before they cause any more destruction.

Orion interrupted Timothy’s thoughts. “You said that you encountered the remnants of Ordinus before?”

Timothy corrected him. “Remnants, and under the assumption.”

Orion raised his eyebrows. “Care to elaborate?”

“We didn’t catch the person, but he left a pendant,” Timothy explained, pulling out a sphinx-shaped pendant with reverse horns. “It showed up on one of the archives back at HQ.”

Orion inspected the pendant closely, his eyes widening in recognition. “This could be a vital clue in our investigation.”

Timothy nodded, recognizing that every lead was important in unraveling this mystery. They needed to identify who or what was responsible for the massive destruction, and they needed to do it quickly. Orion raised his gaze to meet Timothy’s. “You don’t think it’s either of those two?” Orion questioned.

Timothy shrugged his shoulders. “No, I’m not sure.”

“What about Enrick and Suzy? They’re also incognito,” Orion inquired. “We have no idea where they are either.”

“Well, back to square one,” Orion exhaled. “But let’s handle this one step at a time,” he said, re-evaluating the crater below. “If it wasn’t an explosive device that caused that crater down there, what is it?”

Timothy looked puzzled, tilting his head to one side. “The only thing I can think of is raw strength.”

“Do you believe it?” Orion asked.

“I don’t know, but I’m not ruling out the possibility,” Timothy replied.

Orion’s assumption wasn’t incorrect, but it wasn’t entirely correct either. It was best to keep things below the surface. From the GEMS, Timothy learned that no amount of assumption would prove anything. It was best to stay pragmatic. However, someone needed to be paranoid enough over small details, and there should be someone level-headed to maintain balance in a team. As the team leader, the responsibility fell on Timothy should anything happen to his team. At least, that’s what he gleaned from Orion’s response.

“How’s the Archaegian hunter doing?” Orion asked.

“He’s fine and stable for now. Lester needs some time to recover,” Timothy replied. “That spell nearly drained his mana. Using more could cause complications. I’m glad he didn’t.”

Orion breathed a sigh of relief, the stress, and frustration etched on his face. “Let’s hope he’ll recover,” Orion said, looking at Timothy. “We need more manpower.”

“Why not call for backup?” Timothy suggested.

Orion shook his head and darted towards the forest. “I hate to break it to you. HQ won’t accept any more requests until we assess the threat. We have a few men as backups for now. The last time we encountered a crisis, it took most of our people to deal with it.”

Timothy knew what Orion meant. He wasn’t there, but he heard about the large gap that opened up in the middle of the desert. Monsters came out of it and headed toward Egypt, but Orion, Brix, and the other agents were able to hold them off and send an emergency distress call to the GEMS. The aftermath was tragic.

Orion ordered the investigation to be canceled. He didn’t want to provoke more questions from the authorities in Maryvale. As far as he was concerned, their focus was on Hive, Jay, Suzy, and Enrick. Their whereabouts were still unknown.

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They sat on the other side of the table. Alastor offered Van a coffee, a kind gesture of hospitality considering how he greeted him. Van looked around, mentally evaluating the furniture. Although Alastor’s house may have looked shabby, it was well-kept. Van finally accepted the offer.

“So, you don’t belong to any kind of coven?” Alastor asked.

“No,” Van replied.

“Oh,” Alastor said, “no shit. No wonder why you’re clueless about who you are.”

Van cocked an eyebrow. “Does being part of a coven matter?”

Alastor nodded in response. “It all matters to your growth. Being part of a coven means being complete. Someone will be there to teach you what you truly are – about what you can do.”

“What coven do you belong to?” Van asked.

Alastor cocked his head. “I don’t know.”

Van hunched his back against the seat. “How ironic.”

Alastor faintly smiled. “Yeah. I know. No need to mention it.”

“Then how did you know I’m a hunter?” Van inquired.

Alastor took a sip of his drink and shot back, “Because I can see your mark—the mark of a hunter.”

Van looked around his body, confused. Then, he brought up his eyes. “No, I don’t think I have one.”

“It’s because you can’t see it, dumbass,” Alastor returned. “You won’t be able to detect it until you’re properly trained.”

Van scratched his head. “If you don’t know what kind of a hunter you are, how will you know what type I am?”

Alastor smirked. “You’re a smart one. I’ll give you that.” He continued, “Hunters have different upbringings and transitions, but we are bound by the same predisposition of desires.”

“And what is that desire?” Van asked.

“The desire to run free,” Alastor explained. “The twitch in our flesh that keeps telling us to run deep into the forest. Our instincts sharpen whenever we feel in danger and the horrendous voices at the back of our heads telling us to avenge them. The timing of each symptom is undetermined, but there’s no mistaking it. In the history of hunters, we always share these symptoms. The only thing that differentiates us is what we undergo after experiencing those symptoms. It has always been there, the deepest part of our desire. We cannot tell what it is, but it makes us act based on an instinctual level, splintering our thoughts into catatonically disrupting our rational mind. But that’s all it is, a mere fraction of what we want to see in our lives.”

“Some of us can see the flow of life. The energy around us,” Alastor continued. “Those hunters would absorb it to boost their powers. Then we have those who are hell bent on dark arts. They don’t have magic of their own, but they can repel any type of black magic and absorb it to use as their fuel. There are so many transitions that a hunter goes through and rituals to attend to before reaching their full potential. Mine and yours are different.”

“How so?” Van asked.

Alastor shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. Throughout my studies, I can’t seem to figure out where I belong. Then again, I haven’t fully undergone any of the symptoms or any distinct transitions. I can’t determine which one I am. As I said, we have different phases. Tell me, Van,” Alastor shot him a look, “Have your parents told you what kind of hunters they are?”

Van was struck by the question. Of course, his parents were also hunters. It didn’t cross his mind that they could be anything else. But there’s no point in scouring over the past.

“I don’t think there’s any possibility I could know about my heritage or theirs,” Van said, his voice heavy with resignation.

Alastor looked at him quizzically. “Why not?”

“They’re dead,” Van replied, his tone flat.

Alastor was stunned. “Oh, um,” he stuttered, struggling to find the right words to say.

“It’s okay,” Van assured him. “Someone adopted me. So...”

“That’s rough,” Alastor said, breathing in deeply. “It would be helpful if you knew,” his words trailed off as he looked at Van’s sorry face reflected on the water surface of his coffee. “There’s no need to worry. We will get to the bottom of this.”

Despite the early hour, the oppressive heat already drained him. The breeze whispered in his ears, tempting him to close his eyes and drift off to sleep, but the blistering heat blanched him to wakefulness, and the sun beat down mercilessly. Van’s face was long, and he waited for a couple of minutes, wanting to get inside to figure out what he was doing, but he held back. Alastor blasted him with several constructs, his plucky attitude spelling trouble.

Van swept off the beads of sweat accumulating on his forehead and looked at the door. With a harsh breath, he shouted, “Al! You dickwad, don’t make me wait here outside.”

“Ah! Dammit!” Alastor returned.

Heavy footsteps trailed down, and the door snapped open and then slammed back and closed. Alastor’s face was dripping wet.

“I was looking for proper weapons to give to you.”

“Hold up,” Van raised a hand. “So, you left me for 10 minutes just to scour your junk?”

“Hey,” Alastor responded. “They’re not junk. I bought them from the black market. I thought that maybe you could use them. You can say it’s a gift for you.”

Van raised a brow. “Why would you give me a gift?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Alastor returned. “You look dumb, clueless, and weak. You need something to protect yourself.”

“Ah-huh,” Van said. He was impervious to bribing, so he knew when someone was trying to hush him off with money. Alastor was clear as the water’s surface; he wanted something. “And in return?”

Alastor was taken aback by his words. “W-what? You think I’m that kind of person?”

“Yeah,” Van said, explaining. “You have a smug face and plucky attitude. I take it there is something you want as an exchange?”

Alastor chuckled. “Yeah. But that is of no importance. We’re going to focus on your training for now.”

Van crossed his arms.

Alastor defended himself once more. “I promise, it’s not anything dangerous. I’m just going to ask a teeny-tiny favor.”

“Spill it now,” Van ordered.

“Van,” Alastor called him by his name. “Do you want to train or not?”

Van scoffed and turned around to observe the forest. “What is it you want me to do?”

“We’re gonna run,” Alastor responded.

“What now?”

“We’re gonna run over the forest.”

“Are you mental?”

“No.”

“There are probably monsters that are still alive by now.”

“I won’t worry too much about them,” Alastor confidently answered. “They’re still monsters, but their innate, unique powers were stripped off. I made sure of that.”

“I’m kind of lost here. I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Van said, scratching his head.

A smile stretched across Alastor’s face. “It felt like déjà vu. I swear Kate said the same thing. The two of you baked the same cake. That’s kinda cute.”

Van’s face flushed red as he turned around, feeling embarrassed.

“You might as well get that shirt off,” Alastor said. “Trust me, you don’t want your shirt sop in sweat.”

Van grunted and took off his shirt, hanging it on a nearby hanger.

Alastor stepped forward, flexing his arm to snap it. Van did the same, but his focus was on his feet as he relaxed his limbs and rolled his feet.

Alastor looked to his left and saw Van’s tense yet calm and ready face.

“Whoa,” Alastor commented. “Ease up, buddy. This ain’t a contest.”

Van shook off his serious thoughts. “Yeah, I sometimes forget I’m not on the track field.”

“So, you’re part of the track team?” Alastor asked.

“Yes,” Van replied.

“Cool. What’s your role?”

“Sprinter.”

Alastor darted forward, extending his legs back down to knee level. Van followed Alastor. His eyes trained ahead of him.

“This is how it works,” Alastor explained. “Whoever leads the race will have to determine the path until they get passed by another competitor.”

“And where’s the finish line supposed to be?” Van asked.

“That’s the neat part,” Alastor beamed. “There’s none.”

“What?!” Van exclaimed.

Alastor pushed forward, causing the ground behind him to crack as he hovered through the forest. Van was left behind, struck with awe, yet he followed anyway. Van felt the wind abruptly brush his face, but he was used to it. As a sprinter, he knew he could never lose sight of the finish line or his competitors. His feet pounded hard as he leaped from the rocky steep to the soft grass he landed on. Alastor was ten feet ahead of him and gaining, utterly giving him the middle finger as he turned.

Unlike Alastor, Van was having a hard time adjusting to the field. He only ever ran on track fields or any other surfaces that were cemented. In the forest, where the ground was formed differently, he was likely to be challenged by the terrain. Van huffed, feeling each step of rock penetrating through his boots, causing him to lose momentum. He looked up at him with his eyes deeply panicked.

“You’ve got to stop worrying about small things!” Alastor shouted at him. “Let it in and feel everything around you.”

“It’s easy for you to say!”

Alastor laughed. “Then you’ll be truly left behind.”

As Van ran, he let it all in. He took in the blazing wind, the birds chirping around the corner, and the pain in his feet against the rocky ground. Just as Alastor said, he ignored the small things and focused on what was ahead.

As everything became clear to him, Van felt a burning sensation inside. He let it all in; the wind flushing his face, the bird crying in its nest, and everything that surrounded him, all washed away as he absorbed them. It was as if a flame ignited within him, doubling his strength and driving away his pain. He felt exhilarated and alive as he opened his eyes in wonder. Not long after, Van left Alastor behind and ran ahead of him with ease.

Alastor beamed in victory, proud of Van’s progress. He always knew that Van had great potential, but without proper guidance, that potential would have remained untapped. Alastor himself was once lost and confused, stripped of his parents at a young age. It was Meil, more like a brother than a father figure, who had taken care of him.

Meil had left Alastor alone in the Glade to live his own life, and Alastor had grown numb and indifferent. He saw others fall from grace due to their greed and he didn’t want to be one of them. So, he lived by simple principles: live for the money, live for yourself, do not harm others, and bury your emotions deep within.

But despite his single-minded approach to life, Alastor couldn’t help but feel a sense of satisfaction as he watched Van’s progress. He was gaining ahead, and Alastor couldn’t resist showing off his strength by leaping over Van.

“Hey!” Van hollered at him. “There’s no rule that using magic is allowed!”

“I didn’t use any magic,” Alastor replied to Van’s protest. “It was my raw strength.”

Van was surprised by the gap between them, but he didn’t let it get to him. He waited for the skinny trees and began to navigate through them with ease, smirking over his shoulder at Alastor.

The trees surrounded them, creating a maze of greenery and branches. Van’s senses were overwhelmed by the scent of pine and the rustling of leaves. The ground beneath his feet was soft and spongy, and he could feel the moisture seeping through his shoes.

As he continued to run, Van felt his heart pounding in his chest, and his muscles burning with exertion. But he pushed on, driven by the desire to reach the end and prove himself. Alastor watched as Van disappeared into the distance, feeling a sense of pride and admiration for the young hunter. He knew that with proper guidance, Van would become a formidable hunter, just like him.

Alastor was bemused. “Smartass,” he muttered under his breath.

According to the rules, to gain an advantage, the player must run past their competitor, so that they will follow. It was a challenging move, but Alastor was undeterred. He knew the forest like the back of his hand and took it easy, allowing Van to slip through like a snake.

As Van darted further into the woods, a blazing wind brushed his face. He felt the depth of the cliff beneath him as he stomped on the ground in an attempt to halt his sprint. He was teetering on the edge of the cliff, the depth of which was over twenty-five feet or more. From above, he could see the clearing field, and on forward was a river streaming by.

“That was close,” Van thought, frozen in his tracks. “Too close.”

“Tag. You’re it!” was the last thing he heard from Alastor as he tapped his shoulder, then dove headfirst off the cliff, spun, and landed on his feet.

Van remained frozen. His eyes were glued to the bottom of the cliff. Alastor’s eyes were brought up to see Van.

“The hell are you waiting for?!” he shouted. “Jump!”

“Are you batshit crazy?!” Van vociferate.

“Pussy!” Alastor mocked. “Let go of your fear!” he shouted and mouthed. “And feel everything.”

Van hesitated. He hated that Alastor expected more from him when he felt he was lesser than him. But he remembered how he fought Icarus despite the odds being against him, and how he was able to bring out his better self and win the fight. This was just another challenge.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, trying to muster the courage to jump off the cliff. Finally, he turned curtly, his head held high, and clenched his jaw. In the briefest moment he could, he dove off the cliff.

The cold wind splashed against his entire body, causing his body to tremble. But it was the wake-up call he needed, as a flush of fear and adrenaline coursed through his body. At that moment, the swish of wind, the incessant dread, and the feeling of isolation brought out his instincts as a hunter. His eyes snapped into dim yellow, and he broke through the spell of fear. The hunter in him emerged, and he hurled himself forward. His feet plunged into the ground, causing the terrain to shake, and the smoke to swell over as the wind whooshed through.

Alastor could see how Van woke up his potential, noticing his yellow eyes above everything else behind the smoke of dust.

“And that is what we call a superhero landing,” Alastor nodded in approval.

Van took a small step forward, and the hunter fell. His knees trembled, and his strength dropped off. Alastor caught him mid-fall, feeling Van’s heart thumping hard before steadily declining back to its normal rate.

“You did well, kid,” he said, patting Van on the back.

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Kate struggled to shake the memories of that fateful day from her mind. Her emotions were in constant flux, sometimes feeling pain and other times feeling nothing at all. She often dreamt of her dark half, urging her to let go of her fears, but she knew that the consequences could be dire. If she let her dark side take over again, she might not be able to come back. Besides, her sister Mia has already been through enough this month, and Kate wanted to make sure she was fine.

As she washed her face, hoping to rinse away her fears, Kate realized that she wasn’t paying much attention to her surroundings lately. The pile of unwashed clothes in the corner of the room was proof of that. With a deep breath, she moved to the kitchen and started to cook breakfast.

“Mia!” she called out. “Breakfast is ready!”

Kate expected to hear the usual groan or refusal, but there was nothing. She slowly made her way to Mia’s room and knocked on the door.

“Mia?”

She finally heard something, a muffled voice and something vibrating inside. She opened the door and scanned the room until she realized what Mia was doing. Mia’s eyes widened, and she shouted for Kate to leave.

Feeling embarrassed, Kate quickly closed the door and headed back down to the kitchen to eat. When Mia finally emerged from her room and sat down at the table, Kate wasn’t sure how to approach the situation, but she wanted to make sure that Mia was okay.

“Uhm,” Kate hesitated before asking, “Did you finish?”

Mia put down her spoon and fork on the plate, almost slamming them down. “Kate, do you have to ask that?”

“I just wanted to know if you’re alright,” Kate replied.

Mia looked at her in disbelief. She grabbed her coffee mug and took a sip.

“You know you can use lube to make things spicier,” Kate suggested out of nowhere.

Mia choked on her drink and coughed. “What the hell?”

“I’m just suggesting,” Kate said. “If you’re going to do it anyway, then do it right?”

Mia shrugged her shoulders. “Whatever. Just please don’t talk to anyone about this.”

After they finished eating and Mia washed the dishes, Kate finally gathered the courage to speak her mind. “Mia, can we talk?”

Mia sighed. “What is it?”

“Are we... okay?” Kate asked, her voice calm but insistent.

“Well... you kind of lied to me. There’s that,” Mia said. “But I can’t say I hated it, you put them down.”

Kate felt relieved at Mia’s response. “So, who was it?” Mia asked.

“It was Suzy Megan,” Kate replied. “But I don’t know who’s collaborating with her.”

“That hag from our school?” Mia asked incredulously.

Kate nodded. “That’s her, but I didn’t get any information out of her.”

“Good, but it doesn’t fix everything,” Mia said. “I want you to promise that from now on, you’ll stay away from trouble.”

Kate raised her hand, pleading. “I swear I won’t get myself into any trouble unless it’s necessary.”

Mia narrowed her eyes. “Don’t play word games with me, Kate.”

“I’m not playing anything.”

“Is part of your promise that you won’t voluntarily get yourself into trouble?” Mia asked.

“Yes,” Kate replied, making it sound like a question.

“Kate, do you want me to play Aunt Bella’s card here?” Mia threatened.

“Well, if you tell her, she’ll probably take away those books of witchcraft,” Kate replied. “

Mia let out a heavy sigh, exasperated by Kate’s stubbornness. “Obviously no. But if you’re going to leave me no choice, I am going to call her and let her know the things you’ve been doing,” she said, frustration lacing her tone.

Kate rolled her eyes. “Okay, that’s overboard. I invoke my right against self-incrimination. I’ll invoke the fifth amendment if we’re going down that road.”

Mia glared at her. “You’re the adult here, why aren’t you acting like one?” she asked, her voice tinged with disappointment.

“I am acting like an adult,” Kate retorted, her expression unyielding.

“Then don’t use comedy in serious conversations like this,” Mia replied, her tone firm. “You’re the one who told me that magic wasn’t meant to hurt people – which we should use it to improve our lives and to protect. Not to kill.”

Kate shook her head. “Not this time. Those people out there were planning to wipe out this entire city. You may not remember, but you nearly got yourself killed back in the music fest.”

Mia’s memory was fuzzy, but she tried to recall the events that happened. “That’s not possible,” she mumbled. “You said it was some sort of pedophile?”

“No. A monster was sent out to kill people. You were lucky enough that Van was nearby and stopped it from taking you,” Kate explained. “So, you see, all I want is to make sure that your life won’t be at risk again and the people in this city from them.”

Mia mentally nodded, understanding Kate’s point. “Fine. You can do whatever you want, but if you ever get hurt or in critical condition, I am going to call Aunt Bella and inform her all about this,” she said, her ultimatum clear.

Kate sighed, but she knew Mia had a point. At least it dawned on Mia the importance of their mission, though precipitously. She accepted that this would be part of their daily lives.

Magic was never intended to harm people or to be weaponized and bring destruction. According to Grimoire, the first line of witches who lived developed the art of magic and witchcraft to understand the elements of nature and life. However, for many years, kings and tyrants discovered the mystic abilities of witches and enslaved them to rise to power.

“Power is everything,” Kate remembered reading in the book. According to the Grimoire, power became everything ever since magic was brought into existence. It fueled the cycle of violence and spread like a plague. But the witches retaliated and vanished from the eyes of men. They still practiced witchcraft, but only in secret for they feared that their power would be used once more for violence and would start another chain of events that would lead to disasters.

Kate always upheld the values and teachings of witchcraft, but people nowadays evolved, and she had to come up with something else if she wanted to keep everyone safe. She already let her parents die, and she could not let that happen again to anyone.

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Van finally got a good night’s sleep after their fruitful training session with Alastor the day before. The connection to his ancestral heritage made it possible for him to tap into his power more often, allowing him to draw out ten percent of his power. Alastor emphasized the importance of continuing their training, so Van was eager to get back to it.

After finishing his morning routine, Van noticed Timothy preparing to leave with a bag in hand. “Where are you going?” Van inquired.

“I’m going to Daletown,” Timothy replied. “We’ll be staying there for the week. In the meantime, you’ll be in charge of taking care of the apartment. No bringing any girls, do you understand?” Timothy warned.

Van nodded and asked, “You already told Dad about this?”

“Yes, I have,” Timothy replied.

As Van stepped out of the apartment, he ignored Timothy’s warning and planned to invite Kate over for a dinner date. He jogged down the pedestrian lane, following the same path he took before. With each step, he felt a newfound sense of control over his powers. No longer were the voices controlling him, he was his own master now.

As he sprinted through the jungle, he bounced off boulders and hurled himself into the air, catching branches and spinning around before continuing on his way. His voice echoed through the trees as he reveled in his newfound power.

Suddenly, Alastor woke up from his nap, sensing something was coming towards them. He quickly realized it was Van, and conjured a wall construct to protect himself, but it was no match for the force hurtling towards him. The impact knocked Alastor down, but he quickly got back up, stunned to see Van standing before him.

“Son of a bitch,” Alastor muttered, shaking the smoke off his clothes. He was caught off guard by Van’s incredible speed and strength, but he couldn’t help but feel impressed.

“Phew, you alright?” it was Van’s voice that registered in his ears. “Sorry. I’m still hanging with it.”

 “Damn it, kid.” Alastor groaned and stood.

Alastor cast a dubious look at Van, unsure if the kid was like any other normal child in his town. But then again, he was a hunter, with a childish attitude at that. Shaking his head, Alastor shrugged off the thought and picked up the folding chair where he hunched, crossed his feet, and lay back to sleep.

“Uhm, I thought we were going to train today?” Van asked, a hint of disappointment lacing his voice.

“No,” Alastor replied, his annoyance palpable. “You said it yesterday.”

“But-”

“Okay, here’s your next training,” Alastor interrupted sharply. “Shut up.” He then returned to his slumber.

Van couldn’t believe Alastor’s response. He began to poke him, but Alastor blasted him away with a single spell. Undeterred, Van scratched his head and tried reasoning with Alastor.

“You know,” Van said, his voice laced with a playful tone. “I thought you were a cool person, Al. From the moment we met, I always knew you’re like a wiener, you’re always uptight.”

Alastor immediately rose to his feet, his eyes flared with anger. Van walked back into the house, thinking he won, but it was the opposite. Suddenly, the window on the second floor opened, and Alastor dropped out from it. In his right hand, he held a silver double-edged sword, while a sharp katana was on his left.

“You want training, you little—?!” Alastor shouted at Van, his voice menacing.

Van’s heart leaped into his throat as he sprinted away from the murderous intent of Alastor. Alastor chased him into the forest, his swords at the ready. The leaves crunched under their feet, the only sound breaking the eerie silence of the forest.

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As they stopped by a small-town unknown to him, Gilt trusted the girl’s judgment as his car was being fixed by the mechanics. He followed Cassandra and Paula into a crowded bar, and the sight of a bottle of beer caught Gilt’s attention. He bought three beers, a gesture of gratitude for the women who helped him earlier. He served the beers on the table, then hunched down on a barstool.

Cassandra and Paula each took a bottle of beer and drank plentifully, appreciating Gilt’s treat. After drinking, Cassandra turned to Gilt and asked, “So, where’d you come from?”

Gilt replied, “Maryvale.”

“That’s relatively close,” Paula commented. “Where are you headed?”

“I’m visiting family. It’s very far,” Gilt said.

“How far?” Cassandra asked.

“Ohio,” Gilt answered.

“Ohio? Hm,” Cassandra nodded. “That’s very far indeed.”

Curious about the two women, Gilt asked, “So, the two of you?”

“We’re heading to Mississippi,” Paula said. “We have a farm back there and a few relatives. I brought my sister along.”

“Your sister?” Gilt said, surprised.

Paula nodded. “Yeah. We’re siblings.”

“Huh. Makes sense,” Gilt said.

“What did you just figure out?” Cassandra asked, amused. “We thought you had it all figured out when you were checking on us earlier.”

Gilt beamed with innocence, realizing he made it too obvious. “I gave it away too obviously, didn’t I?”

“We’re not sure,” Cassandra said. The girls glanced at each other. “It looks like you were doing it on purpose. Hmm. Now, why is that?”

Gilt innocently shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know. Maybe I wanted confirmation.”

“Like what? Like we’re lesbians and a couple?” Paula teased.

Gilt looked at Cassandra, who raised her brows in confirmation.

“Maybe,” Gilt said, “or maybe I just wanted to get laid.”

Paula leaned closer to him, her eyes pouring him with a seductive gesture. “Well, if that’s the case, maybe we can abide by that as your way of compensating us for helping you.”

Gilt looked at Cassandra, who nodded in agreement.

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It was a bright day, and the acacia branches swayed gently in the breeze as Rick got out of his house, riding on his scooter. The unseen scent of blossoms hung in the air, and the weather seemed to ease his ailment.

Rick was mortified when he found out that Gilt was going to leave. He was already notified about Gilt’s whereabouts and left him a message, informing him that he would be going out to Ohio to meet Maris, the headmistress of the household. It was rare for Maris to call him or check on him. Out of every member of the family, it was only Gilt who showed even a shred of compassion on his situation.

To be honest, Rick would have preferred Gilt to stay over at Maryvale. He felt more secure when he was around, especially given the recent events. It wasn’t like he was dependent on him, but he preferred to have someone stronger than him around.

Rick bought a scooter motorcycle to make his transportation more convenient. Taxis weren’t always available in Maryvale, and the location of his house wasn’t exactly the kind of place where a single taxi would be willing to pick him up.

As he jostled through the busy lane and into the square, he passed by the bar where he worked, logged in, and picked up a couple of boxes that he tied to the bucket of his scooter motorcycle.

The sunlight reflected off the eastern side, facing the windows of the apartments, scattering in blurring lights. As Rick picked up speed, the people on the side road, walking with their dogs, parents carrying their children, the trees lined the side road that he usually took, the houses, and stores, all disappeared. His vision completely abandoned him.

Rick’s mind brought him to a foreign section of his memory. He found himself outside the Mavenhart’s residence, standing alone. Behind him was a fountain built somewhere around the 18th century.

Rick couldn’t see his hands or figure out what he was doing there. He turned and walked to the fountain, seeing his inverted image become still, and watched how his other half lured him in. Then, his eyes turned to blood.

Rick backed away, and his anxiety only plunged deeper when he heard several growls from the forest, their eyes glowering and glowing. They slowly walked out of the darkness. Abominations. That was the first word that came to his mind. They looked like humans, yet they were deformed into unrecognizable features that made them easily distinguishable from any normal human, but those distinctions were disturbing the most.

Rick shut his eyes, knowing that he was having a daydream. Any moment now, this memory would be terminated. But when he opened his eyes, he was still in that place.

Suddenly, something struck his arm, and a sharp pain erupted. He looked around and saw a devious monster biting off his flesh. Strangely enough, Rick did not feel anything, even though his blood was gushing out of his body. He fell, and the rest of the monsters came in and, in celebration, consumed his organs.

His eyes traveled to the top, and the red moon dawned on him. Rick saw his body steaming, and the smoke drifted away. He was on fire, and the monsters moved back away. Around the corner, where his soulless eyes dipped, a black wolf emerged from the forest. He blinked, and it was gone. Rick’s body trembled and distorted, and the pain finally seeped into his senses. Every inch of his bones began to snap, and his limbs constricted. Rick could only scream in horror.

As Rick’s body transformed, he felt an intense surge of power coursing through his veins. His muscles rippled and grew in size as he stood up, towering over the now tiny monsters who tried to consume him. His senses sharpened, and he could smell the distinct scent of fear emanating from the creatures as they backed away.

With a fierce growl, Rick lunged forward, sinking his razor-sharp teeth into the abomination’s legs. The creature shrieked in agony as he bit down, tearing off chunks of flesh and bone. He then swiftly decapitated the monster with a powerful swipe of his claws, sending its head flying through the air.

Without hesitation, Rick leaped back, evading the futile attacks of the remaining creatures. He moved with astonishing speed, tearing off limbs and spitting them out in disgust out of discontentment. The taste was revolting, but he knew he had to keep going.

As the chaos died down, Rick made his way toward the fountain, his thirst growing stronger by the second. He approached on all fours, his paws splashing into the water as he took a long, satisfying drink. It was then that he noticed his reflection in the water.

Gone was the man he once was, replaced by a terrifying werewolf. His fur was a deep, rich black, and his eyes glowed with an eerie red light. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing, but at the same time, he felt exhilarated by his newfound power.

With a loud howl, Rick turned and bounded off into the night.

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Rick’s vision returned to him in a sudden rush, causing him to blink and regain focus on the road ahead. He saw his hand on the handlebars, and the signal light in his direction turned red. But before he could react, he found himself passing through the line just as a car was speeding toward him. Rick’s reflexes kicked in. He barely managed to grip the handle, wobbling and veering to the side just in time to brush off the vehicle.

He turned around to see the driver throwing him a middle finger. “Sorry!” Rick shouted, feeling his heart racing with adrenaline. He continued on his way, still shaken from the near accident.

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Rick wasn’t a fan of beer, even though he liked the taste of it. It was the aftereffects he despised the most – the drowsiness that lingered long after the party was over. He couldn’t handle his alcohol, which was why he avoided parties and bars, where he could easily be knocked out and robbed of his money. He declined the offer from a couple of people at the bar owned by the old man Gregory, after delivering the boxes of beers.

As Rick walked towards the local bookstore, he wondered what was new. It had been a while since he visited the store, and he was eager to see what imported novels they had in stock. He made a beeline for the Japanese books section, where he discovered a new title that caught his eye.

Ever since he first stumbled upon Japanese light novels, Rick grew increasingly fascinated with literary fiction. He became addicted to it, devouring book after book until he became an expert on the subject.

Suddenly, he felt someone tugging at the back of his shirt. He turned around to see a young woman standing there, looking sheepish and timid. She held out a piece of paper and asked, “D-do you know where I can find this address?”

The paper directed her to an apartment complex on 2nd Avenue, which was put under closure after a recent riot and explosion caused an imbalance in the building. The police barricaded the place and forbade anyone from entering until the owner sorted things out.

“You’re new here?” Rick asked, noticing that she seemed lost and unsure of herself.

She nodded. “Yeah. I just got here an hour ago. I thought I’d check out the local store first and get to know the landmarks, then head to the apartment. But the people here in town are not in a good mood to even bother to answer my question.”

“No wonder,” Rick muttered. “I don’t recommend going to that place.”

“Why not?” she asked, looking concerned.

“Well,” he began to explain, “there was a recent riot, and in the apartment building you’re looking for, there was an explosion that caused an imbalance in the building. The police have forbidden people from entering the place until the owner sorts it out.”

“That’s terrible,” she said, looking shaken.

“Yeah,” Rick said with a sigh. “I can recommend a place to stay if you want.”

She blinked. “Thanks. Do you know any place closer to school?”

“Are you planning to enroll in Maryvale School?” Rick asked, surprised.

“Transfer, but yes,” she nodded. “My parents live in Daletown, but they only have a private school. They can’t afford the price, so, here I am.”

“You heard about the recent riot, right?” Rick asked, concerned for her safety.

“I heard,” she replied with a resigned shrug. “But it’s not like I have another choice. Budget is tight, and I need to apply as a part-timer to at least help my parents.”

Rick nodded and gave a small smile. “No problem, Edith. It’s not the safest place around here, but there are still good people who can help you out.” He glanced around at the town, taking in the sights and sounds. The sun was setting, casting a warm glow over the buildings and the people bustling about their business. He could hear the distant hum of cars and the chatter of people as they passed by.

“Listen, if you need anything, just let me know. I live nearby, so I can help you out if you’re ever in a tight spot,” Rick offered, gesturing toward the direction of his house.

“Thanks, Rick. I appreciate it,” Edith said, a small smile spreading across her face. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Rick watched as she walked away, her footsteps echoing against the pavement. He hoped she would be safe and find what she was looking for. As he turned to head to the bookstore, he caught a glimpse of something in the corner of his eye. It was a flicker of movement, something darting across the street.

He frowned, trying to catch another glimpse of whatever it was. But the street was empty, save for a few stragglers hurrying home. He shrugged it off and continued on his way, the tantalizing scent of fresh books wafting toward him as he entered the bookstore.

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Gilt was jolted awake by the sudden splash of cold water on his face. He groaned and squinted, struggling to come to his senses. A familiar voice shouted at him, urging him to wake up. He grunted and opened his eyes for a brief moment, only to close them again and yawn. The throbbing pain in his head and the drowsiness that came with the hangover were still there. He consumed blood the night before, and it left him in a stupor.

Suddenly, a disturbing image flashed in his mind, bringing him back to reality. It was the carnage he left behind at the bar. All those bastards who tried to nab him had died. He thought he was in heaven for a moment with Cassandra and Paula, but it was all part of their elaborate plan. When he noticed their eyes turn green and their fangs bared, he knew what they were. Gilt ripped their heads off with ease, and outside, a group of lanky werewolves awaited him. He resorted to dirty tricks, relying on his speed and evading their attacks. He killed them with either a knife or stones, but most of the part, he butchered them thoroughly.

After that, he goes to the bar where the entire pack of werewolves stood their ground. He was smarter than to take them head-on, so Gilt resorted to a quick and gruesome method. He stole a gas truck and then had it crash inside the bar, where it exploded, killing everyone else. Gilt was about to take off after refilling his car, but someone yanked him off and put him unconscious.

As his sight returned to normal, he slowly brought his eyes up. The first thing he saw was curly red hair bouncing off against the explosion of wind. Her tan skin reminded him of someone he hadn’t thought he’d meet again for a very long time.

“Oh no,” Gilt muttered when it dawned on him. Though his vision was still blurred, he was indeed looking at a woman. Someone who he was familiar with.

“Oh no, it is.” The woman replied, sounding annoyed.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you again,” Gilt groaned.

“Me too,” she responded.

She was the last person he wanted to meet. Roxy was ever the person who would console someone with a motherly attitude. Nagging and snarky, that’s what she was. She was still the freckled red-headed lass he last met in 1955. Roxy hadn’t grown at all, but then again, vampirism doesn’t grant someone the ability to grow taller. Gilt hung his head, looked down, and saw that he was thoroughly chained to a tree. He stared at her.

“Bug off,” Gilt said.

“Really?” Roxy replied. “That’s all you’re going to say after we have been estranged for the last 70 years?”

“68 years,” Gilt corrected. “And yes, you’re in my way.”

“Can’t say I didn’t miss the boldness of this kid,” another voice chimed in. Her beloved, Mark, swept in beside her.

“I was wondering if you’re part of this,” Gilt said. “Where have you been?”

“Oh, killing the darlings,” Mark replied. “As Roxy and I can see, you’ve been busy butchering people, so I paid attention to the trails you left and cleaned up some of your mess.”

“Do I get a discount for your cleaning services?” Gilt asked.

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Roxy replied, she was still pissed of what Gilt had done, but there was a hint of reason in her tone. “Although, you can tell us why you’ve turned it on.”

Gilt raised an eyebrow as he surveyed his two visitors. “How did you guys know I was here?” he asked.

Mark stepped forward and kneeled at Gilt’s level. “It’s not hard to catch up with the news when someone has been on a killing spree,” he said.

Roxy chimed in. “It’s spreading like wildfire in the underground community, Gilt. An Uninhibited Vampire is on a killing spree in Maryvale, Daletown, and now here in the small-town outskirts of Mississippi.”

“So,” Mark started, “what gives? What caused you to give in again? After all we've been through, I doubt there’s anything that could hurt you enough to turn it on again.”

Gilt paused, his eyes scanning his visitors before replying. “Look at the two of you,” he grinned. “Goody-goody buddies. The last time I heard, you two had a fallout in the 1980s. Yet, you were sometimes seeing, dating, and who knows what the two of you were doing, but I could never pinpoint the endgame. Now, please, enlighten me: are you two still in a rough patch, or are you still in the hate-banging phase? I can’t tell.” Gilt laughed hoarsely.

Roxy and Mark stared at him in disgust.

“I hate it when he’s uninhibited,” Roxy said, snorting and glaring. “There’s no censor on his mouth.”

“When did he ever have a censor on his mouth?” Mark groaned, exasperated.

“Should we put duct tape on his mouth?” Roxy asked.

Mark nodded in assent. “If time deems so, I think we should.” He turned back to Gilt. “Kid, this isn’t a joke.”

“Oh yeah?” Gilt shot back.

“Oh yeah,” Roxy retorted. “You’ve pissed off an entire pack of werewolves, and they might come after you.”

“Then I’ll handle them myself,” Gilt said, smirking.

“Don’t be cocky, Gilt,” Mark warned. “You’ve gone too far, far off the trails. We’ll be taking care of you.” Mark turned around. “The least you can do is pay us some respect. After all, we’re all friends here. The best of the good ones you’ve got.”

“Yeah, you’re kinda right about the respect part,” Gilt admitted. “You two are way older than me.” He jerked his head towards Mark. “Your outfit,” he said, gesturing to the dark jacket with spikes on Mark’s shoulders. “You kinda look like an emo punk. Still living in the 2000s.”

Mark immediately looked at Roxy, who was suppressing a smile. She felt a guilty pleasure from her husband’s clumsiness.

“Is it true?” Mark winced.

Roxy hesitated before responding. “Sorry,” she said.

“You should have told me about it,” Mark said. “I thought I was getting in on the current trend. Turns out, I’ve been making a joke of myself.”

“No, no,” Roxy said, taking his arm and looking into his eyes. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t bring myself to say that to you. You looked adorable when you tried it out and showed it to me. Trust me, you’ll do fine. It’s not like everyone has to follow the current trends. You’re fine the way you are, honey.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I’m gonna barf,” Gilt muttered. “The purpose was supposed to be fun. Now I’ve got my eyes and ears tortured with you lovebirds.”

They sharply turned to Gilt. “Now what do we do with him?” Mark asked.

“We do what we do best,” Roxy said. “We have to figure out why he turned it on.”

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Van slumped against the ground, exhausted from the rigorous training session. The sun beat down on his bare feet, scorching his skin, but he welcomed the pain. It distracted him from the soreness that throbbed in his muscles, a result of Alastor’s relentless training regimen. Seeking refuge from the heat, Van sought shelter beneath the leafy canopy of a towering tree.

Despite the grueling process of his recent training, Van clung to the hope that Alastor’s tutelage would unlock new opportunities for his abilities. He felt a growing power within him, and as it expanded, he gained a deeper understanding of himself. Alastor, overcome by fatigue, retired to the shade of a nearby tree. Van knew that his request for training had not been entirely cordial. He pushed Alastor’s patience to the brink, unaware that disturbing his mentor’s nap could lead to a grumpy response.

As the minutes ticked by, the silence of the forest became unbearable. Van sighed and rose to his feet, determined to make productive use of his time. He recalled Alastor’s teachings about the importance of relying on one’s instincts and senses, qualities that were crucial for any successful hunter. Closing his eyes, Van focused his mind and opened his ears to the sounds around him. He heard the chirping of birds, the rustling of leaves, and the whistling of the wind as it tore through the forest in the north. And then, a cry from a child pierced the air.

Without hesitation, Van sprang into action, darting through the trees and into the depths of the forest. As he closed in on the sound, his senses went into overdrive, scanning his surroundings for any signs of danger. He stopped abruptly, his heart racing, and his breath ragged. There was no one there.

A sickening realization dawned on him. This was like the last time when Icarus baited him out. His heart pounded in his chest, and his eyes darted around, searching for any signs of danger. Could he still be alive? It seemed unlikely, given that Van saw him die at his own hands. But what if Icarus concealed abilities that he did not reveal to Van? The thought made Van’s head spin. Unbeknownst to him, the danger was encroaching on his position. But Van remained steady, his senses honed and his instincts sharp.

As Van stood amidst the forest, he was lost in thought until a sudden movement behind him brought him back to reality. Something struck the ground with a dull thud, causing him to snap his attention toward the sound.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Alastor shouted at him, breaking Van’s trance.

Van’s eyes settled on the ground, where a lifeless monster lay sprawled awkwardly. The sword that struck it down, flung away and was summoned back to Alastor’s hand. As they stood there, several growls emanated from the dark parts of the forest. The inhuman monsters finally emerged from the covering, bearing fangs and claws. Lust for hunger was reflected in the profuse release of saliva, and they charged toward the hunters.

Alastor raised his guard, his swords trained forward. “I can lend you my katana if you want,” Alastor suggested. “This isn’t something that your fist can solve.”

“I-,” Van began but was cut short as a monster leaped forward. Van quickly withdrew from his position and ducked, then moved away. The monster, on the other hand, met its fate when Alastor swung his katana vertically, splitting its head open. Then, Alastor moved back, and his double-edged sword flipped backhanded, striking the monster from behind through its chest. The blood spilled over the back of his shirt. “Ah,” Alastor muttered. “I just washed my shirt yesterday.”

Van moved in an agile manner, jerking on his left, allowing the claw to come past his right. Then, he countered with a rear hook that plowed the enemy’s face, battering it and hurling it over a nearby tree. Van flipped back to avoid getting cornered by the enemies.

Alastor moved with his swords whipping from right to left, slaying them. He landed near Van, their backs attached. “Your fists won’t be enough to kill them,” Alastor commented. “Here,” he offered his katana, but Van shoved it off. “No.”

“Why?” Alastor asked.

“Because I can’t,” Van replied.

Van spun around and kicked the enemy away. Then, his left fist flickered on the right, staggering the enemy. Alastor twirled, cutting off its head, and he threw his katana like a javelin at the enemy in Van’s position. Alastor’s action was justified when Van twirled around to catch the enemy’s hand, breaking its elbow and snapping it.

They moved in synergy, working together to kill the enemies one by one. Whenever Van would stun the enemy with his blows, Alastor would come to deliver a fatal strike. Their cooperative movements allowed them to slay the monsters one by one.

Finally, there was only a single enemy left. Van pushed forward in boxing formation. His arms were raised as a guard. The hunter moved his upper body on the left, then jabbed its nose, and swung his arm, petrifying it on the ground. The monster writhed, and Van saw its eyes flickered with tears. At that moment, Van remained standing, and a bloody image of Icarus flashed before his eyes.

Alastor observed Van’s reaction but didn’t bother to confront him. He swiftly dealt with the enemy, turning around to shake Van’s shoulders to get his attention.

“Hey!” Alastor shouted, “Why did you hesitate?”

Van raised his eyes, tears brimming. Alastor took a step back. “Don’t tell me you have sympathy for those monsters?” he asked incredulously.

“I don’t know,” Van stammered.

“Van!” Alastor shook him. “You and I are hunters. We have to maintain the balance. When there are monsters on the loose, they pose a threat to innocent people. We are the ones who protect them. There is only balance and it’s what keeps this world spinning.”

“But who are we to make that decision?” Van asked.

“What?” Alastor was taken aback by the unusual question.

“What if a monster was once a human?” Van continued. “Do you think they deserve something better than being killed?”

“I don’t know where you’re coming from, but if someone is capable of harm, you shouldn’t hold back. It’s either you or them. It’s that simple.”

“Can you tell me what makes a monster?” Van asked.

Alastor was surprised by the question. “A monster is something that threatens human life. It could be anything from a supernatural creature to a human capable of terrible things.”

“If being a Hunter means indiscriminately killing and giving up my humanity, then I don’t think I can do this,” Van said. “I don’t want to be like you.”

Van turned and started walking down the street.

## Chapter 4

Kate managed to dodge the bullets when Bella asked about her whereabouts recently. It was nothing out of the norm; Bella was more investigative than before, just wanting to ensure that they were safe. Kate told her that she and Mia were hiding in the basement when it all happened. Bella knew that the basement door was made of reinforced steel and couldn’t be easily penetrated.

“I’m sorry I haven’t visited you two for a while. I’ve been busy,” Bella said.

Kate shook her head. “Don’t apologize. We’re doing fine.”

Bella beamed and hugged Kate. “Since when did you grow up this much?”

Kate chuckled. “I’m fine. You don’t have to worry about us anymore. You can focus on your job.”

Bella freed herself from Kate’s grasp.

“After all of this, I am going to treat you and Mia outside.”

Kate smiled. “That would be nice.”

Bella motioned to the kitchen and opened the plastic container of food. The smell that hung in the air drifted over to Mia’s room and woke her up. She burst out of the room and ran down the stairs to the kitchen.

Mia picked up a spoon and started to feed herself.

“Whoa, whoa,” Bella said. “Easy there, sweetheart. You’re not gonna run out of food.”

Kate served three plates, spoons, and forks. They began to dig into Bella’s food.

“So, tell me,” Bella said. “I’ve heard that you’ve been hanging out with someone lately.”

Kate automatically looked at Mia, and her sister slowly looked away.

“Don’t look at me,” Mia said. “I’m a civilian here.”

Kate brought her eyes back to Bella. “We’re just friends.”

“Friends with benefits,” Mia sneakily added.

Kate shot Mia an eye that said ‘You are so dead.’

“Van and I are just friends,” Kate exclaimed. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Bella nodded. “If you like him, I won’t stop you.”

“For real?” Kate shot back, but she already gave away a positive implication, confirming Mia’s previous remark.

“Yeah. He seems nice despite being weird.”

Kate mentally smiled. “Oh, but as I said, he’s just a friend.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Mia’s mischievous grin spread wider as she interjected in their conversation. “You know there’s a time when Kate brought Van back to his home, drunk and got home late,” she said.

Bella’s face turned stern. “That is so not true!” Kate defended herself, shooting Mia a piercing glare. “Tell her that it’s not true,” she demanded.

“Why me? I’m not the one who has to explain,” Mia countered.

“Is it true though?” Bella inquired.

Kate hesitated at first but then spoke up. “I brought him back to his house, but that’s it. No fishy business,” she insisted.

Bella nodded in agreement. “Okay, if you say so.”

Kate’s glare remained fixed on Mia even after the conversation settled. Bella walked outside and took a seat on the cozy chair. The cool, fresh air wafted over her, offering a refreshing respite.

“You know, I never get to say thank you for taking care of us despite your busy schedule,” Kate remarked as she stood by the front door.

Bella smiled warmly. “You don’t have to,” she said, staring at Kate. “I made a promise to your parents, Penelope and Tommy. It was the last thing they asked me to do if something happened to them, and the two of you kind of grew on me.”

Kate’s smile was endearing, revealing the gap in her white teeth. “About Van,” Bella began, “you better make sure that he’s fine.”

“You don’t have to express your concern,” Kate replied with a hint of annoyance. “He’s a friend.”

“Aha,” Bella groaned, adding, “Friends with benefits.”

Bella stood up, scrutinizing Kate. “It feels like I’ve been missing some parts of your life. You’ve grown so much,” she said.

Kate scoffed and hugged Bella. “I’ll be 18 next year, so you won’t need to constantly worry about us anymore. You can focus on something else. Have you checked on Rick?”

Bella nodded. “He’s at Mavenhart’s residence by now, taking care of some things. I don’t know what he’s going in there actually,” she said with a shrug. “That kid is an odd one.”

Kate chuckled. “Well, you have another kid to watch over then. I heard Van is trying to make friends with him.”

“Really?” Bella asked.

“Yeah, but he’s—as always—uptight.”

“That would be great. Rick was so focused on his part-time job. I doubt that he has any friends at all. He’s so young, but he always has to take care of things seriously. I’ve been providing him with money and materials for his school, but as you can see, he doesn’t listen to me,” Bella lamented. “Speaking of which, you’re kind of like him too. Snobbish and stubborn.”

“But I’ve grown up,” Kate retorted with an “at least I am” tone.

“That’s for sure,” Bella conceded.

Bella looked around and noticed a familiar face. She nodded and glanced in the direction of the visitor. “Looks like someone is here to see you,” she said.

Kate looked ahead and saw Van crossing the pedestrian lane. He sharply turned to the sidewalk and caught sight of Bella. He immediately ducked and clutched behind the bushes. Kate chuckled.

Bella noticed Kate’s subtle gaze and nodded in confirmation.

“I have somewhere else to go,” Bella said, her voice tinged with regret as she looked at Kate. “Take care of yourself, Kate.”

“Bye,” Kate replied, watching as Bella walked down the small stepping stones and got into her car. Before driving off, Bella buzzed down the window and called out to Van. “No need to hide in the bushes, Van. Don’t worry, I’m not gonna eat you alive.”

Van winced, slowly emerging from his hiding place before hastily walking towards Kate’s house as if nothing happened. Bella finally drove, leaving Kate and Van alone. Van hesitantly raised his eyes to meet Kate’s, mindful of her giggling.

“Well,” he started, “that was awkward.”

A short laugh burst from Kate’s throat. “I recommend you shouldn’t do that again.”

“It made me look like a creep, didn’t it?” Van replied playfully, though he thought she was expecting a different response from him.

“No,” she smirked in response. “But then again, we all have weird sides.”

He raised his eyebrows at her, intrigued. “So, what are you up to?”

Kate looked behind her, scanning to see if Mia was around to snoop, then turned back to Van. “Aunt Bella visited us. She was checking in to see if we were doing fine.”

“I thought that was odd,” Van replied, furrowing his brow. “I’ve never seen her come to your house before.”

“She does it rarely,” Kate responded. “She’s having a hard time with work, given the number of murder cases and all.”

Van nodded in understanding. “So, what’s the reason you came here?”

Almost shyly, Van blinked. “I was wondering if we could go out and have breakfast.”

“We just ate,” Kate replied, a hint of annoyance creeping into her voice.

There was a long pause. Van’s words felt stuck in his windpipe. How could he have been so wrong with the timing? He should have come later when he wouldn’t have to bother her and could do something more than talk to him. Surely, Kate has something else to do.

Van forced a smile, his eyes weary as though he went through a rough patch of study. He was struggling with Alastor’s training.

Kate opened the door for him. “We still have leftovers from earlier. You can come inside and eat.”

As Van entered the house, a leaf rolled in on the wind, humming at the back of his head. Kate was still waiting for him to move, but he was frozen in place, his mind racing.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll just go home and cook for myself,” he said finally, turning to leave.

“You sure?” Kate asked, her voice tinged with concern.

Van nodded and started to walk away, but he stopped and looked back. Kate was still staring at him.

“Tim is out of town for the entire week. I was wondering if we could have dinner,” he said, making it sound like a question and waiting for her affirmation.

Kate raised an eyebrow at him, her eyes questioning. “You mean like a dinner date?”

Van paused, blinked, and then answered, “Yeah, kind of.”

Kate stepped forward, nodding her head curtly. A smile spread across her face. “So, when will it be?”

“I was thinking maybe tomorrow?” Van said, his heart pounding.

Kate’s eyes settled on a point in the distance, then returned to Van. “Okay. But nothing extravagant, okay? I just want to have a normal evening.”

Van nodded, feeling defeated, and walked back down the road toward his home.

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Marcus was mesmerized by her beauty. He could still recall the moment when he tasted her blood. It was an illusion he was seeking for a long time. The blood was not just good; it was exceptional. It was as if he was fed from the blood of a royalty. Normal people’s blood did not have the same unique flavor that he craved. It was the temptation that made it special, different, and exotic.

However, Marcus knew his limits, and he stopped himself from overfeeding. He still has a sense of honor for the woman who kindly offered herself to satiate his hunger. Jane was now resting in her room after voluntarily letting Marcus feed on her. She has a strong spirit, but her impulsive act had left her in a state of stupefaction. She was asleep for nine hours, and Marcus was starting to worry.

He checked her pulse now and then, but every time he tried to wake her up, she only responded with a grunt and groan before falling back to sleep. Marcus didn’t know what to do in such a situation. He paced back and forth for hours before retiring for the night, only to find himself doing the same thing again moments later.

Late at night, Marcus heard Jane groaning in agony. He rushed to her room and saw her writhing in pain. He could feel her heart tightening and throbbing, something that no human should possess. “What’s wrong with you, Jane?” Marcus pleaded for answers, as he tried to comfort her.

He washed her arms and massaged them to ease her pain. Her face was pale and drained, but a sigh of relaxation finally relieved her discomfort. She remained in pain for a few minutes before falling asleep again.

Marcus replenished the water and scuttled to the kitchen to look for food. He found a pack of oatmeal in the refrigerator and read the instructions on the back cover. He returned with food, placed it on the table, and gently shook Jane.

“I don’t know if you can hear me, but you need to wake up and eat something, luv, or you’ll continue to grow weak,” Marcus said to the unconscious woman.

Finally, Jane’s eyes made a slight movement, and she mouthed something.

“What did you say?” Marcus asked.

Jane’s throat tightened, and she said, “Water,” her voice weary but audible.

Marcus rushed off and returned with a glass of water and a container. He overfed her, and he felt guilty and ashamed. Moments later, Jane opened her eyes and sluggishly rose. Marcus tried to help her, but she stopped him, only to fall back and sit.

“My apologies for overfeeding you, Luv. I shouldn’t have done that,” Marcus said with remorse in his voice.

“At least you feel sorry about it,” Jane thought to herself. She offered a forced smile and said, “I know what I’ve done.” She raised her eyes to him.

“Even still,” Marcus’s words trailed off.

Jane sighed and looked away from Marcus, then to the oatmeal he brought. “The least you can do is feed me. I can barely move a muscle,” she huffed.

Marcus spooned a portion of oatmeal onto the spoon and carefully fed it to Jane, making sure not to spill any on her. She closed her eyes as she savored the taste of the warm, creamy oatmeal. Jane dipped her eyes to the glass of water as Marcus crunched the food inside her mouth. Marcus waited for the right moment to give her water, either after she gulped or based on her expression. He was gentle and patient, like a nurse tending to his patient’s needs. After breakfast, Marcus changed Jane’s sheet and assisted her to the bathroom. When it came to changing her clothes, he knew that was out of his line.

Once she was settled back into bed, Marcus would return to check her temperature and listen to her heartbeats. It appeared that her conditions were within the normal range. “You’re still on me?” Jane wearily said. “Go and get some rest.”

“A vampire does not know rest, Jane. We’ve outgrown human decrepitude qualities,” Marcus replied with a chuckle.

“And yet here you are,” her eyes were hollow and tired. “Still bitchin’. I’ll be fine. Tomorrow you’ll see. Let me fall asleep knowing that there’s no stalker inside my room, please?”

Marcus gave an imperceptible sigh and responded. “Very well.” It wasn’t like he couldn’t hear her miles away, but Marcus only wanted to examine her condition. Regardless, Marcus did not dare to retort to her request. Once he left, she returned to her deep sleep, feeling safe and secure.

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Meanwhile, Alastor returned home earlier than he expected. He groaned as he scuttled to the kitchen, feeling the hunger pangs gnawing at his stomach. He watched the ingredients in his refrigerator, feeling uninspired. He sighed and decided to have instant noodles for breakfast. One cup was not enough, and he had to open more than five before his stomach was finally satiated.

After breakfast, Alastor went through his usual routine. He slicked back his hair with the help of gelatin, wore his usual clothing, and headed out to the city for a stroll. He passed by the market district, observing the bustling activity and scrutinizing every shop. As he walked down the lane towards the vehicle shop, his attention was caught by a red Subaru R60.

He immediately went to the bar and asked, “What are the odds of me getting a driver’s license?”

“Zero,” Gregory replied, his face long and tired.

“Surely you can do something about it,” Alastor urged, feeling hopeful.

“Like what?” Gregory rolled his eyes. “Maybe you can tinker with some documents?”

Gregory sighed, giving Alastor an eye that said he was done with the world. “Do you even have a car?”

Alastor shook his head. “I haven’t bought anything yet.”

“Then it’s useless,” Gregory said, annoyed. He paused, then looked down at the counter before staring back at Alastor. “Come with me.”

Gregory nodded over at the barkeep and took over his position. They went to the back of the storage room, then turned hard right. There was a door that led them underground. Gregory tapped the button, and the lights turned on. They walked down the metal stairs and came across dozens of boxes and containers alike. Finally, they came to a halt in front of a huge covering.

“Behold,” Gregory said with a hint of pride in his voice as he pulled off the covering, revealing an armored car. The overlook was similar to others, yet the platings were different. He can tell that it’s reinforced by different brands of metals. The outside appearance itself made it look heavy.

Alastor hesitated at the sight of the vehicle. It looked like it was built for military combat, which meant it was likely, not legal. Nevertheless, he was intrigued by it. “Um, hey,” he called to Gregory. “Are you sure this vehicle is even legal?”

Gregory confirmed his suspicion. “No. I built this on my own fifteen years ago, but as you can see now, I have no further use for it. You can have it if you want.”

Alastor’s face twisted with indecision. “I’m not sure. I want a regular car, not a military-issued vehicle that might put me on decommission.”

Gregory reassured him. “Don’t worry about it,” he said and pressed a button inside the vehicle. It began to change its appearance, turning into different colors and models, before finally returning to normal.

“Well?” Gregory asked him.

“I don’t know what to say. How much is it?”

“Four hundred thousand dollars,” Gregory replied.

Alastor was taken aback. “What?!” he exclaimed. His voice hushed. He was lost for words when he heard the price. “The hell?”

“The parts that were purchased for this beauty are considered top-notch and rare,” Gregory explained. “You can’t just expect that I’d give it to you for free.”

Alastor gave a huge sigh, his face conveying his defeat. “Maybe next time,” he said, turning to leave.

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As Alastor strolled outside in the bustling square, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled his nose. His eyes scanned the surroundings, searching for the café where he ate last time. Coincidentally, he spotted Van sitting alone at the corner of the café, enjoying his pie. He ordered himself an espresso, bagels, and donuts. With his hands full, he walked over to Van and sat down in the same section, facing him.

Van lifted his eyes from his food and saw Alastor. His face was exasperated as he asked, “What is it you want?”

Alastor took a bite of his bagel and sipped his coffee before replying, “I just want to talk with you.”

Van cocked an eyebrow and returned his eyes to his food. “What is it now? You're gonna console me into not giving up becoming a hunter and masculinize me to one?”

Alastor scoffed, “Of course not. I know guys like you don’t back down from a decision. I can respect that, and you’re right about one thing.” Van looked up at him. Alastor continued, “You can’t be like me. I was raised by a bunch of mercenaries who trained kids to become killing machines. We were given a choice, to live normally or to be like them. I chose the latter because I don’t have anyone or any special reasons to go back to civilization. I don’t have a reason to live at all.”

“That sounds like child abuse, you know,” Van said, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Have you ever thought about talking to the police?” Van asked.

“Oh, I’m not so sure about that,” Alastor chuckled. “We don’t have a comprehensive system of justice back in my world.”

“Your world?” Van looked at him quizzically.

Alastor nodded, “Yeah.”

Van cocked his head to the side, “Are you saying you’re an alien?”

“This is the first time you’re seeing one?” Alastor smirked.

“No bullshit?” Van asked.

“No bullshit,” Alastor confirmed.

Van remained perplexed, and Alastor explained further, “Van, this is a big world. There are a lot of things you don’t know yet.”

Van whispered, “If you’re an alien, how come you can speak our language or even breathe?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I also have a human anatomical structure. Surely even Sherlock doesn’t need to guess that much of an obvious case,” Alastor chuckled.

“I’m lost,” Van admitted.

“We may be from different planets, but our histories are connected as one,” Alastor said.

“How?” Van blinked.

“I believe that’s a tale for another time.”

“Really?” Van asked.

“You know, you’re very lucky to be born in this world,” Alastor said, looking outside where people worry less than Alastor and Van went through. “It’s less shitty than mine, always on a constant brink of war.”

“Is it rough there? On the other side?” Van asked.

“Yes,” Alastor replied. “But it’s not always bad.”

“What did you do back then?” Van inquired.

“I am a mercenary, a dirty one. We run operations that no justice system would allow us to do. When there’s a protected douchebag politician, we cut their horns together with their heads. If monsters are pestering your neighborhood that no hunters or adventurers would want to take on, you can call us, and we’ll happily clean it for you. But most of the time I always kill people, which is the most bizarre thing I have done considering I was lecturing you about being a hunter since I recently found out that I am also one.” Alastor nodded. “I met a coven of hunters, the Tribunal Hunters. They can copy certain abilities of monsters and can enslave if their wills are strong enough to bond.”

Van remained silent, listening intently to Alastor’s words. The wind whistled through the trees, and the distant sound of birds echoed in the background.

“Listen, Van. I know that this may not appeal to you, but in this business, there’s no gray area, only black and white,” Alastor said sternly. “You cannot rationalize monsters and people alike to swap their idiotic beliefs. If they want to kill you, they will try to kill you, and there’s no reviving once you die.”

Van took a moment to contemplate, his eyes darting around the bustling square, to the sun fading from the view. The night was approaching.

“Is that why you’re so indifferent? Living in abundance? In the forest away from people so you won’t be turned?” he asked.

Alastor paused, his eyes narrowing. “I’m putting distance between this world and myself because I know the dangers in it. Practically speaking, I refuse to be stipulated by others’ beliefs or desire any ridiculous and spontaneous idiocy.”

“You may sound aggressive and tough, but in reality, you’re just being hard on yourself,” Van observed. “You said to yourself, it’s not always bad.”

“I was talking about the wars,” Alastor replied, his annoyance palpable. “Every 80 years or so, there’s always a conflict in my world, and people like me who have little things get easily ripped off. That’s why I don’t want anything in life; I only want to survive. Desire is a poison that every man’s weakness has.”

Van shook his head. “That’s a lie. You almost made me believe, but the more I listen, the more I can see self-contradictory statements. If you don’t want anything, then why come at me, telling all of these things about not taking after you?”

“You’re an exception,” Alastor defended himself.

“Bullshit,” Van retorted.

“Not really,” Alastor said. “I only did it out of the ordinary. You don’t have any coven to tell you what you are or to guide at least. I just offered a helping hand.”

Van scoffed. “That’s not the case, is it? You did it. After all, you took pity on me because you saw yourself in me. We don’t have a coven, and you took me under your wing because you know what it felt like to be alone. No one was there to tell you what you are, and in the briefest moment when you saw me, unaware of my condition, you decided to help me. And that’s not a bad thing to feel for others. It’s what we call empathy.”

Alastor hissed. “There’s a fine line between reality and delusion, and you’re bridging to the latter.”

Van nodded. “I thought all this time you were a jackass troll, but you’re just like any the rest of us. And that’s good because that doesn’t make you less human than me or anybody else.”

Alastor hunched his arms on one another, and Van noticed a shift in his demeanor.

“Being human will put you in danger, Van. And you’re the kind of man who would willingly put yourself aside and ask for trouble,” Alastor said, his voice low. “When we desire more than what we deserve, we are bound to lose a part of ourselves.”

“That sounds nihilistic, don’t you think? You’re devaluing your life for the sake of self-preservation. You’re taking it way too extreme,” Van countered.

“I’m being realistic, Van. I don’t live in a world where I have a leisure number of options,”

Van gazed at Alastor, waiting for his response, as the silence lingered between them. The faint sound of a distant siren echoed through the air, a constant reminder of the dangers that lurked outside. Suddenly, the television caught their attention, interrupting their conversation with a garbled transmission of the news. The images flickered on the screen, showing gruesome footage of the recent murders that was plaguing the city.

Alastor’s eyes darted back and forth as he watched the news report, his expression growing more somber by the second. Van could feel the tension in the air, thick and palpable. The two exchanged a solemn look, knowing that they had to get to the bottom of the case before it was too late.

Finally, Alastor turned back to Van, his voice heavy. “You don’t understand, Van,” he said, his eyes filled with a sense of resignation. “I’ve seen things you wouldn’t believe. Things that would make your blood run cold.”

Van met his gaze with a determined look, refusing to be deterred. “Maybe so,” he replied, “but that doesn’t mean you have to give up on everything. There’s more to life than just surviving.”

Alastor considered his words carefully, his expression thoughtful. For a moment, it seemed as though he might concede, but then his eyes hardened, and he shook his head. “You don’t get it,” he said. “This world is cruel, and it will chew you up and spit you out if you’re not careful. A sympathy with no boundaries is no worse than self-destruction.”

Van sighed, feeling a sense of frustration creeping over him. “I understand that,” he said, “but that doesn’t mean we should just give up on everything. We have to fight for what we believe in.”

Alastor remained silent for a moment. His expression was unreadable. Finally, he spoke, his voice low and measured. “Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Maybe there is more to life than just survival. But it’s not an easy road to walk.”

Van nodded, acknowledging that maybe there was truth in his words. As they exchanged a final look, the sound of the television faded away, replaced by the quiet hum of the night outside.

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The sweet aroma of the broth wafted through the air, tantalized Marcus’ senses and aroused his appetite. He emerged from his room and made his way to the kitchen, where he was greeted by a surprising sight. There was Jane, looking lively and energetic, singing and dancing as if she hadn't been bedridden just a few days ago.

Not wanting to interrupt her joyful moment, Marcus approached the table and sat down quietly, watching as Jane expertly flipped an egg and seasoned it with salt. She divided the egg into two plates and placed them on either side of the table. With a squeal of delight, she noticed Marcus and served him a bowl of soup.

As Marcus watched Jane eat, he was struck by how agile she was despite her recent illness. “That’s a spirit I rarely see,” he remarked, admiringly.

Jane raised an eyebrow and gave him a stern look. “The last thing I need is your condescending treatment, given you fed on me.”

Feeling chastised, Marcus looked down, ashamed. “Forgive me. I cannot bring myself into discretion,” he said, sounding disappointed in himself.

Jane sighed, realizing that there was something seriously wrong with Marcus. “You told me before that you want my help, to be your guide. If you want that to happen, you must listen to me,” she said gently.

Marcus nodded. “I will abide by your words.”

“Good,” Jane said, relieved from the tension. “In the meantime, I want you to stay here and not do anything stupid. I will be out. I haven’t been outside in a while, and some of my friends might be looking for me. We don’t want any unnecessary attention, now, do we? Do you understand me?”

Marcus nodded again, gesturing his agreement.

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After she gave him her instructions, Jane left the apartment, stepping out into the frigid northern air. She shivered as the cold wind swept past her, pushing her hair back. She was wearing her faded jeans and a thin white shirt, covered by a coat that was pulled tightly around her body.

As she walked, she made her way through the busy streets, weaving in and out of the crowds. Eventually, she found herself in a bookstore, scanning through the academic section for some books on a particular topic of interest. After selecting a few, she was about to leave when she bumped into someone at an intersection around the corner.

The books wobbled in her hands, and she stumbled, but a pair of strong arms caught her, preventing her from falling. As she steadied herself, she looked up and saw that it was Rick, an old friend.

“Jane?” Rick said, surprised.

“Rick?” Jane replied, relieved to see a familiar face.

Jane blinked twice, the cold air making her eyes watery. She quickly tucked her hair behind her ears to keep it from flying into her face. Despite the weariness of the cold, she smiled at Rick, feeling a heat rise in her cheeks.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Fine,” he replied.

“It’s been like, two weeks? I haven’t had the chance to get in touch with you since then.”

“Yeah. It’s been quite some time,” he said, rolling his shoulders. “Do you think we can hang out?”

Jane’s heart skipped a beat at his words. Rick must have noticed the change in her expression, because his eyes flickered, as though he was trying to decipher the red shades on her face.

“Like a date?” she asked, her voice almost a whisper.

To his surprise, he did not expect that she’d take it that way, but he still agreed. “Like a date,” he nodded.

“Alright. When?” Jane asked, trying to hide her excitement.

Rick looked down, thinking. “How about tomorrow? We can have a movie marathon at my house.”

“That would be lovely,” Jane replied, a smile spreading across her face. She felt relief wash over her as though the sun rose to her accordance. She was worried that Rick already got over her and wouldn’t mind her outside school activities. Perhaps she was being too overly pessimistic. Regardless of the thought, she couldn’t help but feel grateful for his courteousness.

“I’ll see you then,” Rick said, before turning to leave.

“Yeah, tomorrow,” Jane replied, watching him disappear into the crowd. She took a deep breath, feeling a mix of excitement and nervousness. She had to make sure everything was perfect for their date tomorrow.

Jane had no idea that they wouldn't meet tomorrow and the days after that.

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Van admitted his defeat after a short while, throwing his hands up in the air and the controller on the couch behind him. Kate cornered him in just ten minutes, but Van remained dissatisfied despite the outcome. He turned to her, filled with annoyance, but Kate brushed it off and beamed in triumph. The screen displayed ‘Player 2 wins’ until Van turned to the menu.

“Don’t tell anyone about this,” Van said.

“Don’t talk about what?” Kate grinned. “That you got your ass kicked by a noob?”

“You humiliated me with the same three moves for the last ten minutes. That’s not going to go out, especially to Timothy. He’d roast me if he knew about this.”

Although he found it unacceptable, a win was still a win. Van scoffed and headed to the kitchen where he already prepared their dinner of Takoyaki and Siomai, soaked in soy sauce and spice.

Kate picked up a fork and tasted the food. Van, still on his controller, started the next round. Kate raised an eyebrow at him.

“I thought you were over it?” she said.

“I’m kind of masochistic, y’know,” he replied.

“Bring it on.”

Kate grabbed the controller and chose her previous character. For the next ten minutes, Kate continued to do the same unimaginable move that Van was trying to conquer and avoid. Van trudged off to his room with heavy footsteps and slammed the door shut. Kate heard his infuriating scream for five seconds and then burst out laughing. Van returned to the living room as if nothing happened.

Kate let go of the controller and turned on the TV to watch some movies. She felt full, but Van made too much food, and she couldn’t help but help him finish it off. Kate hugged him from behind while Van washed the dishes.

“Are you still mad at me?” she asked.

Van shook his head. “No. Why would I be mad about silly things?”

“Because you’re silly?”

She swore she felt his heart tense, and Kate defended herself. “I’m just kidding.”

Once everything settled, Van and Kate sat on opposite ends of the couch, staring at each other.

“So, how’s the training?” Kate asked.

Van was taken aback and took five seconds to reply. “It’s fine. I guess.”

“That’s not an answer,” she automatically shot back, sensing that something was bothering him. “Is there something I should know?”

“Nothing,” he said, looking down.

Kate tilted her head. She wanted to reach out and hold his hand, but the moment she touched him, Van shuddered and winced in pain. His head contorted with aching.

“Van?” she shouted. “What’s wrong?”

Images flashed in his head. Those were the times when he fought Icarus. No doubt Van was suffering from the enormity of his twitch, a condition over which he has no control. Kate could only watch him in agony, unsure of what to do. She may be an all-powerful witch, but she has no solution to shut off Van’s condition or lobotomize him without risking his life. In the end, Kate held his hand and hugged him in comfort. That was the most sensible thing she could do right now. His suffering only ended when Van collapsed into unconsciousness.

At 7 pm, the clock finally struck the hour. An hour passed since Van was unconscious. Kate, who was patiently waiting, heard him groaning and rose to sit. He was massaging his head, still feeling dizzy and disoriented.

“What the hell happened?” were the first few words that popped into Kate’s head when Van woke up, but she ignored them and focused on his well-being. She went to the kitchen and brought back a glass of water, which he declined. She put it down on the table and kept her attention on him.

Van remained hungover for the last forty seconds before snapping back to reality. His eyes moved to her as she remained an onlooker to his transpiration. “I passed out, didn’t I?” he asked absently.

Kate confirmed his suspicion. “Yes. Now, do you mind telling me what was happening to you?”

But Van remained firm and veered. “I don’t think being a Hunter suits me, Kate.”

She raised a brow. “Are you saying you’re giving up now? After all the trouble we went through?”

“I can’t handle the process.” His voice sounded dispirited. “There are a lot of things that Alastor taught me about being a hunter.”

“I’m not a mind reader.” She blinked. “Could you please elaborate?”

He took the glass and drank before clearing his throat. “It means shutting off your humanity and living in abundance. I can’t handle living like that. That’s why I wanted to turn back from whatever this transition is.”

Kate mentally shook her head, unable to grasp any of his words. “Then how are you going to stop that from happening again if you don’t want to become a hunter anymore?”

“Then solve it.”

“Van,” she softly said. “I barely know the history of hunters. You can’t expect me to give you all the answers. And there is something else, isn’t it?”

Van remained silent, but Kate could sense that there was something inside him, something that he was struggling to articulate.

“Please, talk to me.”

With what he could muster, Van finally said those three words like a child forming letters in his mouth. “I-I-I killed him.”

Kate moved forward. She saw the pain in his eyes and didn’t hesitate to console him. “Who?”

“Icarus,” Van said, and his voice broke. “I wasn’t trying to kill him, but everything became distant. It was as if something pulled me behind and took over.” Tears welled in his eyes and began to trickle down. As soon as she heard his breathing become ragged, Kate immediately hugged him as they sat down, comforting him.

She hugged him tightly, patting his head and hushing him down. “It’s not your fault,” she whispered. “Everything’s going to be alright.”

“I was hoping to save him. But I couldn’t control it,” he sniffed. “Do you think I’m broken?”

She shook her head. “No, you’re not.” And she continued, “That’s all the more reason why you shouldn’t back down. Listen, I don’t know how to suppress or remove those violent twitches or any of those symptoms. The best thing you can do to avoid it happening again is to learn how to be a hunter and control it. I know it’s hard, but nothing worth having is easy.”

“Do you think my brother would think less of me if he knew what I’ve been doing these days?” Van asked, wiping away his tears.

“I’m pretty sure he’d be angry, But I don’t think he’ll stay mad at you for long, considering all that you’ve been through. One thing I know for sure is that no brother or sister will hold a grudge against you for doing something good, even if it was reckless.”

“You’ve been doing this for a while, right?” he asked. Kate nodded. “How do you do it? How can you kill monsters and people without flinching?”

Kate turned away from him quickly. She didn’t say anything, but her stoic expression told him it was more daunting than he could imagine.

“When you spend most of your life torn apart, you get used to the loneliness and live in an attempt to look for the perpetrators, you will be surprised what lengths you can go just for the sake of it,” she said softly, sitting motionless with her hands on her knees.

Van didn’t ask any further.

“You know,” she continued after a moment. “My mom used to take me and my sister, Mia, to the park. She’d teach me how to ride a bike or buy us ice cream. Mia always threw a tantrum when she didn’t get what she wanted.” She chuckled. “She’s annoying, but she’s my annoying little sister, so I learned to live with it.”

“You’re lucky you have those memories of your parents,” Van said, his eyes seeming distant.

Kate cocked her head. “You don’t remember anything about your parents?”

Van shook his head. “No. I have amnesia. The doctor said my brain was traumatized by the accident. We tried to find ways to remember, but nothing worked.”

Van looked toward his room, and something caught his attention.

“Can I show you something?” he asked, without waiting for her answer.

He walked to his room and returned a few seconds later holding a dusty journal.

“Whoever my parents are, they are definitely not normal,” he said, dusting off the journal before handing it to Kate. “I found this in my house before I left. It has to be from my parents. But as you can see, there’s nothing written inside.”

“What do you think it means?” Kate asked.

“I don’t know.” Van shrugged. “I was hoping you could help me figure that out. I think there might be a message hidden in here. My parents might have used magic to hide it.”

Kate looked at the journal.

“Diez eyuz,” she said, and her eyes flickered with violet light. Suddenly, the world was painted in different colors, and the journal glowed with yellow, red, and white light.

“You were right. This book contains magic. Your parents were very careful about hiding sensitive information.”

Kate waved her hand over a blank page, and muttered another spell, “Kie—”

But before she could finish the spell, the journal emitted a hostile spark of energy, snapping back and causing Kate to withdraw in shock and pain.

“Are you okay?” Van asked.

Kate closed her eyes, trying to shake off the pain. “I’m fine. That must have been a safety trigger. Your parents knew how to keep anyone from reading it.”

“That’s never happened before,” Van said.

“Of course not,” Kate replied. “It would only react that way if someone tried to break the seal. Even if you could break it, I doubt your parents would want you to be in danger.”

“Do you think you can do it?” Van asked.

“I need some time. The magic in this book is unknown to me. We don’t want to trigger any more safety measures. That minor alarm was already a warning that it won’t be easy to unlock the secrets inside.”

“Just tell me if you need anything, okay?”

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Until the alarm blared, Kate’s uneventful day started. It was the start of the second week of November. But it felt like she didn’t have enough rest at all.

At 8:30 am Kate washed the plates after they ate breakfast. She went to her room and Mia’s to collect the used clothes and scuttled to the bathroom. She looked indifferently at the windows. The light peering inside was blinding.

That’s when her phone rang before she got to take care of her business. Kate withdrew the container of clothes and answered the call. The name ‘Laswell’ rang brightly on her screen.

It was quite some time since the last time they talked. He was supposed to be in their house last week to do some laundry. But he never made it and this pondered her till now why.

As she walked to shut off the blinders, Kate answered the call. By then answering the call, her entire weekend would be another pain in the bottom, and she’d regret answering it.

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Alastor grew fond of the peace that this world offered him. Unlike back in Radiya, where he was stuck doing the same boring chores, or even taking on new requests that were forced upon him, he found a new perspective in this world. He was surprised that the little device he held in his hand could provide him with so much entertainment. However, he knew that he must return to his home world eventually. People were waiting for him, especially her. Nevertheless, Alastor understood that he mustn’t neglect his current situation. The people behind the assault on the city were still unknown, and he was finicky about them. Despite his best efforts, Layla wouldn’t provide any more details about them, which further frustrated him.

Alastor turned off his phone when he heard several knocks coming from the door. He opened the door, still half-naked, and was blinded by the ray of light around her. He took a step back and squinted his eyes. “Good morning,” Kate greeted and offered a half-smile, but he did not smile back. He saw suspicion straight in her face, alongside a strand of his black hair and his pair of deep dark eyes. “I know it’s too early to cause trouble, but I need your help.”

“What do you want?” he asked in a calm but tired voice. He held his body noncommittally, and a trace of wariness crossed her face. Judging the tightness of her throat and her hangdog eyes, he knew that this was something personal.

“Not a morning person, I see,” Kate replied, ignoring his point.

Alastor frowned. “Just get to the point,” he said with a loud, hard, and clear voice.

“Someone in my family got involved in an occult business,” Kate said with a sigh. “Let’s say, my cousin’s dad is off the tracks, and we need to find him.”

Rather than feeling despondent, Alastor arched a brow in wonder. “Explain,” he demanded.

“My cousin didn’t tell me much except that we needed to find his dad,” Kate said. In such a short time, Alastor noted that Kate wasn’t the type of person who would ignore every little detail. So, it was uncharacteristic for her to not be fussy about the details of the situation her cousin was in. But then again, it was an emergency call, so it would be reasonable to convey considerations about it.

Despite her plea, Alastor wasn’t going to involve himself in something he had no idea about unless there was something in it for him. “What do I get out of it?” he asked.

Kate was silent.

“Yeah, I thought so,” he said as though in farewell.

“Wait,” Kate called before he could snap the door closed. “I don’t have any money right now, but I’m sure there are things we can work at.”

“Like what?” Alastor looked up at her, interested.

“If you have any problems or a request that requires in-depth knowledge about magic or any other kind of stuff, you can count me in.”

Alastor thought about accepting her offer. Her proposition sounded kind enough to him. There were things he didn’t know about this world, especially about how their magic system worked, or any other intercontinental functions. He should have someone else to guide him through it. That was what he would prefer. He finally nodded. “Fine.”

“Maybe we can also borrow your car?”

Two questions pondered in his mind when she said those words. “We? And what car?”

Kate stepped back, allowing Alastor to step outside and see the silver-plated car parked in front of them. Van stood beside the car with his sharp features staring in amazement at the model vehicle. Alastor was surprised that he didn’t notice it before and felt a sense of unease at Van’s presence.

Whispering to Kate, Alastor asked, “I’m sorry, he’s also coming?”

Kate nodded. “Yeah. Is there a problem?”

“You know he just started training, right?”

“I do, but situations harbor experience,” she replied.

Alastor was annoyed at Kate’s response. “I know what that phrase means, but this is a life-threatening situation. He’s not ready for combat yet.”

Van overheard their conversation and stepped closer. “Who’re you calling baggage? You saw what I can do. I am more than meets the eye.”

Alastor rolled his eyes. “Yes, I know, but you’re also incapable of maintaining your power. You can barely hold it in for ten minutes, much less in a life-threatening situation.”

Van made a face of disbelief but quickly composed himself. “If you give me some time, maybe I can bring more out of my abilities.”

“I thought you didn’t want to train anymore,” Alastor said.

“I didn’t say that,” Van replied. “I just changed my mind.”

Alastor didn’t bother to respond anymore. He shook his head and walked towards the car, reluctantly accepting the request.

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The air was frosty and refreshing as they departed Maryvale early in the morning. The first rays of light illuminated the vehicle as they drove past the orchid trees outside of Maryvale. The sky was not blue, but instead, it was adorned with opaque and milky clouds.

Alastor was already well-versed in driving, and although the car was different from what he was used to in his world, he found the silver Chevy Impala to be quite pleasing to the eye. Gregory left a note for him explaining that he pulled some strings and forged some documents to procure a license plate for the car. Alastor couldn’t fathom why the old man went to such great lengths to help him, but he appreciated it nonetheless.

As they drove, Alastor studied the road ahead as he took a sharp right turn. The wind picked up, causing the leaves to rustle and dance before being carried away. They were approximately an hour and a half away from Daletown. Boredom began to set in, and Alastor thought he might try something. He shifted the transmission into low gear, accelerated, hit the brakes, turned the wheel, and started drifting on the curved road. Van was jolted awake from his slumber, looking a little queasy as he gripped his seatbelt tightly. Kate was also awakened by the screeching of the tires, and she clung to her seat for dear life. Alastor quickly shifted the gear back to normal as they turned onto a narrow road.

Kate’s voice was shaky as she asked, “Do you want us to have a heart attack?”

Alastor flashed a crooked, jeering smile in response. “You and your boyfriend were snoring so loud. It was beginning to make my ears bleed.”

Kate turned to Van and asked, “Did I snore?”

Van, still a bit disoriented, replied, “I don’t know. Both of us slept.”

Kate wiped the sweat from her face with a towel and turned on the radio, which Alastor promptly shut off. “I can’t focus when it’s too loud,” he explained. “By the way, where’s your lanky-ass friend, Gilt?”

Kate shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know.”

A look of exasperation crossed her face as she thought.

“Al, can I ask you something?” Van inquired.

Alastor turned to face him. “Sure, what is it?”

“How did you control the urge for violence?”

Alastor braced himself, gathering his thoughts before answering. “I never had one before. We’re not the same, remember?”

“I know, but still, I was hoping you could provide me with some tips on how to control the urge,” Van replied.

“There’s no specific method to shut it off. It comes after undergoing the trials. The best way to deal with it is to redirect the energy into something else, something that doesn’t require violence. Like using dirty words,” Alastor explained.

Van raised an eyebrow. “And how does that help?”

“It can make you feel better and might even subside the harmful thoughts,” Alastor replied.

After their conversation, Alastor found his way to Lavvy Street, which was deserted and vacated, with houses empty like from a movie set. They passed a long line of oak trees before a tall, thin man waved at them from the street.

Alastor pulled the car to the side road, parked, and turned off the engine. Kate got out of the passenger seat, tightly pulling the taut of her coat due to the chilly air. However, Van and Alastor weren’t bothered by the thin air despite wearing thin clothes. Kate approached Laswell first while the two remained behind.

“Hello, bitch,” Laswell greeted her.

Kate rolled her eyes before replying, “Hey, ass.” She beamed.

Looking weary, Laswell brought his eyes to Van and Alastor, his brows arched. “And they’re here for what?” he asked.

“I took the liberty of asking for some help,” Kate responded.

Laswell scrutinized them, but they didn’t mind.

Alastor stepped forward and offered his hand. “The name’s Alastor, but you can call me Al.”

Laswell nodded and shook his hand. “Laswell. I’m Kate’s cousin.”

“So, I’ve been told,” Alastor replied with a smile. “Let’s get inside, shall we?”

Laswell’s house was simple and close to the city’s square, distinguishable by its blue and white paint. Laswell was already inside, and Kate waited for the two to enter before shutting the door.

They sat on the shabby sofa while Laswell prepared something in the kitchen. “What do you guys prefer?” Laswell shouted. “Tea, juice, or water?”

“Tea,” the three said in unison.

Laswell returned with the tea and sat down with them.

“So, why don’t you tell us what happened to your father?” Alastor queried as he took a sip of a bit of the coffee, then looked up at him, expressing his concern.

“I—” he paused, hesitated at first, but then added, “I’m not quite sure what happened to him, but let’s just say my father was cursed.”

“I think it would be clarifying if you started from the beginning,” Kate suggested.

Taking the hint, Laswell took a deep breath, collected his thoughts, and returned his mind to them.

“My father was an archaeologist before he became a professor. As you can see, he was always interested in studying myths, artifacts, and relics, and visiting cultural places alike. Then he stumbled upon these people who were descendants of the Roanoke Colony.”

“Wait,” Kate halted him. “You mean the lost colony back in the 16th century?”

Laswell nodded. “That’s the one.”

“How is that even possible?” Van asked.

“They say a god sheltered them from being harmed by the colonizers when they were let go forward by the liberators. As we all know, by the time they got there, the only thing that they saw was the cryptic word ‘Croatoa.” Laswell continued, “These people who claimed to be descendants of them became known as Bywalkers. They travel to places in search of the remains of certain artifacts for their self-proclaimed god, Croatoa.”

“I’m guessing by now, your father willingly handed himself over to them,” Alastor exclaimed.

Laswell could only smile, then respond. “I wasn’t by his side when he met them, but he kept tabs on me about his research about them. He made it sound like the cult themselves welcomed him, which wasn’t the case until the end.”

“What happened?” Kate asked, her voice steely. Laswell tore away his gaze from her.

“They did something to him. I don’t know what it was, but by the time he came back to our home, he wasn’t the same person. It was exactly nine months ago to this day when he was sucked onto a portal to an unknown whereabouts.”

“I’m sorry, nine months?” Kate asked incredulously. Laswell lowered his gaze. “He’s been gone that long, and you didn’t tell me? Who were we talking to over the phone for the past months?”

“It was me.”

“Why? You could’ve told me.”

“Because you have enough problems, and I didn’t want to burden you.”

“Still, you should have told me first.” She shook her head. “Which doesn’t matter now since it’s been like this.”

Laswell sighed and continued. “That’s not all of it. I’d also like to stress that my father has returned. Sometime two months ago, he reached out to me but failed. Then I tried using a few locator spells.”

“And?” Van asked.

“And this.”

Laswell flicked in the air, and a map appeared in thin blue light before materializing. He picked it up and showed them the location. The red blot blinked somewhere out in the open sea, specifically around the Caribbean.

“His last known location,” Laswell said, his voice quiet. “I need your help finding him.”

“What the hell is your father doing in the middle of the ocean?” Van demanded.

“That’s what I want to find out too,” Laswell replied. “My theory is that there’s an island hidden nearby. It just couldn’t be seen due to mystical phenomena.”

“I get it now,” Alastor said. “You want us to fetch your dad.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Van retorted.

“If that island is hidden off the map, how the hell are we supposed to pick him up?” Kate asked. “It’s not like we can just fly there and see it from above.”

Alastor tilted his head in realization. “Then maybe we just have to fly over there.”

“You know, sometimes your ideas scare me,” Van said. “It’s not like we have wings, you know.”

“It’s not a bad plan,” Kate commented.

“Yeah, I know,” Van replied. “Just like how he pushed me off the cliff to bring out my hunter side.”

Kate immediately turned to Van. “I’m sorry, what?” Then she turned to Alastor. “You pushed him off the cliff?”

Alastor avoided her gaze before replying, “Well, it’s part of the training.”

Kate shook off her surprise and focused on the task at hand. “How are we going to fly?” she asked again.

Alastor solemnly closed his eyes before reopening them. His face seemed to ask, ‘Are you guys serious?’

“We’re not going to fly literally. We’re going to open a portal on top of the island and jump in.”

They all looked at him with the same deadpan expression.

“It’s either the bravest or the most idiotic thing to do,” Kate said.

“At least he has a plan,” Van enthused.

“It’s not bad, actually,” Laswell finally said. “We can buy some parachutes.”

“What if we’re wrong?” Kate asked, dropping a dreary question. “What if the only thing we see is the vast sea?”

“Then we’ll pull back,” Alastor said.

“You made it sound so easy,” Kate mocked. “None of us even knows how to use teleportation magic.”

“I do,” Laswell said. “Dad used to collect certain relics. Down in the basement, he kept an artifact that can transport objects from one place to another.”

As per Laswell’s instructions, the artifact he mentioned earlier required the use of a locator spell and a marking spell. For it to work, they marked themselves and the location on the map, which made it more daunting for Alastor considering that these people did not have any weapons. Alastor, however, already hid his weapons with an invisibility spell.

“Are you sure you’re not going to bring any weapons? At least some armor or guns, perhaps?” Alastor asked them.

The three crouched around the table and mouthed the spell on the star-like relic, which Laswell referred to as the ‘Star of Bethlehem.’ Kate brought up her gaze to Alastor, cocking an eyebrow. “For what?”

“You know, monsters,” Alastor explained. “Where we’re going is uncharted territory. Guessing won’t be enough. It’s better to be prepared.” He turned to Van. “Especially you, Van. You don’t have any prior experience, and given that you’ve just awakened your heritage, you’re the biggest liability.”

“Dude,” Van uttered. “I’m right here.”

“I disagree,” Kate said, shunning the mercenary’s statement. “I think you should give Van some credit here. He fought several monsters alone.”

“Really?” Alastor’s eyes traversed questionably to Van. “You? Alone?”

Van nodded. His eyes fixed on the Star of Bethlehem in the center of the room. The relic glowed softly, casting an otherworldly light on their faces.

“He’s the one who brought Icarus down,” Kate replied, a note of admiration in her voice.

“Well, I don’t know who that is. But just to make sure, I’m going to cast a protective spell on all of you.” Alastor waved his hand at them, and several glitters flew from his fingertips, landing on their skin and clothes. They shimmered and glowed with a strange light that seemed to seep into their very beings. Alastor snapped his fingers, and his weapons materialized. His dark coat hung loosely over his light breastplate, and a katana scabbard hung from his waist. At his back were his pair of guns.

“Someone here is hardcore,” Laswell commented, eyeing Alastor with a mixture of awe and apprehension.

“What are we waiting for?” Alastor said, a fierce glint in his eye. “Let’s do it.”

They stood inside the circle in front of the Star of Bethlehem, in the empty living room. Laswell began to chant the spell, his voice rising and falling in a mesmerizing rhythm. The relic bore its light, traveling across the trail of dust and onto them, enveloping around in a brilliant glow. The light was blinding, and for a moment, they felt weightless, as if they were floating in space.

## Chapter 5

The cold wind whipped against their faces as they fell at the wide, milky sky above. The sea-borne winds dipped their noses with salty breath as they crossed their arms in front of their faces. The island loomed ahead of them, visible in the six o’clock dawn. The saltwater swayed wildly, hitting the ridges with its heavy splash, just like how their breath became heavier due to the wind’s pressure. Fifty clicks away, they opened their parachutes and were carried ashore by the wind. They landed on sandy runes and removed their parachutes before burrowing deep into the sand.

Kate spewed out a sigh. “That was the easy part.”

“Don’t get comfortable,” Alastor said indifferently. “We don’t have any clue where to start or how many enemies are out there. Stay sharp.”

*As dull as ever*, Kate thought.

“Yes sir.” Van uttered.

The four threaded, dragging their feet tiredly as they passed the dune to the uphill path where the green field stretched. Five miles ahead lay the forest and a long piece of dirt and hard ground road snaked inside it. They knew by then that it was probably best to stay on the path as the eerie silence got under their skin. They felt someone watching them from a distance. Alastor’s words finally penetrated them.

“Keep your guards up, everyone.”

They heeded his advice and proceeded with utmost caution on the road. Until they passed the borough of trees and bushes, the gang did not stop for any rest. In short order, they reached the precipice of their demands.

A tall gate blocked the road that led inside the canyon. It was petrified and steely, and judging by its appearance, it weighed more than five hundred pounds, maybe more. There was no way any of them could open it with sheer strength.

“I think we should go around,” Van suggested. “It usually has backdoors.”

“Probably,” Laswell responded. “We should look for alternatives. We’ll stick to it later, but if not, well, let’s say we’ll have to blast through that door.”

There were no retorts, and they all agreed.

As Alastor turned around, he caught sight of a figure sitting on a flat slab of stone, wearing a turban cloth and observing them from not too far away. Alastor’s hand immediately reached for his sword, and he drew it close to the monk.

“At ease, my friend. I intend no harm to you or your friends,” the monk said calmly, sensing the tension in the air.

The others spun around, their arms at the ready in case of danger.

“Who the hell are you supposed to be?” Alastor demanded, eyeing the monk suspiciously.

The monk raised his eyes to meet Alastor’s. “I’m just a monastic person who has lived to this day practicing the spiritual way.”

“He doesn’t seem dangerous,” Kate interjected, giving Alastor a nod to move on. “Let’s go.”

Alastor hesitated at first but eventually chose to follow, keeping a watchful eye on the monk as the group moved forward.

“You seek to cross the valley, do you not?” the monk asked, his voice low and measured.

Van turned sharply to face him. “You know how to get inside?”

The monk nodded. “Yes, I can open it for you,” he said, as if there was something else he wanted to say but held back.

“But you wanted something else from us, am I right?” Alastor inquired. His suspicion was still evident in his tone.

“Yes, indeed,” the monk replied, standing up from his perch. “Practicing my religion has taken a toll on my diet and my appetite. It’s been a long time since I got to eat something different than the fruits and vegetables around here. I’d appreciate it if you could give me a taste of what’s new and delicious out there.”

“Aren’t monks supposed to detach themselves from worldly pleasures?” Van asked, his eyebrows furrowing in confusion.

The monk coughed and shook his shoulders. “Can’t a man living in isolation be curious?”

Van let out a sigh and pulled a protein bar out of his pocket. He peeled off the wrapper and offered it to the monk.

“Here, try this.”

The monk eagerly took the food and examined it with curious eyes. He took a small bite, and his face lit up with delight.

“This is delicious!” he exclaimed, savoring the taste. He continued to gobble the food for another minute, clearly enjoying the new experience.

“You’re pretty far off for an old monk,” Alastor commented, eyeing the man suspiciously. “Hope you’re not getting yourself in trouble.”

The monk brushed him off, but eventually spoke up. “It doesn’t matter anymore. I am one of the few who remain.”

Laswell raised an eyebrow. “What does that mean?”

The monk paused his snacking and took a deep breath. “It all started when they came. We monks who live here have a sacred duty to ward off the evil artifact that lurks behind the mountain. But when those people found this island, everything became hell. They plundered and killed until there was only me left. The seal that caged the monster deep within the cave of the mountain managed to slip its’ avatar to guide those who worship it.”

Kate spoke up, “Does this monster have a name?”

The monk’s face darkened. “Croatoan.”

The group was stunned into silence.

Alastor spoke up again. “Well, there you go. That’s our monster.”

Van nodded. “We believe someone we knew was abducted by it, so our objective is to rescue him and kill its followers.”

Kate quickly interjected, “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. There is something we don’t know about them yet.”

The monk spoke up again, “Oh, I won’t be so sure about that. If they come after me or any of you, I’m not going to hesitate regardless of the reasons why.”

Van cut in, “Can you please open the gate for us?”

The monk walked over to the gate, placed his hands on it, and with a great effort, heaved it open. The group watched in awe as the old monk pushed the gate open, revealing a rocky path leading down into darkness.

As they walked, Van trailed his hand along the rocky wall for balance. The heat and light of the sun were enough to guide them through the path, creating a cursive tendril of shadows from the trees above.

Finally, they reached a level surface, and the monk led the way. He turned around and scrutinized them with his small eyes. They all came to a halt, waiting for what would come next.

“What is it?” Van asked as they looked out at the barren land before them.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” the old monk asked, his face furrowed with concern. “These people who occupied this land do not behave well, and make no mistake, they will slaughter you all with no remorse.”

Laswell explained their purpose. “The only thing we want is to find my father. After we retrieve him, we’re going to pull out from here.”

The old monk blinked. “Retrieve? I hope that will be easy. When they want something, they will fight for it. If your father was taken by them, then consider him gone.”

“No,” Laswell said firmly. “He’s not gone. He called me. He tried to reach me.”

“When was the last time he tried to connect with you? Did he even show his face?” The monk’s voice was skeptical.

Laswell hesitated to reply. “I’m not sure. Something has been bothering me.”

“That’s not your father, boy,” the monk said solemnly. “If you want to go further, I won’t stop you. But know this, whatever you’ll see in there, you won’t find what you’re looking for.”

Van spoke up. “What about you? I’m sure nothing is waiting for you here. Why not leave?”

“This is my home,” the monk replied. “My family’s souls remained here, and so is my duty to fend off evil forces. Sometimes it’s better to turn back from problems, but that’s an easy way out for cowards, and I am not a coward.”

“What are you going to do now?” Alastor asked.

“I’ll go back and see if there are any others who’ll try to cross the gate. I’m going to warn them.”

“There were others?” Laswell asked in surprise.

“Yes. You think you’re the first people who wandered around this island?”

“I thought so,” Laswell admitted.

“I’m going to have to fend them off from this place,” the monk said. “I’m going to prevent them from entering.”

Alastor quipped, “Well if that doesn’t sound like favoritism.”

The monk chuckled. “I don’t think that would be of your concern. You lot are worthy enough to enter, and I don’t think you’re keen to give up that easily after the trouble you youngsters went through.”

“What do you know about us?” Van asked.

“One that kept trouble to himself, one that is still mindful of the past, one who does not know who he is, and one who does not value himself,” the monk replied enigmatically. “Don’t ask me which is which. You guys are better off learning about yourselves.”

He turned to see them one last time. “The path that lies ahead is full of darkness that even I cannot surpass. Know this, you will be overwhelmed by the darkness, but faith is stronger than anything in this world. Have faith not just in yourselves but in others.”

Alastor muttered, “Sorry if I called you a juke.”

The monk nodded. “You stood tall with a tongue sharp as your wits, but keep running that smart mouth, and to the wall, I shall throw you over.”

The rest of the group cleared their throats, suppressing their chuckles, except for Alastor who was left dumbfounded as the old monk walked back to the depressed rocky road.

“Did that old fart just throw a dirty jab at me?” Alastor exclaimed, rubbing his arm where the old monk hit him with his staff.

“I think he did.” Van chuckled and patted Alastor’s shoulder. “But in his defense, you were kinda rude earlier.”

It had been an hour since they walked past the valley. They made the trek on foot to the top of the hill where the dead grass penetrated down the slope. The forest was different here; the leaves were ashen gray, and the logs were left dried as though they were transmuted into thin paper.

The gang had to come down and take a closer look. As Van was oblivious to what happened in the surrounding area, the rest were able to differentiate it from any normal circumstances. The life force was snuffed out. Not even the animals were spared from the onslaught against nature.

“This is bad,” Alastor commented.

“It is,” Laswell agreed.

“Am I the only one who’s clueless here?” Van asked, unease reflected in his eyes.

“The old monk was right,” Kate said, her eyes reflecting dread. “This place is hell. Whatever they did to this place caused them to wreak black magic. Don’t touch anything, okay?” She reminded everyone.

They didn’t need to reply; they already accepted the fact that this occurrence was abnormal. They already realized that their assumptions were far-fetched from what was happening on this island. The only thing they could do was brace for the fact that they were going to be taken by surprise. They must be able to fight back, regardless of the uncanny situation they were in.

After a brief observation, the gang moved forward into the forest where no more trail or path led them elsewhere. They remembered what the old monk said about this place being sacred ground. If that were the case, then it was plausible to think that there might be a few residential areas where the monks reside. They couldn’t shake off the feeling that there was something odd.

By then, the gang came across a few lines of tall trees, and everyone was gone in a blink of an eye. Alastor was lost in thought when they came into his sight. He looked back and twirled. The only thing that caught his peripheral vision was the dark trees extending seamlessly. The mercenary deduced, accounted for every worst possibility, and prepared himself.

He unsheathed his switch katana from its scabbard and held his pistol, Cristina, in his left hand. Alastor scuttled through the bushes and passed the borough of white spruce, then came to an open space in the forest. He solemnly closed his eyes, gathering his thoughts on something valuable to think of for a while before expunging a sigh.

The mercenary was unsettled since he came here. The thought of being caught off guard thoroughly shaken him. He shifted uneasily for another ten seconds until something caught his ears. He heard whispers of the grass, preemptively passing around. Some sort of slithery sound seemed to come from every direction.

Despite the unusual occurrence, Alastor could discern that the chaotic shift of sounds was caused by one thing or someone. But it wasn’t enough to ease his thoughts. Whatever it was, it was evident that it had been watching him for some time.

As Alastor surveyed his surroundings, a faint rustling noise came from behind him, and suddenly, something sprang out. Reacting quickly, Alastor spun around, his katana slicing through the air with a hiss. From the corner of his eye, he saw the figure crouch down to avoid the blade and then jab him in the abdomen.

The sound of metal on metal echoed as the breastplate absorbed the blow, lessening the force of the attack. Nevertheless, the power behind the strike signaled that the enemy was a formidable opponent.

The enemy retreated, the ground beneath him gouged by his boots. Alastor remained on guard, wary of the figure before him. A pale light illuminated the man’s face, revealing a familiar yet unfamiliar presence.

“Benny,” Alastor muttered, his voice darkened. “I was wondering if I was the only one who got thrown off into this world.”

Benny arched an eyebrow, as though he has no memory of Alastor. “Is Hannibal and Jett here too?” Alastor demanded. His tone was urgent.

Benny remained silent, prompting Alastor to launch an attack. He lunged forward with his katana raised, but Benny parried the strike with ease.

Alastor stumbled back. His shoulder hunched defensively as he sized up his opponent. Benny was quick and skilled, his blade creating multiple afterimages as he closed in on Alastor.

Caught off guard, Alastor tried to deflect the next strike, but the impact sent his katana flying from his hand. Stunned by Benny’s abilities, Alastor lost his footing and tripped over a rock, falling to the ground.

Just as Benny was about to strike, something flashed against his blade, causing him to pause. “We’ve been looking for you for the last ten minutes, and here you are having the beating of your life,” Van said, grinning.

Van’s blade clashed with Alastor’s katana, sending a jolt of energy through the metal. With lightning-fast reflexes, Van jabbed Benny in the face before delivering an uppercut that sent him reeling.

A nod from Van signaled the arrival of the others. Kate and Laswell conjured a spell that constricted Benny’s movement with the use of vines and roots, while Laswell cast a sleep spell on him, causing the rampaging man to finally fall.

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Kate spoke grimly, her eyes fixed on her uncle. “I don’t want to overstretch it, but my uncle is brimming with dark magic.” The others nodded in agreement. Having seen how he acted earlier.

“No shit,” Laswell muttered to himself. “What the hell did they do to him?”

Alastor asked with a condescending tone, “That’s your father?” Kate raised her eyebrow in response, prompting Alastor to explain, “Your father tried to kill me before.”

Kate’s curiosity was piqued. “Explain.”

“Benny, or whoever he is, came to my place and made some allies. It wasn’t pretty, I assure you. He has been with bad people, making dirty schemes, such as smuggling weapons, selling illegal substances, and even attempting to kidnap a princess.”

Laswell was skeptical. “A princess? That sounds less likely. If my dad tried to kidnap a princess before, his name would be all over national TV by now.”

Alastor countered, “Maybe not in this world, but in mine.”

The group was confused, except for Van, who was already told. “You’re messing with us?” Laswell asked.

Alastor shook his head. “No, unfortunately not. I came from another world, one where magic and monsters are not strangers.”

Kate was intrigued. “So, you’re like an alien? How does that even work?”

Alastor responded, “We have the same human anatomy, so I can adapt just fine to your world. There are even people from your realm who know about the existence of my world, and we trade knowledge, languages, and other things that are unique to our respective worlds.”

Van interjected, “Guys, we don’t have much time. When we got here, it was morning. By the time the sun sets and the moon rises, that’s when we need to be extra cautious.”

Kate refocused her attention on Alastor. “How did my uncle end up on the other side?”

Alastor shrugged. “Beats me. When we met, he was already angry because we kept getting ahead of him and his collaborators.”

Laswell’s tone was dreary and threatening. “You fought him?”

“In my defense, he was trying to murder all of us and wanted to kidnap the person I was protecting,” Alastor replied.

Benny’s condition was alarming, and Alastor wanted to examine him. Laswell was hesitant, but Kate convinced him to let Alastor take a look. Alastor carefully inspected Benny’s chest and saw that several symbols in tattoos ensnared his body. “This right here is what we call a multi-conjunction spell. It’s not your regular black magic; this takes the purest form of ‘hex,’ several alterations of earth and fire magic. Whoever did this to him must be powerful, powerful enough to cast on multiple persons.”

Laswell deduced, “Then those people who invited him before? Are they also subjugated? That could also mean that there’s someone who’s pulling the strings from behind.”

Alastor agreed, “That would be factual, but we don’t know the full nature of the spell yet. That’s why I don’t want any of you to try to experiment with lifting it off. We might consider splitting into two groups. Kate and Laswell will stay outside the gate and make sure Benny’s movements are restricted, while Van and I move forward to investigate what’s going on.”

Kate disagreed. She looked at Van with concern and said, “I think Van should head back with Laswell.”

Alastor rushed ahead, headlong into the scorching sun. The relentless heat beat down upon them, a warning of the perils that lay ahead. As the sky began to shift towards dusk, Van, who was cautious until now, didn’t want to waste any more time and decided to follow Alastor’s lead.

“Van,” Kate’s voice sounded tense, calling out to him. He turned around to face her.

“Please be careful, okay?” Kate’s worried expression betrayed her fear for Van’s safety.

“I will,” Van nodded reassuringly, flashing her a confident smile. “Don’t worry about me, I volunteered for this. I want to expand my horizons. And I have Alastor with me, he won’t leave me alone.”

Van took a deep breath, preparing himself mentally for what lay ahead. The dusty ground crunched beneath his boots as he set off after Alastor, his heart pounding in his chest. The landscape stretched out before him, vast and desolate, punctuated by the occasional towering rock formation. A hot, dry wind whipped at his face, stinging his skin and leaving him parched.

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The path ahead was murky and filled with mire. They were walking for over thirty minutes, yet there was no sign of a road or a nearby village that could offer them any answers. Alastor watched as Van slipped through the bushes to peer over the downhill path, which seemed to stretch on endlessly with logs.

Finally, they emerged from the forest and onto the road, but what greeted them was a sight that filled them with dread. The path ahead was lined with torches topped with flaming skulls, filling the air with a scent of burning. Van’s steps faltered as he felt the icy grip of fear take hold of him. Alastor, on the other hand, inspected the burning skull from a safe distance.

“This doesn’t look like one of those Halloween props you’d naturally see in shops,” Alastor remarked matter-of-factly.

Van took a small step forward and asked, “Is it real?”

Alastor nodded in confirmation. “Yeah. I wouldn’t touch it if I were you.”

Van gulped nervously and agreed, “Noted.”

As they continued on their journey, the dismal atmosphere still lingered on them, affecting Van more than Alastor. Alastor noticed Van spacing out and snapped his fingers in front of him to bring him back to reality.

“You’re spacing out,” he pointed out.

Van shook his head and apologized, “Sorry. I just...”

It was clear that Van’s enthusiastic mood dampened, but he remembered what he said to Kate and tried to muster some courage. Alastor intended to jab at Van’s confidence, but he was glad to see that Van wasn’t easily discouraged. He knew that perseverance alone wasn’t enough to overcome the challenges Van would face and that he wouldn’t be around to help him forever.

“I’ll be fine,” Van assured Alastor, although weariness was evident in his voice and expression.

Van swallowed the bitter truth and looked up at the sky, where clouds were gathering and bruising the air with the scent of impending rain. The thunder rang overhead, causing a rumble that passed by Van’s ears. Alastor called out to him, bringing him back to the present moment.

“Van, what is it?” Alastor asked.

“There are some things I want to say,” he said, and Van patiently listened as they walked through the forest. “There will come a time when I won’t be here to help you. I was hoping that you’d be prepared by then.”

Van nodded. “I know. That’s why I joined this adventure, remember? To expand my experience. I don’t want to be a burden, and I want to know what I can do with this gift.”

Alastor beamed. “Just don’t push yourself. Anything that is forced usually ends up badly.”

Van tilted his head to the side. “Where is this coming from?”

“I’m just looking out for you,” Alastor wearily said.

“I know, but this feels weird,” Van’s face squirmed into a cringe.

Alastor laughed a bit, but then his face became long and penitent. “You don’t have to make it sound worse. But I know what it feels like to lose, to not know what you’re meant to be. I'm still looking for the right answers on what path I should take.” He paused and looked ahead. Alastor emphasized, “Remember this: when darkness overwhelms, faith overcomes. Have faith in yourself, and you will never find yourself falling twice on your back.”

“Thanks,” Van said genuinely. Those words were ones he’d remember in the years to come. “That was nice of you.”

“Shut up,” Alastor responded sharply. “Don’t tell anyone about this, or I’ll kill you.”

“Hey, it’s not like your friends are in this world. They’re on the other side.”

“Still, no,” he sternly returned with a hard look.

“Fine.”

“We should move,” Alastor said, dismissing him off to his internal monologue.

They started to move forward, slowly, braced their arms ready. They couldn’t lie and wait for time to pass by. They had to jog across the pillar of logs, and their efforts weren’t in vain. They came out of the forest and saw a village hanging in the middle of the pinewoods below the cliff.

Alastor took the initiative and conjured a construct they slid down. They scurried through and lay back in the corner of the woods, where they were shadowed by the tall trees. The houses nearby were monasteries where monks lived, only denoted that it was trampled by people who made some modern adjustments. Though not significant, there were warehouses built with security.

One thing was certain, their repetitive patterns and robot gestures signaled that they were under possession. They did not watch over the borders as they heard one of them call the others and gather at the monastery.

They carefully threaded to the monastery, following them and slipping through the dark halls, where they stalked them. It had come to their attention that the enslaved people halted at an altar. All religious constructs were turned decrepit, perverted, and warped into their cult sanctuary.

On top of the wall where they were worshiping, a dark image of a demon emanated the illusion of staring everywhere. With its long horns and sharp jaw, together with its teeth sharpened as a shark, it couldn’t be mistaken as a demon. It had a lanky body, four arms which were bestowed with long claws perfect for a predator, along with its sharp eyes that did not have an iris, all but red. An arching object was attached to its back along with four scabbards.

They watched and listened in awe to the dark chanting emanating from the people gathered around the monastery’s abbey. The sound of a horn pierced through the night, almost like a calling, and the worshippers began to dance with abandon. The stained-glass windows above shone upon them, casting a red hue on their frenzied movements.

“What kind of ritual shindig is this?” Van muttered, clearly disturbed by the bizarre scene unfolding before them.

“The kind that involves lunacy and a dance fever,” Alastor responded, equally bewildered.

They thought their lookout was secure and tight in the dark room, but a pair of golden eyes blinked dimly from behind, locked onto them. Alastor’s instincts kicked at the moment the cold touch of darkness reached him, and he felt an impending danger. While Van remained oblivious, Alastor dragged him out of the room and into the abbey, where the people halted in their frolic procession.

The two stumbled and fell on their backsides on the cold granite ground. Van grunted as he rose to his feet and then pulled Alastor up.

“What the hell was that?” Van asked, still disoriented.

Alastor didn’t have the chance to explain his actions as he noticed the dead silence with their bright yellow eyes locked onto them. The worshippers turned on them, and Van let out a curse under his breath.

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Meanwhile, Kate and Laswell were dealing with Benny, who was ensnared by vines that crept up his body to restrain him from any further harm. Kate released a huge sigh as she finally refrained from her mana, and Laswell was on the ground, panting from exhaustion.

“Damn,” Kate muttered. “Your father is one hell of a baggage.”

“I know. The guy must have been in weight management,” Laswell quipped, trying to lighten the mood.

“Are you alright getting schooled by your son, uncle?” Kate teased the unconscious Benny. “I’m wondering how your father got held captive. I’m well aware that he could be blind as blithe sometimes, but taking him for a fool would be an understatement.”

Laswell shook his head. “But he could be reckless sometimes.”

“You should have told me about this from the start,” Kate gently said.

“Kate, you already have so many problems on your plate. I didn’t want to burden you,” Laswell defended himself.

“Still,” she hardly said. “The two of you are the only family I have left, the closest thing I have to my mother. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to help you.”

“Oh, so you have retrieved him. I see,” an old monk said, stepping in. His long thick beard dangled and curved with his hand.

“His entire being was drowned into a pool of black magic,” the monk stated matter-of-factly. “He’s in a dire situation should the intoxication not prevail.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Laswell muttered, clearly not impressed by the old monk’s observation.

“Laswell,” Kate chided him, giving him a reproachful look. “The monk is trying to help.”

The old monk nodded, unfazed by Laswell’s attitude. “I’ve been living far off from them and in hiding for the last few years. But one thing I can tell you; whatever is hiding on the mountain behind the monastery is where you can find the answers to what you seek.”

“You sure?” Kate asked, clearly skeptical.

The old monk nodded again. “They were already seen by those people. Any stray further, and they will surely meet their ends. Go.”

Laswell and Kate looked at each other.

“Well one of us should stay here in case he wakes up,” Laswell said and affirmed. “You should go. I’ll be fine here.”

Kate immediately turned toward the path and sprinted off.

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Alastor quickly pulled Van to his side as the inhuman creature lurched towards them. They turned towards the dense forest where a group of possessed individuals chased after them. So far, they managed to avoid several cult members, but their luck wouldn’t last forever. Alastor knew they needed to find a way out soon.

As they took a turn to evade another blow, a bolt whistled overhead. Alastor shouted in frustration, “Great! Now we’re up against an entire cult!”

“And they have crossbows too,” Van added, panting from the exertion.

Alastor let Van take the lead while he drew protection spells against the projectiles flung out by the enemies. They ran towards a hill where they found some cover. Alastor quickly unsheathed his katana and cut off several trees, using them as a blockade to stop the cult members from following them.

They were able to run far enough for the enemies to lose sight of them and remained behind the downtrodden path. But exhaustion soon caught up with them, and they were drenched in sweat, their hearts pumping with adrenaline.

“You sure that’s enough?” Van said and caught his breath.

Alastor turned back to look at the forest. The sound of marching footsteps echoed in the distance, and he knew they had to keep moving. “No,” he shook his head. “I don’t think so. Let’s make a run for it.”

They jogged deeper into the dark forest, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the cult members as possible. Suddenly, they stumbled upon a ten-foot Oakwood fence embedded in the ground. A pale-shaped crescent caught the corner of their eyes, illuminating the gloomy weather.

“What was that?” Van asked, his eyes darting around nervously.

“I don’t know,” Alastor mumbled, his senses on high alert.

“I was wondering where the two of you went.” A familiar voice interrupted their conversation, causing them to jump in surprise.

It was Kate, who caught up with them. She was panting heavily after the headlong sprint and bent on her knees to catch her breath.

“Why did you come?” Van asked, his voice filled with concern.

“The old monk told me you were in deep trouble,” Kate responded, her voice strained.

Alastor couldn’t help but shake his head in disbelief. “Isn’t that sweet? You could have gotten yourself killed,” he said sarcastically.

“What?” Kate looked confused, not understanding what he meant.

Van shot Alastor a disapproving look before turning to Kate. “It’s a long story,” he explained before recounting what happened in the last forty minutes since they parted ways.

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Her face was still laden with dread and fear as she realized the situation they were in. She found it hard to believe that an entire cult tracked down these two and caught her along with them. She didn’t want to turn her back on them, but it might be advantageous to investigate the infested monastery while Van and Alastor were being chased by the entire cult.

They had no choice but to scamper behind the tall oak wood fence and bar it with protection magic. Alastor’s wall magic proved to be as effective as Kate’s protection magic. The two-folded steel wall stood brimming.

“You sure that will hold?” Van said discerningly. “There are like hundreds of them, you know.”

“It will hold,” Kate said. Then she turned around to survey the area ahead.

Chrysanthemums spread across the meadow to the farthest part it could reach. Alastor raised a brow, dazed and confused.

“This place is different from any others,” Alastor darkly muttered.

“Yeah,” Van nodded. “How the hell have these flowers managed to survive this far?”

“Out of all places, this is the only one unaffected by the black magic scourging around,” Kate commented.

When a gust of wind blew by, some chrysanthemums rode away, and one of them was caught by Alastor’s hand. He picked it up and stared at it for a while. It wasn’t out of the ordinary, but he felt like he had to see it for himself, unsure what kind of answer it might offer him.

His eyes took it in, tracing the pattern of lavender, orange, yellow, and red. At that moment, something jolted his mind. Images flashed in his head - of those from a woman. He stumbled on the ground. His heartbeats raced and he had a fever.

Kate came to him. “Are you okay?”

Alastor wiped off the beads of sweat from his forehead and took a moment before rising from below.

“I’m fine,” he uttered.

Alastor brushed off the flower and moved ahead. Van and Kate exchanged worried looks and nodded.

To see the answers, one must see them for themselves and walk down the rough path. The images of a woman clung to his mind as though they glued themselves to his consciousness. Alastor reeled his thoughts over the times when he was in near-death situations, but as soon as he got over it, his mind plunged into a series of replay of images.

Van sprung on his side and held Alastor’s arm from falling.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

Alastor shook his head. “Yeah,” he ruffed. “Must be jet lag.”

“Bro,” Van muttered. “We leaped off a thousand feet from the sky. I don’t think jetlag has anything to do with your jet lag.”

The pain and disruption came to pass. Alastor’s muscles burned, but he stood his ground and shook his head, removing the thought from his head.

“Maybe it’s for the best to rest,” Kate suggested.

“No,” Alastor evenly said. “We shouldn’t waste any more time.”

Ignored, the two could only follow and thrust forward.

Throttling over the hill path, they found a cave on the mountainside. Alastor gestured to halt any further.

“What is it?” Kate asked.

“Something’s off,” Van commented instead. He felt tingling. “Isn’t it, Al?”

“Yeah,” Alastor responded with his breath, taking in. His eyes traveled from here and there. “Heads up. Something is coming.”

They heard it too, the rustling of leaves and the trees swaying violently from the sudden gust of wind. And then, silence.

Alastor and Kate were on high alert, their nerves on edge. But it was Van, with his exceptional hearing, who picked up on something unusual. “Something huge is coming, guys,” he warned.

“How can you tell?” Alastor asked, his eyes darting around for any signs of danger.

“I can...” Van trailed off. His attention was drawn to movement in the forest.

He yanked Kate down and took cover himself. “What the--?” Alastor barely had time to react as a being emerged from the woods, scraping his back with a loud clang as he fell to the ground.

Alastor grunted, casting a loathsome glare at Van. “A warning would have been appreciated, Van.”

“Sorry,” Van said, looking ashamed. “It came in so fast.”

Kate cut in, urging them to focus. “Save the banter for later. Heads up!”

As they stood up, the ground began to rumble and split open. A twenty-foot-tall monster emerged, its massive horns jutting straight up from its head. Its rib cage was enormous, even its reddish skin seemed to strain to contain it. And its eyes were a deep, endless black.

“No humans have reached this far, only a few of you managed to get past my pitiful acolytes!” the monster snarled.

“This must be the monster that’s controlling them,” Van said, his voice low and urgent.

“How dare you call me a monster?!” the creature bellowed. “I am Croatoan, the master of illusion and disguise! The first monster to have ascended into godhood!”

“Bitch,” Van interjected, his voice calm but dripping with contempt. “Screw your nonsense!”

Alastor and Kate were taken aback by the sudden outburst, but before they could say anything, Croatoan shouted back at them. “I am a GOD!”

“No, you’re not!” Van spat vehemently. “You’re an ass!”

Alastor regained his senses and spoke up. “Have you ever asked yourself what are gods to the non-believers?”

“Maybe you guys shouldn’t address it like that,” Kate stuttered. “I don’t think it’s a good idea to piss it off any further.”

Croatoan shrieked like a pig and hurled a handful of fire at them.

Alastor leaped out of the way, but Kate and Van remained rooted to the spot. When the flames died down, Alastor couldn’t see any visible damage on his companions, but he knew their protective spells wouldn’t hold up against the monster’s attacks for long. They audibly hissed as they stood.

“You guys could have dodged, you know,” Alastor complained.

“Well, we’re not exactly blessed with acute senses,” Kate reprimanded.

The protective spell crackled and shimmered before returning to its original state.

Alastor hissed in frustration and turned back to face Croatoan. They were in for a tough fight.

“Kate, support us from a distance. And you, Van, find the right timing to engage,” Alastor instructed, as they all aimed their attention at the monstrous Croatoan.

Alastor charged forward, conjuring several flames that the Croatoan unnaturally evaded with its massive body. He then slid beneath the monster and cut the skin off its leg, but the creature quickly turned around, snarling and waving its black claws.

Van saw his chance while the Croatoan was distracted by the others. He quickly approached and launched his fist like a pistol, breaking off the front of its knee. The monster snarled and signaled its claws toward Van, but Alastor summoned a wall to protect him. However, the Croatoan destroyed the wall, sending Van flying off, but unscathed.

Kate breathed a sigh of relief and began chanting a spell, “Espellere fluctus powietrza.” A strong gust of wind gathered on her palm, violent and shaky, creating a vortex that scraped the ground, trees, and even herself. Kate winced as she aimed her arm toward the monster, and in a quick turn, the vortex shot off, ripping the Croatoan’s skin and spitting blood and veins all over the gray land. The vortex penetrated the flesh and drilled through the mountainside, causing a loud explosion.

The Croatoan cried in pain, its attention was towards the aggressor. It lurched forward towards Kate, but a wall blocked its path. Alastor sprinted and leaped on several constructs, aiming his blade at the monster’s head, but the monster ducked and captured him in its huge hands, throwing him off to the mountainside. Alastor’s protection came undone and skinned off of him, leaving him in pain.

The brief moment allowed the monster to break the barrier, only to be stopped once more by Van, who stabbed its feet with a sharp log of tree and punched it in the jaw, causing it to stagger back and growl. The monster hit Van, causing him to tumble and drift aimlessly, while his mind began to wander off.

Kate knew that Van couldn’t hold the monster alone, so she summoned a tornado of fire with the spell “Fluctus Golfiraga.” The tornado burned what remained of the green in the gray land but was easily squashed by the Croatoan, who consumed it with a loud burp.

“Youngling, I was born of the flame from the deepest part of hell. Such petty tricks won’t hold me down!” the Croatoan roared.

The monster was about to attack Kate when something bulleted off to it and dragged it to the ground. Van repeatedly drove his fist down to the monster, perforating his hand onto its ribcage and reaching its heart. A white light began to emanate as Van’s light drove inside the monster, causing it to scream antithetical to humans. The light traversed, and the Croatoan’s motion fell off, its life drained away.

Van finally resided on top of the monster and jumped down, while Kate rushed to his side, catching him in her arms. Alastor woke up from being unconscious and asked, “You guys finished it?”

“Van did,” Kate replied.

“How?” Alastor asked.

“I don’t know what happened. Ask him,” Kate said as Van’s mind wandered off to the surroundings.

Alastor kneeled and observed Van’s pale face, noticing a trace of fear in his eyes.

“Hey,” Alastor called to him. “Snap out of it!”

Van’s head shook as he turned his eyes toward them. “What –”

Alastor considered the possibility that Van was not responsible for what happened. “Please tell me you remember what just happened.”

Van looked around, confused. “What happened?”

Alastor groaned and turned to answer Kate’s questioning gaze. “The voices must have taken over again. It will take some time before he remembers what happened.”

As Van stood up and wearily observed the body of the Croatoan, everything flooded back to him. He felt a sharp sting in his mind.

“Or maybe not,” Alastor said.

It didn’t take long for Van to recognize what he had done, and he turned to see them. “I did this?” he stated.

“Yeah, you did,” Kate replied. “Do you remember?”

“Barely,” Van nodded.

“Would you mind telling us what that light was all about?” Kate asked.

“I can’t say. I don’t know. It just came out,” Van replied.

“Light?” Alastor looked at Kate. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Van just took the monster on the ground and jabbed his hand onto it, then there’s this bright light that flickered and then the monster is dead,” Kate explained.

“Hmm,” Alastor fell into thought. “That couldn’t be...”

“Do you know something about it?” Kate questioned him.

“Yes, but I’m not sure if that’s the case. In our world, we call it the Purification,” Alastor explained. “That spell was exclusive among the elves. There was no record of a human being able to use it. Only items imbued with divinity can do this and inflict such damage. But if that were the case, it would make sense how he defeated a demon. Every abomination made by dark magic can be expelled with the use of Purification. What we have right here might be new.”

“So, you mean to say that Van can purify demons alike?” Kate asked.

“Maybe. I don’t know much of the details, but it appears that Van just unlocked his new profound ability.”

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They took the path back to where the village’s monastery lay and found traces of ashes and shadows burnt on the ground. It took a few minutes to stroll and inspect the village and monastery when they realized that no one was there.

“Anyone!” Van’s voice echoed throughout the village.

Alastor immediately hushed him down. “Don’t call them out like that. The last thing we want is an entire colony coming after us.”

“Relax. I doubt they’re still--urghh!” Van fell to his knees, bearing his head blaring in pain and shrieking. Memories not belonging to him flooded his mind. It felt like a lifetime when he got struck by the flooding memories of individuals, but when it finally ended, Van wearily lifted his head and looked at them. “These people were the ones from the lost colony.”

“You mean the lost colony of Roanoke?” Kate asked.

Van nodded. “They were supposed to meet up with the soldiers when the Croatoan appeared. It trapped them within its illusion and cast a spell similar to what we saw in your Uncle Benny. It continued to feed and grew from that.”

“That’s odd,” Kate said. “If it was feeding for the last hundreds of years, it should be stronger by now.”

“Don’t underestimate its power, Kate,” Alastor warned her. “It’s incredibly strong, probably even stronger than a bishop vampire. We were just lucky that Van knew how to purify it.”

“I have no idea what you just said right now, but fine.” Kate replied with a snicker.

As they left the site, Van couldn’t help but look back and noticed a few silhouettes moving furtively. When he turned back to the road, he heard something whispering behind his ear. “Thank you,” it said. Van shuddered and immediately ran closer to Kate and Alastor.

“What’s gotten into you?” Alastor asked.

“Nothing,” Van shakily replied.

“Weird.”

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“Is Uncle Benny okay now?” Kate asked, tired after the long walk.

Laswell was tending his father who was laid in the grass. Faint mist of light covered his body. He was being recuperated from the dark energy.

“It appears so,” Laswell replied, his dreadful expression replaced with relief. “The hex that was cast upon him is no longer there. What did you guys do, by the way?”

The three exchanged a look.

“Well, we took down the demon who was controlling the minds of the people, so...” Alastor said.

“You mean Van took down the monster all by himself,” Kate corrected.

“Van took the monster down all by himself?” Laswell asked.

“Yeah,” Alastor confirmed. “My boy right here purified the hell out of the demon.”

While they talked about Van, Kate lost her grip on her surroundings. She found herself feeling dizzy and uncomfortable, her breaths cut short. Her vision was lost, and she felt the pit of her stomach sting.

“Kate?” Van quickly caught her in his arms. They immediately withdrew their attention and tended to her.

“She just collapsed. I don’t know what’s going on,” Van said, worried.

Alastor held her arms and felt her heartbeats. “This couldn’t be,” he muttered.

“Well, what is it?” Van asked.

Alastor turned to him with a dreadful face before stating the words that might change their view of her.

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Kate wasn’t sure how long she was watching the house burn, but the pain, sorrow, and grief remained with her. Born from the ashes of the house, the darkling made her appearance known and strode onto her with a fastidious smile. Her presence reminded Kate of the cold and desolate feeling she experienced back in the underground chamber, something she couldn’t shake off even with meditation. And with her smile that could fill her in, she felt like a moth, trapped in a spider’s web.

“Wake up!”

Something pulled her out of her wicked dream.

Kate’s eyes snapped open, and she breathed in raggedly. She felt her spirit shudder as she put her mindfulness on Van.

“You were having a bad dream,” Van said and grabbed a glass of water.

Kate drank and took a deep breath. She wiped the beads of sweat off her face before responding.

“How long have I been asleep?”

“Six hours,” Van replied. “It’s 5 in the afternoon. Come on, you need to eat something.”

Kate sat up straight while Van put the wooden breakfast serving tray on her lap.

“You cooked all of this?” she asked, surprised.

“Yeah, I did,” Van replied. “Look, I’m gonna go to the kitchen and grab something.”

“Okay,” Kate smiled.

Van walked out of the bedroom and returned from the kitchen with tea.

“Here,” he said, putting the tea down on the table. “Alastor said that this might help you ease whatever you’re going through.”

Kate lifted her eyes, and her brow curved. “And what would that be?”

Van expelled a breath. “You hide it pretty well.”

“Look, whatever he said to you –”

Van interrupted Kate. “We already know that you’ve been using black magic, Kate,” Van called out her bluff. “Alastor confirmed it.”

Kate looked down, ashamed.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Van asked with a hint of disappointment.

“Because it’s not your problem,” Kate replied, trying to avoid eye contact.

Van took a deep breath and let out a defeated sigh. “Between the two of us, you’re supposed to be the smart one, and yet, you’re acting like a kid.”

“Speak for yourself. You’re the one who’s not direct,” Kate retorted, her voice quivering with emotion. She paused to collect herself before continuing. “About us. What are we? Because I feel like you’re into me just for convenience. You were never straightforward about what you feel.”

Van looked down, disheartened. “Sorry if I’m giving you mixed signals. It’s a bad habit. You know someone like me who does less, people get suspicious, but whenever I try to do or say something out of my mind, I always find myself in the opposite direction. So, it is easier not to do or say anything at all. Maybe that’s why I’m not good at conveying something in words, but I’m trying to be better... with you.”

Kate blinked, her eyes widened briefly, and looked down, but instantly filled with regret. “Then maybe you should continue being better,” she said softly. Van’s eyes gazed upon her, listening carefully. “There are times when I miss my parents. I wanted to tell them that I only realized now, so that the memory before they die, can carry out to wherever they’re going after this life. It’s harder to not say anything at all because there are people out there who need to hear comforting words, especially those who seem to have a lot of time. The words we never got to say are the ones that can kill.”

“If it’s the words we never got to say that can kill, then you should have come to me in the first place. I may not be able to help that much, but I can assure you that I won’t back out just because it’s inconvenient. I’m telling you this because I care about you, Kate Anderson,” Van said, his voice filled with sincerity. “Take it from someone who is really crazy, you’ll be fine because you have someone.”

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Don’t talk to yourself like that. You’re not crazy.”

Van smiled, stood and let Kate have some rest. It was a good opportunity to have the time to think about her actions.

Kate lay back down, the warmth of Van’s words embracing her. She knew she had to face her problems and deal with the consequences of her actions. She couldn’t keep running away from her problems and expecting others to clean up her mess.

As she lay there, she thought about her parents, the darkling, and the black magic she had been using. She knew she needed to make things right, even if it meant facing her worst fears.

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Early in the morning, Mark left for Maryvale. He and Roxy knew that something had happened to make Gilt lose his inhibitions. They had to find a solution to the problem. In the meantime, Roxy went to buy some ready-to-eat meals and went to the hospital to hypnotize a doctor into bringing her some blood bags. When she returned, the foxy redhead complained about the poor service in a certain restaurant, but when she reached Gilt, she found nothing but a dangling chain.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she muttered. Roxy traced back to the city and followed the smell of blood drops. She discovered a hidden alley behind a pub and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that the girl was still alive. However, the uninhibited vampire turned to her, blood dripping from his mouth.

Roxy swooped in and dragged Gilt, pushing him against the wall. “I thought you were busy shopping, Mom?” he huffed.

Roxy snickered. “Hilarious. You made yourself a free man and then you fed again. How delightfully grim.”

Gilt feigned deafness to her words, his attention returning to the young woman. But Roxy pushed him back against the wall, harder this time. “Not so fast. You can’t just feed on someone in broad daylight. Do you think all of this is a cakewalk?”

“Yeah,” Gilt nodded. “It is.”

“Speak for yourself. You got yourself found out by certain people.”

Gilt arched a brow. “Who now?”

Knowing Gilt well, Roxy made sure the girl healed first before putting her under complete hypnosis. She ordered Mark to go back to her house and forget everything that happened.

Like everyone else, Roxy was tired of what Gilt had been going through. She hasn't slept as well since she contacted him. Unlike any other vampires, Roxy found it restful after a tiring day. Finally, she could put her mind at ease and focus on him.

“You want to be in the world of pain, don’t you?” Roxy said, her voice full of annoyance. “I won’t be the one who ends up on the front page being killed.”

“Then let me. What’s the point of all of this?”

There was a pain in Gilt’s tone and this triggered Roxy back then when they first found him. This made her feel unbearable.

Roxy raised her eyebrow in frustration. “Damn it, Gilt! I’m trying to help you, but you keep doing the same old crap. Haven’t you moved on from this? You promised you’d never harm innocent people.”

“That was hundreds of years ago. People change, Roxy,” Gilt replied.

Roxy wished the wind blowing past them could wash away her vexation. She knew that getting angry over something petty wouldn’t make a difference. Instead, she reminisced about the memories they shared when Gilt was warm and kind.

Trying to keep her voice level, Roxy asked, “So, what’s your end goal now?”

“My end goal is to travel to Ohio and visit a certain family to remind them of their sins,” Gilt answered.

Roxy knew that Gilt’s motivations had nothing to do with his ego or personal glory. She believed that he was hurting for someone else. She wasn’t sure if Rick’s suffering had anything to do with Gilt’s desire to bomb Maris with a flurry of words.

Nodding in agreement, Roxy said, “It has something to do with Maris abandoning Rick, doesn’t it? I thought you didn’t bear a grudge when we talked on the phone earlier. I guess you were never honest with anyone, including yourself.”

“That’s an understatement,” Gilt scoffed.

Suddenly, someone rang behind them. Roxy and Gilt turned around to see an old and vulnerable Maris Mavenhart. Her eyes were stern as if she could see right through them.

Gilt walked towards Maris, and Roxy followed closely behind as a precaution.

“Do you have any idea how tough it’s been for us?” Maris asked Gilt.

“Not my problem,” Gilt replied quietly. He knew that he was to blame for the decisions that led to their current situation.

“What I know about being a vampire is that it takes away every bit of humanity. I didn’t know your brain cells had been reduced too,” Maris said coldly.

“You’re a mean old lady,” Roxy interjected coldly. “I called you to help, not insult him.”

“I am helping,” Maris said evenly. “If you want to know why he’s acting like this, here’s your answer.”

Maris held their hands, and her cold touch jolted their minds, merging their thoughts. In a collision of memories, Maris flooded Roxy’s mind with recent events. Then, she let them go.

Discombobulated and dazed, Gilt took a step back and hung his head, feeling defeated. “What did you do?” he gritted his teeth.

“I did what I had to do,” Maris replied callously, then turned to Roxy. “All of this is for a girl. Gilt felt responsible for her death.” Maris scoffed, “Don’t blame me for not being competent enough. I may be negligent, but you’re the one who allowed it to happen.”

“How the hell does that even make sense?!” Gilt exclaimed in frustration.

Roxy stepped in between them, and even then, Gilt’s murderous intent did not falter, only momentarily satiated by the blood of his victims. That thought alone sparked concern in Roxy’s mind.

“All for one girl,” Maris stated, “I thought you were better than this.”

“Away, now!” Roxy shouted at Maris.

“When all of this is over, come and talk to me,” Maris hissed as she edged away from them and retreated to the city.

With Maris fulfilling her purpose, it was now on Roxy’s shoulders to figure out how to turn the situation around.

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The city was bustling with activity, but the people lacked their usual liveliness. There was a recent attack from the mobs, and the people were still recovering from that incident. Maryvale had always been a peaceful city with low to no crime rates, and Mark never imagined that it would be plagued by such unfortunate events.

Mark was intrigued by what his beloved other half uncovered. He has no idea that Gilt was affectionate towards someone. Mark knew that Gilt was not someone who could easily be dissuaded from his commitment as a misogamist. The past 70 years have been quite eventful for him.

If the circumstances were different, he would love to hear about Kate, but above everything, he needed to focus on something else first.

Mark made his way through the borough and into the plaza. He halted when he reached the street and heard whispers several feet away mentioning the name “Kate.” It could help him track down her house if he knew where she lived. He felt a twinge of regret wash over him for not paying closer attention.

All he could do was walk down the road, hoping to stumble upon her location.

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Kate never felt more feverish than she did now. Her stomach twisted and turned, causing her immense pain. Her blood pumped harder through her veins, making her muscles cramp up and rendering her unable to move for some time. She curled up in her bed, whimpering in agony.

The day had been eventful for Kate. She couldn’t believe that the guy who seemed so boringly studious was able to outmatch a demon itself, let alone that he was capable of an advanced and unknown spell. As she lay in bed, she huddled with the blanket on her stomach, feeling the weight of the day’s events.

It hadn’t been long since Van left, but she already missed him. She felt like she kept too much to herself, and it had even rubbed off on him. What she wanted most was to find the answers to her problem, but she didn’t know where to start.

As she lay there, her stomach grumbled once more. She decided to get up from her bed and reconsider the pie Van had left for her earlier that afternoon. Hastily, she plucked out the pie and spoon, feeding herself with a sense of comfort. That was when the door knocked.

## Interlude

On March 20, 1433, the sweet aroma of spring filled the air and lifted the people’s spirits, masking the stench emanating from the river banks. As the sun began to set, crowds gathered in the location where they usually met. Marcus, a man of all business and no play was not the type to attend such gatherings. He and his brothers had been dealing with abominations for the past two years, and they had no choice but to take on the dangerous tasks, despite the risks being against them.

Marcus and his brothers came to Florence from Vienna in search of a specific group of people, but they hit a dead end. So, they decided to take a break, rest their tired minds, and mingle with the locals to gather some information. While they were only planning on relaxing and restocking their supplies, Antoninus, Marcus’s twin brother, insisted that they attend a gathering hosted by the Medici family.

Verus, another one of Marcus’s brothers, already secured an invitation to the private event. Since it was already done, Marcus reluctantly agreed, but he couldn’t shake off the feeling that something was off about the whole situation. Yet he was relieved to know that the Borgia’s, specifically Pope Callixtus III, were not invited, as a witch from their quarters foretold of an ill-fated child that would bring chaos to Italy. Marcus was determined to prevent this prophecy from coming true with his own hands should he give it a chance.

As the event began, Marcus wandered off to the corners of the room, admiring the artwork displayed there. While most people seemed to be more focused on paintings, Marcus was drawn to the sculptures, particularly Giovanni Pisano’s Head of the Bearded Man, which he found outstanding. He appreciated the attention to the details and the balance of the crafter’s vision and tools. Lost in his admiration, he was interrupted by a woman’s voice from his right.

“Not very artistic, don’t you think so, messere?” the woman said.

Marcus turned to look at her, taking in his mind her small button nose at first. Composed of beautiful complexion, her sundress glinting under the candles ran to her rich auburn hair flowing and shimmered against the light. Along with her perky coral cheeks, the cherry blossoms would shy away at the behest of her crimson lips. Her dilated, stunning gorgeous eyes, the color of amber, held a mischievous glint.

Marcus’s vacant and stolid overlook was filled with confusion, mentally speaking. He does not know what she meant when she said those words, but he did not show any kind of facial, or verbal reaction at first. He reassessed his thoughts for a moment. *Was she referring to the work of Pisano or was she questioning my taste in art?*

During those ten seconds, Marcus observed her heartbeat and remembered the tone of her voice. Her intentions were unclear, but perhaps he was being nitpicky about the details so that it’d slipped into his mind that this young lady was just trying to start a conversation with him. Even so, Marcus does not know what he can offer to her, but it wouldn’t hurt if he’d entertain himself a little. He finally flashed a smile.

Her waiting wasn’t wasted as he responded at last, “Were you talking about my taste in art, or was it about the artwork itself, perdere?”

Her face fell under the realization and in awe. “That’s an artwork?” She started to look around the place and observed the other sculptures. He could’ve guessed, she finally saw the names under the arts. “Please, pardon me. I am just a novice in this section of art.”

Marcus stifled a laugh. “No worries.” he shook his head. “I understand where you’re coming from. How does this statue become an artwork if it were a common attribute as décor in everyone’s houses?” he jested.

“My apologies, messere.” Yet her lips purse into a smile.

“No need.” He answered and responded with a half-beam.

The woman laughed, and Marcus couldn’t help but fully smile. He had a feeling that this event was about to get a lot more interesting.

“But I beg to differ, Signora,” Marcus said, taking in a breath. “Sculptures, such as this one by Pisano, offer a unique perspective on art. They capture the essence of their subjects with incredible detail.”

The woman smiled, amused by his words. “I see. You are a man of discerning taste, messere.”

Marcus nodded, impressed by the woman’s wit despite the awkward situation. “And you, Signora, seem to have an eye for a gorgeous woman yourself.”

She chuckled softly, her eyes glancing around the ornate ballroom. “Oh, I’m way off from my zone. I only attend for the sake of attending,” she groaned exasperatedly. The tedium was written all over her face. “But you, you don’t seem to be the kind of guy who’d stay in for... quite a boorish situation like this.”

“My siblings were quite a conniving bunch,” he answered. His voice was raised enough for her to hear against the festive music. “They wanted to be part of this social gathering and convinced me that it would be to my liking, but as you can see where I lie right now. What about you? Who dragged you into this tedious case?”

“My father.” She nodded in her father’s direction. His rotund complex distinguished from the others. “He was being pesky about admitting himself over here.” She sighed, her eyes roaming over the elaborate decor. “It’s not for me. People bore me. I’d prefer if he had taken me over to his business to learn something one or two, even if it’s as exhausting and dull as ever, at least it would be worth my time, but I think this night is worth more than its glaring issues.” Karla stared up at him. Her eyes enticed desire and Marcus was slowly falling for it. His heart beat faster for unknown reasons despite being uninhibited.

She chuckled lightly. “Would you please enlighten me, messere?” Her eyes dipped back to the sculpture.

Marcus shook his head off from taking in her beauty and directed his attention back to the sculpture. “This piece of sculpture is known as the Head of Bearded Man, like what would appeal to the sculpture itself,” he chuckled. “It was made by none other than Giovanni Pisano. He was sometimes renowned by people as the only true Gothic sculptor here in Italy because of his masterpiece Pulpit of Sant’ Andrea, Pistoia.”

Marcus brought his eyes back to her, and she nodded in amazement. “All this knowledge of sculptors, I dare assume you’re a sculptor as well, messere?”

Marcus beamed ear to ear. Those words were music to his earlobes, but sadly, he wasn’t the man that he wanted to be. Marcus shook his head. “Although it’s nice to hear, but no. I’m not trained enough to build my own, let alone handle a hammer or a chisel.”

She jerked her head, her eyes wide with surprise. “Why not?”

“Let’s say, I’m not young enough to dream that big nor have the privilege to excavate myself to learn it.”

“I don’t understand,” she replied enthusiastically. “You looked very young to me. Certainly, you can do it.”

That might be true for her, but for him, he was over one hundred and sixteen years old. For all those seasons of years, his passion faded, and the fire vanished.

“Yes, you’re right,” he returned and smiled wryly. “But I’m way past that. My priorities now are different.”

“Che spreco,” she mumbled under her breath. “You appear to be interested in that profession. Yet allured by something else. You seem to be the kind of man who’d pursue what you want according to your desire.”

Marcus scoffed, feeling that something wasn’t quite right in her words. “It’s not something you should be worried about, perdere,” he said. “Some of us were meant to be different from what we intended to become, and there’s nothing wrong with that.”

Marcus’s eyes shimmered in the fire as he looked at her. There was still a hint of passion despite the lack of intention. They say a person’s eyes are the window of the soul, right then, he saw well her eyes fueled by curiosity and that was for him.

“What do you like about sculpture?” she queried, her brow arching.

“Every product, invention, and idea was molded thoroughly into reality. The sculpture wouldn’t be as it is if it weren’t for the careful use of the tools by the sculptor himself. Every inch and corner was crafted with details written in our heads. Desires poured and imagination widened. Patience, control, time, and power—all were united into a singularity. A unity that brought perfection to life. Which is why I think the sculptor emphasizes that our head is the faculty of knowledge and reasoning. And that we should listen to it.”

“And what about the heart?”

“What about it?”

“You can’t just make something with passion to fuel our desire. You can’t enjoy your creation if you don’t have the desire to pursue it. I think everyone should pursue what they love and not let lies in our heads control everything.”

Marcus was astounded. “You’re right.”

She couldn’t resist and let out a soft chuckle as he finished his brief monologue.

“Is there something amusing about what I said?” he asked, his eyes flashing with annoyance.

“No,” she said, trying to suppress her laughter. “I just didn’t expect you to be both an aspiring sculptor and a poet-like. You’re full of surprises.”

Marcus’ sour mood dissipated, and he beamed. “Bene. I’m surprised as much as you are,” he said, chuckling. “I never thought I could talk this much, let alone that someone might be interested in me.”

As they stopped, their eyes came past each other, and Marcus beamed, his gaze drifting past her to the coachman.

“La signorina!” the coachman called out. “We must hurry. Your father is already intoxicated and has ordered us to leave.”

She glanced back at Marcus and then at her coachman. “I’ll follow you,” she said.

The coachman nodded imperceptibly and hastened back to the carriage.

“It’s been a pleasure being with you, Signore, but I must bid you farewell now,” she said, turning to Marcus.

“The pleasure was mine to be your host,” Marcus replied. He grasped her hand before she could leave. “Forgive me, but I didn’t catch your name.”

As the torch flickered upon her, her hazelnut eyes seemed to light up like flames, kindling the candle of his heart.

“Karla,” she said, returning an answer to his curious gaze. “Karla de Florence.”

“Marcus. Marcus Mavenhart,” he replied, pulled her hand and kissed the back of her palm. “Will we meet again?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered, hoping it would be true. “Let fate decide.”

These were the final words he heard from her as she scuttled through the crowd.

Watching her walk away, Marcus couldn’t help but feel a sense of longing. He witnessed the way her sundress bounced off the moonlight, shimmering in a majestic view as she melted into the crowd. The smell of freshly cut flowers and the sound of laughter filled the room, but all he could focus on was the fading image of Karla.

Marcus wished he could ask to spend another time with her, but he held back, for he knew very well that she was just another stranger passing by.

## Chapter 6

It was confirmed – no one was in Mavenhart’s residence.

Mark wasn’t sure if Rick had been informed of Gilt’s affliction or if he even wanted to deal with the situation. He couldn’t let the youngster fend for himself every day without adult supervision. He wanted to make sure Rick was fine by himself to spare Gilt any further concerns, should he ever snap back to normal, but he was nowhere to be found.

Mark slipped by the side windows of the house, being careful not to make any noise. His ears were keenly tuned, searching for any trace of sound. So far, he hadn’t heard anything from inside. Mark returned to the front door and hesitantly knocked, but no one answered.

“That’s it,” he sighed, “the kid might be somewhere else.”

“Is there anything you want?” someone asked behind him.

Mark promptly turned and saw the sheriff.

“Ah, yes. I was wondering where the residence of the house is at this hour. I’m acquainted with Gilt.”

“You live around here?” the sheriff asked.

Mark shook his head. “No.”

“Can I see your ID?” she asked.

Mark pulled out his wallet and showed her his identification card. Once she confirmed it, she returned it to him.

“I assure you I mean no harm. I’m just visiting an old friend. I haven’t seen him for a while. So...” Mark trailed off.

The sheriff nodded. “I think I remember him. Rick told me he was his cousin. I don’t know where he is.”

“I’ll see myself off then,” Mark said as he strode past her. But then he remembered something and turned back. “What about Rick? I haven’t seen him for a while.”

The sheriff blinked. “He’s on a road trip with his friends.”

“Now?”

“I know. He usually stays in the house or goes to work rather than going out with people.”

“Is that so? Thank you for your time, Miss Officer,” Mark said as he turned and made his way back to the city’s square.

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In his hand, Mark held a warm cup of coffee. He carefully placed a cube of sugar in it, stirred it, and took a sip while observing the dispersing crowd from sitting outside a cafe. Even though he appeared to be enjoying himself, his ears were alert, scanning for any clues about Kate’s whereabouts. With time running out, he knew he needed to find her quickly.

Fortunately, Mark’s patience paid off soon enough. Across the road from where he was sitting, he heard a distinct noise coming from a convenience store. As he sat up straight to investigate, a fair, light-skinned woman walked out of the store, looking both excited and curious. At first, Mark didn’t think she was related to the person he was looking for, but then he noticed her striking resemblance to the description Roxy gave him earlier. Although her height and petite frame didn’t match, her likeness was close enough to catch Mark’s attention.

Determined not to lose sight of her, Mark quickly made his way to the street corner and followed her discreetly. As he trailed her, he caught snippets of their conversation. It has to be her. Without hesitation, Mark darted across the street, took cover in the shadows, and watched as she entered her home. He listened intently as he heard footsteps inside. Two people were arguing over trivial household chores.

Moments later, only one person came downstairs to the living room. Mark smirked and waited for the right moment to step in front of the door. He realized that the younger person may not be aware of the situation, so he decided to talk to the older person, who was the target of his visit. As he watched the porch light flicker on and off before shutting down, Mark hesitated before knocking on the door. The girl who answered the door was in her late teens, and she eyed him warily. Her gaze measured him, but his charming smile put her at ease. Mark couldn’t help but notice why Gilt had his eyes on her.

“What the hell do you want?” she asked, looking at the brochure in his pocket with a disdainful expression. “If this is one of your promotional stunts, I’m going to have to turn it down.”

Mark chuckled and shook his head. “No, not really. I don’t intend to sell you anything.”

“Good,” she responded sharply, about to shut the door. But Mark quickly slipped his hand inside, only to burn it in the process. The girl’s guard immediately went up as she summoned a flame in her hands.

“So, you’re just another vampire out of luck,” she said, a hint of anger in her voice.

“Lady, I--”

“Fiara Repulsio,” she incanted, blasting Mark out of her home.

Although the spell wasn’t fatal, Mark’s jacket didn’t fare so well. He quickly got up and dodged the fireball that narrowly missed his head.

“Your friend Gilt Strauss Mavenhart is in dire need of your help. I came here to fetch you so that we can fix him,” Mark said urgently.

Kate took a moment to think and blinked, causing the fire to dissipate. “What happened to him?” she asked.

“You sure missed a lot,” Mark replied.

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Gilt was only seventeen years old when he was turned into one of them. He didn’t know exactly how it happened, but he could still vividly remember the events that led to his transformation, bit by bit.

As he crouched behind the low, depressed road, a bolt whistled past his ears. He saw several more bolts streak through the trees, and he hoped that whoever was firing them would pass him by. But then he noticed the flickering torches in the darkness and heard the sound of people barking with their blades and torches held aloft.

Gilt knelt and closed his eyes, clutching his blood-drenched waistcoat. Every breath he took was sharp and painful, and his chest heaved harder than ever before. He waited, hoping that the attackers would pass him by.

Eventually, the people turned and headed in the opposite direction, drawn by a sound in the bushes on the other side of the forest. Gilt moved, slowly and carefully, one corner at a time.

But then the memory of what happened flickered again, and Gilt’s face twisted with pain and sorrow. A single tear escaped from his eye, and he wiped it away, noticing the blood smeared across his face from his hand. He stared down at himself in horror.

“I didn’t mean to,” he muttered to himself, gulping back his tears and saliva.

Although he has some idea of what happened to him, he couldn’t control his newfound power. The thought of the beast inside him waking up made him tremble with fear.

“They did this to me,” he thought bitterly. “And now, my own family has turned against me.”

Suddenly, Gilt sprang from his hiding place, his uncontrolled power causing him to crash into the side of a nearby house with a loud bang. He knew he had to run as soon as possible, before the people who were pursuing him caught up.

As he sprinted through the rocky, fog-filled road, he remembered leaving Arianne at the gala with the others before the incident had broken out. Although his memory was hazy, he knew that they had been planning to cause trouble and that Arianne was in the middle of it.

Gilt passed through the clustered houses, turning right and sprinting towards the open part of the forest where the tail of the road ended at the entrance to Mavenhart’s residence. But as he arrived, he was met with a scene of devastation: the manor was filled with smoke and fire, which had already spread from the second floor down to the living room.

“No, no, no!” Gilt cried out in horror.

He tore apart the gate and launched himself towards the huge front door, his heart pounding with fear and adrenaline. The blood of the guests was smeared all over the mansion, mixed with their entrails and burning in the fire. Gilt suspected that no one was spared in the brutal onslaught.

“They did it! They did it!” Gilt growled, gritting his teeth.

If he were human, he would have struggled to breathe amidst the wildfire’s raging heat and smoke. Fortunately, his vampiric abilities gave him the strength to push forward despite the dire circumstances.

With blurred vision, Gilt stumbled towards the second floor. His body propelled him forward, allowing him to skip over the destroyed portion of the stairs. Gilt hoped that the fire had not yet engulfed the second floor.

“Please, be safe!” he muttered under his breath.

As he reached the brink of the staircase, he froze in his tracks. The maiden statue made of wood, once a beautiful centerpiece, was now blackened by flames. Gilt could see no colors of life, only the flames expanding into dirty rags of clouds from the mansion out to the windows and off to the bruised clouds.

With no hesitation, Gilt leaped into the raging inferno, nimbly hopping and crossing to the broken path. His habit à la française was being shredded to bits by the constant crashing of flames. He glanced up to the ceiling, where a candelabra chandelier shook by the thunderous fire.

The supporting bolt holding the chandelier up to the ceiling tore apart, and Gilt lurched aside. Unexpectedly, the ceiling collapsed on him as the candelabra fell. Luckily enough amidst the blazing fire and crashing walls, the debris did not pierce his heart, but his gutted stomach was severely wounded.

Gilt struggled to pluck out each splinter that went through his guts before picking himself up. Although the pain was bearable, his worrisome thoughts magnified the injury he sustained. The suit, already torn, was now stained with a plentiful amount of blood, further weakening him. Nevertheless, Gilt persisted forward.

With each step, his mind slowly slipped away as the thought of not being able to rescue Arianne in time plagued him. Eventually, Gilt reached the dining room on the second floor. He carefully detached the broken hinged door and tossed it aside.

The blaze did not calm down, but to his relief, the fire did not yet engulf the second floor. However, his eyes were irritated by the smoke, making it difficult to look through the pile of bodies lingering on the floor. Gilt persevered, determined to find Arianne.

Fortunately, Arianne had the most unique dress and physique, making it easier for Gilt to identify her. But soon he would regret having such a sharp memory. Gilt dragged his feet to the center of the room, scanning the area for Arianne. That’s when he spotted her golden braid hair beneath the piano.

He rushed over, carefully raising the piano before pushing it aside. Arianne lay lifeless on the floor. Her once beautiful red dress was now torn into shreds, with numerous splinters piercing her from head to toe. Her eyes were gouged out, and several bite marks covered every inch of her neck, with a blade plunged into her chest.

Gilt knew that those who committed this atrocity were no good, yet he still considered them his friends. And because of his inaction, his only sibling had suffered. Now, he could not breathe. Why does his heart ache even when he is no longer human? He shouldn’t be able to feel any of this, but his mind kept wandering back to his primordial state.

“It doesn’t matter anymore - whether my sanity is intact or not,” Gilt murmured under his breath.

He left Arianne’s lifeless body in her music room, where she loved to sing and play the piano.

He remembered those days when Arianne would sneak into his chambers, begging him to buy various instruments. He always thought that this was her way of getting his attention. Gilt was busy those days, and he couldn’t recall the last time he took Arianne out. A pang of guilt burned inside him.

Despite all his efforts to suppress his humanity, Gilt couldn’t stop his mind from altering its disposition. Perhaps, this was his curse, that no matter how hard he tried, the image of her dead body would remain deeply ingrained in his mind.

The fire finally took over the mansion. Gilt laid her down on her bed and looked around the room. The paintings she made were burning to ashes, and the silver and crimson silken dress she crafted was slowly peeling away in the flames. He painfully looked away, bidding one last mournful goodbye with his eyes before jumping out of the room. There was nothing he could do at this point but watch his home being torn down by the blaze fueled by their outrage. Gilt’s face became dreadfully stoned, but his eyes remained full of woe.

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“This is when your sister – Arianne died, right?” Roxy said, moving to his left. She made her presence known by wearing her mantua and holding his shoulder, softly pressing her fingertips in an attempt to ease the pain rising in his heart.

Gilt’s tears continued to run down his cheeks. “Now I see why you’re fixated on Kate. She resembles your sister,” Roxy said, staring up at him. This time, Gilt looked over his shoulder. “All this time, Arianne has always been on your mind.”

“Her memory is the reason why I continued to live. I tried to make up for my mistakes and look where it got me. Another dead one. If I convinced her to stop, she wouldn’t have died again,” Gilt sobbed.

Roxy cupped his face with her soft hands, turning his face towards her. “Look at me. I’m not going to pretend I know everything that happened, but turning back to the monster you once detested isn’t going to make things better. And certainly, the Arianne in your mind will never smile if you continue to live like this.”

Gilt was stirred by contemplation, regret, sorrow, and anguish, and he fell to his knees. His heart ached just as his breath ragged. When was the last time he felt this way? More importantly, when did he stop feeling this way?

“I tried to live the best I could, and look where goodness takes me? Another dead body,” he cried.

Roxy also knelt and caressed his tears. “Your tears are proof that you are not yet lost. We can still go back. Start again. Just please, don’t turn it on again. We must be better than our failures.”

Roxy rose and offered her hand to him. Gilt accepted her, and with a firm grip, he stood up.

“She’s right, you know,” a familiar disembodied voice called out from behind. When he turned to her, he realized that everything he knew was not entirely the truth.

“Kate?”

Everything around them seemed to brighten. The somber clouds along with the mansion vanished from their eyes. The dead grass grew back to life and became green.

Gilt was at a loss for words. He couldn’t believe that what he was seeing was real. Despite his suspicion, he knew that there was something else going on. “This is your doing,” he said, turning his head to face Roxy, who only shook her head in denial.

“No, Gilt, this is real. You’ve got it all wrong. All this time, she’s been alive,” Roxy explained, nodding past him.

A pang of joy jolted through Gilt as he turned his head to see the person Roxy was referring to. The curtain that shadowed his thoughts for so long suddenly lifted, and he was filled with hope. However, the joy he felt was short-lived as memories of his crimes came flooding back, taking a heavy toll on his mind.

In a matter of seconds, Gilt’s vampiric and human sides began to slither into conflict, causing him to shout out in pain as he fell to the ground. His thin skin bulged with thick veins, and his eyes began to bleed as he succumbed to a catatonic state.

“What the hell is happening to him?” Kate hurried down to him and touched his head with her palm. Instantly, she felt the battle raging within him, and her heart sank.

Roxy pulled her away, “Do not attempt to invade his mind or it will affect you too. There’s a spell that our witch friend used on him before,” she explained. “Repeat after me: Tange placans, intus roga malum et vince. And remember, do not lose focus should some voices try to persuade you.”

Kate understood the words and rose to her feet, her palms emitting a warm glow. “Tange placans, intus roga malum et vince,” she repeated, the words rolling off her tongue with ease. As she uttered the spell, Kate felt heat rising from inside her palm as she pointed it at Gilt. The pain he was experiencing transferred to her, but she persisted, summoning a powerful burst of mana that shattered his consciousness into unconsciousness, causing him to fall to the ground, insentient.

Her eyes struggled to focus, but she eventually locked onto Roxy with a questioning gaze. “What do we do with him now?”

Roxy sighed and looked down at Gilt. “This isn’t the first time he’s lost control over his uninhibited side. It took us years to calm him down, and I won’t say it’s going to be easy. But I need you to watch over him.”

Kate stared at Roxy, feeling a sense of dread creeping up on her. “What’s the most dangerous part of being a vampire?”

“Attachment,” Roxy replied, her voice heavy with emotion. “Attachment is a dangerous element that a vampire could have, especially those who have experienced a great loss after they transformed. It can magnify to an extent that we call an obsession. Gilt has that attachment.”

Infected by wonder, Kate lifted her gaze from Roxy to Gilt. “What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Roxy said, her eyes narrowing. Kate always knew that there was something more to Gilt’s desire to stay and protect the city, but she never bothered to ask. Now, she felt a sense of enlightenment dawning on her.

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It had been a day since Gilt was locked up in the cellar of their mansion. Time was of the essence, as they needed to fix the problem before Rick’s scheduled departure. They were lucky that Rick wasn’t there to witness Gilt’s loss of sanity. Dealing with an uninhibited vampire was already problematic enough, but having his nephew freak out only added to the chaos.

Roxy explained to Kate the various symptoms that uninhibited vampires may exhibit, including emotional outbursts and withdrawal symptoms. Those uncontrollable factors made Gilt a liability that they couldn’t risk to free, even though he regained a part of his humanity. Kate hadn’t informed Van of the events yet, knowing that his hunter instincts might deem Gilt to be dangerous and could lead to a fatalistic result.

Kate took a deep breath and looked at the tray in front of her. It was filled with pancakes covered in maple syrup and a glass of blood, which was essential to keep Gilt alive. However, Roxy instructed them to limit his blood intake to reduce his obsession with it. That includes interacting with people so that he could keep whatever left of his humanity intact as much as possible.

As Kate made her way downstairs, she couldn’t shake off the feeling that something was off. The footfalls echoed through the halls, and the air became thin, cold, and dry, almost choking her life. She knew that it was her mind playing tricks on her, but she couldn’t deny the presence of unknown forces in the chamber below. She felt a shiver down her spine as a ghastly voice whispered her name. Kate tried to ignore the apparitions that seemed to follow her every step, almost dragging her feet as she walked past the locked rooms. She finally reached the threshold where the supplies were kept, and not too far away, she heard growls and a bottle crashed against the wall.

Kate opened the peephole and was met with the thick aroma of wine and alcohol. The wine barrels occupied almost the entire right side of the cellar, while two long cabinets were barricaded at the left side. The cellar was barely spacious, and it felt more like a prison designed to optimize supervision. Kate knew that Gilt’s condition was critical, and they needed to find a solution before it was too late.

Kate didn’t find it odd that the wine was being spilled freely. Gilt wasn’t himself; he was still angry, but she knew that it was his uninhibited side that was causing it. The smell of the wine reminded her of the boiling blood inside Suzy when she conjured black magic, and memories crept into her mind. Her hands tingled and went numb from the constant berating of her memories.

Shaking her head, Kate forcefully drowned the memories. When she opened her eyes, she found Gilt staring at her. He rose from sitting on the cold cobblestone, and almost without warning, he lurched towards her as fast as her eyes could catch up.

Gilt approached the door quietly and greeted her. Kate gulped her fear. “I see you’re still in a bad mood,” she eventually said.

“Of course, I am,” Gilt replied. His eyes shifted to the tray. “Is that my breakfast?”

Kate nodded with a smile, but she knew that his sneer was just a façade. “Intricata Gravija,” she muttered, and Gilt was sent flying into the wall. He was struck by a force that immobilized him and glued his back. The uninhibited vampire was nettled not because of the spell, but because it was Kate who had done it to him. He felt betrayed.

“What’s this supposed to be, Kate?” Gilt finally admitted his annoyance as he gritted his teeth. His fangs never dulled when he needed prey.

“You’ll have to forgive me. It’s for precaution,” Kate replied, using her spell again to unlock the barrier around the door and opening it. She walked carefully to the desk and put the tray of food and a bag of blood on it.

“You’re still not yourself.”

“Not myself? I’m fine. You broke me, remember?” Gilt’s voice cracked, and regret filled his twisted face, but Kate knew what he meant in another way. Painfully, she avoided his eyes.

She had to show no emotions; otherwise, she could break at any moment. “No, I did not. There is still the uninhibited side that lingers in you. Your friend just managed to bring some of your senses back,” Kate frowned as she apprehensively absorbed the sight of his hands. Veins bulge underneath his skin, protruding towards his claws. His intentions were as sharp as his crimson eyes.

Gilt saw the horror in her eyes. He laid down his eyes and saw what scared her. “This is not what it looks like,” Gilt said quickly as his claws returned to normal, unwilling to admit his derailment. “Kate, you know I won’t harm you.”

“But it appears like you are seconds away from tearing me apart should I not take precautions,” Kate replied, glancing at him with teary eyes. “I can’t blame you, though. If only I had been more thoughtful, this could have been prevented. I’m sorry, Gilt.”

Without heed of his appeal, Kate hastened to move out and locked the door behind her.

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By noon, Kate returned to her house and slumped down at the chair outside, her eyes fixed on the newly decorated lanterns that cast a dim yellow light. She couldn’t believe that she missed all the alarming signs that her friend was in trouble. She heard about the recent murders in Daletown at the intersection of Kansas and Missouri, but she never imagined that her friend could be involved.

Kate buried her face in her legs and whimpered under duress. Suddenly, she heard a familiar voice that made her lift her head. It was Bella, her neighbor and close friend, smiling warmly as she sat down beside her.

“Boy problem?” Bella asked with a hint of teasing.

Kate groaned. “Yes.”

“Do I know who it is?” Bella asked, concerned.

Kate nodded and clarified, “It’s more like a friend problem. I didn’t know he was going through some issues. I should have been the first one to notice it, but I didn’t.”

Bella’s voice grew serious. “It sounds serious. Did anything happen to him?”

Kate shook her head. “Let’s just say he’s on the dark side.”

“Most of us experience going to the dark side, but the important thing is to measure someone’s actions,” Bella said, trying to comfort her.

“I don’t know if I can help him anymore,” Kate sniffed, finally lifting her head and resting her chin on her knees.

“That doesn’t sound like you,” Bella said, sensing that Kate wasn’t defeated yet. “I don’t believe that he’s lost at all. You still believe you can help him, right?”

Bella looked earnestly at her, her eyes with the look of a parent to her child. Even though they don’t share the same blood, Bella has no problem taking care of her, because she never had anyone except for Kate and Rick. She raised her arm and wrapped it around Kate.

“He was... no, I think I can still reason with him,” Kate said, sniffing and pressing the back of her head against her arm. “I haven’t checked on him for quite some time. It’s my fault that he’s like this.”

Her words were no more than a whisper as they trailed off with the breeze.

“Don’t blame yourself. It’s beyond your control,” Bella said, trying to reassure her.

“Maybe,” Kate whispered, though not out loud. She nodded mentally, trying to shake off the grasp of despair that lingered in her mind. The lanterns cast a warm glow around them, and for a moment, Kate felt a glimmer of hope.

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‘Let me rest. Just for now.’

“Hello?”

‘Shut up.’

“Are you fine?”

I haven’t for a very long time...

The soothing voice continued to talk until it became distant, vague and fell into deep silence.

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Monsters differ from each other. They too have different personalities. Some are cruel because of nature, but care for their offspring, others loathe each kind but persevere to survive without conflict and some are monsters. Alastor learned from a very young age that men can become monsters. If you give them the potions of desires, they can do whatever they want. Even they can extensively go to lengths just to prove themselves.

Right then, he can still hear their cries. Their pleading words before he killed them embarked on his mind. Alastor recalled his first kill. It was a politician from the Indigium Region. Their information entails that the politician was planning to transfer billions of amounts of money to a secure lookout to fund a rising terrorist organization to commence a bio attack. The plan was to sell the cure after terrorists do their bidding. But the Glade already sent their best mercenaries and destroyed the convoy and killed his men.

The young mercenary that has joined them has a different purpose, to kill the rest and the politician. His order was to make sure no one would be left as a witness, and that’s what he did. He killed all of them in cold blood. He spared not even a single child or woman.

That day, he couldn’t scratch off their screams from his head. Their horrid screams only tranquilize when he’s on a mission, but one after another, their screams became more vivid. He learned how to calm them down by accepting them instead of denying them.

The question that still lingers in his mind is, what is a monster?

He knew what it meant but there was something more than that, he believed. What makes him different from one or the other people who’re drunk in power? He knew the vicious nature of man. Was being cruel enough a deciding factor to determine if someone’s a monster? Was he a monster just like them? What makes him different from those he killed?

Whatever the answer remains to be heard.

Alastor was abruptly awakened by a loud crash.

He rubbed the spiky locks of hair from his face and slowly opened his eyes. The weight of the previous days’ training hit him hard, and he grunted as he freed himself from his blanket. For a moment, he lay there feeling strangely at peace, as if his senses had left him.

Taking a deep breath, Alastor stretched his arms and yawned. As his vision cleared, he noticed a dance of beauty outside his shabby window. The leaves were dancing and reminded him of his world, but all he could recall was the hardship and torture he endured.

Suddenly, his mesmerizing ended as he caught sight of a tree trembling, and something hissed before it fell. He glanced below and saw Van experimenting with different potions and such alike at the expense of risking destroying his property.

Alastor’s face contorted, and his eyes showed regret. He was partly to blame for allowing Van to continue his training at his home. He thought of sharing a fair number of tricks he learned back in the Glade but ended up ending the peaceful days of solitary by inviting Van in.

“I should have seen this coming,” the mercenary thought, snorting as he anticipated how his day would go.

Van, who wasn’t too far, heard him razzed and put down his ingredients to wave at him. Alastor ignored him and walked down to the kitchen, annoyed.

It wasn’t overcompensation when Van thought that maybe he ought to be doing something productive. The school break hasn’t been lifted, and officials have restricted people from going out, imposing curfews and enforcing checkpoints. While it was inconvenient, they couldn’t do much about it. In any case, there hadn’t been any monster activities, so it wasn’t too far-fetched for Van to focus on his training. Yet, he was confused by how he had come to this. He was once an outcast, and now he knew why, and for a good reason. Alastor was aware of this too.

Alastor grabbed a cup and put in two sugar cubes and one spoon of coffee before pouring hot water from the thermos flask. He sat down and enjoyed his morning coffee. But his peace was short-lived as he heard the loud creak of the door being pushed wide open.

Van came in without much regard for manners. “Sorry about the noise,” he said, wiping the sweat off his forehead with a towel from his bag.

Alastor drank the coffee, put the cup on the table, and released his clasp. He outstretched his arms and cracked his neck, left to right. He yawned, feeling annoyed with Van’s presence.

“It’s too early in the morning, Van. Don’t you have anything better to do?” Alastor asked, shooting Van a sharp glance.

“I used to have one,” Van shrugged. “I was planning to meet up with Kate.”

“Why not give her a visit then?” Alastor yelled.

Van dismissively shook his head. “I would have done that if she didn’t tell me she’s busy.”

“Busy doing what?” Alastor asked before taking another sip of coffee. “We’re in Maryvale, and there’s not much to do here. Maybe Kate is secretly meeting someone.”

Van furrowed his brows, trying to think. “Why would she meet someone in secret?

“I don’t know,” Alastor said. “Maybe she has a boyfriend.”

Alastor savored the rich aroma of the coffee as he finished the last drop, leaving no trace in the cup. He stood up from the chair and placed the cup carefully in the sink before returning to his seat. Across from him, he noticed Van’s face had become long and distant, lost in thought. Alastor observed him closely, sensing that something was troubling him.

After a moment of silence, Van spoke up. “I’ve been thinking about Kate. I just can’t shake this feeling that she’s seeing someone else.”

Alastor raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure you’re reading the right signals? Maybe you’re mistaken.”

Van sighed. “That’s just what I needed, more doubt.”

Alastor’s lips curled slightly at the corners. “Relax, buddy, I doubt Kate has time for that. But seriously, you’ve been staying with me for four days now. I want my peace back.”

Van chuckled in relief, grateful for the lighthearted moment. “Sorry about that, man.”

Alastor gave him a skeptical look. “If you’re really sorry, why don’t you find something else to do?”

Van muttered under his breath. “It’s not like there’s anything better to do.”

Suddenly, Van’s head began to spin, and his mind was clouded by an ominous presence. He felt as though he was being called to a dark place within the city, where several other dark auras lingered. Despite his efforts to remain conscious, the pressure of his newfound ability was too much for him to bear, and he collapsed onto the floor.

Alastor rushed to his side, concerned. “Van, are you okay?”

Van groaned in response, his mind still reeling from the overwhelming experience.

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Van awoke with a throbbing pain on his cheek. He wearily opened his eyes and blinked for the next ten seconds before stretching his arms out and rising to a seated position on the couch. His exhaustion did not dissipate, but the pain kept his mind alert. He shook his head once more, feeling as if he was hit by a truck. Though he never had, the weighty sensation brought intense pain to his body.

As he looked around, Van realized he slept on the sofa. He couldn’t taint it with dirt after conducting the experiment earlier that morning. That was when he heard footsteps coming from the kitchen.

Alastor brought a cup of water and set it down on the table before sitting across from Van. “Does this occur frequently?” he asked.

Van answered lethargically, his eyes casted down. “Not really.”

“You’re not really good at lying,” Alastor said, folding his arms. “Please, be honest. How many times has this happened?”

Van took a deep breath before replying, “Ever since my 17th birthday, I usually have blackouts.”

Alastor interrupted him. “Yeah, I know. Some hunters experience blackouts, but only when their instincts take over. What I don’t understand is how you still have blackouts despite learning how to use a small percentage of your powers?”

Van shook his head. “I don’t know. You were supposed to be the one who knows all of this.”

Alastor rubbed his chin. “Probably another symptom of transition.”

“Probably?” Van breathed in frustration.

“I’m not a damn encyclopedia, Van,” Alastor said, his tone disdainful. “This is the first time I’ve heard of a hunter experiencing blackouts.”

“So, what now?” Van muttered, unsettled by the fact that even Alastor didn’t know about his condition.

“There’s nothing I can do, except wait,” Alastor said, getting up and heading towards the door. “Wanna go out?”

“Go where?” Van asked.

“Arcade,” Alastor replied, atypical for him. “We’ve been through a lot these days. It wouldn’t hurt if we had a little fun.”

“You, fun?” Van smirked, trying to decipher Alastor’s words.

“Do I look like I’m no fun?” Alastor grunted, indifferent. “Do you want to go to the arcade or not?”

“Well, I guess I could use some fresh air,” Van said, jumping up from the sofa, his expression filled with excitement.

Van couldn’t shake the feeling that something was amiss about his family, and he was determined to find the truth. He couldn’t believe that his retrograde amnesia was simply due to the accident, and he couldn’t be sure that his current family wasn’t keeping something from him.

The dead couldn’t speak for themselves, but Van could figure it out for himself, and he wouldn’t stop at anything until he had the answers he yearned for. Besides, he wasn’t alone, and he had a lot to learn.

For now, Van intended to enjoy the time he had before another problem came knocking on their door.

\*\*\*

On the night when they unleashed the monsters and betrayed their allies, Jay swerved sharply to the right and raced past 2nd Avenue. As he drove by, he observed the police clearing up the aftermath of the attack. Their gear was shredded, and their bodies bore the scars of battle. Medical personnel rushed to attend to the wounded officers, while others solemnly relocated the corpses of their fallen comrades. His view was obstructed by the police presence, forcing him to slow down and lower his window to catch a glimpse of the action.

“Is there a problem, officer?” Jay asked, trying to sound respectful.

The officer eyed him suspiciously. “Just checking. Where have you been? Didn’t you hear the announcement?”

Jay shook his head. “I was out of town visiting an old friend in Daletown. What’s going on here?”

He knew they would lie to him. The sheriff already gave them a cover story for these strange events.

“There’s a riot,” the officer said.

Jay mentally smirked, knowing he baited them to his own convenience. “I see. Can I go now? It’s been a long day.”

He noticed the officer exchange a knowing look with his colleague, and Jay knew they were trying to identify him. They wouldn’t want to detain him, especially with the monster corpses lying around. A matter of moments, they receive a call. Their eyes were at of emergence and immediately nodded with anxious washed on their face.

The police blocking his car nodded him through. “You’re clear. Please avoid the intersection and take another route.”

“Will do,” Jay replied, nodding in gratitude.

He took a left turn, passing a row of empty buildings before finally arriving at his warehouse. The structure was located in a clearing behind a forest, and he parked his car on the side of the road before entering the office room. A wave of his hand opened the door, and he slammed it shut behind him.

Inside, the warehouse was dimly lit by a few encased lights as he made his way to the docking port. He weaved around the machinery and climbed the stairs to the storage area. As he turned a corner, the pungent smell of blood hit him, and he slowed his pace. He walked past stacks of boxes and carts until he came face to face with Hive, who has a bloody face with his bloody sleek haircut, he was still clutching the large knife used as the murder weapon.

Jay stopped in his tracks when he saw Enrick’s lifeless body lying on the ground. He was killed quickly with a slash to the throat and a stab wound to the chest. Jay handed Hive his handkerchief, which he gratefully accepted to clean himself up. The thick liquid was hard to remove, and he had to use alcohol to fully rinse the remaining redness from his face before heading to the bathroom.

Using magic, Jay levitated Enrick’s remains into a body bag and placed it inside a truck. He then drained the blood from the floor and into the sewer. However, there was still much work to be done.

Hive returned moments later, now dressed in a different suit.

“Did anyone follow you?” Jay asked.

“No,” Hive shook his head. “I made sure that no one saw us. Enrick was a confidential guy. He never revealed his whereabouts to anyone.”

“What about the video feeds?”

“The staff closed them before they left. Enrick never saw it coming. Don’t make me regret this, Jay. I’ve put in ten years of effort helping to build what we have here.”

Jay reassured him. “Don’t worry. I’ll hold the end of my bargain. I’ll help you find your brother as long as you provide your in-depth knowledge of blood magic.”

“Good,” Hive nodded. “Is there any chance you’d tell me your family’s secret?”

Jay gave him a look.

Hive avoided his dark, sullen eyes. “It’s a no then.”

“Our work here is done,” Jay said. “Do not dispose of the body yet. Put his body in the freezing chamber and wait for my instruction.”

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Jay had never found the long stair difficult to climb. It was just another Tuesday for him, and he viewed it as an opportunity to reflect on his day. While nothing untoward happened to him recently, he considered this day’s climb a chance to explore his thoughts. He was searching for his long-lost brother, but he did not discover any clues to his whereabouts. There was a curious murder that could be linked to his brother, but the connection was tenuous at best. A reckless teenager was found dead in a dumpster near a club, but the murderer escaped because people were too inebriated to notice that their friend was taken away.

Jay wondered how the murderer managed to choose the perfect moment to commit the crime. Moreover, there had to be people who saw the culprit walking along the road. He couldn’t understand why the killer had not been spotted since there was a public eye wherever the road he probably went. However, no evidence of anyone except for the victim’s friends emerged from the crime scene.

Jay’s paranoid mind urged him to sneak into the police station and look at the victim’s corpse. He discovered a vital piece of information that had not been revealed to the media: a body hardly resembled a human, drained of blood, and familiarity. The culprit did not only drain every ounce of blood from the victim’s body and did not attempt to harm any other part of it. Except for the four bite marks on his neck, there were no fatal wounds that could explain the cause of death. Jay was sure that the attack was carried out by a vampire who must have been desperately hungry. He knew that no sane vampire would make its presence known in the city because that would be equivalent to committing suicide. The person who committed this heinous crime might have been a vampire who had not fed in a long time.

Although an uninhibited vampire was capable of such brutality, there has been no similar incident since that fateful day. An uninhibited vampire was likely to embark on a killing spree. Although there were animals that could substitute for human blood, it would be hard for an uninhibited vampire to curb its hunger, which would only be magnified tenfold.

Jay bowed his head in confusion at this peculiar case and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Before he could take another step up to his apartment’s floor, he sensed someone’s presence. A shadow appeared on the top floor from the bottom. Jay unlocked his magic restraints and flew towards the person, ignoring the potential harm of his powers. He kept a low profile and watched the person he was looking for. It was Marcus Mavenhart, his long-lost brother, who stood before him, healthy and not at all like what Jay had expected.

“It’s been a long time, brother,” Marcus said, clapping at Jay in disdain. “Since you were having a hard time figuring out my sweet release and whereabouts, I thought I’d make my presence known to make it easier for you. I’m quite disappointed that you didn’t put in enough effort to look for me. All those lessons we had were just squabbles.”

Jay was confused by Marcus’s sudden appearance. He couldn’t believe that he finally found his brother after all these years.

“Why now, Marcus?” Jay asked, hoping for answers that could ease the worries that plagued him.

“I only wanted you to know that I’ve outsmarted you this time,” Marcus said, making an argumentative statement. He shifted from one foot to another. He scanned the room, taking in the cluttered furniture and the peeling wallpaper. The air was thick with the musty scent of neglect.

Jay didn’t believe a word Marcus said. He knew that there was something more significant than declaring his freedom and making a point. This was Marcus’s opening remark, and he was up to something.

“I don’t intend to loiter in this...soiled land of yours. So, let me get straight to the point,” Marcus declared, his voice deep and menacing.

“I am going to tear you apart, limb by limb. I know where you live, I know the empire you built, and I know what life you have led. Most of all, promising brother, I know what you’re intending to do next. All those years we spent, the deceit you cast on our family, I learned that the most powerful allies are not the ones closest to you the most, but to the people who are unlikely to be ones.”

Jay’s heart sank at Marcus’s words. He knew his brother was capable of terrible things, but he hoped for some mercy. “Wait, brother—” he started, but Marcus cut him off.

“No!” Marcus’s voice echoed through the apartment complex, making the hair on the back of Jay’s neck stand up. “You will not see mercy in me! All those years that I’ve sheltered you, wasted. The only thing you brought to our family was destruction! You betrayed your own family.” He let out a heavy breath, labored by the torment he endured for hundreds of years. His eyes flashed with ferocity.

“I can still fix us, brother!” Jay pleaded, his voice softening as he begged for Marcus’s clemency. He looked into his brother’s eyes, hoping to see some sign of forgiveness. “I am not the only one who’s at fault, brother! You know that! I may have pulled the string, but you were the one who loaded the bow!”

“Do not project your mistakes on me. You listened to that woman’s lies and you doomed us all!” Marcus’s anger was palpable.

“I apologize for what happened. If only you knew the pain, I endured all those years,” Jay said, his voice filled with regret.

“What do you know about pain?” Marcus asked, his teeth gnashing, and his jaw clenching. “No amount of reason will ease my wrath for your betrayal.”

“There’s a good reason behind that,” Jay insisted, his voice now pleading with his brother.

“There is no good reason when you betray your own family!”

“Please, brother, do not turn away. Just come with me –”

“For what?!” Marcus yelled, his voice echoed loudly. “So, you can stab me again in the back?”

Jay saw no willingness in Marcus’s words. He knew as much. There was a slight chance he could make his brother listen to him without force. If he didn’t escape, Jay could have prepared a much better setup for his *confession*, but he did not anticipate his early release. Jay felt his breathing tailoring with regret, confusion, and weariness. As quick as he snapped his eyes open, he found a stern resolution. He nodded solemnly, “If you’re not willing to cooperate, then I will make you.”

“Still ever the committing one, eh?” Marcus said with a distasteful tone. “I take this as your declaration of opposition. So, you’d rather die hard?”

There was no chance Jay could take Marcus from the beginning. Such thoughts brought only one answer that would prevent any foreboding onslaught. The mana welled in Jay’s hand, rose to heat, and the blaze burned bright.

“Scufunjafiranhari.” Jay muttered the spell.

A fiery blaze erupted from Jay’s hand, illuminating the room with its intense heat and blinding light. Even the blaring of the sprinklers was no match for the ferocity of the flame as it dissipated into a thin, hazy mist. The ceiling above groaned and cracked under pressure, threatening to collapse at any moment.

“Touché, brother,” Marcus’s voice echoed from somewhere below. “You’ve grown powerful.”

In the blink of an eye, a shadowy figure shot up the staircase and appeared on the same floor as Jay. Before he could react, Marcus’s fist collided with his stomach, causing him to double over in pain and crash into the hard wall. Furniture and debris toppled over him, burying him in a heap. Through the haze of pain, Jay heard Marcus’s triumphant laughter. He barked in agony and howled in anger like an animal trapped in a cage.

“You better gather those people you intend to contest against me, brother! Because I won’t be the only one who will guide you to oblivion,” Marcus sneered.

Jay struggled to get up, his muscles screaming in protest, but Marcus’s taunts only fueled his rage. With a determined look on his face, he spun on his heels and broke into a sprint, making his way out of the hole as fast as he could. But when he looked back, Marcus was nowhere to be found. His presence served only as a grim reminder of the past and the impending conflict that now loomed ahead.

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Jane pondered about Rick, whom she had not heard from in a week. They had plans to hang out, but now she was uncertain. Should she call him or not? Suddenly, a whoosh sound startled her, and she rose from her seat, casting a spell as her eyes scanned the area cautiously.

“There is no trouble around,” Marcus assured her from behind.

Jane shrieked as she saw Marcus standing upright in a dark corner, far from the reach of the lamp. “You shouldn’t have done that!” she yelled. “You could have given me a heart attack. Why can’t you walk like a normal person?”

As Marcus stepped into the light, Jane noticed his stricken jaw, sharp eyes, and tumultuous expression of hate. The air became still and oppressive with every step he took. Jane unconsciously stood and moved back.

“Did something happen?” she asked, her voice shaking as she saw tendrils bulging on his skin that ran to his crimson eyes.

Jane made an impressive decision by putting a barrier between them. Her suspicion was paid by a frightful realization: ‘Marcus.’ Her lips began to form the man’s name. The last time she felt this way was when she intentionally let him feed on her, but she couldn’t summon the same confidence in her voice. Her calling was mixed with fear for what he might do to her and hope that maybe all of this was just a sham, a ploy for him to relish in a childish jest.

“I’m so sorry, mademoiselle,” he started. Jane shuddered and wished that Marcus could hear her heart protesting in fear, but she knew it was useless, as useless as trying to reason with a man who was enveloped by hunger once. “When I looked into your memories, I learned that you have known some people who are... different, like you and me.”

“What did you plan to do with them?” Jane’s voice was full of dread, but she had to quench her troubled heart with a steel grip.

“Forgive me for my insolence, amore mio,” Marcus paused. The ferocity dissipated when he looked into her eyes as if he read every inch of her shuddering figure.

Even still, when Marcus moved forward, Jane gestured a threat by waving the flame in front of him. Without even hearing a word, Marcus understood well and kept his distance from her. Her heavy breaths gradually steadied and calmed.

“What’s the matter with you?” Jane saw a flicker of light fall from his eyes; the calling of despair and pain. Without paying much attention to her words, Marcus fell with a defeated figure, his face covered by his hand. He groaned and let out a breath before facing her, now masked with calmness.

“Have I told you about my family?” he asked.

Jane shook her head. “No. You have a connection with Gilt and Rick, but I didn’t take it that you’re close to them.”

Her words were reasonable. She came to terms with ignoring every sensible question and staying only behind the lines. His recession with his background only brought prominent ominous advice that she shouldn’t attempt in any way to probe Marcus.

“Smart woman,” Marcus smirked. “That’s what I like most about you. You don’t have to prove anything just for the sake of being outlandish.”

Jane shook her head in confusion, her eyes quivering, but she refused to let his words dig into her head. “I don’t know what to make of that,” she said.

Marcus waved his hand in dismissal and put on a regretful expression before looking back up to her. “I’m sorry if I acted roughly.”

“Roughly is an understatement,” Jane said. She appeared to be calm and confident, but in reality, she felt the opposite. She was terrified.

“You’re family, what about it?” Jane asked. “It doesn’t sound colorful I assume.”

In a split moment, Jane witnessed Marcus’s eyes quivering. She didn’t know if the flinch was from hesitation or embarrassment, but she could only assume that it was something worse than she initially thought.

“As you can see, I come from a long line of lost relatives of the Mavenhart residence. I was a vampire sealed behind that door for over 600 years.”

“How did you get stuck there?” Jane asked.

Marcus cleared his throat. “Let me finish,” he continued. “At some point in the past, my family was in a dire situation that caused distrust among our ranks. What we didn’t know was that the cause was on our side. My brother was ensnared by a woman to commit a folly act. One by one, he lured my brothers to their demise and sealed me.”

“Why didn’t your brother kill you?” Jane asked.

Marcus’s eyes snapped open at the question he anticipated. “Because I’m not like any other vampire. My kind was molded by forbidden dark arts imbued to the very inch of *our* souls. It made *us* unkillable.”

“An immortal?” Jane asked.

Marcus nodded. “But even though we are still susceptible to several spells. Which is why I cannot take my brother lightly this time. He might have allies that can contend with my abilities. I may be immortal, but I can still be vulnerable to some degree.” He continued, “Which is why I require the assistance of your friends.”

“I doubt they’d be willing. They’re quite suspicious, you know,” Jane said.

“I won’t be so sure about that, Jane,” Marcus said, his voice betraying a hint of bestiality and depravity, a reflection of the unwarranted emotions stirred by his brother.

Jane couldn’t grasp the immensity of his prowess when he dashed across the barrier in a split moment. He grabbed her by the collar and lifted her against the wall, leaving her beholden to his prowess.

“Now, you’re going to tell me everything about them,” Marcus commanded.

“That’s an impressive display of strength,” Jane said, her voice calm despite the fear that gripped her. “But let me remind you that I’m not one of your enemies which is why I know you won’t kill me. I’ve seen the horrified look in your eyes. There is still some humanity left inside you.”

“You don’t know what I’m capable of.” Marcus snarled, but Jane did not budge to concede. With no other choice, Marcus released her, taking a step back. “My apologies,” he said, but there was no hint of regret in his tone. “I didn’t mean to scare you. It’s just that I’m under a lot of pressure, and I need to find my brother before he causes more harm.”

Jane straightened her collar and tried to regain her composure. “I understand your situation, but you can’t expect me to betray my friends. They’re good people, and they have no reason to help you.”

“That’s the thing darling,” Marcus said ominously, “I don’t intend to appeal with their kindness."

Jane’s face winced as he gripped her arm tightly.

“I am going to give your friends reasons why to help me.”

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Even though Jane warned him not to have a sliver of hope that they will aid his cause, Marcus didn’t even take her words as susceptible as a warning for his aim to contact them. Though it yields some sense of their personality, Marcus couldn’t care less much of their opinion. Marcus needed them to obey, and he will receive the obedience he requires.

Marcus walked by along the crowd and followed Van and Alastor, but the linear crowd only made him impatient that he bumped someone on the shoulder. The stranger was about to entangle Marcus in a fight, but he was taken aback when Marcus glared at him.

It took him minutes to say the least to come up with different scenarios, but in the end, all theories must be put to a test. Marcus followed them to the bowling alley where they took a break and ate their snacks.

Marcus did what he thought to do. He was pretending to play and intentionally missed a spot. “You know, I could never get how people smoothly play bowling. My grip seemingly can’t measure control.” Marcus successfully caught their attention. He shook his head. “Sorry, I was thinking out loud.”

“Do you need any tips?” Van asked.

Marcus nodded. This seems assured. But when it comes to Alastor, he was positively cautious and indistinctive.

“I would very much like to learn some tips,” Marcus said.

Van stood from the seat and came to his side and showed how to properly hold a bowling ball. “First, you need to insert the ring and middle fingers on top, and your thumb at the bottom. You must grip it properly.”

Marcus followed his instruction and showed it to him. His face was stricken and uncomfortable. It was sanitary that he was concerned about, but such trivial things can be ignored.

“Good. Now, you might want to study how to swing your arm properly. I saw earlier how you throw your arms. It’s sloppy. Too sloppy.”

“Really?”

Van nodded. “Yeah. I was scared that the ball might go to the ceiling instead.”

Marcus chuckled. “Well, I guess I should keep practicing.”

Marcus observed Van as he straightened his hand and wrist. He held his bowling arm out at a distance and kept his arm straight, then swung it towards his ankle. He rotated the wrist, hand, and arm away from his body as he brought the ball near his ankle and launched the ball forward. It was a clean hit.

Marcus did the same, but there were five remaining pins. He felt contempt and satisfaction. Maybe it was because he never had this fun for a while. Yet, he didn’t forget his objective.

Van patted his back. “Don’t worry about it, buddy. It takes some time before you get good at it.”

Marcus tilted his head. “Thanks.”

Van looked back at Alastor as if he was affirming a non-verbal message to him with a nod. Then, he looked back to Marcus with a gleeful smile.

“Do you have any other things to do?” Van asked.

Marcus replied with a dismissive shake of his head. “Not at the moment.”

Van’s eyes widened and gave Alastor a look. “We can use another member of our team to play later after lunch. Is that okay with you?”

“Oh,” Marcus wasn’t expecting the invitation. He replayed the question one more time before he returned a call. He blinked. “I guess so.”

Alastor jumped from behind and held Van’s shoulder. Marcus’s eyes flinched at his intervention.

“I don’t think we have that much time,” Alastor said. “We have something else to do.”

Before they spun around, Marcus caught the single look of suggestion to Van when Alastor glanced at him, but the implications didn’t make sense to Marcus. Until, when he felt the sharp urge of distrust acting out of instinct bursting within Alastor. It was the kind of eyes that had unmistakably suspicion.

Marcus knew what else this could mean.

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Van’s heart raced as he realized the gravity of the situation. Alastor was trying to warn him, but he ignored the signs. Marcus dragged them outside at the back of the establishment. It took him no effort for him to do it. Now, they were face to face with a vampire of immense power.

Marcus’ grip on their necks was suffocating, and Van could feel the world slipping away from him. Van gasped for air as Marcus released them, his mind reeling from the sudden attack. Marcus was not done with them yet. He sat down on a nearby seat, his eyes fixed on Van and Alastor.

“You are lucky to be alive,” he said. “For I have chosen you two to be my soldiers.” The vampire said.

Van’s mind raced with questions, but he couldn’t utter the words in his mouth. He watched as Alastor leaped at Marcus, sword in hand, only to be met with an intangible opponent who disappeared into thin air. Suddenly, the atmosphere around Van became oppressive, and he detected a foul odor emanating from his right. Instinctively, he launched a left jab toward the source, interrupting Marcus’ movement with dizziness. Before Alastor could help to ganged him, Marcus braced his fist with sheer force, sending Van crashing into the wall. As Alastor took over and continued to engage Marcus, Van struggled to catch his breath, the pain in his head and ribs making it difficult to focus.

Alastor made a quick twirl, the sword hissed against the air, he didn’t feel he made contact with his flesh and sensed a shuffle of movement. He twisted his hips, reverting with a wide vertical slash. Marcus flicked his hand, a hard gripped preventing Alastor’s sword from reaching his face. That was the moment Van was waiting for. He launched forward. Once Van’s fist hit Marcus' stomach, he felt his arms weakened, but the impact was fruitful. Marcus was knocked back though still in his feet, the face grimaced.

Van quickly advanced forward, he looped with his legs and Marcus backed with haste. He saw Alastor leaped on his wall construct, the light refracted on his eyes, but he didn’t care as such. His ears heard his galloping breath, steady and focus. Marcus stifled a chuckle, with no delay he forwarded, out of harm's way and blocked Van’s attacks with his elbows and arms. With every swoop, the hunter’s attack increasingly stinging. The vampire had to raise his power as well. Behind him, Alastor’s muffling whine was a wonderful ring on Marcus’s ears. The mercenary turned with ferocious swing which was – for the lack of room for evasion and his way of mocking the swordsmanship – barred with Marcus bare hand, allowing the sword to cut the surface of the skin while the other smacked Van’s face and briefly stunned the hunter, he felt Van’s blood drooped in his trench coat. Alastor snarled. Marcus ducked, slipped through the attack to his behind and with cracking aggression, Marcus pushed him. He was expecting that Alastor’s movements would waver, but appalled with the brimming light around the mercenary. Marcus knew that spell was only decreasing the immensity of the force. The mercenary felt some of the damage as evident when he grind his teeth. He didn’t account that Alastor cascaded himself with protective magic – a mistake on his part, he could have increased the power of his attack. Van recovered and picked himself up. The duo stood side-by-side.

They advance in quick succession. While the hunter was throwing useless punches – a poor attempt to lure him in and to make him engage for a counterattack. The mercenary, on the other hand, proceeded with swatting his blade carefully, but quickly. Almost with no effort, Marcus shifted from ducking to lurching back while obstructing Van’s strikes. Marcus hit Van preemptively after Alastor briefly lost his balance due to their hapless coordination which allowed him to maneuver nimbly and caught their arms, preventing them from making any movements. Marcus chuckled. It’s his win. But the pride got better off him. And that position was the least favorable, because out of the corner of his eyes caught the mana slowly swelling in the mercenary’s left hand. That was his second mistake; he took his eyes from the hunter. Van willed with what controlled power he has as a hunter, battered Marcus’s ankle and quickly pounded his face with hardness. The vampire could only muffle his groan. A screeching vortex of mana clutched by Alastor’s hand reverberating, and loose it to Marcus' chest that sent him away from them. Alastor’s attack effectively knocked out Marcus, Alastor was sure of that, but the vampire was far from defeated. The vampire could recover sooner than they expected.

“That bastard,” Alastor muttered under his breath, sheathing his sword.

Van was shaking with fear as he stood. “We have to get out of here,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Alastor nodded, his face grim. “I don’t want to be the guy who’s all doom and gloom, but we’re out of our league if we continue to fight.”

Van couldn’t agree more. They needed to retreat and regroup before Marcus could come after them again. The pain in his head and ribs was almost unbearable, but he knew better well to keep moving before the vampire recovered.

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They were getting close.

Kate felt their presence even though they were several blocks away. It was one of the perks of amet-unra, an orb that enhances one’s sensory abilities. However, the artifact doesn’t let her see the persons, only to feel them, and right then, she felt their panicking hearts. Their breathings were heavy, and they walked awkwardly as though they were limping.

“Something must have happened,” Kate muttered under her breath.

Kate got up from her seat, her feet hastened out of the basement. She already anticipated their arrival. The timing was impeccable as they burst in. The loud slam of the door against the wall made Mia jump out of the sofa. It took her a split second to process and became enraged by their arrival. Alastor wearily looked up while Van lay flat on the ground.

“Who do you think you are?!” Mia asked as she moved up to them. Enrage washed over her face.

“Sorry for disturbing your peace, but we’re really in a cinch.” Van groaned. It took him all his strength to muster to stand up. Every fiber of his muscles is aching even as he speaks. The same thing can be said of Alastor. The pain still lingered despite the protection of the breastplate.

“You got yourself in trouble, didn’t you?” Kate asked.

“Quite the opposite. The trouble came to us.” Alastor’s voice seemed wretched from his throat.

“I hope not him.”

Mia caught all of their attention when she nodded outside.

Kate saw a squared man with a striking appearance standing on the street outside of their house. He possessed a strict jaw, hair was slick back with little amount of hair hanging at the side, almost he looked like just another normal human being, but no less he was a powerful man, it was evident to Alastor and Van’s current state. She stepped in closer, unable to pierce the darkness in his eyes to make out the intentions of this man.

“I supposed you didn’t come here to talk?” Kate asked, the bluish mana in her palm beginning to swirl.

Whether it was Van’s condition or the man’s uncanny intrusion, there was a frightening sensation that creeped up at the bottom of her stomach. A familiar sensation she hadn't felt in a while. Regardless, she had diminished the doubt with her own flame.

“Back off,” Kate said.

The man in a black suit watched as the friction of the bluish mana in her palm rotated violently and gradually turned into a fire. He understood that she was a witch, but did not come off as a surprise to him. He was smiling the whole time.

Back when Kate was hunting monsters all by herself, she didn’t mind her face getting recognized by the enemies. She saw this as an opportunity to make it easier for them to come after her so that she can annihilate them in one sweep. But now, she felt a mix of uneasiness, trouble, and perhaps also frustration, because she couldn’t get something out of this man. She saw herself walking in a promenade of a dark hall into the unknown and this man threatening her. It was clear that he did not acknowledge her. He interrupted the beating rhythm of cold wind against the hard blow of force of his speed when swept past instantaneously in the front door. His breathing labored with tenacity for flesh and blood.

Kate’s eyes lifted to him, he was one foot away from getting inside. She suspected as much that he knew there was something that kept him from entering. She already took precautions. The moment the tip of his finger the line of the door, it lit. The barrier spell with the addition of the blessing of the house permeated the people inside secured protection. He did not flinch, but it doesn’t mean no harm was inflicted. Despite the unnatural reaction, he held a familiar sensation she felt from someone. This could mean one thing; he was uninhibited.

“Great. It’s not like I have finished dealing with a vampire. Now comes another and not a bright one.” Kate exclaimed with an exasperated sigh.

Finally, he broke into a chortle before giving her an eye-to-eye.

“You know, you’re the third funny person I’ve met today. After those two right inside in this domain of yours.” He said.

Even though Kate put up confidence in an attempt to mask her fear, the flinches and unwarranted jerks of her muscles gave an understandable comprehension to him. And she knew, he already saw her façade. This man may be uninhibited like Gilt, but the darkness withheld within was far more sinister than anyone she encountered.

“You’re wise for a young lady.” He said with a brazen smile playing on his face. “Of course, if there are hunters, it’s highly likely that a witch stays here in the city as well.”

Kate’s eyes squinted. “Not enlightening. If I were you, I’d go out on my way by now. There’s no way that you could break down the spell without getting yourself burned.”

“But a witch can find a way to dispel this though.”

Kate smiled, ear-to-ear. “Good luck looking for one.”

He chortled. “You know, I have been observing you a lot for quite a while now. Nothing out of hassle. You see, I was stuck in limbo for hundreds of years. Foreign technologies Ostend my curiosity. I found myself at a disadvantageous point. So, I kept a low profile in case people like you exist. But the funny thing is, I didn’t expect that you witches from this era are so naïve. I expected a lot of you.”

“What are you getting at?” Kate tilted her head quizzically.

“You’re not the only witch that lived here. The other one happens to be... oblivious to dangers around her.” He chuckled. “I have Jane.”

A surge of anxiety flooded her body. Kate supposedly didn’t consider Jane’s vulnerability, though she had some hunch, but she did not expect that this man – in any sense - could lure Jane to captivity. His image flashed in her head when they were in the café. He was the same man that Jane met that day. Kate always felt something off and became painfully clear that he was hiding behind her back this whole time. Fighting off her worry, Kate got to see that she will not yield to his ploy. She was staring at him, cold blood. Her fingertips jerked while the mana upset louder.

“If you touch her –”

“Or what?” He stepped close to her. The barrier was the only thing that kept him away from tearing her apart. She backed one step away. “You’re powerless against me, you know that. Those two barely inflicted damage on me. What could a witch like you do to me?”

Kate turned sour, but leaned on without giving off a hint of hesitation. “Screw you.”

“Heh. I can assure you, darling, I intend no harm.”

“Then why bother to do all this?” She shrugged her shoulders. “You’re bargaining for something, don’t you?”

He smiled not out of mockery, but a spur of admiration. “Jane always thought of you as smart to the point I thought she was exaggerating, but here you are, exceeding my expectations. Your sharp mind complemented your mouth full of wits.”

“I think this is the time where you should explain your evil master plan.” Van interjected.

“Heh-heh. You think I’m evil?”

“You kidnapped my bestfriend and tried to kill the other two. That sounds evil to me.” Kate said with an even sharp cold tone.

“I can assure you, I am no evil alike... unlike my brother.” He looked down, a moment of nostalgia awash his eyes, then turned up with an indistinctive look. “If you don’t help me, my brother is going to tear this city apart.”

“I don’t like where this is going.”

Van stood behind Kate enough to see the vampire.

“Oh, you’re not going to like it, yes.”

Whether it was the truth or a lie, they couldn’t let their guards down, especially when this vampire was far stronger than Gilt.

“I don’t want to be rude, so let’s start with a proper introduction. My name is Marcus Mavenhart.”

Kate curve a brow. “Mavenhart? Just like Gilt?”

“Yes. I don’t mean to confuse you, but I am a long lost relative of the family.”

“That doesn’t sound metaphorical.” Van said.

“It is not.” Marcus nodded. He looked down, reminiscing, but when he looked up, his eyes were indifferent. “My brother was a psion. Bent on power, drunk in jealousy, misled by his belief. When we were working together back in the days – you may refer to the ‘Renaissance Period’, we were part of a coven, a powerful one. You may not know it, but we call ourselves the Ordinals. The coven gave us power due to our innate talents. Naturally, we honed and nurtured our power. Until he decided it wasn’t enough. There are people who are hell bent on destroying our success and the poor bastard was fed with words of lies and deceits. He became jealous of everything I had. They organized an ambush – the nerve of those spineless cowards. I fought back, but my powers weren't enough against a legion of sorcerers, vampires and witches. And I was locked up in eternal darkness.”

Kate, who was listening, chuckled impudently.

“What’s so funny?” Marcus grimaced.

She shook her head. “Nothing. It just occurred to me that your family has a lot of dramas in life. I guess they got it from you.” Kate tilted her head back to him. Her eyes reflected those who saw pitifulness.

“I don’t understand.”

“We’re not going to be part of your shit-show.”

“Even if you don’t want to, I still have Jane. Please, rethink this carefully. Despite your refusal, my brother will surely come after you. I know him well, if he deem someone as a threat, he’d no doubt eliminate those who can oppose him. He is coming after you. I will give you a day. I expect that you have an answer when I return.”

Kate didn’t reply and watched the vampire sped away.

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The sound of the rumbling noise from the committee made Bella regret coming over Enrick’s place. Though she wasn’t much of a talker, there was little she could do since her position as the sheriff was one of the vital parts of their group. But honestly, all the ramblings were distasteful. There’s a little thing that an argument could do rather than finding a solution to all the trouble from the previous days. In any case, it was obvious why they’re in such a mess. There was a recent killing in the city, one was committed by a bold vampire. Who would have thought that a vampire has the balls to commit a horrendous crime in broad daylight? The answer would be a repulsive hungry one. They’d been racking their heads about how to fix this problem considering that they just recovered from the previous onslaught that was caught by certain eyeful people. It was a matter of time for the media to bombard them with questions. The mayor himself was worried how it could affect the city’s situation and forthcoming election next year.

 Although the mayor was capable despite the troubles, it wasn’t a golden opportunity for anyone to hold the position as mayor. For her, it was a pain in the ass to handle such authority and be targeted by unknown individuals who had powers that they couldn’t easily comprehend. Yet, the mayor was not discouraged about this. The priest, on the other hand, was dismayed and subjected with doubts which was ironic of his position. The least tense person who got her head on the game was Dally. Too bad she wasn’t here to watch the show. She told her that she’d be late due to her priorities at school. Understandably, they let her do her job. It’s not like there was a little else the council could do against the monsters. They were short on staff to face the danger outside. Even the people within the police are hesitant to face monsters anymore after last month’s insurgence. Not that she was confident, but Bella has fair experiences in this field, she was after all, trained to kill monsters ever since her parents taught her that monsters exist and were real.

Aside from Bella, the mayor, and Dally, there were some other members who kept themselves level headed, but right now, she doesn’t know if they can keep their composure because there are some members who are less likely to cooperate. Speaking of cooperation, Enrick was the one who made the call for this meeting. It was something about ‘the truth and that we should cooperate’, that at least what she could have remembered from his cryptic message. Puzzle was not one of her fortes.

She called a fellow council member and whispered, “Has anyone seen Enrick?”

He shook his head and promptly returned to the circle of conversation. It was thirty minutes since they came here, but there was still no sign of Enrick. It was so unlike him to be late for this meeting when he was the one who opened up this gathering. The intrusive thoughts to wander around the manor won as she decided to look for him. It was big, but spacious enough for her to memorize every corner of the house without getting loose. Enrick was the only one who lived here so it was sound that there were less ornaments than any other mansions she visited.

Bella was completely aware that she was breaching someone’s privacy. She didn’t like the assembly as much as violating the boundaries, but his absence alarmed her that something else must have happened. This was what everyone called a detective hunch. The creak made such louder noise in her ears rather than people in the living room instead. She hurried her pace slightly, she wanted a reaction from him should he be supposed to be in his room, that way she can ease her troubling mind without making herself look like that she was going to rob him.

No one.

Bella increased her pace in a hurry until she reached his room at the end of the floor. She hesitated at first before she knocked at the door.

“Enrick?”

She received no reply. She knocked again.

“We’ve been here since ten. I’ve been wondering what’s taking you so long.”

There was still no response. This was odd. Too odd. She would wager that Enrick must’ve funny business behind the door, but this goes beyond sedition. Bella placed her ears at the door, feeling the cold, and sought to hear if there were any signs of life before she’d tore down the door to look for answers. She laid still and it didn't take her long enough to find out what was behind. It was faint but she was sure of it that it was continuous ticks. She could have ignored it, but the apparent faster ticks caught her attention. Her blood ran cold.

Bella ran down the stairs, her head whipped at the council, the semblance of panicked on her face.

“Everybody get out of here! There’s a bo—”

An echoing explosion ensued in the place, flames scattered, and then pitch black took hold.

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After their little meeting Marcus, Van and Kate received a phone call from the hospital. What they’re not expecting was worse. The world froze around them as their eyes met. But this was no time to think of anything.

They got up in haste, tense and serious. Alastor was surprised with their synergistic mood that he thought there was another monster. But alas, he would have known sooner that this was no monster problem.

“I’m going to borrow your car.” Van said he wasn’t asking.

“Hey, doesn’t mean we’re friends—”

“We don’t have time for this.”

Van attempted to grab Alastor’s keys, but Kate intercepted and held his arms.

“Please, just take us to the hospital. ASAP.” She said.

When Alastor saw their overwrought faces, he didn’t dare to ask what happened and reluctantly did so.

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Until Alastor parked and honked the car, Van woke up from his daydream. Kate wasn’t perplexed at all nor at least distraught of the news. Her eyes trained as if she was focused. Yet, with the little time they spent together Van found her to be inhibited, she barely spoke of her feelings. He can’t tell whether she was in distress or planning ten steps ahead how to kill the person responsible for Bella’s hospitalization, it could be both. They got out of the car and locked it. The lot was still more than half empty, but the emergency vehicles continuously occupied the entrance. No longer now, relatives of victims will flood this place eventually. Rising eight stories high, the building was encumbered by the somber gray clouds. *A bad premonition.* Van thought.

At the entrance lobby, the double door opened to reveal the wide corridor extending in several directions. Family members were frantically hassling the doctors, and some were waiting for the outcome of their loved ones, hoping they would survive. However, their anticipation was crushed. Seeing the people breaking down from the news, and the victims carried in an attempt to resuscitate with small life left on their body, had their heat drained from the gripped of fear.

“Excuse me, but are any of you related to any of these patients?” The nurse asked them and they snapped back to reality.

“I'm Dally Hawthorne.”

“Also, Bella Hemlock.”

Fortunately, Dally didn’t receive any major damage. Though there were cuts and wounds that would heal for a few weeks, nothing fatal she was still subjugated with excessive treatment. She was knocked out by the blast when she was outside of the house and should wake up a few days from now, but they insisted for her to stay for a couple of days to monitor her condition.

Bella, on the other hand, was in critical condition. Out of all people, she was the closest person from the blast radius. The doctor considered her to be lucky that the blast did not totally burn her. It was the shockwave that threw her outside and was spared from the additional explosion of a petrol gas at the kitchen which contributed to the fatal result of other victims. Although, the strong impact to the head caused her to hemorrhaging. Bella was still at the emergency room for the immediate treatment.

It was well past afternoon, but none of them had the appetite. Alastor offered to deliver them some food, but wasn’t allowed because he doesn’t have a relative inside and on top of that bringing food from outside was prohibited. It doesn’t matter though, they don’t have the appetite to bring themselves to eat knowing they’re fighting for their life. Van knew that he should be worried with Dally for now, but couldn’t help to notice Kate’s unusual reservation with her thoughts. He could hardly picture what was circling in her mind. Still, he didn’t hesitate to hold her hand and looked at her face.

“Everything’s going to be alright.” He softly said.

“I hope... I hope so.” Kate muttered. She may be holding it, but she was pretty shaken.

After a seemingly long thirty minutes, a doctor finally came in. They hoped that he’d brought good news. They rose from the couch. The man has gentle eyes, though emanating a frailty, he was young at best. He turned to them with the utmost sincere tone.

“Who’s the relative of Bella Hemlock?” The doctor asked.

Kate stepped forward. “I-I can’t say that I'm a relative, but she was my guardian for the last five years.”

The doctor looked despondent and sincere. “I’m sorry. Even if you’re under her care, I can’t have teenagers handle all of this. Do you know any adult relatives you know?”

Kate held her breath. She cleared her throat and forcedly shook her head. In all those years, Kate knew little of Bella’s family relatives, but she was told that they’re on the other side of the country. Even if she contacted them, it would take days or even weeks before they arrived. Bella would be dead by the time they come. She was left with no choice.

“Iredeya.” Kate uttered a spell.

The doctor quickly looked at the papers below, scanning thoroughly. Then showed her, “I’m going to need you to sign this and this...”

After signing the documents, the doctor began to explain.

“Bella is suffering from a cerebral hemorrhage. When she was brought to our ward, she was already having a hemorrhage, so there was little chance to prevent the worst case scenario at that time. We immediately operated her brain and attempted to resuscitate her heart and lungs, but there was nothing we could do. Her heart couldn’t breathe on its own. The machine was the only thing that is keeping her alive with the heart stimulants to aid her progress. However, her deep coma is leading towards brain death. I’m sorry.”

Kate did not know how to respond properly with those words left by the doctor. She could hardly see her only mother-figure in such a state. Suddenly, she felt a warm sensation within her, and ignition. She wanted to forget, her visions blurred, her mind was in crimson, and she wanted to scream. Kate did her best to hide her face, but a pain-wistful whimper escaped her mouth. Van attempted to comfort her when the room began to shake. The light bulbs began to spark and blacken. He hurriedly came to her, holding her shoulders.

“Hey, hey. Look at me. Look at me. I know that this sounds worst, but right now, control yourself. You can’t let it win. There’s a lot of people here, including Bella.”

The pain didn’t make Kate deaf and heard Van’s appeasement. The feeling of implosion left her body. She nodded and took it all in, for now.

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Timothy and his company were on search for clues most of the entire day. The case of werewolves’ massacre rang loudly in the underground community. This type of case can be ignored due to the conflict of positions. The organizations simply don't want to get involved in a supernatural community, but given that this might be connected to recent bodies found at several roads, they couldn’t just ignore the probability. The radius of incidents followed a single pattern that led them to this part of a backwater town. It was too good for it to be a coincidence.

They were thankful that the HQ provided them with backup; Orion, Brix, and several operatives. They made the cover up as smooth as possible. Timothy’s group couldn’t make themselves up as competent, they were just too tense around the cops.

“This is no ordinary monster,” Brix muttered, her eyes sweeping from one mutilated body to the others at the bar. “That’s for certain.”

“Obviously.” Raymond said disinterestedly and wore his eyeglasses after cleaning with cloth. “Like there are any monsters who are normal.”

“I mean out of normalcy.” Brix shrugged her head. “No monsters would just attack a specific group of species. This could only be done by someone who has intellect.”

Orion stepped in, he scratched his head and drank his coffee. “Whoever or whatever it was must be pissed enough to mutilate them.”

“And must have been snapped out from his trance to leave all of this mess.” Timothy said, looking at the ax struck at the chest of a female adult.

“Trance?”

Timothy continued. He was hesitant to look at the monsters at the beginning, but developed tolerance over the disgusting sight and the reeking smell of corpses. “Just a hunch. It’s the pattern of the monster’s destination. There are monsters who are susceptible to evolve and become frenzy as a result. First it got itself outside Maryvale and the roads of Daletown, then continued its spree to several small towns outside Missouri. This could be the work of a mutated monster like we have seen in Maryvale.”

“You mean the monsters created by the Ordinus? It’s possible since this started after that night.” Brix cleared her throat and glanced at Timothy. “This poor community must have been the object of its frustration. A collateral damage.”

“It could be.” Orion sniffed over the latte. “But we haven’t found any members or the founders. Ever since the insurgence, their tracks have gone cold.”

They all gave an imperceptible nod. There was no need to debate who’s right. It was time for them to clean up the mess. There should be enough time for them to clean the place before the media arrives. It was bad enough that some police had their case on this, it would be worse once the media got their hands on this issue and spread it to the public.

“You are quite far from the truth,”

They all heard a shuffling noise and a distinguishable voice from the counter. Timothy and the rest held onto their pistols and trained to the source. Behind the kiosk, the sorcerer, Jay Walter rose from crouching to reach a bottle of vodka. He plucked the cork with his magic and grabbed a glass which he poured carefully before drinking.

“Does anyone want some vodka?” The witch said.

“Hands in the air, dammit!” Brix yelled.

Jay moaned from the bitterness. “Would you prefer chardonnay instead?”

Timothy pulled the trigger and the vodka exploded into pieces. Some fragments remained still in the air for a few seconds then commanded by Jay to fall.

“Man, you just made it easy for us to capture you.” Raymond said.

“Capture? No. Does it look like I came here voluntarily just to be caught? I didn’t expect that a short-sighted person like you came from GEMS. Although, the integrity of your organization was put in question when you failed to grasp what was happening in the city.”

“Hands. On. The. Air.” Timothy repeated.

Jay threw his hands up. He sneered. “Uh-oh. Police brutality coming right up.”

“Are you mocking us?” Boston scowled.

“You’re catching up. Good for you.” Jay said. “But enough with the tirade. I didn’t come here for trouble.”

“Don’t worry. You won’t have to.” Boston said and he pulled the trigger.

Jay stayed still. Everything around him suspended slowly. The bullet ringed and with a flick of his finger, he changed the trajectory on to the wall.

“So close.”

“Boston, stand down! We need him alive.” Timothy grabbed Boston’s wrist and pulled it down away from his aim.

“Did you do this?” Orion asked. “Did you kill everyone?”

Jay shook his head. “No. I’m not an animal.”

“Didn’t make you stop with those people you abducted.”

“Point taken, but like I’ve said, you are far from the truth. I’m not responsible for this. An uninhibited vampire did all of this.” Jay put his hands down, leaning forward, his half-shut enigmatic raven-eyes sparkled. His smile turned to grave.

His words were something they didn’t consider. There was a distinguishability in the vampire’s cases. A basic example was bites around the neck. Uninhibited vampires, on the other hand, are of another caliber, though there are similarities – they have different approaches on feeding their victims, they either decapitate them or drink their blood to the point where the bones and ragtag skin are the only thing that remains. But as they can see the massacre, it was hard to prove an uninhibited vampire was responsible. Timothy ignored his words in contemptuous silence.

“Even if that’s the case, there isn’t a single thing that can prove that you’re right.” Timothy grinded his teeth. “Now. Hands on your head.”

Jay sighed exasperatedly and complied. “It’s like dealing with children. Fine. Have it your way.”

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At best, it was the ideal approach.

Jay could have forced them to bend on his will, but he won’t. He knew better than to instigate against an entire organization lest he would lose potential allies for the upcoming reunion. He was not desperate to resort to such a cowardly act. He knew that Marcus as well was taking his time looking for allies. They were playing which of them was going to run out of time.

He was detained in an interrogation room, where a bulb illuminated from corner to corner. It was solidly barred windows that any physical couldn’t break it off by such means. The cuffs wrapped his wrist dangled heavily as it was conjoined below to his legs, irritable to move.

Even though the walls and black-tinted windows are soundproof, Jay could still hear their frantic voice and confrontations behind the thick glass through her psychokinetic magic. To sum up their conversation, the head of the other group, Orion, reprimanded the actions of Boston earlier, he couldn’t agree more. The young lad got his emotion the better of him. Although he could hardly blame him, Jay, in fact, did provoke him. He briefly forgot the fact that he was one of those people that unleashed chaos in the city. Regardless, his thoughts about the matter do not concern Boston’s position or whatsoever. Timothy had to intercept the conversation and managed to ease Orion’s anger.

At the current hand, they talked about what to do with Jay. Among themselves, some are hesitant to believe his words about an uninhibited vampire, but knowing that he was impervious with the details, it was best to assume that he was lying. Jay won’t deny that they were right to be suspicious about him, but if he wants his plan to succeed he needs to gain their trust first.

They don’t want to risk being caught by his web of lies, but they couldn’t risk it either if an uninhibited vampire was on the loose or not. Jay scoffed hearing them. He was disappointed that they didn’t listen to him, well he was not disappointed with all of them. Before either two parties could decide to put their thoughts into the matter, Brix steadfastly broke through them without words. She didn’t hear their yells anymore and decided what they couldn’t do. She pleaded with them to give him a chance, maybe he has something worth considering. Orion and Timothy reluctantly agreed to her request. The air became still.

The tribunal hunter herself came inside, locked the door with the safe automatically locked. Brix did not spare him a look when she sat down together with two cups of coffee.

“I hope the other one is for me.” Jay said after a moment of silence.

She looked up to him. “You like vanilla?”

“Not my taste, but I’ll take it.” Jay nodded eagerly. “Thank you.”

“Good,” She dragged the cup closer to him. The chains locked on his wrist dangled willfully as he reached for it. Brix slouched. “Because I’m not going to give this chocolate either way.”

Jay didn’t reply. He bowed, smelt off the sweet-sweet aroma. He took a sip and groaned.

“I take it, you're ready to hear me out?” Jay promptly asked. He put down the coffee before he held his gaze to her.

Brix, who didn’t seem to be bothered by his suspicious complexion, weighed him up thoroughly with her umber eyes.

“Not exactly,” She said and drank. “I didn’t come here only to talk about the uninhibited vampire. I want to know why you surrendered willingly.”

Jay smiled. The woman knew how to ask the right questions. He could tell by now that he was a few steps ahead from gaining their subordination. Though, not exactly what he had thought, this may do as well.

The sorcerer cleared his throat. “Before I begin, I must insist that you should believe me when I say that what I’m about to tell you is most important for the future days to come. I want to seek shelter in your care along with my brother.”

“You want immunity? Is that a joke?”

“No,” He shook his head earnestly and smiled faintly. “I’m sorry I didn’t make it clear. I want to work with the GEMS as a way to serve my misdeeds and repentance.”

There was silence. A still air prominent with suspicious glance. Brix looked behind through the thick window for some sort of affirmation. When she didn’t receive any signs of refusal, she continued.

“We will consider that later. Go on.” She urged.

The air became cold, unbearably bitterly cold.

“I want you to believe every word I’m going to say, because this is going to change everything you know.”

He was not wrong. There was a fragment of truth in his words.

“Great,” He clasped his hands in content when he heard no objections. “Let me start by telling you my real name. I am Verus Mavenhart.”

## Chapter 7

“This is one of his charades.” Marcus grimaced, resting his arms on the table. Alastor snorted and looked at Kate. She didn’t say anything and put the cleaning cloth at the counter. She walked back to the kitchen washing her hands. Van looked at the letter of invitation that Marcus' brother sent to him this morning. He read it thoroughly.

“He wants us to attend a party.” Van finally said.

Across the sky outside the windows, towards the plaza’s clock tower, an eagle flew, singing loudly. Marcus looked at it, a bright reminder of their roles.

“First, the explosion. Now this.” Marcus said and turned around to see them.

“He’s provoking us.” Kate said as she wore the apron. She sat down at the stool without uttering new words.

Alastor moaned and lifted his head, massaging his weary eyes. “Let’s not assume the worst. We don’t even know if he’s the one responsible.”

“Then who else is there who is motivated enough to commit a horrendous act?” Marcus asked.

“I don’t know.” Alastor shrugged his shoulders. “It could be anyone other than your brother. That place was filled with important people. Hell, they might have enemies of their own.” The crimson irradiation of the sun phase through the window’s shop. Alastor rose and lounged on another seat. “I’m telling you, fighting him would be a bad idea.”

“Let's agree to disagree.” Van sharply said, “Don’t forget, it’s not like we have another choice either.”

Alastor couldn’t disagree with that. He reluctantly nodded.

“It’s really amazing that you can talk like that while I’m here.” Marcus said.

“Marcus,” Kate interrupted sharply. She finally withdrew from staring blankly at the ground. She tossed her head around and her blue eyes flashed. Her eyes are strange. Very strange. Van did like those eyes for a long time. When he stared at those, it was like he could see the reflection of her intentions. Now, he couldn’t make any of it as if it was devoid of life.

She continued, “You seem so sure that it was your brother who did it. Why?”

They all glanced at him; he assent in return.

“Because I’m the one who taught him.”

There was a silent, a chilling one. They heard an awful shriek from a crow outside. They did not look, except for Van. He saw the eagle previously choking the crow with its sharp claws and dragged it somewhere in the forest.

“Damn,” Van broke the long silence. He tore his gaze from outside. “To think I’m the only one who’s crazy here. You guys are savages.”

“Spare me with your judgment,” Marcus cast his eyes on him. “You have no idea what reasons we have why we commit just to survive.”

At that time, Kate wondered for a moment and decided to respond. “A friend of mine, Gilt, used to say that his family has done good and bad things throughout the previous lines, but most of it was bad. Things that anyone would consider evil , which is why his family makes so much effort to cover their family’s history. Now, I can see why.”

“Things we do in the name of family,” Marcus said, looking down, angry at himself, because he sounded stupid for all those years he did for *them*, but he did not regret it. Not even once. “You would be surprised what a desperate man can do just to protect his family.”

“I would be hypocritical if I deny I wouldn’t do anything to protect the only family I have,” She turned and began to tap the desk. “But you – you’re a different kind of monster than anyone in this room.”

Marcus stared outside. There was nothing much he wanted to respond to.

“Speaking of which,” Van looked at her and leaned his head close. “Where is Gilt? We could use his help.”

“He just came back last night.” She said, looking at him. “I’ve already told him what happened.”

“Where was he for the last few days?” Van immediately asked.

Kate stuttered at first before she could utter the words properly. “He’s been busy with his friends. You know the guy knows a lot of people.”

“I hope I can meet him soon.” Marcus said, “I’m eager to see a relative in this era.”

Kate smiled wryly, “You’d be surprised how he resembled you.”

“Very well,” Marcus said. “Let us start, shall we?”

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After Marcus notified them with their short meet up and setting up a plan, Alastor called out Van to talk privately, whereas, Kate left at the shop to cater with the customers. Alastor led Van to the bar where Gregory coldly reproached him for bringing a minor. The mercenary rebut with jeer and gag. The barkeep shook his head in dismay, reluctantly allowing Van to enter. They sat at the corner. Alastor greedily drinks a large glass of bar until its half. Gregory gave Van a juice, he wasn’t given much of a choice. Van tried his best to avoid making eye contact within the room; they all appear to be unnatural. Van hasn’t been to other places like this, but he knew people don’t look like someone who’s ready to pick a fight. He clung coldly to the glass and drank it to soothe his nerves.

“Are you sure we should be here?” Van asked.

 Alastor snorted after drinking, his face squirmed and cringed before responding, “Don’t worry. You’re fine. The barkeep is my friend.”

“I hope he thinks the same way,” Van said, hesitating to look at him while cleaning the desk. “He’s really going to whoop your ass after this. And hey, are you old enough to drink?”

“Dude,” Alastor mumbled. “I’m twenty-one.”

“Shit. That explains why you look so haggard.” Van said, he smiled meaningfully and stared at the glass of beer resting on the table. “You should stop drinking.”

“Hey,” Alastor wiped the froth off his mouth. He moved the glass closer to him. “We got tangled with someone’s family problem, then we are supposed to fight a vampire’s brother who was a psion that might have several allies as powerful as he is. So, no. I’m not going to stop drinking, for now, at least. You know,” he said after breaking a pause, “I take back when I said your world is less crazy than mine. Well, your world, but your people are just as crazy as mine. Mmm.”

Alastor slurped the remainder. The glass clinked against the table when he put it down and he groaned delightfully. Van rested his chin with his hand and the elbow on the table. The hunter was feeling apprehensive and pensive.

“Why are we here again?” Van sighed. Alastor looked up at once, straight to his eyes. Van slightly taken aback, for he knew that this was something important.

“You remember when I told you ‘There’s a fine line between reality and delusion’? I want to know which you are bridging right now.”

“Are we going to argue philosophy again? Because I’m not up to it.”

“Van,” Alastor interrupted coldly. “You told me before that you don’t want to be a hunter. You don’t want to become like me, but you threw yourself over the danger again and again. You are just as inconsistent as Kate. Which might be the reason why you’re perfect to be together.” Alastor gave a brief pause. Van discreetly avoided his eyes without a word. Alastor snorted and continued. “I want to know if you’re decisive.”

“I know that you’re worried and why.” Van said out of the blue. “This is about the last time with that Croatoan.”

“No, it’s not.” Alastor said, there was a modicum of control over his tensing voice. “This is not like any other you have. Those previous times, I can handle watching you over, but neither me nor Kate can look after you all the time. You might get yourself hurt or worse we might end up forced to kill someone and we both know you can’t have that blood on your hands. You might lose control again like at that time in the forest.” He lowered his voice. “I’m not saying this out of spite, but you know within yourself that there is something wrong with you, and you can’t even face it yet. Not now. Not sooner or later until you’re willing to face it and let it go.”

Van sighed, gazing at the shape of the glass, to the yellowish liquid, before completely drinking it. He fixed his eyes on him.

“Do you really think I’m a liability?”

Alastor was hesitant, but responded with a nod.

“Frankly, I think you do.”

“You know why I can’t keep up my mind? It’s because of Kate. I can’t stop myself from getting involved with her knowing she’s in trouble. She has been through much. It’s not fair that she’s handling it on her own.”

“And that’s your second problem.” Alastor said, his eyes half-shut. “You’re only acting on behalf of others, not because you think it’s the right thing to do. You end up forgetting you have your own problems without looking out for them first.” He sighed sharply. “If you want to solve your problem, take this as a lesson; Let go of the hate. Let go of your fear. Let go of your emotions. A sympathy with no borders is self-destruction. Remember.”

There wasn’t so much to say about it. Alastor was right. Even his lesson was right. There was tug in his chest, the brief pain much like the same of his twitch, but worse. He felt like bursting out of his suppressed emotions, but he did not. Alastor’s words started to govern his thoughts.

“I’m telling you this because you remind me of someone I knew.” Alastor said after giving a pause. “He is confused, has a lot of insecurities, and is lost. He’s looking for answers all over the wrong places when he should be examining himself. It didn’t end up well when he grew up.”

“He became a man-child?”

“I wouldn’t say it like that, but kind of. He eventually got angry, not at the world, but to himself. This person did not know what he wanted, because he never had the willingness to let go. He’s a second rate sort. He never fit in with anyone. Never decisive. Always doubtful. And doesn’t have faith in himself. Though he managed to survive throughout the years, by being practical, yet the pain and longing did not end. While the world is moving against him, he is still as a rock waiting to be crushed. It’s all because he didn’t make a sacrifice. His poor choices led to his dreadful position. His ideals killed his heart. Not making any sacrifice will lead you to the path of self-destruction.”

Van was silent, interestingly listening to Alastor as he gobbled the beer.

“He’s like a child full of unadulterated hope.” Alastor groaned as he put down the tankard. “Full of potential. He can be everything he dreams of, but right now, he is not anything he wants. Don’t be like him, Van. Don’t be an ugly adult. Don’t be unlovable. If you want to be great at something, if you want the right answers, if you want to know the right path, you have to make a sacrifice.”

“I don’t agree with you.” Van interjected coldly and looked up to him. “A hope of a child can move even the boulder even an adult could not budge. Hope can reinvent things that anyone would consider impossible. Sacrificing your dreams and hope as a child will not change the world as it is. It’s maybe you against the world, and you’re probably going to lose, but at least you’re going to lose on your own terms with your right moves.”

“Then, what are your dreams?”

A still silence hung in the air. The noises died except his thoughts. Eventually, he blinked with a resolution and content.

“I just want to be the guy doing the right thing. That is what it seems to be lacking these days. Sometimes, you just don’t need a reason to help someone.”

“You know you’re going to get yourself killed, right?”

“I know.” Van looked down, staring at the drink.

“This is not a game, Van.” Alastor said without taking his eyes off him. “You will have to make decisions you won’t like. There is no middle ground. There is no gray area between light and dark. There is life and death. And you gotta fight on one side. If you don’t, you will die.”

Van did not have any courage to find any words, nor even bothered to think of anything anymore.

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“You sure this is the place?”

Van had never seen nor attempted to take a look of the damage at the mega-apartment complex in the 2nd avenue. He knew that this place was once a den of monsters collected by the people from a cult as Alastor told him. The solitary building stood eerily with its shadow casting on establishments below. From the moment he was at the doorstep of the building, he felt the twitch of his flesh telling him the darkness brewing once within this place. There should be no monster that resides further, but all his instinct was telling him to keep his guard. He pulled closer his coat from the fanned of cold wind.

“This is the address that Marcus told us.” Kate said from behind.

Once Van peered over his shoulder, he saw Kate who dressed in a transparent, blue georgette blouse and silken wavy dress with emphasizing details over the curve of her body. Her hair flowed naturally, demanding no effort to show her radiance when she tossed her head around. Her steel-blue eyes were wide and had a nice glint when the moon’s glow refracted on her. The sweet pea lingered fleetingly in the air. He snapped at once.

“You know,” Van started, trying to hide his astonishment. “I always imagine what our senior ball would look like. It didn’t come across to me that this is going to be less…”

“Violent? Dramatic?”

“Yeah. Are you cold?”

“Not really. You don’t have to…”

Before she could deny his offer, Van pulled over his tux and wrapped around her shoulder. He didn’t hesitate at first, but now, he felt like a fool, because she could see her tuxedo barely fit on him. Kate has a different opinion about it.

“You look nice,” Kate said, her eyes were elusive.

At the sight and her words, felt himself blushing. His eyes blinked, mesmerized.

“You too.” Van had to look away, to hide his face, and rubbed his nose. “You’re pretty in that dress.”

Kate smiled while Alastor who just got there, sighed loudly

“You’re not going to kiss each other, do you?” Alastor asked.

“No!” Van blurted, moved one step behind, and looked away when Kate caught him staring at her crimson lips, “That’s not what friends do.”

“Yeah, we’re just friends.” Kate said and blushed.

“Please,” Alastor said and groaned. They looked at once. His black and red suit flashed as he passed ahead of them which was befitting to his personality. “Take it somewhere else.”

Kate could hear Van click his tongue when they moved onward. Alastor knocked on the door of the complex. The eyehole opened.

“Invitation.” The guard said impatiently.

Alastor deftly pulled the three invitation cards that were given to him earlier. They heard a clang and groaned at the door. The muscular bouncer nodded over ahead.

They were in awe when they came inside and entered the room ahead of the lounge. Bustling people filled the place with noises, clamors, laughter, and several people who were alike found themselves hanging loosely at the corner where they chatted comfortably. The chandeliers hummed, spun around brightly, the people happily chattering and lively dancing. Musicians are playing pleasant jazz tunes in the background.

“Did we enter the wrong party?” Van asked. He saw Alastor leering around and looking sharply ahead. Van followed the direction of Alastor’s interest and saw a woman, who wore a velvet, shoulderless seductive garment. Van tore his gaze away when the woman returned a quizzical look at Alastor.

“This is a social gathering, Van. Not a party. And no, this is the place.” Alastor pulled his red tux. “Now, if you excuse me.”

Alastor strode and jostled amongst the crowd. He vanished in their eyes.

“Isn’t this nice, just the two of us?”

“I doubt that.” Kate said and pointed somewhere on the second floor. Among the crowded onlookers, Timothy was enjoying himself along with the others and continued on talking to other people.

“Oh, shit.” Van muttered slowly. “I need to go.”

“Don’t leave me.”

Van already took off, hurriedly walked through the crowd and to the staircase. Kate knew that Van was terrified of his brother, but not this much. Regardless, she considered Timothy’s presence to be alarming. A trouble was brewing around the corner, she knew it, and all of those people who are involved in Mavenhart’s messed knew it – wherever they are. Therefore, they couldn’t afford any of their relatives and friends stay in here. Mia included. Kate hope that her sister stayed in her house as she supposed to be.

“I hope I’m not bothering.”

Kate whipped around when she heard a familiar tone. Jane slowly walked close to her, careful not to step on her long black dress decorated with lace on her knees. Her curly luxuriant black hair dangled softly around her collarbone. Almost with no regard around her, Kate sprang to hug her tight. Jane laughed quietly as she returned with an embrace.

“It’s been a while.” Kate said, finally parting, and scanning her friend. “How are you? Did he hurt you?”

Jane shook her head. “No. He… he didn’t.”

“Are you sure?” Kate asked.

Jane briefly paused. Her eyes projected gloom.

“He’s complicated to live with, but he did not hurt me. Never.”

“She’s right.” Marcus swept in. The uneven ribbon ties on his neck was the first thing she noticed. Kate wanted to choke him with it, but she let go of her hostile thoughts when she remembered Jane’s situation. Marcus lent his tuxedo to Jane, wrapping around her shoulders. “I would never hurt my mademoiselle. She was a pleasant host to live with.”

Kate gave him an eye, a threatening one.

“Don’t give me that look.” Marcus moved between them, but did not occupy the space in the middle, just enough to hush her, a brief reminder of the promise they made. “Jane will stay here as long as the act hasn’t started yet. Don’t bother to talk her out. I used my mind compulsion on her. So, the moment you…”

“You’ll let her kill herself.” Kate sharply said and looked him straight in the eyes.

Marcus stifled a laugh. He shook his head. “No. She won’t. Do not take me as a cruel person, Kate. I only instill on her to leave anonymously should everything’s gone ablaze.”

She knew it was a lie. He would never give in such an easy way out.

“Well, I leave the two of you at it.” Marcus said before he left.

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“Where are you?” Alastor mumbled quietly. He briskly walked with no manner of care around the people he stumbled upon. His eyes examined hastily around and there she was. Not too far at the fountain of glasses of wine, behind it, she was laughing with someone pretentiously. She raised half of the glass when she looked at him and drank slowly. She said something to her companion and left. Alastor walked by, carefully this time.

“Dashing,” Layla commented. She poured another bottle of champagne. A waitress came at him and offered a glass. He accepted and poured himself a wine too.

“Why are you here, Layla?” Alastor’s voice was gruff, unsettling for her to hear, but he didn’t mind, like the crowds behind him. “You aren’t supposed to be here.”

Layla raised with a contemplative look. “Is that how you start to pick up the girls you like?”

“This is not the time for jokes, Layla,” Alastor said, harder this time. “You are in serious trouble right now. This place is brewing with conflict and you’re in the middle of it. I don’t want you to get involved in this matter.”

Layla stared down at her drink. There was something on its texture that attracted her eyes. “I am well aware of it. I’m part of it too.”

Alastor was taken aback slightly. “You work for the other party?”

She nodded regretfully. “Not willingly.”

“Shit.” He uttered indistinctly. “You are so unlucky.”

“I could say the same thing to you too.” Layla scoffed. He didn’t return a response for there was nothing amusing in the circumstances they were in. There was a shift of music played by the musicians, loud and lively. Alastor turned around to watch people gathered in the middle and began to dance. He wished he could feel the same as them. He promptly returned his eyes on her, softened.

“What now?”

“What about now?”

Layla’s eyes glued to him. Alastor tore his eyes away. Her eyes were inviting and seducing. It was bad enough he would be addicted to it.

“You know what I’m talking about.” Alastor said, taking his time to process the situation. “We’d be forced to fight. I don’t want to fight you.”

“What choice do I have? This is my way of repenting my mistakes. But you aren’t here by force, aren’t you?”

Alastor raised his head. He glanced at her.

“I’m not.”

“Then leave.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I might be the reason why someone is going to die. I can’t let that be on my conscience.”

“Heh.” She smiled. “You aren’t as cold a bastard as I thought.”

“What do you mean?”

Her eyes squinted, measuring, and weighing. “You care for someone other than yourself. You are a big softie. You surprised me. Don’t worry too much. If we ever fight, I promise I will hold my punches.”

“Layla –”

“Alastor, no.” Layla interrupted quickly and coldly. “There is nothing you can do to convince me nor to stop what’s about to happen.”

Layla left no room for Alastor to say. She was right though. There is nothing to stop what's going to happen.

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As soon as Marcus left them, Kate brought Jane to a dark corner where no one could see them. Kate threw questions at Jane more than what her friend could handle. Jane had to interrupt her. She unconsciously stepped back to breath.

“Please, ask one question at a time.” Jane said. She was uncharacteristically patient over Kate.

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry about that.” Kate blinked and drank the wine before putting the glass on a cocktail table.

“You look different.” Jane said out of the blue as she ate a meatball.

“What do you mean?”

“You look tense. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Kate smiled faintly. Her eyes became distant for a few seconds until Jane snapped her out of it.

“Kate?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t lie to me.” Jane licked the seasoning off her fingers and cleaned her hands with a handkerchief. “What really happened?”

“Nothing.”

Jane cocked her head at the side. She knew that Kate’s words were empty, resisting any further reveal. Yet, even though Kate did say anything of what was troubling her lately, Jane was able to grasp that it was something big enough for Kate to hide from her.

“I know that you’re lying.”

“Nothing is going on.” Kate held Jane’s hands. “We’re here to help you. I’m so sorry if I didn’t bother to check you up. You wouldn't be in this situation in the first place if I just bothered to call.”

Jane shook her head. “It’s not your fault, Kate. There’s nothing you can do about it. The guy is tricky. I didn’t even see him coming until he knocked on my door.”

“He didn’t hurt you, didn’t he?”

There was a pause. An awfully long one. Kate’s eyes narrowed.

“Did he—”

“That’s not simple, Kate.”

“I am going to whoop his ass.”

“Listen to me,” Jane tightly clutched Kate’s hand when she was about to march towards her death. “He’s sick. There is something deep wrong with him that makes him act unnaturally.”

Kate seemingly ignored her words, went lean on to look at her neck and removed her hair to see several marks. Though the wound was unnoticeable at first—clearly from being healed, she can clearly recognize the odd bite on a closer look.

“How many times did he feed on you?”

Jane did not entertain that question with a proper reply. Instead, she veered off. Kate could not distinguish the old Jane from this one.

“He’s not a bad person, Kate.”

“He kidnapped and fed you.”

“I know that. Get a move on. His brother is the one who you should be worried about.”

“I don’t know anything about them and I don’t give a damn what’s going on between them. Clearly, both of them are assholes. I just need you to be safe.”

“And I am.”

“No, you’re not. You are clearly attached to him.” Kate said. “This is his doing. Once we’re clear, I am going to sneak you out. Laswell knows a spell that’s going to free you from his influence.”

Jane, who was beginning to lose her patience, kept herself in silence, and looked to her left. She took notice of the music becoming eerily distinct from the previous one they played. Right now, she was letting the music carry her emotions.

“You know nothing about him.”

Somehow, Jane’s voice was tinged with sorrow.

“You know what? Fine. If that is how you think about him, I leave you with it. But I am going to do my best to get you out of this situation.”

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Kate left Jane for a moment by herself to sort out her thoughts. It was bad enough to know that Jane was under Marcus influence, she wouldn’t want to risk her doing any risky actions. Kate hoped that washing her hands would carry her worries, but instead, it magnified when she thought over the worse scenarios.

When Kate left the bathroom, she saw Verus leaning his back on the wall, patiently waiting for her. Kate sighed deeply and walked past him. Verus followed behind at a slow pace.

“What do you want?” Kate shot her question away.

“I understand that my brother tangled you into this mess. I intend to propose—”

“Zip it.” Kate said abruptly as she turned around. “I’m not interested.”

Verus did not take her reply soberly. It was common sense not to trust your enemy on the battlefield. What he didn’t understand was why didn’t she opposed and seemingly colluded with Marcus. If there was anything that his brother’s lesson deeply struck on him, it would be the art of bargaining. Verus considered that a possibility, but he would like much to learn how big this ‘bargain’ that Marcus held against her.

“What did my brother do to hold you in his will?”

“Nothing.” Kate addressed the lie with no trouble. Verus gazed at him in stupefaction which was reasonable on his side. “It’s not something that your brother holds something against me. It’s something that you did against me. You see your parlor trick got my aunt and Van’s aunt on their deathbed.”

Verus' confusion was washed away by her reasoning. He was impassive for a moment. He understood that she was in no position to alter her side. Verus' plan to turn her against him was doomed to begin with.

“You really take his word as the truth?” Verus' words weren't a mere question, it was a fact he understood. “That’s unfortunate.”

“You think of someone easily to be a fool, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Verus said, vaguely hiding his disappointment. “You were led by a lie. My brother’s words are not something you should trust hastily. Just for you to know, he’s a compulsive liar. On top of that, you should know that he’s an uninhibited vampire. So, he will surely break his promise and he will devour your friend with no remorse if you let them on their own.”

Verus walked ahead past her.

He was right, the deal they made with Marcus heavily implied that it was on his advantage. It was not like they had other choices either.

“Wait.”

Her voice didn’t reach him. Verus was gone out of her sight.

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Right when Van got through the crowd, Timothy and his friends had already vanished. He turned his head around. Every corner was teeming with guests and decorations that were bound to cover the person he was looking for.

Van let out a sigh. He grabbed a drink from a walking waitress and drank. He licked his lips. The music was getting louder. He move to scanned again. Out of sudden, he bumped on a guest. Van smelled the alcohol odor around him, he was drunk. So, he ignored and tread forward.

For the next few moments, Van was getting impatient, he tried to cast an eye over around until he felt someone tugged over his sleeve. He spun at once and saw his brother with displeasure painted over his face.

“What are you doing here?” Timothy asked. His arms cross over one another. His eyes penetrated Van. “Did you sneak in here? How the hell did you get invited? You’re not supposed to be here.”

“And you are?” Van returned evenly suspicious. “You told me that you’re going to check Lester. I’m going to tell dad about this.”

“Van, don’t be a snitch. We’re both in trouble for this. I have a friend that invited me here.” Timothy said. Though, Van could make out with clear that he was telling the truth, he felt a punch on his guts that something was odd. This meeting was convenient. Far too convenient. That was when he realized that Timothy and others were also part of this.

Van backed at once. He bumped on a server, but he didn’t mind. He was occupied with his thoughts as to how his brother got himself into this trouble.

“Are you alright, Van?” Timothy asked.

Van shook his head and jerked his head around to see Kate who was talking with Jane. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Marcus eyeing someone. The vampire was frustrated. It appeared his person of interest briefly lost from his sight. Van felt an unreasonable cold surge flooding through his body.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Van returned a complacent reply.

“Can I ask you something?” Timothy asked with an urgent tone. “You don’t happen to be with that guy, do you?”

Van looked at once to whom Timothy was pointing at. Marcus threaded and followed someone quietly, but paused at once when something caught his attention. The vampire looked up to them, his face empty and probed back to his person of interest who was at the stage announcing.

“Yeah.” Van didn’t know what he was thinking when he uttered that word. He knew as well that Timothy had something to do with the other party. The hunter was about to interrogate his brother, but when he turned around, he was nowhere to be found.

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Marcus did not expect for Verus to be so bold as to approach him in such grandeur and indecisive manner. The wayward kin brought his subordinates without attempting to censor their appearances. The ordinal vampire could hear their murmuring voices. They honestly thought he couldn’t hear their words about opting for a more direct method over putting up with this poor ploy where they have to invite some actors. He couldn’t agree more. Marcus would prefer to meet in an even ground where they could ramble as they please. Nevertheless, it was out of their hands, Verus was the one after all who proposed this poor ploy. Marcus knew that his brother was being cautious of what Marcus might do to him, so it would sound right for him to enact such a method.

Marcus jostled through the crowd at once when he saw the suggestive look of Verus amidst the crowd. He wanted to share two cents of his thoughts about the current matter. He was sure that Verus was just ahead of him when he went out of his sight on the spur of the moment. But something had caught his ears. He looked up and saw Van with a worried look on his face, however, Verus familiar voice rang out and the chattering amongst the crowd was put to silence. Marcus spun out once.

“Ladies, gentlemen, and honorable guests. It is my family’s pleasure for you to be part of a ceremonious event in such untimely and quick call.” Verus coughed and paused. He looked straight at Marcus and beamed out of taunting him. Marcus narrowed his eyes. “We are here to celebrate the reunion of my family. Though only some of you may have known us, our family was one of the founders of this city. Today, we arranged this ceremony as a prologue of our first contribution to the society after long years of silence and to announce our return. We are the Mavenhart’s family.”

An explosion of cheers and applause rang throughout the ballroom, but Marcus was utterly still. He was not having it. Verus' announcement made no sense. Marcus knew that this was just his attempt to distract him, just like the lie he told him in their previous meeting. He was certain of it from the fact that even now he can hear several people muttering among themselves. Ignoring the sidelines hub-hub of noises, Marcus lay quiet, listening to what his brother had to say.

“Despite the lack of family members due to unwarranted troubles, please let us welcome two of my family members; Gilt Strauss Mavenhart,” They all spun at once when the encore trailed at a man with striking resemblance to their family’s gothic beauty. His stature was well endowed and had the same porcelain skin as them. His smile was absolutely enigmatic and brilliant. Gilt reminded Marcus of his younger brother from a distant past. Verus continued. “And my older brother, Marcus Mavenhart.”

Marcus' eyes briefly brightened in anger when Verus mentioned his name. He thought as much that this was part of his ploy. A surge of ferocity coursed through his temple the moment the spotlight went to him. He had no other choice. Marcus walked past by the murmuring crowds and mustered the savagery urging him to do a reckless thing.

‘Gilt’s with us.’ Marcus heard those words amongst the crowd. He flashed a look at his right and saw Kate nodding unto him. He knew what she meant. Although, Marcus wished Gilt wasn’t part of this. It was bad enough that they had outsiders get strangled in their game, it would be worse to have their own blood be part of their long years of hatred. He doesn’t want to spoil their children’s blood for they were his brother’s blood that continued their bloodline and legacy. No, it would be embarrassing to drag them into this mess.

As Marcus walked up to the red carpet and to the stage, he lazily smiled at his brother and awkwardly waved at the people. He stood three feet beside him, not even batting him with an eye.

“As I promised, this social gathering is our prologue on helping the foundation of this city. How? By donating five million dollars in the city’s welfare and helping to raise the livelihood of this city.”

Another explosion of applause rang once more. Despite his eyes dripping malevolent Marcus’ eyes flickered in astonishment of Verus’s announcement. Extraordinary enough for him. Verus managed to impress Marcus. Verus did think it through with how he should write the sequence of events.

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After a while of the announcement, greetings with the guests, the three members of the family gathered at the center of the hall. Marcus was pensive. Verus, as usual with his man stature, was composed, unperturbed by the hostility that Marcus purposely sent to him. Gilt never felt safe among them, he certainly did not expect that he would get to meet his ancestors, and even so, the rivalry was evident with their eyes bleached with hostility towards one another. Gilt was cautious around them.

“Quite a splendid performance you did there, Verus.” Marcus snapped, appearing at Gilt’s side after he went to get a glass of champagne. “I wonder, how long have you been planning this?”

“For a while.” Verus nodded with a bow. “Although, there were some altercations due to your untimely revival and your impetuous aptitude that had brought several party’s attention in his city.”

Marcus eyebrows ticked out of curiosity. “And what would that be?”

“Don’t turn blind eye to this.” Verus said confidently. Gilt was keenly listening. Marcus could almost feel his own fangs sharpening. “You’re the uninhibited vampire who was on a killing spree for the last few weeks.”

Marcus laughed in derision and contempt. “A bold accusation.” He shook his head. “No, brother. It’s not me.”

“Oh?” Verus hung his eyes suspiciously at Marcus. “You were locked in that dimension for several centuries. With the imprisonment, the surging cold blood within your system is undoubtedly looking for anything warm to be mixed and meld. Did the woman serve your appetite well?”

Verus' last words did not rang well in Marcus’s ears. The vampire’s eyes glimmered at once when he snapped open. “I do not like the tone of your words, Verus.”

“Did I strike a nerve?”

Marcus did not return a reply. His focus turned inward on his rising hostile thoughts. He was taming his emotions as much as possible.

“You still are as bold as ever. Proclaiming me falsely for something I didn’t do.” Marcus stirred the wine slowly. “Tell me, do you tell yourself in front of the mirror every morning that your conscience is just as clean as the still water?” He smiled naughtily.

Verus blinked expectantly. Gilt was silently watching and listening over. Marcus finally drank and sent a childish grin that anyone would consider as rebellious.

“Oh come on.” Marcus said. “You know what I’m talking about. There’s no use hiding it. I can smell the trail of miasma and dark energy lingering over the compound, especially below. You know,” he said after a pause. “I’ve always taught you that being courageous and the line of brave do not harbor the same meaning. You can be bold, but dumb at the same time. Now, I know I’m not a prime example, but how did you manage to screw yourself up?”

Verus scoffed and beamed after a while. “You surprised me brother. I never took you as someone who has the keen nose of a werewolf.” With those words, the smile on Marcus' face wiped off. Verus continued. “Less includes the ability to foretell my draught upbringing. I must confess, my failures take after you.”

Gilt had to interrupt when he saw Marcus’ veins popped under his skin. He moved slightly between them.

“Guys,” Gilt started, he was squeezing every ounce of courage to talk down with the brothers. Their mana are far greater than anyone he encountered with. “If you don’t mind, let’s not start something that we might regret. Not for now, at least.”

Marcus became easy, his shoulder hunched down, and his sharpened nails trimmed back to normal. He still has the right sound of mental faculties to consider what was the right thing to do.

“It appears that despite our deliberate curse of our bloodline, our fruits yield some good results.” Marcus confessed and looked over Gilt. “I’m glad you did not take after us. Except for being a vampire, of course.”

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” Verus commented. “There have been some questions that are spiraling in my head. Tell me honestly, where is Rick?”

Marcus turned over his attention to Verus out of curiosity. He never heard Rick before. Even Caroline barely mentions Rick due to the fact she felt the need to keep anyone she knew from his knowledge. Of course, it didn’t work.

“I, for once, are astounded. I never heard that Rick was part of our family.” Marcus said after returning the empty glass to the passing waitress and had another one. “Hm. Where is he by the way?”

“He’s on a trip with his friends.” Gilt said without returning a look. He was passively looking down. The squabbles between the brothers must have bored him. “He should be away in the meantime for about two to three weeks.”

“It may be for the best for the young one to stay away from all of this mess.” Marcus said. “We don’t want to take away his innocence for what might happen tonight.”

“I couldn’t agree more, but…” Verus said. Marcus brows cocked skeptically. “Nothing will happen tonight. I can assure you, Gilt.”

“What makes you think that would be the case, brother?” Marcus asked. His attention was now on Marcus. The music finally died and was replaced by another. “You had the entire place filled with maggots. I cannot comprehend what made you go to such lengths to conspire with these people that clearly detest you.”

Gilt called a server to come in and grab a drink. Verus was silent for a moment while Marcus was amused by his brother’s feigned ignorance.

Marcus continued. “I’m a vampire, Verus. I can hear people amongst the crowd talking vehemently behind your back.”

“I could say the same thing to you, brother.” Verus said with disdain, “You had put those people on your leash just to follow your commands. How so likely of you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t presume ahead, brother. I did not force them to do anything.” Marcus’s smile stretched, knowing it was his win. “They willingly colluded with me.”

“Willingly? How?” Verus brows furrowed. His voice was deep and stricken in his throat.

“Oh, brother,” Marcus had to pause, amused over Verus charade. “And you say I’m the one who’s hiding a dirty secret.”

“I do not know what you mean, Marcus.” Verus smiled innocently, his eyes frantic and gazing off from theirs. His effort of transparency did not escape their scrutinizing eyes.

“Don’t pretend to be clueless. We both know you’re the one who blew up the house filled with people at Enrick’s residence.” Marcus said. This time, he had Verus complete attention on him, and so was Gilt. “Oh, I know the connection between the two of you, brother. I did some thorough investigation. I didn’t waste my days loitering around.” Marcus smirked. “There’s no use denying.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about Marcus.” Verus pulled his tuxedo closer and arranged his bowtie even though it was not disheveled. “There’s nothing I’m hiding.”

Behind Verus deceitful smile, Marcus already discerned how his brother would respond. He knew very well that Verus would sway him with his words in order to avoid any direct attempt to question him. Marcus won't indulge with his brother’s lies.

“Is it necessary for you to make an effort on this grandiose event?” Marcus asked, though he already knew the answer.

Verus smiled earnestly. “You would have ripped my heart out the moment there were no obstacles to hinder you.”

“Is it true?” Gilt asked out of sudden and looked despondently at Verus. “Did you put a bomb in Enrick’s house?”

“Nonsense.” Verus said and turned his eyes away. “I will never commit to such an act. Enrick and I have been friends for many years.”

“So, you do admit that you have a connection with him?” Marcus interjected before Verus could twist his words even more. Marcus saw how deftly Verus sharpened his eyes on him with malevolent intention.

Hearing no response, a renewal dawned on Gilt’s mind. It was something that the brothers and the parties involved didn’t expect – Gilt ran through the crowd, barely visible to their naked eyes and went to the corner where there was an emergency button in case of emergency. The moment he pressed it, a blaring noise erupted. There was a sudden confusion among the people until the guards outside hastily escorted the guests off the room.

That moment the curtain fell, they saw each other’s familiar faces. They knew it was time for the next act.

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No one uttered anything when they entered the dining room.

They were astounded. Most of them. There were some people who were expecting that something would happen sooner or later. Regardless, this was bound to happen. Van breathed in the last of the wine and drank it, but it did not help the tension rising in his chest when he heard several footsteps from the upper floor and on the ground.

“Let’s not do anything hasty, Gilt.” Kate said as she got out from the dark enclosure.

Out in the corner, troubles descended from the stairs. Most were very familiar to Van, except for one – Alastor’s friend. It wasn’t Van’s business, but her crestfallen face made it known to him that she was dearly close to Alastor. Of course, Van tore his eyes away the moment he saw the darkened faces of Raymond, Boston, and his brother – Timothy following from behind as the others made their way, apparently surrounding Marcus.

Alastor was also taken by surprise when he saw Timothy. Alastor may have only known by his face as Van showed to him in brief occasions, but he won’t easily forget him. Alastor looked up to Van and he sent a nod in assent. Alastor put down the wine glass and exasperatedly sighed as he crossed his arms while leaning his right shoulder at the pillar. Van did not expect that his brother would be part of this, neither of them are.

Had their interaction would be casual, Van would recognize his brother’s impetuousness in a heartbeat. And yet, he could not see the natural cherry and wits outlook – neither of it registered on his brother’s face.

There were others who came late, Van had not formally met them, but Kate already told him who they were. Roxy in her long red wavy dress was walking carefully, clutching the arm of Mark. The newcomers' expressions were tired and solemn. This probed a question to Van.

“Are we late?” Mark asked. A response to that question was unwarranted. It was noticeable enough that the air was eerily silent as the entire room. The others did not bother even to look.

Van swallowed the last of his wine, including his own saliva, and put it down at the nearby cocktail table.

“This is quite an intriguing revelation.” The one who has his hair slick back appeared to be the brother Marcus was talking about, Verus Mavenhart. Verus flashed a half-smile. Gilt did not like it, not even one bit. Something told Van that this Verus might have done somewhat on Gilt.

Van heard a scoff when he got down near Alastor and Kate. At the side, where there was a door behind the fountain of wine glass was another two familiar faces; their ‘supposed’ to be teacher Osiris and the owner of the bakery shop Brix. The owner of the bakery shop could not keep herself still, obviously she was not used to wearing a cocktail dress. As Van and Kate turned and glanced at one another, Osiris scoffed and addled when he looked at them. After a while, his face returned to being stoic.

“I’m telling Mr. Spotsman about this. Consider both of your grades ‘D’.” Osiris said.

Their eyes traversed on one another. Then there was a frustrated groan. Verus threw his hands up over the attempt to cower behind the innocent people. He admitted that his plan won’t work effectively, not when his skeptical brother was around.

“Let’s take this talk elsewhere, shall we?”

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When they went to the other room just behind the hall, Verus had summoned a long black and white marble table. The brothers were in the middle of two parties who were on the opposite side. They were all under the impression of enjoying the meal, but they were stealing glances at one another, measuring their potential enemies.

"Not what I expected, but it'll do," Marcus said. "Before we rip each other's throats out, tell me, brother, what do you have to say to even prepare such a gastronomic affair? I can hardly imagine that you're going to throw another speech again. I will definitely stab you if you try to perform such theatrics again."

Verus shook his head and held the neck of the stemware.

“I assure you, brother,” Verus said after he had a drink, groaning over the sweet-malt liquor. “I won’t put up an act.”

Marcus used his cutlery to slice through the steak. He then took a bite and looked at Verus at once.

“I’m glad that’s the case,” Marcus’s hands were on the drink and had the time of his life savoring it. “This is the fiery indignation, brother. I do not want to indulge with your lies any longer. So, anything that you will say will dictate the outcome of your plea.” His eyes sharpened ahead. The others listened intently.

“What is this?” Verus scoffed. “You sound like you are persecuting me. Am I the only one to blame for this discord unfolding before our eyes?”

“I’m not the one who betrayed our kin.” Marcus spat intensely. “Definitely, I’m not the one who twists words of my own accord.”

“You are quite a hypocrite don’t you think?” Timothy shot the question out loud of a sudden. Their eyes gathered at him. Orion shook his head as a signal to not interfere, but Timothy did not acknowledge it. “You talk about how wrong twisting words and all this betrayal.”

Marcus' eyes traveled back to Verus and said, “Have your companion's mouth shut or I’ll force him to.”

“Timothy, shut your mouth or he’ll force you to.” Verus sardonically said without looking at Timothy. Marcus rolled his eyes.

“This is not what you think it is, Tim.” Van interjected before anything else could happen.

Van was about to call out his brother, but Timothy stared sharply at him. Van’s tongue locked tightly and did not dare to say anything. He felt Kate’s soft hand held his.

“Don’t say anything, Van.” Timothy icily said. “I don’t know how you got into this mess, but I am going to make sure you won’t be part of this madness.”

Marcus, who was listening with interest, arched his brow.

“I may not be someone who can read thoughts, but I can recognize the worries that are similar to those of his relatives when I see them.” Marcus said and narrowed his eyes out of suspicion. “The two of you came from the same tree, don't you?”

“Timothy, is he your brother?” Verus asked.

“Yeah, he is.” Timothy replied and stared at Van.

“Huh,” Verus carefully turned his neck. “I can speculate that this is another plot of yours, Marcus.”

“Oh, this is no plot of mine, brother. You know that. The world is just too small. I did not expect that Van’s brother is going to be one of your allies. I assure you, Timothy, it was not my intention to pit you against your own kin.” Marcus said.

“Or you are just too good of a sociopath.” Timothy vigorously uttered.

“For the sake of your brother, I will not kill you for your ignorant words.” Marcus said.

“Is that a threat, Marcus?” Verus asked.

“Don’t twist my words, Verus.” Marcus snarled at his brother. His fangs began to sharpen. “Putting gas on fire will do no good.”

Verus felt his brother’s patience becoming thin. He wiped off the smirk on his face.

“I see now. I apologized for that.” Verus nodded. Marcus was still eyeing him. The rest couldn’t resist the grave tense unfolding before their eyes. Verus continued. “I did not invite you to have a quarrel. I want you to surrender.”

The room draped with an eerie silence. Their attention was on Marcus and Verus. After a while, Marcus laughed in derision. They weren’t expecting his reaction.

“You want me to surrender? Is this a joke? Did the soup clog the functionalities in that brain of yours? I ought to rip your tongue!”

Verus halted his group which they did and he rested his arms on the table and relaxed his shoulders.

“I only want to make amends for my offense against you.” Verus said sincerely. “I want to apologize for what I did. We can start again elsewhere toge–”

“Shut your mouth!” Marcus rose and the room was filled with fierce growls. “You are over a hundred years too late, brother!”

“You must know that I didn't do it on purpose.” Verus' voice finally broke out.

“Betraying your own family is not done out of accident.” Marcus said.

“Whoa-whoa.” Van interrupted quickly. “Before we rip each other’s throats, why don’t we just sit down for a moment and consider taking a deep breath?”

They all listened to Van. Thankfully, rage hadn’t clouded Marcus mind. Van may not have heard it, but the rest were grateful for postponing an immediate bloodbath.

“This sounds like a long family drama.” Orion said.

“No kidding.” Brix added, drinking another wine. “This is a family drama, alright.”

Alastor was silently stitching everything together and gave it a thought to contribute in the conversation as well considering that they were all reluctant in this case. He put down the knife and the fork at once. His arms crossed on one another.

“I’ve had my fair share of dealing with people who were betrayed before.” Alastor held his chin high, looking at Marcus and Verus. “There’s always a motif. The question here is who pulled the trigger? And who was the reason behind who pulled the trigger? Those are the questions that must be answered before the two of you start to rip each other apart.”

Verus was silent, bearing in mind Alastor’s words. Marcus, however, was bold with his accusation, but Alastor knew as well as anybody else in this room that his enraged was out of pain searing in his heart, especially the group of Timothy since they were told about what occurred back then, at least, on Verus’s perspective. Hence, Marcus’s claims was not to be fully trusted. Among all of them, Van and the others wasn’t clarified what was the reason they were fighting. Ultimately, both parties were on the losing side since they do not know the full story of these two brothers. Their bargains were the only thing that was accounted of the reason to wield their weapons.

“It is Verus who started it all.” Marcus scorned his brother and paused. The room was enveloped with a weighty ambiance. Their eyes gathered at Marcus. “To make it easy to understand; my brother and her surreptitiously she-like viper betrayed and destroyed my family. This fool made a grandiose exposition to kill us one-by-one.”

“You were right,” Orion turned to Brix. “This sounds like a family drama out of a television.”

“That wasn’t the whole story.” Verus said bitterly. “You may have seen our acts as mere betrayal, but we did what we did to spare our family’s lives.”

“Tell that to our dead brothers.”

“You are incorrect.” Verus said and bared his teeth. He was clinging to the last of his patience. “They are not dead. If so, then you won’t be here.”

Verus' last words were sarcastic for some reason, but they understood well the frustration of a man who was trying to de-escalate the situation, more specifically, Verus’s side. Timothy and the others were provided the knowledge of the Mavenhart’s family history, a thing that Timothy wished that he never had to learn.

“Ever still the sharp mouth, eh, Verus?” Marcus drank the wine to soothe his nerves.

“And you are still the same obnoxious the last time we saw each other.” Verus grunted. “You think that everything is my fault, but no, brother. If you didn’t just let that woman get into you, we wouldn't be in this situation.”

Marcus glared at his kin. “Oh please, Verus. Karla is of no consequence. Do not project your failure to an innocent bystander. That turncoat Delilah was the one who started the chains of the events. Your gal slithered her way in our family while feeding the Ordinals information which led to our downfall.”

“I’ve kept hearing about these Ordinals.” Kate interrupted. “Who are they?”

“A supernatural cult, bent on dominating every supernatural creature in this world.” Orion filled in. Kate turned on him. “At least, that’s what I’ve heard from the rumors. They’re myths.”

Verus cast his eyes down on Orion. “They are far from myths, young ones. The Ordinals are real. They’ve been hiding since the 50’s after a—”

“I don’t think that’s of any relevance in our current precedence.” Marcus cut off.

Verus spun his head at once. He smiled. “No, it is not. You see, brother,” Verus said after a pause. His voice slightly trembled. “You can blame, sugarcoat, and pretend all you like, but it’s not going to change the fact that when you let Karla in your life, you open up the possibility of our demise. We could have had it all. We wouldn’t be in this situation if you didn’t just let her in!”

“And you’re telling me I’m projecting?” Marcus asked and laughed. He sounds somewhere between annoyed and mocking. “Is that how you see it that way?”

“You know the Ordinals do not tolerate weaknesses. You provided one.”

Marcus drooped at Verus angrily and his brother did the same with even contempt.

“That’s a lie.” Marcus icily said. “You were jealous of me. Out of envy, you colluded with Delilah to bring me down.”

Verus gasped, the intake of breath became stifled. “I admit, I was jealous. You had the chance to live and love as a normal man, but not even once I did want to bring down our family. My collusion with Delilah was done out to spare our family.”

“And then there he is.” Marcus uttered, completely ignoring the rest of Verus words except the last. “You did conspire with her.”

“No matter what I say, you will never believe me.” Verus said, crackling while his jaw juddered.

“Never.”

That settled it, there was in any way that Verus would convince Marcus. As much as Verus wanted this to settle quietly, he already anticipated that this outcome was inevitable.

“Verus, remember, we’re here to negotiate.” Orion said quietly. The agents of GEMS were already reluctant to be part of this, regarding that their enemy was on a different scale. But Verus was too at a different scale.

“Do not blame me. You have let that snake get into you. I’m just glad that she’s dead.”

“At least,” Verus started, drank the wine, and continued. “My beloved fulfilled her purpose. Yours, on the other hand, is just another collateral damage.”

Not even a sound registered in their ears from Marcus when he lunged forward, except the thrashing the entire wineries on the table against his incredible speed. The vampire grabbed his brother by his collar. Malice was clear on Marcus' eyes.

Verus was lifted into the air, but not a bit he struggled to flash a mocking smile. Marcus became infuriated. His jaw clenched and his teeth spikes. The vampire was fast, that was for sure, but his anger dulled his other senses to hear someone already on his flank. Boston struck Marcus with a wind magic, hurdling and crashing against the wall.

“I guess that’s the signal.” Boston said, staring ahead.

It all happened fast. Brix struck a blow on Roxy, flinching the vampire from the sudden attempt, but it wasn’t in any sense injured. Roxy was flabbergasted by the assailant. Mark was about to return the favor when Orion shot him with a left hook. Mark staggered back a little and they engaged.

Alastor found himself in position where he was being pushed by Layla’s assaults with her bow staff, but the mercenary was fast to parry her attacks and delivered several counters. Each blow had a setback and each time Layla struck him, Alastor resorted by contorting his body to swerve and deliver pirouettes to compensate for her attacks. Layla’s blows were somehow lightened when she made contact with his sword—probably she was becoming tired. His worries somewhat lightened.

Gilt threw Raymond across the hall in hope to knock him down, but the agent apparently had too much of a fight within him to be eliminated that easily. Witnessing how Raymond was a ragdoll, Boston turned his attention to Gilt and launched himself forward. The vampire who was ever cautious with his surroundings heard Boston coming closer and Gilt’s right arm swept towards Boston without looking back, but was blocked, and countered by a jab. Then, Boston followed up by thrust on the gut. As soon as Kate had Jane hide away from them, she immediately got back up Gilt preventing Boston from pulling his gun by commanding magic to forcibly lock it on its holster. Kate ducked a hook, moved back his upper body to evade another punch, and returned a two jabs at the face. When Raymond got up and Kate did not notice, Gilt immediately defended her which Raymond got away prominently. They continued to fight side by side.

“Do we really have to fight?” Van asked his brother.

Timothy ignored his question. He was trying to weigh how to take down his own brother. He was swallowed by the whirlpool of conflict.

“I don’t know how that vampire got to you, but I won’t let him control you any further.” Timothy said.

“There are things you don’t know.”

Without further warning, Timothy hurled a sharp jab. Van ducked out of instinct, narrowly avoiding the blow. But the next one caught his cheek. Naturally, Van should feel the impact, but the punch did not register as painful when his body acted up and hardened his skin.

There was no time to sort out his thoughts as he saw Timothy pressed another strike below the ribs. Van raised his knee to guard and countered with a push at Timothy’s breast. Pain washed over Timothy’s face, rolling his hand as he staggered back. The minor inconvenience won’t stop Timothy, but he was stunned with Van’s fighting capabilities.

“The fact that you can fight well already implies that you’re under his hypnosis.” Timothy said, dusting off his jacket.

“No, I am not. Can you just listen?”

Timothy leapt closer, swung his fist fiercely that Van evaded by moving back quickly. The wind from the punch ruffled his air as he returned with a massive right hook on Timothy’s gut. Obviously, Van did not use all of his strength. Rather, he was having a hard time controlling it.

Marcus was fast, flickering in and out around to confuse Verus, and he was astonished, but his impatience was even greater when Marcus attacked at his right side, not allowing him the chance to contort and deliver a counter. Verus caught two blows on his ribcage and on his face. He flew backward, crashing his head against the painting hanging at the column. The pain bore everywhere in his body and his knees went weak, but the fight was not over.

“Something really did not change.” Verus bent one of his knees and spat blood accumulating on his mouth. “You’re the same ruthless bastard I remember.”

“And you’re the same good-for-nothing black sheep.”

Marcus appeared in front of him and squeezed Verus face tightly, dragging and slamming him on the ground. But he heard Verus laughing. Suddenly, he felt a familiar heat on his chest. Verus' hand reached at his chest, releasing an explosion of red mana, thrusting the target at full speed off to the ceiling.

As soon as Verus got up, he cleared his suit off dust, straightened his body, and wounds began to heal with his magic. Verus saw chaos take over the premise.

Brix flew away from Roxy’s reach and she countered with wind magic that knocked Roxy, but got up on her knees with damage sustained. Orion was doing his best to evade the fatalistic blows of Mark. Orion’s Kevlar was the only thing that was protecting him against the strikes, but there was no need to worry about. Verus can tell that none of them wants to cut each other’s throat. Their aim was to put them to sleep.

“Al, watch out!” Van yelled after pushing Timothy out of the way.

“I am!” Alastor returned without hiding his annoyance over Van’s unnecessary call. It was evident that he was not affected by his enemy. Overwhelmed with contrite, but in no way he was going to lose. The mercenary blocked another attack from Layla.

“Are you holding back?”

“No.” Alastor answered unsurely. Layla spots that uncertainty in his face.

“Are you holding back against me?” Layla asked again. Frustration began to rise. Those words were his impending doom.

“A little… yeah.”

Layla glared at Alastor that seemed to flicker a fire into burst and the skin on her forehead furrowed. The pattern of her attacks changed. From being nimble, Layla's stride became straight up predictable.

Alastor moved back and slid on her left, allowing the bow staff to pass an inch away from him. He had redirected the impact of Layla’s staff the moment she addressed another shot and stuck at the handrail. The metal was a flickering drizzle of sparks. Layla pulled off her bow staff.

“Do you really want to kill me?” Alastor asked. He moved back and avoided another strike. The tip of the bow staff cracked the floor.

“That’s what I’m trying to do!”

Layla continued to attack and Alastor was left with no choice, but to defend himself.

Verus lifted his fingers and several objects floated around. The psion ejected it to Van; locking him on to the wall. The hunter offered resistance to free himself, but to no avail.

Timothy got up, stood straight, blinking angrily due to the unwanted interruption, and grabbed Verus by his collar.

“That’s my brother.”

Verus would have Timothy decapitate for that if not for his empathic thoughts. He pulled his hands and shook it off.

“Which is why I’m putting him off from the fight so you won’t worry about him anymore.” Verus said and looked over his shoulder when Marcus struck the wall. The vampire came in, his eyes shot up in crimson. Verus continued, “I was wondering where you were.”

Marcus was ferocious, that was for sure. He would have straight up charged ahead, but not this time. Marcus grabbed the knife on the floor and threw it on Verus, it was caught and the second time he threw another plate. Verus smiled cheekily over the attempt. Marcus grinned back at his success.

Marcus tossed himself forward and struck Verus’s stomach. His brother crashed onto the wall and was about to prepare for magic when Marcus stabbed his palm with a knife. Blood was pouring out the wound. Verus gasped when Marcus aimed for his left wrist and crushed with sheer force. Verus screamed in agony and became silent.

Verus, feeling hot fury began to rise on the very pit of his core, drew every ounce of willpower to conjure a wave of mana to shake off his brother. Not only Marcus, but the force of impact from the wave affected the entire area, people included. Some lost their balance, hanging on their feet in dizziness, and those who were least expecting and didn’t have the mental capacity to endure the attack, fainted.

It was painful when Verus rearranged his wrist and pulled out the knife, but found it riveting when he lose the restraints he embedded on himself for a while. Verus saw Marcus wriggled on his feet trying to get a footing, but was interrupted due to the psion’s ability to levitate object. Marcus was lifted into the air by a strong grip. He was slowly turned around and got struck by the same knife he use on Verus, dragging the blade from his hand up to his forearms, it was pulled and did the same on his other arm.

Whatever small of humanity left on Marcus, Verus pulled it out, magnified to the intensity, a faint replica of emotions Marcus felt once, so that he can feast with his eyes how Marcus face wrenched and writhed in agony. Verus pulled Marcus closer to him. The psion began to chant a spell, digging deeper into Marcus psych.

“Kate, do something!” Marcus shouted.

“No!” Verus yelled. “You didn’t come willingly. Marcus holds someone on his neck, doesn't he? Let me do this and I’ll free your friend from my brother’s wickedness.”

“He’s the reason why your aunt is on deathbed!” Marcus yelled.

“Would you rather test my mercy and be fooled by my brother’s mediocre attempt rather than see your friend to safety?”

Marcus howled in pain as he resisted the manipulation of Verus on his mind. Elsewhere in his mind, Marcus saw and felt the hesitation of Kate to aid him, so he reached out to make his bargain notice and remind her of the promise she made.

Jane walked out of the room she was hiding earlier. There was no trace of liveliness in her eyes; she was gray and empty. She picked up a knife and pointed it at her neck.

“Is that the kind of man you trust?” Verus asked Kate. “Like I said earlier, he is not to be trusted.”

“You planned this? You talk to him?” Van rose, his body was still weary from being stuck on the wall.

Kate hushed her thoughts. She was in deep concentration and finally heed his request. She nodded at once.

Though he was all hands on Marcus, Verus was able to prevent Jane from slitting her own when Verus commanded magic for her hand to throw away. Jane was knocked out, but it does not mean Marcus’s influence was cut off.

Kate urged forward and carried Jane on her back. She called Laswell.

“I need you here now!”

“About time.” Laswell said.

It did not take much time for Laswell to come. Kate had him on standby outside before they came. Though she didn’t like keeping plans to herself, she didn’t have much of a choice either.

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The murmuring of spells filled the room with an unpleasant tone creeping on their ears. Amidst the echoing voices of Verus, the way he talks was distinctly clear.

“You must listen to me! She’s alive, Marcus. Karla is alive.”

“Liar. You killed her.” Marcus struggled to utter the word, but clear enough. His eyes were out of focus as though his mental faculty to operate was slowly being occupied by Verus.

“I did not. When the Ordinals stormed our house, I was left with no choice, but to seal our brothers, that includes your beloved. I was hoping after I tricked them, we would be able to reunite. But you just have to make it hard.”

Pressing the mana on Marcus forehead, Verus began to let his thoughts flow within his brother. Flashes emerged on Marcus' eyes. Though flickering faster than any human eyes could comprehend, Marcus was able to process everything in a second. He saw how everything started from the start—on how his own brethren knew the inevitable demise of their family when the Ordinals forced Delilah to give up her knowledge about their affairs. A certain point of their schemes led Marcus in disbelief of everything he thought was real.

When the Ordinals suspected Marcus’s and Verus hidden relationships, they sought to apprehend Delilah who were the closest target within their ranks. The secrets Verus told her revealed no more than later. Following her escape, Delilah told Verus everything and they came up with an immediate plan to ensure their family won’t fall on Ordinals’ insidious plan. Though, their plan was worst of the kinds that they could have thought of; Verus chose to seal them and hid their bodies in several catacombs. However, the complications started with Marcus missing and Karla’s captivity by the Ordinals. Verus had to face his brother alone after they fought the first wave of Ordinals. But the worst thing had happened, Karla was caught in the crossfire.

Enraged by her death, Marcus nearly killed Verus, but Delilah sealed him in the Door of Chasm. Though sealing his brother in that prison was not part of the plan, they weren’t given any choice.

When Marcus thought that it was the end, an unknown sequence of images flickered. Verus and Delilah caught the life essence of Karla, sealing it into a bottle. Her soul was kept away for the time being.

For Marcus, it was a haunting revelation. For Verus, it was the opening for control.

When Marcus saw everything, he left his guard open and Verus pierced in to take control. Marcus was now in his control.

There was a reason why Verus aimed to take over Marcus. Aside from the fact that he was left with no choice to bring him with no conflict, the situation warrants Verus to rely on the agents of GEMS, but he has no intentions to join them. All he wanted was to get Marcus out of that town and retrieve his brothers. Most of all, in order to get escape was the need for manpower and Marcus has that. As vampires, they have to suppress their uninhibited prowess in order to retain a decent amount of their humanity. But Marcus—through his sheer will—was able to keep his uninhibited strength without losing to his sadistic nature.

Verus loathes the fact he had to manipulate everything on his end. If it weren’t for his subordinates meddling, there was no need for him to come out in the open spotlight. Marcus stood with no life in his eyes as Verus moved around to see their awestruck faces.

Timothy found the strength to get up on his feet. He already had some ideas on what was happening. Timothy—not even once—believed that Verus would fulfill his promise. Verus’s mocking smile even further confirmed his suspicion as if he was giving him a hint.

“You’re not planning to hold up your bargain from the start, aren’t you?” Timothy asked. His question was more suggestive. Doubtlessly, he was sure of his thoughts.

Verus slowly shook his head.

“No.”

In a single wave of his hand, a pulse of fire crept over him. The fire was searing with intensity, closing his eyes due to the heat. Timothy felt he was wrapped by a comforting light to protect him. The flame no longer threatened him. He looked ahead and saw Van dispel the attack into dust.

“What was that?” Boston asked.

Timothy also had the same question in his head. He could not fathom how Van was able to do it. All those years that they were together, not even a hint showed he possessed a power.

“Let me deal with this, Tim.” Van said confidently.

Timothy has no words for that. He was lost in his own thoughts.

Alastor, who recovered from the spell, hurled in the air, and landed at Van’s right side. The mercenary’s fast recovery was out of the question. It was not the first time he had been next to an explosive bomb.

“This is not looking good.” Alastor said. He stood straight, cautiously observing them.

“It really isn’t.” Van commented and rubbed his nose.

“Gentlemen,” Verus opened his arms. “Congratulations. You two are the last contestants in our little game.”

“The reign of this parade.” Van understood very well the situation and moved aside to get a closer look at Marcus.

“Van,” Alastor said as he drew out his double-edged sword and the katana switch-blade. “Let me take the lead. Here, take this sword.”

“I thought I said that I don’t need one.” Van said without looking back. “I’ll deal with my fists.”

“Will you stop being such a pain in the—”

The now controlled vampire starts to move against them. Alastor was lucky enough to see Marcus tossed himself forward and was able to push Van aside before his claws got close enough one inch from his face. If it weren’t for Alastor’s inept way to sense his surroundings. However, it was unfortunate for Timothy and Boston that they became the pillow of Van. Van had no time to worry about them and quickly got away to lure Marcus’s attention.

Alastor did not like the fact that his initial intention was thwarted. Regardless, Alastor hoped for the best and turned his attention to Verus. The psion summoned a sword alike to his katana, but its curve, design, and appearance bear a deadlier resemblance of death’s sickle. At close glance, he thought of it as possessing no advantage. Sooner than what he had expected, his assumptions would change.

Verus took a daring leap. The flowing blade glimmered like a fire dancing seductively. Alastor blocked it with his katana. The contact between his katana and his flowing sword was a satisfaction he didn’t expect to be a fatal one until he saw how Verus’s blade put pressure on Alastor’s katana. The distribution of its weight due to its odd curve angle put an irresistible pressure on his katana, pushing and throwing off his balance.

Alastor knew he had to move back three steps away from Verus to get a better angle. The mercenary thought it was a good call, but proved to be precarious when Verus came after for another strike. Verus had no intention for him to breath and relentlessly in pursuit for his flesh.

Alastor was set in motion to avoid, block, and cornered several times. Each time countered, the full weight of Verus' blade would cause him to recoil hard. His wrists are getting numb and he was annoyed. Alastor wrapped the sword with his mana to at least suspend it to give him a slight chance to withstand the blows.

“This is not how I expect to have a rematch!” Van yelled.

Van stepped back to avoid a right hook from Marcus. The hunter fell back, settling for defense and took in another hit, but this time, he was able to block with his arm. Though, each time Van blocked, he cannot numb the pain that was being deferred on his arms. Once Van saw an opening, he pierced through with a heavy blow on Marcus' stomach. The vampire flinched, but appeared to not be affected by the impact.

Van saw how Marcus launched a fast jab and immediately jumped away. He was glad that his training with Alastor paid off. Unlike before, Van had better command on his hunter powers, but it doesn’t mean his going to be close enough with the uninhibited vampire. Marcus was unbelievably fast and too quick, unlike Gilt. Van’s instinct was the only thing that was keeping Marcus from completely tearing his head off.

Van shifted his position and delivered a lightning speed blow. Marcus transferred his weight on his left, allowing Van’s straight to come past his hair. The vampire slid his palm on the hunter’s chest and pushed him off. Van flew and crashed on a stud wall. Oddly enough, Van did not feel anything. He recognized the lethality of the sharp glass poking at his hand, but it never pierce nor the being slammed at the wall caused him to sense pain. At that moment, everything became awfully clear, and his face darkened. Something within him swelled.

Alastor dodged another strike again. He was trying to be avoid blocking each attacks with several maneuvers, by spinning away, slipping sideways, but due to the wretched site, Alastor has very little room for his feet to move and considering how Verus was not giving him room to breathe, the mercenary was exhausted, physically and mentally. Verus took two more heavy strikes before he bellowed and struck at once.

Alastor snarled, jumped back and spun at once when Verus slashed at his right. He returned it with an even force with his sword and swung his katana down at Verus. Alastor screamed when hacked down with his katana in his left hand. Verus blocked it. Again, Alastor had evaded another strike. They were dancing around with an objective to deplete any strategic options at one another. They went on, back and forth, pirouetting with the sound of hideous steel shriek and cascade of sparks—so bright that it could blind a normal person.

Judging by the way the battle went on, it could be said that Alastor might be able to overcome the weapons disadvantage, but proves to be folly with Verus telekinesis. With every intention, Verus can see how Alastor was going to act and counter it by overwhelming Alastor’s courses of approach. Verus was confident until he saw Van stood up with no hint of drawing back and on equal footing with Marcus.

It did not come to cross his mind that Van was capable of withstanding in equal terms against Marcus. Despite Marcus did not retain his full strength, it should be enough to overwhelm his foes. The thought of it made Verus blood rushed. Uneasiness replaced his comfort. Verus deflected Alastor’s katana with all his weight. The mercenary’s weapon flung off his hand, staggered, and dazzled. Then, Verus stricken his movements with his magic. Understandably, Alastor was writhing and struggling to fight against Verus’s magic, but he was pinned. Alastor wrestled with his will, direct his left palm right on Verus face.’

“Flamen.” Alastor said.

A powerful, invisible force blasted the psion away, crashing over the wall, and went beyond. Alastor was no longer held captive by his grip, but the aftereffects lingered on. He had to breathe hard and shook off the dizziness due to Verus influence. It took him to force himself to rise on his feet while panting when he realized the battle was not over yet; Van hadn't defeated Marcus. So, he grabbed a knife on the floor, threw it, and hopefully distract Marcus for a brief moment. He succeeded. Marcus caught the knife, but due to it, an opening paved the way for Van to strike a blow with all his strength right on the vampire’s face. Marcus was shot away and crashed on a pillar.

“I have that covered.” Van said.

“I did not expect even once that someone here is capable of withstanding against me and my brother.” Verus’s voice rang behind the room where he crashed in. Wiping the blood that had slipping out from a small wound on his forehead, Verus licked off the blood, and wiped it off with white handkerchief. He tossed it off together with his tuxedo.

Alastor’s smile wiped off when Verus conjured a clone of himself. His clone came to Van and the original tossed himself forward on Alastor. Verus caught Alastor off guard by preventing his knees from standing up, his fist came in like a drill on his jaw that made him fly in the air.

The very same thing happened to Van. The clone reflexively turned sideways when his fist thrust on it and restricted him from motioning away. The next thing registered in his sense was a fist solidly battering on his chin. Verus lifted them up with his telekinesis and crashed against one another. And as they were about to fall, Marcus sprang and kicked Van, launching him together with Alastor at his back on a concrete wall. The hunter duo cried in pain.

“Get… off… me.” Alastor said and groaned.

Van’s eyes were out of focus due to the river of pain. There is so much damage his body can take. His confidence with his abilities was shaken that will remind him thereon.

Little by little, his strength returned and slowly rose on his feet. One knee was trembling. Even still, somehow he found tranquility rushing in his blood. Something within him is changing. Alastor saw the familiar imposing figure revealing before him.

“I can hear your thoughts. You’re not in your right mind. Your will is shaken. The power you hope for is an illusion.” Verus said as he walked past the unconscious people, he stood confident with his arms crossing on one another. “Fighting for what is right is one thing, but going to such lengths and to put your life at risk… is quite fascinating. You are broken. Deep down you know that.”

“I’d be careful if I were you.” Alastor said.

To Verus, the mercenary’s words were nothing of importance—nothing, but Alastor saw the similar tremendous radiance, a brand so different from what they ever knew. Alastor moved away when he saw Van’s hand twitch and clenched.

In a sudden twist of events, Verus soon witnesses Alastor’s words. The hunter tossed the broken chair. But Verus flicked it with his telekinesis with ease.

A burst of air shrieked when Van leapt in short distance, surpassing Marcus. The hunter scored a strike on Verus' cheek. Another three blows fell on his stomach, ribs, and chest which inevitably led him to fling across the room. Verus' face darkened and wiped off the blood trickling from his nose. Marcus took over and engaged. It was too late for Verus' rescue though. Marcus may be under his control, but they were not in total sync. Verus hadn’t used his powers on the likes of his brother for quite some time, which would explain why his command has its flaws.

Marcus tossed himself forward with a sharp roundhouse kick. Van braced his legs and right arm in preventing Marcus leg. Van whipped around on his left, his elbow crashed against Marcus’s head. That did not stop Marcus from bouncing back and returning an even force by hitting Van’s face. They reenact the same fight. Van came to Marcus, no hesitation. The hunter swept in his fist, but the only thing he hit was the air. Marcus instantaneously moved around Van and locked his fist on Van’s cheek.

The force of their attacks could kill a normal person. The fact that Van had the same capabilities as Marcus already proved Van could probably stop his plan. This prompted Verus to urge progress. When he moved forward, Timothy and Orion blocked his way.

“You’re not going anywhere.” Orion said and cracked his stiff neck.

“I told you he’s going to betray us.” Timothy said.

Verus defiantly lifted his chin. “Bravery is not a succinct replacement for frivolity.”

They felt a gripped on their by some force and were lifted in the air. Verus choked the air out of them with his psionic prowess. The two struggled, but were useless. The word ‘help’ barely escaped from Timothy’s mouth, but it was enough to catch the attention of Van. After Van saw how his brother was clogging out of life, the hunter grabbed Marcus by his neck and flew over Verus, grabbing both of them in his hands—crashing through the walls of the complex and onto beyond the forest. The agents were freed from the grasp of the psion and fell on their knees.

Whether the explosion or the removal of Verus' presence—the rest of the group finally got their senses back. Brix and Boston ran to help Timothy and Orion who were down on their knees catching up their breaths while the others pursued out of the vicinity.

“This is bad!” Kate shouted out of nowhere. She returned after she delivered Jane to Laswell out of the premises.

Alastor groaned and rose on his knees. “Bad? The guy is going to kick their assess.”

“He might lose control over himself again, just like before!” Kate said. She hurriedly followed through the broken wall.

Alastor soon followed, but Timothy blocked the road.

“What did she mean Van's going to lose control?” Timothy asked.

Alastor raised a brow. “You don’t know? Your brother is a Hunter.”

Alastor shook his shoulders and ran ahead of them, leaving Timothy and others behind. His lungs were able to breathe properly, but the pain on his shoulders and legs returned. Regardless, worries radiated on his face. There were so many questions that were running through his head right at that moment.

“Your brother is a hunter?” Orion asked.

“I didn’t know. Brix, have you ever seen any mark on his body? Your kind are the only ones who can see and know whether someone is a hunter.” Timothy said.

Brix gathered her thoughts, she remembered a faint feeling of familiarity that only a fellow hunter could only emit, but she shook it off at first since the strange sensation was so faint, and even if Van did have the mark, she did not saw any indication of it the first time they met or any of their encounters, until now.

“No,” Brix firmly shook her head. “I didn’t see any marks on his body.”

“Is there any possibility he’s hiding the mark?” Orion asked.

Brix doubted any hunters could hide their markings. If hidden, then magic would be involved. However, the thought of spells would be far off, since they have encountered so many times. There was no way Van could hide his hidden potential all the time.

“That would be impossible. No hunters can hide their own mark. Not for too long.” Brix said with conviction.

“Kate may have some answers. I’m going to ask her.”

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By the time they got to follow them into the forest, they saw Marcus was hanging in the air and fell at some part of a forest. They quickly went inside, following the heavy rumbles, grunts, and howls of pain. In between the gaps through the thick forest, they caught a glimpse of what was happening beyond. Trees bent, winds exploded, and several sharp exchanges of blows that could be heard beyond their eyes could reach the shadow of the forest.

A powerful knockback of force caught Gilt, rolling over the dirt. Mark grabbed Roxy as soon as he saw a log of tree flew over them, and came another four. The others didn’t bother to find out where it was going to land and they hid behind the trees. As soon the path ahead was clear, they pressed on.

At this vague part of the forest, they could barely see what they were stepping into. The light of the moon was the only thing that was keeping from being led astray and the sound of battle ahead of them. Not too long, they will witness an astonishing revelation.

Marcus lured Van’s attention and delivered several attempted strikes; a sharp jab, quick drop hammering kick, and feint motions to evade returns of attacks. Van put up a solid defense, but with Verus on his flank, he was bound to receive some of his attacks.

Van had to allow Marcus to strike him with a blow, sending him away. It was either Marcus or the several stakes that Verus darted over him. At least, the attack wasn’t at all fatal.

Reflexively, Van motioned around as soon as he was back on his feet, dodging several stakes hovering towards him. His instincts caught Marcus sprinting behind him and Van leapt on his left. Out of the corner of his eyes, Van saw Marcus lunged sharply on his right, and kicked the ground to redirect towards him.

Van shifted around, motioned, and put all his weight on his left hook, effectively planting his fist on Marcus face. It was a well-made choice despite the fact Verus were on his flank, throwing several small boulders. He had no time to evade and could only guard by covering of his arms. Van had to take a long hard gasped, he was starting to feel the pain. Regardless, the aching soon seethed thanks to his regenerative prowess.

Van immediately got up on his knees, unscathed, and charged headlong. That wasn’t the reaction Verus was expecting. Vain expression dropped over Verus’s face.

Once Van avoided getting hit by the wind spell of Verus, a dreadful familiar sensation jolted in his spine. It was the same manner of form that took over when he fought Icarus. This time, there were no souls that were taking over him. It was his body acting on its own while his mind slowly sank back in the darkness. For a moment, Van’s vision lay motionless. The glimmering flowing sword of Verus did not even scare him anymore. Van’s instinct was able to detect the area of danger—that ability was enough for him to counter a preemptive strike. What caught his attention was the people emerging out from the darkness. Among one of them was Kate.

As soon as Verus followed the direction of Van’s gaze, he knew what he had to do. Using his telekinesis, he summoned the boulder and threw it at Kate. It didn’t occur to the party about the impending attack—not until Van flew ahead and sacrificed his arms to protect Kate.

Kate who was shocked quickly ran to him in attempt to heal Van, but the hunter did not respond and flew immediately towards the enemy. Something was not right. Marcus cut in the middle, delivering several strikes, but nonetheless, they were fruitless. Van did not returned any favorable reactions. In fact, they weren’t even sure if that was the same Van they knew who were fighting.  Van appeared to have been possessed. He showed no reactions. He was particularly ruthless with his attacks. He did not hesitate to break Marcus’s arm and threw him away. The vampire was out of commissioned.

“Van?” Kate asked quietly. She was about to move forward when he felt Raymond’s firm gripped on her shoulder.

“It’s not wise to get any closer.” Raymond said.

He was right. It was not correct to approach otherwise. They could tell Van wasn’t in any sense can be the reason now he was intact in his hunter nature.

Verus could attest to that. He felt the frightful impression lingering in his eyes. It was a right call to stay and attack in distance, only allowing Marcus to be in front, but he couldn’t deny they were losing. Verus saw how Marcus was slowly losing his footing against the hunter. Verus didn’t know why Marcus’s movements were becoming slower and awkward. He only realized the reason why his brother was getting sluggish. The very magic filling his strength and immortality was being stripped away by the hunter. Verus saw several glitters that he didn’t notice at first.

Verus knew he was doomed.

After Van broke Marcus' legs, the hunter went after Verus.

“Stay away from me!” Verus shouted.

Van slipped, ducked, and slide away from the objects that Verus threw at him while keeping his distance. It was a hopeless attempt. Verus no longer had the leverage of surprise when Van grabbed him by the neck and yanked him so hard on the muddy ground. Van got on top and start punching Verus in the face. Blood scattered over Verus’s white shirt and vest.

“Van, stop! You’re going to kill him.” Kate shouted, ignoring the crowds’ warning.

Gilt moved ahead of her. He knew Van was beyond reasoning this time and could hurt anyone, including Kate. He was reluctant to be in front, but he knew he had no choice. He hoped the remaining strength of being an uninhibited vampire would provide enough to at least hold against Van.

Gilt grabbed Van’s arm from pulverizing Verus’s face. The poor man was no longer properly breathing judging how short his breath was. That was the least Gilt should be worried about when he suddenly felt his strength was being drained. He saw Van’s entire arm emitting a faint light. Van pulled him and threw him away.

The others went into action.

Roxy and Mark grabbed Van, but soon realized why Gilt was easily swayed away when Van crushed Mark’s ribs with his elbow and kicked Roxy. Alastor attempted to withhold Van with a lasso made of mana. To his surprise, it melted.

The unwanted attention proved to be advantageous for Orion and Timothy to launch on Van and pinned him on the ground. They all jumped in to help. Kate went around and held Van’s head, chanting a sleeping spell. It took her several times to put his mind into slumber.

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When Van woke up, he saw his brother standing over the balcony. Peering around, he had noticed an orange juice—obviously squeezed out from the fruits on the table. He remembered a time when their parents were at work, leaving only him and Timothy at home. Timothy used to treat them with orange juice after a long lecture when Timothy was teaching Van about school lessons. This time, Van was sure that he was going to receive a far more important lesson.

“When did it start?” Timothy asked without looking back.

“You tell me first.” Van said, he sat on his bed, straightened his back, and reached out to the glass of juice. “I didn’t know you’re a—what should I call you?”

“Don’t be a smartass.” Timothy’s voice was stricken.

“I’m not,” Van replied and drank the juice. Somehow, it soothed the pain on his body. “I’m pretty sure Kate already told you.”

“Not until now, but I just want to hear it from you.” Timothy finally turned around. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Van groaned, his ribs made a soft crunch. “Because I don’t know how to. I don’t even think what I am is normal. So, I kept it on myself.”

“We should tell dad about this.” Timothy said after a pause. “He might have some answers.”

“Whoa-whoa! Dad is part of your band too? Is our family some sort of supernatural agent? Am I the only one who was kept in the dark?”

“You will get your answers. This time, you should rest.”

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Alastor did not like it when Kate got him to string up with Van’s family’s drama. He still covered up on Van's behalf. Regardless, the so-called GEMS interrogated him to the point they were convinced they should have locked him up for interrogation. If it weren’t for Layla’s intervention and convinced them he was on good terms, he would be on the other side of prison’s bars.

Alastor was on his way down the kitchen when he saw Layla waiting on him in the living room. Layla tilted her head around and saw Alastor’s troubled expression. It was understandable, whenever Layla was around him, trouble followed.

“I promised, I didn’t come here with problems.” Layla said.

Alastor exaggeratedly groaned. He walked past behind her and went to grab a glass of water in the kitchen. Layla rose from her seat and joined Alastor, leaning her back against the wall.

“What do you want?” Alastor asked. He moved towards the fridge and grabbed several ingredients for making his breakfast. “If you want to hire me as your errand boy, forget it.”

“Like I said, I didn’t bring any problems.” Layla said and walked behind Alastor. When he turned around, he stood straight in surprise. She was awfully too close. Alastor tried his best to hide his reaction. Layla was clearly teasing him. “I came here because I offer a solution.”

Alastor looked past her right shoulder onto the table. He swiftly escaped her with fast measured steps and grabbed a piece of bread, eating it. Alastor crossed his arm on one another.

“What solution?”

“To your problem.”

“As far as I remember, I don’t have any problems.”

“Sure, you do.” Layla turned on him. “You want to get home, right?”

Alastor paused his eating. That was quite the least he was expecting to hear from her. “Can you get me home?”

Alastor looked straight at her, pleasing and appealing like from a child to a mother. She exhaled quietly. Alastor thought she was being a tease for no reason, but he knew by then her words were of legitimate concern over him.

“I know how to send you back home.” Layla said. Her words seemed to seep into his brain.

“Are you sure?” Alastor asked again.

“How many times do I have to repeat myself?” Layla tiredly said. She shrugged her shoulders and moved around, sitting at the woolen chair.

“I’m sorry, but I find it hard to believe. Do you know any portals? Do you have any portals?” Alastor asked with interest. He leaned in close to her.

Layla blinked. “Well, yes and no.”

Alastor’s shoulders stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“It’s not actually my portal. The Ordinus have this portal where they use to capture monsters from Limbo and bring it here,”

“You guys have serious issues. You told those GEMS people about this?”

“Well… not kinda.” Layla stole the bread from Alastor’s hand and smiled cheekily. “We shouldn’t worry about that. You should be thanking me.”

“Thanking you?” Alastor raised a brow. He moved around to gather the proper tools and start chopping several ingredients. “You’re going to get me in trouble if those GEMS find out about this.”

“I doubt that.” Layla said. She jumped out of her seat and started helping Alastor. Grab a bowl and crack the eggs, pouring in the yolks. “You’re not going to tell anyone about this. Unless, you’re going to say goodbye to them. Do you plan to?”

Thinking about it, Alastor doesn’t want to come out rude without regarding them about his departure. He hated to admit it, he grew fond of them, and their little adventures was something he won’t forget. It won’t hurt if he bid them farewell.

“I’m considering it now.” Alastor said he started to fry the pan on a stove, mixed the eggs with seasonings, and tomatoes. Then, he added oil on the pan.

“I never took you as a person who…”

“Who, what?”

“Sentimental.”

Alastor scoffed at the thought. He poured the egg onto the pan, and after several seconds, his breakfast was ready. He turned off the stove.

“Just paying my respects.”

“I doubt that.” Layla grabbed a plate and passed it onto Alastor. After putting it onto the plate, he moved to sit, and began to eat. Layla followed, also eating his breakfast. “You like them, do you? I thought you don’t like people.”

“Who said I don’t like people?” Alastor groaned. He must have put too much salt on it. He grabbed glasses of water for both of them. Alastor drank greedily.

“Oh, tell me, what things do you like aside from people?” Layla asked and put down the fork.

Alastor just noticed she was prompting questions that seemed to have a motive beyond what he normally heard from her.

“I like it when they shut up after a long-ass talk.” Alastor said. He hoped Layla would comprehend what he was trying to convey.

Layla nodded in acknowledgement. “Alright. I guess, I’m not going to tell you how to get home.”

Alastor didn’t show any reaction. Layla appeared to be crestfallen when she drank the water.

“I was just kidding.”

Layla smiled, a mischievous one. “I know.”

“You cheeky.”

Layla looked up to him. “You ought to play nice to the savior, you know.”

“You’re looking for compensation?”

“I think that sounds right.”

Alastor nodded in agreement. “So, what will it be?”

“A date. One date.”

Alastor definitely halted from opening his mouth, astounded by her words. He took a deep breath and blinked thrice.

“A date? Wow.” Alastor said. Unenthusiastic rested on his voice. He wasn’t sure how to properly react to this. He grunted indifferently.

“What’s with that?” Layla asked after a pause.

“What’s with what?” Alastor said and finally looked up to her.

Looking up to her, Alastor just noticed the difference of her jet black eyes, there were thin blue circles. He always thought of it as a mere fraction of light. That could be the result of her genetics. He exhaled quietly.

“Nothing.” Alastor said and looked away.

Noora did not reply for a few seconds and contemplated before arriving at a conclusion. “Do you have a girlfriend back there?”

“I won’t say girlfriend.” Alastor said. By that time, Layla already emptied the plate. “I just don’t think it would be right if I leave a loose string behind.”

“I won't’ be a loose string, dummy. I just want a date, but I don’t think that would be the case either way. You already have someone in mind, do you?”

Layla felt the embarrassment by then, but she pressed on. Alastor hardly could fathom what she was feeling with her appearing to be confident, but recognizing her true feelings was the last thing her dignity could handle.

“I have someone back there that needs me.”

That was all Layla needed for her to arrive at a conclusion. She got up from her seat. Alastor was unsettled with the sudden change of contemplation over her.

“I get it.” Layla said.

She was a step away from the door. Her words seemed to be carried over by the gale and rustle of leaves outside. Something told Alastor the weather was not going to be pretty. Alastor could not see her face, but knew that her hands were at the door knob.

“Are you fine?” Alastor asked.

“Yeah,” Layla nodded imperceptibly.

Layla looked once more at him with softness and tender. She knew he wouldn’t know what was going on her mind or what she was feeling, but she kept everything within.

“I’m going to go with them. You might as well prepare. Just call me if you’re ready.”

And she left hurriedly.

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The power was beyond his understanding.

What Van had was beyond Verus comprehension. All those years he studied the ancient arts of hunters, he never encountered someone who can remove magic nor even nullify magic to some extent, and for that reason they lose.

It took Verus several hours for his body to fully recuperate from the damage he took from Van’s beating on him. Regardless, he was thankful that Van did not kill him and his brother. The GEMS, on the other hand, did not like the fact he doubled-crossed them.

They took precaution over them this time by putting several cuffs and locks on their wrist, legs, and their hips. The device only activates when they try to use any spell or any supernatural abilities. Its’ function was to restrict the captives movements.

Despite their shortcomings, Orion and Brix came into agreement to grant his request. They were in a villa in Florence. Behind the house were beautiful ornaments of unnamed flowers and rich fruits. Likely, people might mistake this place as belonging to a happy family. That would be true if you would base it from the lies that the GEMS had spread around.

The Mavenhart brothers were held at the lowest section of the house—in a room where it was guarded by several agents. The only thing providing them with light was from the poor bulb, and the window which was sealed with bars.

“The fact that you’re still alive amaze me, brother.” Marcus said. His brother turned around while lying in his bed to see him. He whistled when he heard the shrill of wind come passed by.

Somehow, Verus' wounds reacted from the sharp sound Marcus made his wounds sting a bit. Maybe, it was because Marcus had done nothing, but to pissed him off. Verus stood up and observed the garden outside.

“You should be grateful we have the chance to be in here.” Verus said without looking back.

“Aside from the fact the hunter beat us into pulp, the GEMS also held us captive. Now, tell me, why should I be grateful?”

“You will see, brother.”

Marcus wasn’t satisfied at all, but he won’t ask any further. He felt that there was something else Verus wasn’t willing to talk about. At last, the wish Verus wished to carry about was already at the doorstep. Orion was the one who first entered followed by Brix who wore a face bridled with disdain. She was—after all the one who convinced them to accept the deal he offered. It was understandable, Verus was the one who broke the pact. He was lucky enough they still found favor on him. Unlike him, the GEMS tend to lean on keeping their promises.

“Your vehicle is ready.” Orion said. His eyes were stoic and filled with strictness. “Remember, our men will watch you from afar. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I promise.” Verus said solemnly.

“I just want to emphasize, if you try to backstab us again, we will kill you this time.” Brix said in a threatening tone. “I don’t care about the information you have about the Ordinals nor give a cent of your abilities.”

Brix got out first after she made her thoughts known to him. Orion soon went out, but before he fully left, he gave them a word they should consider.

“Look,” Orion said. He turned on his heels to see them. “I don’t know anything about your past or how you arrived up to this point, but I just want you to know—you should forgive. Something tells me, you don’t completely hate one another. You should start to reconcile.”

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The current Florence had the same fleeting breeze of autumn carried by the wind through the river bank of Ponte Vecchio and Arno River, except this time around it wafted with no foul smell. The Mavenhart brothers enjoyed reminiscing from a coffee shop near the arch bridge.

“What are we doing here actually, brother?” Marcus asked after taking in a sip from coffee. He was weary from their travel, but the sight stored before him at least lifted the burden he was sickening for some time.

Verus did not heed to reply.

“Do you remember the time when we used to dream about having a villa, Marcus?” Verus asked. He was still staring at the river.

Marcus nodded. “It was Nerva who kept bringing up the topic. Even Antoninus got infected by the thought, but I wouldn’t blame them.”

“After all, we only want simple pleasures in life.” Verus said.

He wasn’t wrong. None of them wanted to live this life. This was forced upon them with no other recourse due to the untimely crisis afflicted on their lives.

“You know, I don’t regret accepting the deal from the Ordinals.” Marcus said.

Verus finally looked at his brother. Marcus wasn’t fazed with the contempt Verus attempting to make known. Marcus sighed.

“I know.” Verus said.

Those words were comforting for Marcus. Despite the mistake he brought to them, Verus was willing to overlook it. Verus acknowledges the fact that Marcus actions were only out of desperation. There was nothing he could do only to accept the deal that the Ordinals offered in order to save their brother, Hadrian.

“I apologize for what I’ve said before, Verus.” Marcus said and lifted the coffee cup to drink. “You’re not a black sheep. You’re my brother.”

“Thank you.”

“For real, brother. What are we doing here by the way? I doubt it’s to reminisce how the Arno River used to stink.”

Verus chuckled and shook his head. “No. There is someone I would like for you to meet. They should be here by now after their tour. You’ll have to forgive me, it took them some time.”

The thing Verus was talking about would shake Marcus to the core. A faint resemblance of Karla came inside the café together with several tourists. From her detailed stylish blue dress with double-layered lace frills, he mistakenly took her for a nobility just as the first time they met. She wore a lovely outlook, fair complexion, and a thin smile he had not hoped to see in this lifetime. Though, ‘this’ Karla bore a different air. From a distance, he smelled the fragrance of different compositions. Something urged Marcus to get close and find it out for himself.

“Easy there now, brother.” Verus said softly. He hoped to snap him out of his imagination, but Marcus' eyes were still glued to the woman. “Marcus.”

Verus finally caught his brother’s attention and looked at him, dazed at the revelation.

“How—”

“Delilah revived her soul. Karla was sealed in a person, slumbering waiting for the right time to wake up. That woman is still a hollow shell with no memories. Yet, she lived like a human.”

Marcus blinked and calmed the fire burning within him. “You have my thanks, brother.”

“You shouldn’t be. I only did what’s the right thing to do.” Verus nodded. “You should talk to her later. They should be heading to the museum after this.”

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Though most were only replicas, the Gallery of Historical Figures called out people who have likened the Medieval Arts—those intended targets did not mind the nature of the museum, rather, who values its intellectual offers. Marcus has nothing against the replications, it was how this place was overlooked. The people of the studio didn’t have the money to advertise this place and rightfully so. This gallery was only for those who had keen interest in Gothic Art.

As much as Marcus wanted to enjoy the collection, he had to hurry up, and look where the target of his objective was. He was moving cautiously for some time and blended in among the tourists, carefully observing her a few paces away from him.

Karla was observing the gothic sculptors with keen interest. At some point of her surveillance, something caught her attention, but was hesitant to stray from the crowd. She wanted to explore the frozen beauty this small museum could offer.

Truly, Marcus had no idea what to say upon their first meeting. He hoped fate would store some room for them two. Not that it was a coincidence, but his wish was granted. The travel guide suddenly called the attention of everyone to move on to the next place. Karla didn't hear the announcement and was awestruck ahead.

Marcus looked around and saw his brother, Verus standing outside. Soon after, Orion and Brix apprehended him. He wink before leaving and mouthed ‘Go after her’.

Despite the ugly reality he was living in, Marcus' courage ignited. He won’t indulge with the coward living inside him. This time he will have the normal life he promised to her.

Marcus had a fair share of introspection with her before. Once she told him about how odd for the sculptor to only build the head, complaining about the superficiality of its message to value man’s reasoning. The two had a long argument after that, but never reached a conclusion. Marcus reminded himself with the conversations of the human in this generation and began to imagine how he should imitate the way they speak.

“You like what you’re seeing?” Marcus said. He came in so abruptly that it startled her, but hid her reaction very well. “I’m sorry for startling you.”

“It’s fine.” She mumbled and fixed her hair.

“This sculpture is what we call The Head of Bearded Man.”

“I know,” she cut in and pointed out the small description below. “I can read.”

Marcus was focused on initiating a conversation that he did not notice the answer was already there. He felt embarrassed.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry, you’re just doing your job.”

Marcus raised a brow and ignored her words later on. He observed her dazzled face over the sculpture, but couldn’t quite figure out what distressed her.

“Is there anything bothering you?”

“Yeah,” She said, this time her frustration was tinged in her voice. “Like why is it only the head? Where’s the body? Most of the sculptures I came across have their own bodies. This didn’t have one.”

“It’s quite a mystery for me too. But I think the sculptor wanted to emphasize that the faculty of reasoning were seated on our mind and we should listen to it every time, because it’s the only thing that can bring unity into perfection in everyone’s lives; our needs, wants, power, imagination, and inventions.”

“That’s kind of absurd.”

Marcus quickly turned to her, surprised, and asked expectantly of the answers he knew before, “Why is that?

“How can you enjoy everything in life without a heart? Every idea must have been born out of desire. Our mind can reason, but only our heart can satisfy us.” She said enthusiastically. Marcus had to refrain himself. He saw the same fire that kindled his heart once. He listened to her keenly after a pause. “Our heart is the fuel of desire. I think everyone should follow it.”

“You were right.” Marcus said.

“What was your name again, sir?” She asked.

“Marcus.”

“Carla.”

She reached out her hand. Marcus hesitated at first before clutching her hands firmly and shook it. This was the new beginning that awaited them.

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Van decided it was time to talk about his concerns with Timothy. It was only a matter of time before he would know everything that he had done ever since this power woke up. After his bath, Van went to the kitchen in hope of approaching Timothy. Surprisingly, his brother had the same thoughts.

“Are you planning to run away?” Timothy asked. He got up from his seat, holding a cup of coffee in one hand.

“No.” Van said. He walked down the stairs with small paces.

“Are you planning to lie?”

“Not really.”

Van had to stop in his tracks when he heard a stifled fit of cough. The coffee must be too hot for Timothy.

“It all started short after my 17th birthday.” Van said. “I always have this urge to run out in the city, out in the wild, out of the world. Usually, I don’t remember what I was doing, but I knew there was something happening with me. And then I met Kate. She’s the one who helps and keeps an eye out for me. There’s also Alastor who helped me control my powers.”

Timothy did not reply for quite some time. He moved around the kitchen and started making their breakfast. Van sat down.

“This is my fault.” Timothy said suddenly. “I should’ve kept my eyes out on you.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it is. Dad, entrusted me to take care of you.”

“What now?”

Van rested his arms on the table. He was nervous as to what was going to happen.

“We’re going to see dad. Don’t worry about school. I have people who can pose as us.”

They heard loud knocking at the door. Van swiftly reached it and opened the door. It was Alastor who was waiting outside. The mercenary’s lips stretched wide, but Van saw elsewhere in his eyes he was going to tell something.

“You’re not going to beat me up do you?” Van asked quietly.

“No.” Alastor shook his head. “In fact, I’m here to tell you I’m going to leave. We might not see each other for a very long time.”

“Why?”

“Did I tell you before that I’m from another planet?”

“No.” Van said. His attention was piqued. “So, you’re like an alien?”

“I won’t say that. At some point our world shares a history, but that’s for another tale.”

Alastor handed him over two keys and a card. Van reluctantly accepted it. He raised a brow.

“What is this?”

“Gifts. You can have my house and my car. There is also a surprise waiting in my house. However, that card is something else. Show that to Gregory. He’ll know what to do. And also, you should talk to Kate, there is something she should show to you.”

“Who’s that?” Timothy said. His voice came far from the bathroom. He was peering at one side. Alastor remained silent. “Oh, it’s you. What are you doing here?”

Timothy sounds annoyed and protective. Alastor understood well why he didn't want to provoke him. So, he kept his head down and tone formal.

“I just came here to tell I’m going away. I won’t bother you guys.”

Timothy seemed didn’t mind. He actually didn’t mind and acknowledged Alastor’s request. And Timothy went back to the kitchen.

“Van,” Alastor said and smiled genuinely for once in a while. “You’ll be fine. You don’t have to keep running away. Stop doubting. Whether you like it or not, this is your story. It is time to accept yourself.”

“I will.” Van nodded. “You’re not so bad after all. I always thought of you as a douchebag. Thank you. Everything you have taught me, I will make good use of it.”

“You better do it.”

“Take care of yourself, alright.”

“Noted. Can I talk with your brother?”

Van looked at the kitchen and nodded over at Timothy. His brother caught his gesture and so went on. Van left.

“Yes?” Timothy asked curiously. He didn’t expect that this stranger had something else to say to him.

Alastor grunted indifferently. “I know there’s a lot for the two of you to catch up. Please, don’t be too hard on him. He needs your help more than your judgment. He’s a good kid.”

“I know my brother.”

“Good to know.” Alastor smiled. “You should look at the goodness within him. Guide him, teach him to embrace himself. The strength he has can change the world. Van is a monster in the making.

Alastor seemed to deliver his message very well and didn’t wait for Timothy’s response any longer. He was needed elsewhere.

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Alastor didn’t like the fact that he had to undergo the same process that delivered him to this world. The last time he went in the portal, he forgot some of his memories. It took him several weeks to remember his mission to protect someone.

Alastor felt the curious gaze of Layla as she was invoking the right coordinates on the portal. Normally, anyone would feel awkward should they see someone wearing semi-medieval clothing and equipment. There was nothing to be ashamed of since he was going home.

“Ah, yes.” Layla said. She was reading the manuscript that she stole from the archives of Ordinus. Layla transfixed her eyes elsewhere at the carvings of the circular granite portal. “It should be like this just as how my parents came out of the portal.”

Layla came close atop of it and pressed several markings. She sighed as she finished adjusting the coordinates.

“It should take you from the same location my parents used to go in.” Layla closed the book with a satisfying thump.

Alastor saw her grab something off her pocket. A small violet rock with a transparent feature. He was unsure what kind of materials this was made of.

“It's a marker. You can teleport wherever you want to, given the place you left it.”

Alastor caught the rock when Layla threw it at him. He raised a brow. She took notice of it.

“It’s a farewell gift.”

Alastor heard a sharp humming behind him. When he turned around, a wide berth of energy began to swirl as though it bore the same night sky.

“Thank you for everything.”

Layla’s lips stretched. “I should be thanking you. You didn’t turn your back on me when I needed your help.”

“You didn’t give me a choice to turn back either.”

Layla laughed. “I will miss this small talk, Al.”

Alastor turned around, observing the pool of energy. Before he could leap over, Layla grabbed his shoulder, and felt a soft kiss on his right cheek.

“I’ll see you later.”

Alastor pondered upon her last words when she pushed him. He hoped she was not referring to any trouble. Regardless, he should be looking after his objective. He was at peace knowing he had the chance to get home.

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Kate received good news this morning. Bella finally showed signs of recovering from the injuries she sustained, apart from that, a nurse noticed her hands twitching and her waking up. It was only a matter of time until she would fully recover.

This time, Kate had to make sure Van got these gifts from Alastor. Of course, she was happy about this good news, but she was not sure about herself. She had a contemplation over her actions for the last few days—about her intentions, actions, and thoughts of Van. She never considered it by now that maybe he was better off without her. Kate shook her head in snapping off her daydreaming when she heard someone knock on the door.

Kate put down the drink and hurriedly opened the door. The wind blew from the east and the waves of clouds began to drift over the city. She invited Van inside before he’d get wet from the storm approaching.

“Al told me there is something I should see from you.” Van said.

“Yeah. Come.”

Kate jerked her head to follow her in the basement. Van had to slow his pace when they came in the narrow stairs and let Kate open the locks. As they went in, Kate rushed ahead, grabbed the journal Van handed to her.

“You see, this journal was encrypted by a multi-conjunction of spells. It is something I couldn’t fathom to solve because the spells used were not from our world. I asked Alastor to study it and he showed me the right formula to at least solve it partially.”

“Partially?”

“The spells were designed to reveal its passage bit by bit. I think your parents want you to know their past as you grow up, but they didn’t have the time to show you.” Kate had to pause, carefully considering her words, and continued. “He also managed to recognize the life essence your parents left in this journal and locate their location.”

Van looked up to her, surprised and in disbelief.

“You can see your parents, Van.”

## Epilogue

The pain of hunger returned to him once more.

Gilt knew it was only a matter of time before the complications of inhibition would resurface. So, he already took precautions. He locked himself in the wine cellar. Although he was glad Roxy and Mark offered their help, there was a part of him that wished they should have kept their distance away from him. He preferred to fix his messes alone, but deep down he knew that was a lie. He couldn’t bring himself the chance to take any more lives.

It was quite some time when he talked to someone. Roxy would regularly come down the cellar to give him some blood or talk to him about some things, but this week they became hectic. Most of the time, the two of them were busy keeping the house bills getting paid. The thought of being alone didn’t bother him anymore when he heard a squeak from the rat squeezing its way in a small hole.

“You’re the first guest I have this week.” Gilt said, observing the rat.

Gilt was far from it, but he recognized the rat was fearful.

“Don’t be afraid. I won’t eat you. Unless you give me some reason.”

He heard some quiet steps coming from the stairs.

“You replaced us with some rat as your friend?” Mark asked and smiled.

Mark offered Gilt a blood bag. Gilt got up and reached for it quickly. He drank it greedily.

“You’ve been busy.” Gilt said.

“Well, someone has to pay the bills.”

Mark shuddered at the cold touch of breeze coming from the small window above. The thought of a vampire shaking off by the measly wind had Gilt laughed. He regretted that when the chilly wind got through his senses too.

“You start retaining the humanity you tried to purge, that’s good.” Mark said.

After finishing his meal, Gilt threw the bag on the garbage. He saw the rat jump and come inside in hope of finding some food. They heard a sudden commotion above and several crashes.

“Mark, come here!” Roxy yelled. Her shout echoed throughout the house. “Bring Gilt too!”

Pulling the metallic sheets that were locking Gilt inside, the two vampires immediately sprinted to the living room. Roxy was tending the wound of someone they knew very well. Rick lay on the couch, covered with cuts and bruised. The poor boy was having a hard time breathing.

“They’re coming—they’re coming.” Rick muttered and croaked before he fell into slumber.

Whatever he was talking about, they were sure it was something about the sudden appearance of the blood moon and several howls coming from the darkest parts of the forest.

# 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

The Dark Entry

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The Dark Entry

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