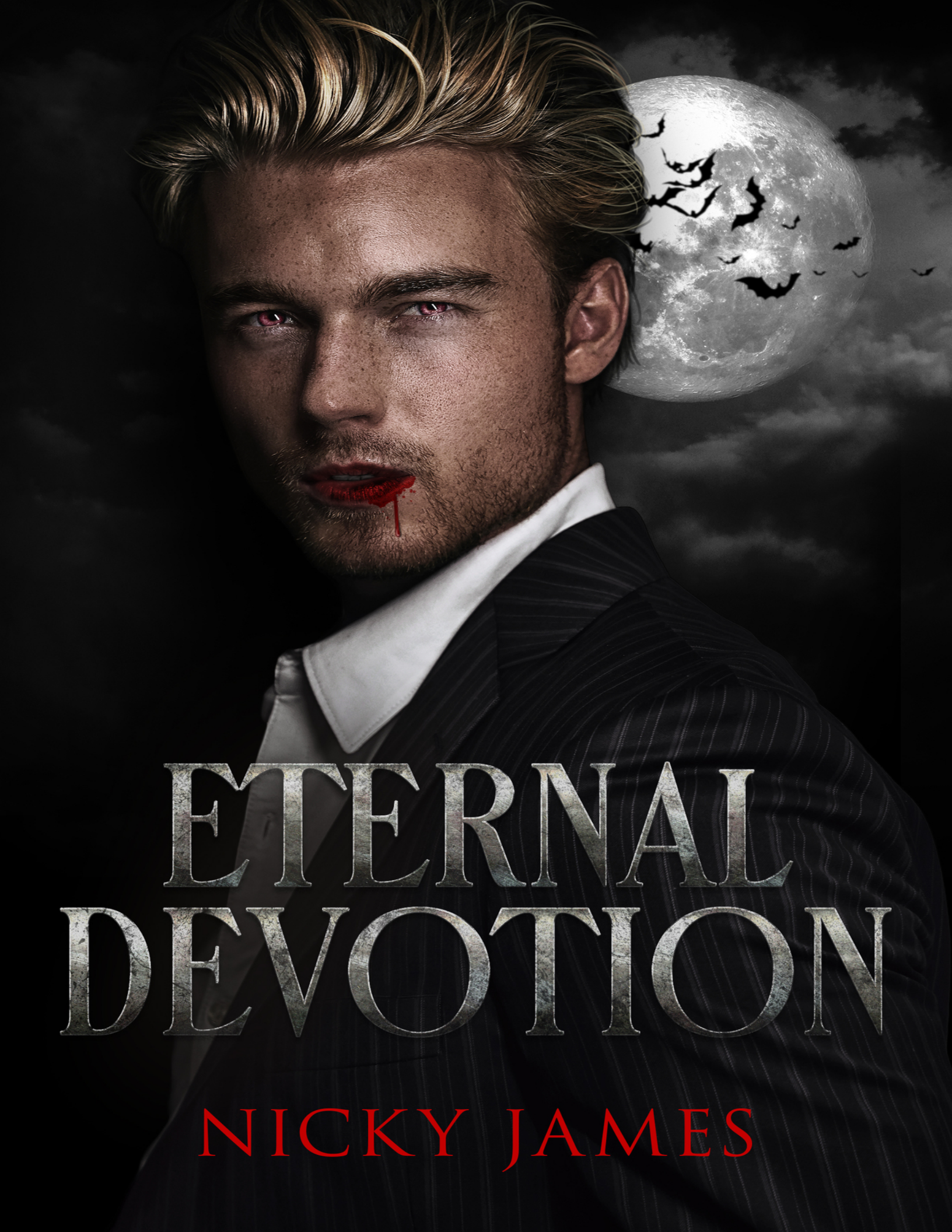

ETERNAL
DEVOTION
NICKY JAMES

Eternal Devotion

Nicky James



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Eternal Devotion

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Note to Readers

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1

Mordecai

FOUR HUNDRED AND THIRTY years ago, off a dirt road in what was once rural Lambeth, in a marshy area on the south bank of the Thames, across from Westminster, was a square piece of land marked by eleven gravestones but only ten bodies.

One for each of my maternal grandparents, another for Father, one for Mother, four belonging to siblings who didn't live past childhood, one for a sister who did, although Abeta had died at fifteen, birthing her first child. That might ring abnormal in today's society, but in my time, girls of fifteen regularly married and had babies. The unnamed child, who didn't survive, had the smallest marker next to her mother.

The last gravestone belonged to me, erected in my honor after word arrived of my passing. My parents had never had a body to bury, so the inscription was not precisely accurate.

If I closed my eyes and peered into the past, I could still read the vital details engraved on the stone's surface.

Here lyeth Mordecai Ashenvale

who departed this life on the 16th of August
AD 1597 in the 27th year of his age.

As I stood on the Riverside Walk, overlooking the Thames, with the St. George Wharf at my back, I mourned the life I never got to live and cursed the uncle who'd changed me. For although I'd died a mortal's death on that rainy August morning in 1597, I lived on.

Eternally.

Miserably.

Walking silently along the quay, I admired the constellation of artificial stars reflected on the surface of the still water. The bustling city on the other side with its brilliant array of electrically powered lights cast a hazy orange veil over the world, washing away the true darkness that called to my unbeating heart.

The rumble of gasoline-powered engines reverberated through the night. Jets roared overhead. Laughter caught the wind, arising from patrons visiting waterfront restaurants, dining on sheltered and heated patios.

Passersby on the Walk stared zombie-like at cell phones, thumbs moving as they typed endless messages to virtual friends all over the world. Others wore bulky headphones and blared music at decibels that irritated my sensitive hearing. They biked, ran, or rode skateboards, dressed in jeans, jumpers, and tennis shoes, with spiked, curled, or straightened hair, doused in perfumed oils that tickled the delicate membrane inside my nose if I inhaled.

The synthetic floral scent did not mask the natural human pheromones beneath. Their mix permeated the air, and my teeth ached as I fought to control my innate urges.

Humans and I were alike in many ways, but vastly different in others. I lived on the periphery of their world, unable to fully blend, yet unwilling to let go of my roots, even centuries after my death.

I longed to be mortal.

Watching them, I noted every nuance of their characters and personalities, copied their stances and mannerisms, repeated the words they used, and echoed their inflections. So much had changed over time. I could hardly keep up.

Every day, for hundreds of years, I scrutinized the way the humans interacted with one another and longed for something I could never have.

In the year 2026, my quaint family cemetery and the village I’d once called home were gone, replaced by waterfront paths and high-rises, shopping centers and massage parlors, restaurants and hair salons. Whether the skeletal remains of my ancestors had been discovered and relocated or had simply turned to dust, I might never know.

I rarely visited anymore. My life had drastically changed, and time rushed onward.

The industrial age had transformed the world I once knew into something unrecognizable. I wouldn't call the rise of the twenty-first century unpleasant. Its advances struck intrigue. Many aspects of societal change called to me in a way that many in my nocturnal family wouldn't understand. Progressive was a term I often heard. I'd seen a lot over the course of my undead life, but this was a direction I'd never dreamed possible.

Curiosity and a century-old longing fueled my nightly excursions across Europe, but my compass always pointed toward home.

Visitors to the waterfront braced against the chilly October wind, shivering and pulling hoods over vulnerable ears. I didn't feel the cold but had donned a wool coat and tucked my hands in the pockets to mimic appropriate behavior.

When I walked amongst the living, the idea was to blend and try not to draw attention to myself.

At the St. George Wharf Tower, I reversed course, treading slowly back the way I'd come while sharpening my hearing to eavesdrop on various conversations taking place on the nearest outdoor patio, particularly that of the two gentlemen who I'd learned were on a date. Their excursion was anything but clandestine. Although I couldn't see them from my vantage, I'd followed them on several occasions, both curious and fascinated at their lack of inhibition.

Smiling to myself, I shortened my stride, not wanting to miss a word of Fletcher's review of the film they'd seen that evening. Noise swelled from every direction. Pedestrians jostled my arm as they scooted around me, expressing annoyance at my languid pace. Boat horns trumpeted, bike bells chirped, dishes from bustling restaurant kitchens clattered. A cacophony. I heard it all.

Despite my narrowed attention and the clamor of a fall evening, a familiar flapping of wings drew my focus. It stilled my feet as I scanned the night. I cocked an ear and listened. The sound originated from behind me, vanishing shortly after I paused.

Inhaling deeply, catching his scent, I pivoted and scanned the Walk. Zeroing in on a dark cluster of hedges that lined the path, I waited.

"I know you're there," I called.

A slinking shadow emerged from a gap in the greenery and strolled in my direction. His dark coattails blustered in his wake as he approached. With

his chin high, black sculpted hair unmoving, and oxblood gaze pinning me in place, a devious grin touched the corners of his mouth, exposing a sharpened canine that caught the light from a distant patio.

Taking in the scenery, he *tsk*ed. “What is your fascination with this spot? You always come here.”

“Hello, Cristofer.”

He stopped a few feet away and scanned me head to toe. The mischief painting his features morphed to disgust. “You’re depleted.”

“I’m not.”

“How long has it been?”

“None of your business.”

“I’ll never understand you, Mordecai.”

“I’ve never asked you to try.”

Cristofer eyed a group of passing teens and subtly wet his lips, leaving them glistening with saliva. “How can you stand being so close, especially in your state? My teeth ache, and I fed sixteen hours ago.”

“It’s called self-control. I practice it regularly.”

Cristofer huffed, nose wrinkled. “Sounds terrible.”

“Are you following me?”

“Not by choice. I’ve been ordered to collect you.”

“Why? By whom?”

“Seamus called a meeting on your behalf.”

I didn’t miss Cristofer’s barbed tone. Seamus should not have been the one taking charge, but between my apathy and absence, someone had to. The weight of responsibility was suffocating, and I’d ignored it for the better part of a year.

“We’re gathering at Fairfax in one hour.” My friend’s eyes darkened. He lowered his voice and leaned in. “They have located Iulian.”

A surge of energy rippled over my skin, and I snapped to attention. My darker side and its relentless urges surfaced, and I clenched my fists. “Where?”

“I don’t know, but the time has come to act. Every day Valerius remains in power, he gains allies. His corruption grows with his army. Our people are giving up and joining *his* fight as we sit back and do nothing. It will be the death of us, Mordecai. Don’t you see? Don’t you care?”

“Of course I do.”

“*Pah*.” Cristofer cut the air with a swipe of his hand and paced to the edge of the concrete walkway. “You don’t, or you would have been actively involved these past few months. Well, you can’t cower now.”

I let his anger simmer before moving in beside him.

“They talk about you,” he continued, tone softer. “Your complacency. Your complete disregard for our perils. They say you’ve given up.”

“I haven’t. I wasn’t made for—”

“Stop with the excuses. You are who you are, and it’s time you make peace with it.”

I stared at the city on the other side of the Thames, hypnotized by its high-rises and pulsing with energy, longing for something I could never have.

“You’re coming.” It wasn’t a question.

“Of course I’m coming.”

“Seamus was insistent.”

“I said I’m coming. Iulian is my blood. I have no choice. I want to find him and free him as much as everyone else.” *Perhaps more*, I didn’t say.

“He’s our rightful leader.”

“I know.”

“If not him—”

“Don’t.”

“It’s a fact, Mordecai.”

No one knew that more than me.

Taking in the Riverside Walk, the Thames, and the tall buildings lining its shore, I met Cristofer’s piercing gaze, resigned to my fate. “We should go if we’re to be on time.”

“Can you change, or are you too weak?”

“I can change.”

Cristofer jutted his chin and narrowed his eyes.

“I can.” I hoped I could. It wouldn’t be the first time I’d allowed myself to get too weak.

Heaving a sigh drenched in doubt, Cristofer led the way to a secluded shadow. As I followed, I taxed my ears, seeking Fletcher’s familiar tenor, thirsting for a final taste of normality, but he and his lover were gone.

I tried to ignore the activity—the humanity—we left behind. It was not my world. It hadn’t been for a long, long time.



Constructed in the height of the Middle Ages, Fairfax held all the markers of a once-illustrious castle. Time had weathered her limestone façade and crumbled many of her crenelated battlements. Moss sank deep into her moldering pores, while thick vines suffocated her more with each passing year. Her high walls and turrets, once meant to keep trespassers wary, had fallen to ruin. No longer manned. No longer threatening. Dark windows, like sightless eyes, left the interior exposed to weather and damage.

Fairfax had been abandoned and left to rot for centuries.

Her history was forgotten. Her ancestors long dead. What remained had been claimed by my nocturnal family. Any human who dared venture into our domain left with fearful tales of devils and monsters that ruled the night.

If they left at all.

She was one of dozens of castles spread across Europe. In the late fifteenth century, our first king—may he find eternal peace in his final death—struck a deal with the devil and our species was born. Although, contextually, the word *born* is inaccurate. The adjective implies that someone or something has been brought to life or into existence. We are neither alive nor living.

Some might call us a disease since we'd spread across the continent, multiplying in numbers with each passing century. We were the immortal undead. Sons and daughters of the devil himself. Ageless and immune to natural death. A blight on the earth. A curse. But not indestructible.

It was the noon of night when Cristofer led us through the empty halls of Fairfax. Our superior vision made light unnecessary. Sure-footed and silent, we maneuvered over fallen beams and the ashy remains of destruction.

Fairfax itself was not the location of Seamus's gathering. The crumbling castle was meant to deceive our curious human counterparts. It was what lay beneath Fairfax that interested us creatures of the night. The ancient and winding catacombs, forsaken for eons, led to a chamber that had been constructed into one of hundreds of lairs we occupied across Europe.

Unlit sconces lined the walls as we descended stone stairs leading underground. The melted wax within their iron frames was thick with dust,

grime, and insect carcasses. The damp air carried the scent of earth and ruin.

My enhanced hearing caught the chatter of dozens of conversations long before we reached the meeting room.

“How many people did he invite?”

Cristofer continued ahead as though I hadn’t spoken.

The narrow tunnel made it impossible for us to walk abreast, so I trailed behind, absorbing the rising tension of those present. Their unease emitted seismic tremors I couldn’t ignore. No one would be pleased to see me, but they had no choice but to accept my presence.

Accessing the lair meant traversing several dank passageways and crossing through countless burial chambers with loculi along the walls containing skeletons and sarcophagi. The barely discernible ancient symbols and art carved into the stones told stories of a time long forgotten.

Out of respect for the true dead, the subterranean roads had been unaltered. Their maze-like configuration made our nest difficult to find. Cristofer took us there on instinct, through what would have been impenetrable darkness had we been human.

Upon entering the main chamber, our decrepit surroundings shifted to something akin to a modern lounge.

Embracing human luxuries, the area had been decorated for comfort with walnut accents, black leather furniture, velvet draperies, and plush, crimson rugs. Low-burning oil lanterns cast deep shadows and provided minimal illumination—unnecessary but a luxury often used for nostalgia.

Cristofer paused in the doorway. Candlelight flickered and danced against his pale skin, highlighting his unnaturally red lips. It reflected the fire in his lacquered irises. His pupils swelled to nocturnal moons in the dim setting.

Dozens of people filled the lounge. Leaders of important families. Brothers of the resistance. Enemies to Valerius. Several noted our arrival. Cristofer was met with respect, while a few caustic glares landed at my feet.

My reluctance to act this past year had left a bad taste in people’s mouths, the consensus being that *I* should be the one actively fighting the threat and taking a stance against Valerius. *I* should be the one to restore order.

My bloodline prevailed. As a direct descendant of the ancient king and Iulian’s nephew, I had a duty, and I’d been ignoring it.

Seamus caught sight of us and rose, crossing the congested room. His eternal age landed him somewhere in his mid-thirties, but accuracy was

hard to discern with our kind. His Slavic ancestry showed in his round face, prominent cheekbones, and ash-colored hair, which he wore long and tied at his nape. I suspected his complexion had always leaned toward pale, but like the rest of us, he was ghastly white.

He wore an expressionless mask as he approached, revealing none of his feelings. Regardless, he emitted an energy that spoke of disappointment and shame. Seamus was not part of the deceased king's bloodline. He would never hold a position of power in the family, but he'd stepped up when I'd turned my back. He'd fought while I hid among the humans, avoiding responsibility.

Before he could reprimand my absence during a time of crisis or remark on my obvious depletion, I spoke. "You've located Iulian."

Seamus stared unblinking for a long time before responding. "Not precisely."

I glowered at Cristofer. "You lied."

"Shut up and listen, Mordecai. You wouldn't have come otherwise." His upper lip rolled over his teeth in a snarl.

Seamus touched Cristofer's arm. "Give us a moment."

When we were alone, Seamus stepped closer and lowered his voice. The scent of copper on his breath made me shiver and clench my fists.

"Iulian *will* be found. We *will* bring him back and restore order. We've narrowed the parameters to something searchable."

"What does that mean?"

"We know the country and city where he's being held."

"And?"

"He is not in Romania like we feared."

A quiet relief loosened my muscles. If the usurper Valerius was holding my uncle in Romania, the chances of us freeing him were next to impossible. Valerius's army had taken control of our home and spread like a disease throughout.

"Where is he?"

"I will speak to everyone, and you will know. I hope you're prepared to act. The time has come."

Before I could conjure an objection or make demands, Seamus clasped my shoulder. Hot, blood-tinged breath tainted the air between us. "Your family needs you, Mordecai. Iulian cannot be freed without you."

With that, Seamus spun and marched away. His shoes whispered along the stone floor as he took position at the front of the room. The gathered crowd hushed and faced forward. I locked eyes with Cristofer, who was half-concealed in a shadowed corner. I could not read his mind, but the warning in every line of his body rang clear.

If you run, I will find you.

"Thank you for coming." Seamus scanned his rapt audience as though he commanded a place of authority. He was a leader in his own right, and the crowd hushed.

"As you know, our spies have been working diligently to discover the location of our precious elder, Iulian the Great, the rightful king of our people, unjustly banished by the traitor, Valerius. I promised an update when I had information to share, and that day is now."

A murmur arose from the gathered crowd. Seamus waved a hand for silence.

"It was believed that Valerius held Iulian somewhere in Romania. Considering the usurper has seized both the king's castle and the fortress Poenari, it seemed logical he would keep our rightful ruler under a watchful eye. It was also our greatest fear since Romania is no longer safe.

"I have good news. This does not seem to be the case. Our spies have learned that Elder Iulian has been shipped far away. To America."

An outcry of shock filled the chamber, ringing in my ears, making me question if I'd heard him correctly. America? Although our kind had spread throughout the continent, few had migrated globally. Crossing the oceans was no longer as perilous as it had been in earlier times. Still, an ingrained discomfort tended to dissuade most from venturing too far from our homeland.

As the meaning of Seamus's words registered, my spine stiffened. I darted my attention to the shadowed alcove, but Cristofer was gone. I scanned the crowd but didn't see him.

America. No. I couldn't go to America.

Seamus continued talking.

Now was my chance. Everyone was occupied.

In the chaos, I backed toward the door and slipped out with every intent on running. The instant the door clicked, I turned and came face to face with Cristofer, who waited a few feet down the dark tunnel as though expecting my attempted escape. He had his arms crossed, blocking the way.

“Going somewhere, duck?”

“Yes, but not America.”

“Valerius will destroy us, Mordecai. He already is. His human army grows every day, and he sends that army to eradicate his own people. Can you not see that you are his primary target? You alone have the power to stop him. You alone can bring Iulian back.”

“I’m not delusional.”

“No. You’re a coward. You walk the streets uncaring that he has targeted you, uncaring that we are powerless without your help.”

“I do care.”

“Bullshit.’’

It was bullshit. Every word, but I wasn’t a coward.

What Cristofer didn’t know, what no one knew, was how I longed for the final death. I’d never asked to be changed. I didn’t want this life. If instinct and necessity weren’t so hard to fight, I would have found a way out long ago. Valerius’s men weren’t hunting hard enough if they hadn’t found me. I spent my nights in plain sight among the humans. I wasn’t hiding.

I was waiting.

The culmination of Seamus’s speech rose from within the chamber. “We will free the rightful king. Iulian will reign again, and Valerius will be dealt with once and for all. You have my word.”

A cheer went up.

Cristofer approached and rested a hand on my cheek. His animosity had shifted to concern. “I believe in you, brother. This may not be the life you chose, but it is the life you were given. Find a way to make peace with it. Let go of your human roots before they destroy you.”

But how? It was impossible.

The door to the chamber opened as Cristofer pressed cold lips to my forehead.

A hand landed on my lower back. “You’re wrong, Cristofer. It’s Mordecai’s obsession with humans that might help our cause. He has learned to blend and walk among the living. A useful skill with the job ahead of him.”

I turned to face Seamus, his direct and unflinching gaze suggesting an authority he did not possess. I steeled myself for what was to come.

“Are you ready to talk?” he asked.

“America? Are you sure?”

“Yes. More specifically, North America. A quiet city in Canada. It’s called Owen Sound, in southwestern Ontario. We don’t know where he’s being held in the city. That is for you to discover.”

“What if your spies are wrong?”

“They aren’t. Be warned, Mordecai. Wherever Iulian is, he is undoubtedly being kept in a forced state of torpor and is heavily guarded by Valerius’s human militia. Trained hunters. Extracting the elder will require delicacy.”

“Quite the understatement. I know what it will require.”

Seamus didn’t react to my biting tone. “It might take time. Be patient. Don’t rush. This is *not* a suicide mission. Don’t make it one. Cristofer has arranged your transportation and accommodations.”

I glanced at my friend, who smirked.

“When do I leave?”

Seamus pressed his lips together. “Tomorrow.” He paused, flashed his attention to Cristofer, then added, “In the early afternoon.”

I cringed. My insides burned at the mere thought of such a vulnerable hour, never mind that I would spend most of the flight over a vast ocean.

“I suggest fortifying yourself for the journey, Mordecai. It will be taxing, and you look,” Seamus raked his gaze over my face, “rather weak.”

Cristofer rested his hand on my shoulder. If it was meant to provide comfort, he failed. “I’ll ensure our dear friend is ready for his trip and gets on the damn plane.”

“I don’t need an escort.”

Seamus nodded as though I hadn’t spoken, then he bowed his head and departed.

The moment we were alone, I dislodged from Cristofer’s hold and glared. “I *don’t* need an escort.”

“I think you do. Now,” Cristofer said draping an arm over my shoulder and guiding me into the catacombs, “Let’s ensure you start your journey at your strongest. I know just the place.”

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2

Ensley

“DID YOU CLOSE ON that house on 6th Avenue West?” Dany’s gaze never left her computer, the desk phone pressed to her ear. Only her raised voice suggested she was speaking to me, not whoever was on the line.

“Yes. The paperwork is filed. You should have gotten the notification.”

“How about 13th Avenue East?”

“They signed last night. I’m finalizing the paperwork right now. I was waiting for confirmation from the bank.”

Instead of responding, Dany lowered her voice and continued her conversation with whoever was on the phone.

Ten minutes later, I filed the report and peeked over the top of my computer. Dany seemed as settled as ever and in no rush to leave.

Fuck my life. The one day I hoped to get home early.

I checked the time on my phone. Quarter after five. Why was she still here? And on a Friday no less. Dany notoriously left the office at five. Something was up. She’d been on the phone all afternoon, a permanently pinched expression cutting a groove between her brows. I wasn’t eavesdropping, but her hushed conversations carried a hint of aggravation.

My message icon showed three missed texts from my good friend Marsden. Double-checking that Dany was occupied, I opened them.

Mars: Ten-man raid. Huldynstat’s Castle. 8pm sharp. You’re in, right? Aiming for Dorignaut’s Lair. That fucking chest piece is long overdue to drop.

Mars: We picked up Grunt for backup heals. Not our first choice, but the best I could do on short notice. Ziggy's tanking.

Mars: Correction. Poet's tanking with Krul. Zig's bringing his rogue for added DPS. He has that spell interrupt that we need.

I typed a quick confirmation while Dany wasn't looking. It was bad enough she saw me as the office lowlife, but if she caught me planning a dungeon run with the guys on a Friday night, it would do me no favors. My choice of desk décor and abundance of classic Nintendo and Zelda T-shirts already earned odd looks. According to her, thirty-three was too old for a gaming obsession.

Killing time—I refused to leave before Dany, especially since I'd arrived late that morning—I pulled up my personal email and discovered a new message from my mother.

My darling Ensley,

Just a quick one today. I'm running out the door. You remember Grace, who I met at yoga? She's taking me for afternoon tea at a cute tea house that recently opened in town. I feel like royalty. We have a matinee at the theater afterward, then we're meeting a few other people for drinks. Sweet child of mine, we are overdue for a phone date. Maybe next week sometime? Let me know what you have available. I have a few things on the calendar, but I'm sure we can work around them.

Love you always and forever, Mom

"Thank you, Grace," I mumbled under my breath. My mother's expanding social life helped me relax and eased the pressure.

Dany spun from her computer, brow hitched. "What was that?"

"Nothing. Talking to myself."

I hit reply and typed a response to Mom's email, giving her a rundown of my boring day. Our daily email exchange had been going on for years, ever since I left Strathroy and moved to Owen Sound when I was twenty-four. I worried about her being all alone in the house without company. My father died fifteen years ago, but not a day passed when I didn't feel responsible for my mother's happiness and well-being.

My dearest Queen Ann,

I hope you enjoyed afternoon tea in the palace with your humble servant, Grace. Do regale me with all that was on offer in your next correspondence. If you should meet a handsome prince, be sure he pampers you as you deserve.

I smiled to myself, knowing my mother would get a kick out of the reply.

It's been a typical day for me. I had a house showing this morning, met with a new client after lunch, and spent the afternoon at the office doing paperwork. My evening plans include vodka coolers and dungeon raids with the crew. Do not despair, Your Royal Highness. Ziggy suggested a night on the town Saturday with real face-to-face socialization. See? I do get out from time to time. Maybe I'll meet my own Prince Charming, but I won't hold my breath.

Dany pushed back from her desk.

Eyeing her over my screen, I willed her to reach for her coat and leave, but she didn't. Instead, she pivoted and aimed for my work area. I clicked away from my personal email and brought up a standard work form to look busy.

Her heels clicked, and her hips swayed. She carried a brown folder close to her chest, expression unreadable. "Hey, Ensley." Uh-oh. The sweet-cherry-pie voice was never a good sign. "What're you up to this evening?"

Her fake kindness was patronizing.

I scrambled for an answer that didn't involve ten-man raids or paint me as the antisocial slug she'd pegged me to be ages ago but came up empty. The pause lasted long enough that Dany drew her own conclusion, a syrupy smile accenting her wrinkles.

"Good." She dropped the folder on my desk. "I need you to close a deal. I know it's last minute, but the whole thing is unconventional. The money has already gone through, ownership has technically transferred hands, but we still need a signature. They also need the keys. They're from overseas somewhere. The heavy lifting was done electronically. Since the new owner hasn't seen the place outside photographs, it would be respectful to offer a walk-through. The gentleman is supposed to be there around eight."

"Whoa. Wait. I can't…" I flashed my attention surreptitiously from Dany to the tiny, unclear property picture attached to the folder with a paperclip. Still, I couldn't make out the image. "I didn't say I was free."

"You didn't say you were busy."

"Well, I *am* busy."

She arched a brow. "Oh? Doing what?"

Words eluded me once again, and I made like a fish, opening and closing my mouth.

“Excellent.” Dany pushed the folder across the desk. “You remember the Branvilla Estate? Oh wait. You’re not a local. Never mind.”

I darted my gaze from the unclear image on the brown folder to Dany, eyes widening, evening plans forgotten. No, I wasn’t a local, but I’d heard plenty of rumors.

“The derelict mansion? Are you serious?”

I grabbed the folder and spun it to face me, getting a better look at the real estate photo clipped to the corner. Dense trees suffocated much of the weathered façade. The picture had been taken in the summer months. A false sense of beauty gave a different impression than the stories that circulated among my friends.

“Wasn’t this place condemned?” I asked.

“Yes, in the nineties.”

“But… How can it be for sale?”

Come to think of it, the property had been on the market for decades, and I’d never thought to question it. The asking price was astronomical for a crumbling piece of shit mansion. In all the years I’d been with the real estate company, I’d never heard of a single person requesting to view it.

“It’s not for sale. It’s sold. Aren’t you listening?”

“Yeah, but… I always thought they should raze it to the ground and sell the land for new development.”

“It’s a historic landmark. It can’t be torn down. A company bought it in 2001, did some structural renovations, and brought it up to code, but they ran into money problems and filed for bankruptcy. The city took ownership, but they won’t fork over the money required to finish the repairs, so it’s been sitting empty. Rather, mostly empty. As far as I understand, some rooms still contain a lot of old furniture and junk.

“Anyhow, thanks to the structural repairs, it’s no longer considered condemned, but I sure wouldn’t want to live there.”

Dany hugged herself and shivered. She was a decade and a half older than me and would have grown up with the ghost stories.

Opening the folder, I browsed the handful of images attached to the document. No one had bothered cleaning it up for show, and the dusty rooms showed signs of disrepair and vandalism.

I closed the file, still reeling at the news that someone had bought it.

My evening plans came back to me, and I pushed the folder to Dany. “I’d love to help you out, but I can’t. Not tonight.”

Dany didn’t reach for the file. “Eight percent contingent on you getting a signature.”

“Say what now?” Eight percent commission was unheard of. Typically, I made five upon closing. Six if I was lucky.

“That’s what I’m told.”

I narrowed my gaze. “What’s the catch? You’re willingly handing me eight percent?”

Based on the price tag, I would have expected Dany to hog the sale with her life.

“Are you kidding? I’m not going anywhere near that place.”

“Seriously?”

I didn’t believe in evil spirits or ghosts, so for once it was me rolling my eyes at her childish fear. I could have complained about my ruined evening, but the price tag was too enticing. The only flaw I could see in Dany’s underhanded plan was that this guy, whoever the fuck he was, took one look at the place and changed his mind.

“You said the loan is approved with the bank?”

“No. They paid outright. It’s a done deal. The money has already been transferred.”

My brows hit my hairline as I touched the astronomical figure printed in the top corner of the deal. “Outright?”

“Yes. Are we good? You’ll meet the new owner at the estate?”

I would have been a fool to turn it down. “Sure. What’s the guy’s name?” I flipped through the paperwork, seeking the answer.

“Mordecai Ashenvale. Eight o’clock.” Dany returned to her desk, grabbed her coat, briefcase, and purse, and shouted, “Have a great weekend,” as she left.

I stared at the photograph of Branvilla Estate for a long time before tapping out a message to Mars, letting him know he would need a substitute healer for the raid. Before heading out, I finished the email to my mother, telling her about my unexpected change of plans.

The mansion is supposedly haunted, so if you don’t hear from me again, I was probably cursed by an evil spirit or fell in love with an undead ghoul. Remember, whatever you do, don’t look in the drawer beside my bed. There are things a mother shouldn’t know about her only son.

Love always, Ensley



I arrived at Branvilla Estate at twenty to eight, intent on familiarizing myself with the house and grounds before the new owner arrived. Mars, Ziggy, and Poet had grown up in Owen Sound and spoke of clandestine adventures onto the property in their youth: spying in the windows and using their Ouija boards to summon spirits. Many bets had been placed on who could last the longest on the property before chickening out. I didn't share those experiences, so my knowledge of the mansion was limited to photographs and tall tales that traveled the rumor mill, none of them remotely believable.

Branvilla was located on the outskirts of the city, on a densely forested piece of land off Side Road 15.

Mid-October meant fall. Shorter days, lots of rain, and a drastic drop in temperature. The scant leaves that remained on the trees ran the spectrum from rusty red to sunburnt orange, mustard yellow to crispy brown. During the daytime, they provided a brilliant spot of color against a permanently ashen sky. They blanketed the ground and covered the overgrown driveway leading to the mansion, making it hard to find my way once I left the main road.

Inching along the twisted lane, deep under a canopy of trees that blocked any trace of the moon, I squinted out the windshield, the Jeep's headlights my only guide. Sooner than expected, the brights caught on a rusted iron gate, glimmering from the earlier rain. It stood twelve feet high, attached to an equally remarkable cobblestone wall that encased the property.

"Lovely."

I kept the Jeep idling as I hopped out. Greeted by the eerily silent woods and a bone-chilling dampness, I zipped my coat to my chin and hustled to the gate. A thick chain wrapped multiple times around the bars held it closed, secured with an oversized padlock. An agency-standard lockbox hung from a link. I'd memorized the combination on the paperwork and got it open in no time. It contained three shiny keys. I assumed one unlocked the gate, another the main door, and the third was likely for a shed or outbuilding of some kind. Dany hadn't gone into specifics.

I got the lock open and unwrapped the chain, all too aware of the dense forest surrounding me. The impenetrable darkness. The heavy scent of

rotten leaves and ozone. The steady and uneven patter of residual raindrops dripping from the trees overhead.

A storm system had moved through the area that afternoon. Every now and then, an owl hooted. Twice, my ears picked out rustling in the undergrowth, but when I paused to listen, the noise vanished. I couldn't help imagining that whatever had caused it was listening back. A mouse? A raccoon? A skunk? A zombie?

With a self-deprecating huff, I mumbled, "How the fuck old are you? Get a grip."

It took effort to tug the gate open. The rusted iron needed to be convinced after years of neglect, enduring rain, snow, and sun. Dragging it through the thick carpet of wet leaves required gumption, and the tired hinges whined and complained at decibels that sang through my teeth and shivered up my spine.

Loud enough to wake the dead, I thought.

Back in the Jeep, I cranked the heat and followed the driveway through several more turns before the historic mansion materialized out of the darkness like a colossal monument to the devil himself.

"Fuck my life. Look at that place." It could have fallen right out of a Grimm's fairy tale.

I parked close to the front entrance, next to the remains of a crumbling fountain, and killed the engine. Leaning forward to peer out the windshield, I took in what I could of the monolithic structure in the dark.

Several windows were boarded up. The ones that weren't presented as ominous, impenetrable pits. What lay beyond was a mystery for my imagination. Creepers swallowed much of the stone façade. I knew from photographs that the exterior was in rough shape, but the night camouflaged a lot of the damage.

The fountain had once featured a cherubic angel, but part of his outstretched arm and face was missing. Under the beam of my headlights, I spotted a bird's nest sheltered against the angel's shoulder and neck, a coating of shit beneath it suggesting it had once been a popular loft.

I had so many questions. Did the guy who bought this place intend to fix it up and sell it? It was the only logical answer. No one in their right mind would live in this dump. He must be some kind of millionaire if he paid for it outright.

The time on the dash read ten to eight. The least I could do was turn the lights on so it would look welcoming. It wouldn't hurt to get a general idea of the floor plan before Mr. Ashenvale arrived too, so I didn't look completely incompetent giving a tour.

Killing the engine, I got out of the Jeep and aimed for the stone stairs leading to the main entrance. An iron knocker hung below a narrow window, darkness beyond. A curtain of cobwebs filled the nook, along with a pile of windswept debris that filled the corner.

The hair on my nape stood on end as I fumbled the keys.

This was stupid. I wasn't a child. There were no such things as ghosts or evil spirits.

The lock had been replaced in the past decade by the look of it, so the key slipped home and turned without trouble. I muscled open the heavy wooden door and was greeted by a tomb of darkness that might have led straight to the gates of hell for all I knew. Stale, musty air hit me in the face.

I stepped blindly into the room and felt along the wall, seeking a switch. The listing said there was electricity, so it was there somewhere. Fumbling my phone from a pocket, I found the flashlight app, turned it on, and was greeted by a bare foyer: dusty, pitted wood floors with a scattering of insect carcasses, peeling gold-embossed emerald-green wallpaper above an intricately carved walnut boiserie. Rusty nails hung at intervals, suggesting pictures had once decorated the walls. Those items were long gone.

I found what I was looking for behind the door and turned on the light. Pale yellow bulbs inside four ornate brass sconces flickered to life. They lined the hall to my left, ending at a solid wooden door two dozen or so feet down the corridor. It wasn't enough illumination to chase away the shadows, but it was better than darkness.

On the right, a few feet along, a pair of carved French doors stood open, the room beyond a yawning black hole—an unwelcome sight if I ever saw one.

Pulling up my big-boy pants, I entered the abyss, found another light switch, and discovered what might once have been a lounge or parlor. A few pieces of antique furniture remained, all of it pushed into a corner. A settee, a matching chair, a sideboard, a piano, and several low tables stacked on top of one another. The built-in bookshelf near the far wall was stuffed with water-damaged leatherbound tomes, most of them wrinkled and scattered haphazardly.

The settee’s brocade showed signs of rot and wear, torn in places, spilling discolored stuffing. One of the tables had a splinted leg. The iron grate over the cracked stone fireplace sat open, showing the ashy remains of a long-extinguished fire. Dusty cobwebs in abundance decorated the corners and hung lace-like over most surfaces. Surprisingly, I didn’t see any signs of rodents, but a thick layer of grime covered everything.

I backed out of the room and eyed the door at the end of the hallway, but I couldn’t shake the chill from my bones and decided I wasn’t ready to venture deeper unless I had company. I would wait outside for Mr. Ashenvale. We could explore the house together… or not at all.

Was it a cowardly decision on my part? Absolutely. Did I care? No… ish? Perhaps a tiny nugget of shame itched my conscience, especially since my favorite pastime included exploring scary dungeons for quests and going face-to-face with all sorts of mythical creatures. Heck, my favorite genre of books was horror, and I took pride in having read Stephen King’s entire catalog.

But this was real life. I didn’t have a tank or healing potions to protect me, and the big man upstairs had not granted me supernatural powers that I was aware of. I was as tragically human and vulnerable as they came. Although I knew, logically, undead beings didn’t exist, I couldn’t find enough nerve to keep going.

Besides, I doubted Mr. Ashenvale would be any more inclined to tour the place after dark when it was obvious he wouldn’t be staying the night. Who in their right mind would? The mansion was unlivable in its condition. If the gentleman wanted to view the property before signing the paperwork, fine. I would find him comfortable accommodations and offer to come back in the morning when the sun chased away the evil spirits.

The eerie sense of foreboding followed me outdoors. Silence and impenetrable shadows crept in from all sides. I scanned the surrounding forest, wondering what kind of beasts might lurk within.

The key ring for the mansion contained a third key of unknown origin. Since there was no sign of Mr. Ashenvale, I walked the length of the mansion to the far corner—a good forty or fifty yards away—and shone my flashlight along the side of the building, seeking signs of an outbuilding or shed.

The mansion and its property were immense. My phone didn’t illuminate far enough for me to get a sense of distance. I paced a while along the side

of the mansion, avoiding broken tree branches and protruding rocks that threatened to trip me up. My coat snagged on an overgrown prickle bush, and it took a second to get free without tearing a hole in the fabric.

I'd gone thirty or so yards without coming to the next corner when the distant howl of a coyote stilled my advance and turned my blood to ice. I panned the wooded area to my right, heart knocking, before hustling back the way I'd come.

Fuck this bullshit. I had no intention of becoming an angry dog's next meal. He could probably smell my fear.

Picking up my pace, I rounded the front of the mansion, flashlight aimed at the ground so I didn't break my neck on forest debris. It wasn't until I nearly reached my destination that I glanced up and came to an abrupt halt.

A man stood beside the Jeep, neck craned as he peered at the upper reaches of the mansion.

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3

Ensley

THE MAN FACED AWAY from me. He wore a long black coat, his hands stuffed in the pockets. Face tipped, he examined the high reaches of the mansion. A single slice of moonlight cut through the canopy of trees and licked a golden path over blond hair. He was so pale that for a fraction of a second, I thought I was seeing a ghost.

Then, I remembered I was thirty-three and didn't believe in such nonsense.

But… How long had I been around the corner? Three minutes? Five at most. I didn't hear a vehicle approach, and apart from the Jeep, I couldn't *see* another one anywhere. Did he park at the gate or on the road and walk in? The notion seemed ridiculous.

Before I could swallow my nerves and call out a greeting, the man turned and spoke as though fully aware I was standing there gawking.

His voice was calm and accented. "I assume you're from the agency?" He'd moved into a pool of darkness, which made it impossible to see his features.

"Yes, I'm—"

The man stepped forward into that same slice of moonlight, and my words vanished. He was beautiful in a way I could not comprehend. In a way I couldn't describe. Breathtakingly. Otherworldly. Almost ethereal.

Sharp eyes held me captive, his gaze inquisitive yet intense. Utterly transfixed, I spent a full minute staring as though under a spell. Shapely brows, light and trimmed facial hair in the same golden hue as the rest. His

unnaturally pale complexion could have been a trick of moonlight, but it made his dark lips stand out, full and enticing. Transfixed by his allure, I questioned if he might be a figment of my imagination. Was I hallucinating?

I'd expected the client to be a wealthy foreigner of advanced age. This guy looked a few years younger than me, although his clothing was finely made and suggested exorbitant wealth.

The man tipped his head to the side after I was silent too long. "My apologies. I seem to have caught you off guard."

"N-no. Not at all." I shook free from the odd spell and hustled forward, hand extended. "I'm so sorry. Ensley Elowen, from Sound Horizon Property Group."

The man returned the shake, his fingers like ice, his grip firmer than I expected. "Mordecai Ashenvale. A pleasure."

"It's nice to meet you. I, um…" Glancing along the length of the overgrown drive, I frowned. "You startled me, is all. I didn't hear you arrive. Did you… walk through the forest?"

The question sounded ridiculous, except when I considered that he couldn't have arrived any other way. Again, I scanned the darkness for another vehicle, but there wasn't one.

Mordecai didn't answer. He turned to the mansion and studied the façade while I studied his profile. Tearing my eyes away proved difficult. He exuded a calmness that felt out of place, considering we were in the woods at night next to a dilapidated mansion.

"It's remarkable, isn't it?" Mordecai's tongue poked out and wet his lips as he shook his head with a quiet chuckle. "Bloody Cristofer. I should have expected nothing less. He'll pay for this."

"I'm afraid the inside isn't in any better shape. I assumed you were aware of the estate's condition."

"I know barely anything, Mr. Elowen."

"Ensley. Please. I'm in the dark as well, to be honest. My boss asked me to come and close the deal only a few hours ago. I was told you're new to the country. Is that right?"

"I arrived in Toronto this afternoon. Got a bit turned around finding your city. I apologize if I'm late."

"You're not. May I ask… Your accent. Is it British? I can't make it out. Where did you move from?"

Mordecai’s interest shifted from studying the mansion to studying me. The direct attention might have been uncomfortable if I didn’t have the distinct impression the guy was checking me out. The perusal was subtle, but I had enough life experience as a gay man to know when a *look* was more than a look.

I wasn’t mad about it, except that debonair Mordecai Ashenvale seemed miles outside my league.

“I’ve lived all over Europe,” he explained. “Mostly in Romania, but I’ve spent time in Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Russia…” He trailed off with a shrug. “All over. I was born in England, and I’ve been there over the past seven or eight months. My accent is likely muddled.”

“You’re well-traveled. What do you do for a living?”

Mordecai’s penetrating gaze lingered for an extended beat before he dismissed the question yet again and motioned to the mansion’s front entrance. “Shall we?”

“Oh. Um… sure. The paperwork is in the Jeep.” I shuffled, intent on grabbing it, but paused. “You know, the light inside isn’t great, and I’m unfortunately not all that familiar with the floor plan. We could come back in the morning and have a proper look around. When the sun is up. It might be easier. I assume you have accommodations in town. If not, I can help you find a place.”

“Not necessary. I’ll be perfectly happy here.”

His words didn’t compute. Was this refined gentleman who clearly had a boatload of money implying he was going to stay in the mansion overnight? “A-are you sure?”

“The house is mine, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’m quite sure.”

Mordecai didn’t carry a backpack, nor did he have luggage so far as I could see. The keys hadn’t transferred hands, so it wasn’t like furniture had arrived ahead of him.

“Are you all right, Mr. Elowen?”

Confused, I wanted to say. I had a million questions, but Mordecai’s relaxed demeanor gave me the sense I was overreacting. If this elegantly gorgeous man wanted to spend the night in a decrepit mansion in the middle of a densely wooded area, who was I to object?

“I’m great. Let me grab those papers and we can walk through.”

I fumbled with the passenger door of the Jeep and found what I was looking for. With the folder clutched to my chest, I offered Mordecai the most pleasant smile I could muster under the circumstances and guided him —against my better judgment—into the mansion.

The hallway remained lit from earlier. Mordecai strolled ahead, bolder and more confident than I'd been. He didn't offer commentary on the state of the mansion, but his gaze caught and paused on each successive flaw and spiderweb.

We entered the room I'd coined a parlor. Mordecai walked the circumference and eyed the stack of furniture pushed against the wall. He nudged the fireplace grate with a polished dress shoe, and it creaked, closing halfway. Plucking an iron poker from its rack, he inspected it and put it back. Above the mantel hung the remains of a framed oil painting. A portrait. I didn't notice it earlier, too caught up in the creep factor and getting the fuck outside.

Mordecai studied it with a tilt of his head, and I thought he might ask questions about the mansion's previous owner, but he didn't. The only history I'd gleaned from Dany was minimal. The group who had meant to restore the place had never lived within her walls. The furniture must have belonged to the last member of the Branson family before they died without an heir. If the man in the portrait was a Branson, I didn't know his name.

"I can put you in touch with a property cleanout service if you're interested. We use them often with estate sales. If a house owner passes away and there isn't a family member to take over, the bank repossesses it and has an estate auction. The cleanout company gets rid of whatever remains."

Mordecai eyed me from over top of a weathered book he'd plucked from the shelf. "Why get rid of it?" He snapped the book shut, sending a puff of dust into the air as he glanced around. "I find the place rather charming, don't you?"

When I frowned, unsure if he was serious, the corner of his mouth twitched. The suggestion of a smile revealed the hint of an eyetooth, and if my gaze caught and held on his luscious lips, who would blame me? They were vibrantly red, standing out against his pale complexion. It hadn't been a trick of moonlight. The man's skin was alabaster: smooth, milky-white, and utterly unblemished.

Humor danced in his eyes. Under the yellowish glow of the sconces, they appeared the color of Bordeaux.

Again, I found myself utterly transfixed. Captivated.

Entranced.

I'd never met anyone with eyes that shade.

"It was a joke," Mordecai said, breaking the spell.

I blinked several times, having lost the thread of the conversation. "I'm sorry?"

Mordecai's smile widened, but he turned his back before I could see its full effect. "The phone number for the cleaning company, Mr. Elowen." He aimed for a closed door on the far side of the parlor, one I hadn't noticed. "It would be of great help."

"Right. Of course."

Every room was in similar disrepair. Most were empty, nothing more than worn hardwood floors and peeling wallpaper. Some held a few broken fragments of furniture, random pieces of artwork in cracked frames, books, and a mix of odds and ends. Every space was filled with a metric ton of dust and a network of cobwebs that made my skin crawl. It smelled like a thousand-year-old tomb. Not that I knew what a thousand-year-old tomb smelled like.

Mordecai didn't seem bothered in the least.

It wasn't so much a tour as two men exploring a timeworn mansion. Although I took in the state of the property, I was more attuned to Mordecai and his untroubled reaction. I waited for him to change his mind and request that I direct him to a local bed-and-breakfast, but he didn't.

A winding staircase took us to the second floor. The banister was dangerously loose, and some of the steps sagged underfoot, moaning their complaints as we climbed. It delivered us to a vast mezzanine with two darkened hallways. One led east. The other west. An elegant chandelier hung crookedly in the center of the open space, but its light only bled so far, and there didn't seem to be another source of illumination.

I turned on my phone's flashlight app and expected Mordecai to do the same, but he didn't.

Instead, he picked a direction and strolled into the shadows. The man seemed perfectly comfortable in the dark, and not a bit unnerved.

Closed doors lined the hallway. Mordecai spent little time exploring. He opened them at random, peered inside, then closed them again and carried

on.

We came upon a bathroom midway down the hall, and Mordecai went inside to inspect the area. It was spacious, but I remained in the doorway, taking it in from a distance, stealing glances at the man, and soaking up his attractive features.

He wasn't tall. No more than five eight or five nine. Despite being concealed by a long wool coat, it was clear he had a honed physique.

The bathroom boasted a porcelain enameled claw-foot tub with exposed brass plumbing, a vintage pedestal sink with polished brass faucets, an ivory pull-chain toilet, a cracked marble-topped washstand, and many dark wood accents. The walls were papered forest-green above wainscotting panels. Over the sink hung an ornate, brass-framed mirror, the glass filmy with years of grime.

As Mordecai crossed in front of the sink to reach the small covered window, my brain registered something obscure, but apart from an odd sense of wrongness, I couldn't pinpoint what triggered the hair-prickling sensation.

I stared at the grimy mirror, my reflection hazy and distorted from the thick layer of filth covering its surface. For no apparent reason, a heavy sense of dread filled my belly. I shivered and wrapped my coat tighter as my heart tripped double-time.

An autonomic reaction associated with fear. But what was I afraid of? For half a second, I wondered if there might be truth behind all those ghost stories. Was there something in the room with us? Did I sense them? It?

Mordecai moved from the window and approached the door. I stepped aside to let him pass, transfixed on the mirror as the circuits inside my brain sparked with an answer, but before they fully ignited, revealing the cause of my sudden anxiety, an exclamation from Mordecai drew my attention.

"Simply fascinating. I haven't seen one of these in years."

I hustled down the hall and found him in a cluttered room at the end. The only light came from a window. He stood in the dark, staring at something I couldn't see.

I shone my light and discovered a practical treasure trove of artifacts that were sadly going to ruin from their hasty storage. In the corner, I illuminated the object responsible for Mordecai's exclamation. An ornate pedestal topped with an antique armor stand. The armor stand displayed a

torso clothed in steel-plated armor: overlapping metal scales over a padded leather backing.

Mordecai ran his fingers over a metal edge, tucked them underneath the plate, and fondled the leather padding. “A 16th-century replica.” Shoulders falling, he sighed and lowered his arm. “The National Museum of Romanian History in Bucharest has fine examples of the real thing.”

I didn’t know how Mordecai could tell it was a fake or what century it was from, but I supposed it was in far better condition than true medieval chest armor would be. Besides, an authentic 16th-century antique wouldn’t be in a rotting mansion outside Owen Sound. Like he said, it would be in a national history museum somewhere across the ocean.

“Ever hear of Immortal Rising?” I asked.

Mordecai didn’t answer right away. He moved on to a stack of paintings propped against the wall.

“It’s an MMORPG.”

“I’m not familiar with the term.”

“Oh, well, it’s been around for a couple of years. It’s a complex game that has taken over my life in an unhealthy way that concerns my mother. The hunt is addictive. It’s become an obsession.”

I chuckled.

Mordecai glanced over his shoulder with a quizzical expression.

I continued. “I was supposed to go on a run in a similarly dilapidated castle tonight. We had a high chance of success too. Came into some new information about a certain boss’s weaknesses. Planned to put a few theories to the test. Anyhow”—I indicated the chest piece—“this reminds me of trash mob loot. Level ten stuff. It looks incredible, but it’s not worth anything. Clunky and awkward. It would slow you down in a real fight. No great protection against the undead, either, you know?”

A pinch appeared in Mordecai’s brow, and I got the sense he wasn’t following the conversation. Worse, I’d revealed my nerdy side and was geeking out with facts no one cared about but my guild. Thirty-three and obsessed with video games. How nerdy could I be in one day?

This was why I didn’t have a boyfriend. If my goal was to impress Mordecai so he noticed me in *that way*, I was failing.

Shame burned my cheeks. I kept my flashlight aimed at the floor, hoping the shadowy room covered my embarrassment.

“Yeah, anyhow. Ignore me. I’m rambling.”

“Do you know who these people are?” Mordecai motioned to the framed portraits.

“No. Likely members of the Branson family. All this stuff would have belonged to them.”

“Their bloodline is gone, I assume?”

“So far as I understand.”

Mordecai walked among the clutter, picking at the random treasures. A rusted birdcage. A broken game table, its chunky wooden pieces scattered about. Two freestanding ashtrays. Cracked vases, tarnished silver ornaments, even a taxidermized raven. This discovery seemed to trouble Mordecai, if his pursed lips and frown said anything.

“Do you think the dead want to be remembered?” he asked, thumbing the feathers on the stuffed bird.

“What do you mean?”

“Would they want their stories passed along from one generation to the next?”

“Don’t we all?”

“I suppose.”

Echoes of the past were everywhere, and the longer we stayed in this wreck of a room, the more uncomfortable I became.

“Should we continue?”

“Of course.” A sad smile turned the corner of his mouth. “I apologize. My question unsettled you.”

“Not at all. I’ve got the worst case of the heebie-jeebies, is all.”

His smile grew. “The house frightens you?”

“No.” The word came out far too defensive, and I laughed at myself. “Okay, a little, but come on. Look at this place. It’s creepy.”

“It’s charming.”

“It’s really not.”

Our gazes locked, and a lick of warmth stole my chill.

“Alas, I shan’t make you suffer. Lead the way, Mr. Elowen.”

“‘*Alas?*’”

“What?”

“Who says that?”

“What’s wrong with alas?”

“Nothing.” We shared another shy smile and awkward laugh before continuing the tour.

We spent another hour exploring the vast mansion and all her rooms: a salon, a grand dining room, a drawing room, a proper library, a smoking room, and another Mordecai called a conservatory, but I didn't understand what that was meant to be. We discovered old servants' quarters and hidden staircases.

By the time we returned to the lower level, we had seen all there was to see, or so I thought. Entering the kitchen via a servant's hallway and scullery, we discovered another door. Assuming it was a pantry, I gave a tug, but it was locked.

"Oh. Hang on. I have another key. I was wondering what it was for."

I dug the ring from my pocket but knew at once none of them would work. The fixture on the wooden door was not newly replaced like the one on the main entrance or the gate chain. It was antique, perhaps as old as the house itself.

Regardless, I tried each of them in turn to no avail.

Frowning, I wiggled the knob. "Shit. I'll have to ask my boss if there were other keys. I don't know where this door leads." I opened the folder of paperwork and paged through the floor plan. "Oh. There's a cellar."

I stared at the door, perplexed. "I wonder why it's locked."

"I'm not concerned."

"Well, I apologize. I'll sort it out and get you a key, or if worse comes to worst, I'll send a locksmith to open it for you."

"I'm not bothered, Mr. Elowen. No need to trouble yourself. I can sort it out."

"Okay. Well, I guess that ends our tour." I tapped the folder. "A few signatures and I can get out of your hair. Are you sure you don't want to find somewhere else to stay tonight? I'd be happy to recommend some places in the city."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm a bit of a night owl, so I don't anticipate sleeping."

"Sure. All right. I forgot about the time difference. You must be jet-lagged."

Mordecai didn't respond, but he was back to examining me with the same subtlety as he had multiple times over the course of the evening.

Feeling ten kinds of awkward but unwilling to let an opportunity pass, I took a chance. "Is this your first time in Owen Sound?"

"First time in America. In fact, I've never crossed an ocean before now."

“Wow. Welcome to Canada.” I shifted my weight, considered my approach, and bit the bullet. “If you’re interested in a tour of our small city or want to know where all the cool kids hang out, feel free to drop me a text. Hang on. I have a card somewhere.”

I patted my pockets, then leafed through the folder until I found one. I took a second to scribble on the back and handed it to Mordecai. “That’s my cell.”

He accepted the card and stared at it for a long time. “Thank you… Ensley.” The adorably shy smile that followed showed another glimpse of his pronounced eyetooth.

Mordecai extended a hand to shake, and I accepted, jolted again by the frigid temperature of his skin. He clung for an extra beat. I didn’t pull away and had to resist the temptation to rub warmth into the poor frigid extremity.

“You should get the heat turned on before you freeze to death. Not sure what it’s like where you’re from, but October in this part of Canada can be cold.”

“I’ll look into it.”

“Well, I guess I’ll take off.”

“It’s been a pleasure.”

His odd vocabulary made me smile. “It really has. Good night.”

I departed then, leaving Mordecai alone in a crumbling mansion, deep in the woods at night. It felt wrong, but I’d given him plenty of opportunities to change his mind.

Only as I pulled onto Side Road 15 and aimed for the city did I recall the odd fear that had struck while viewing the bathroom on the upper level. I hadn’t been able to pinpoint the cause at the time, but upon reflection, I had the uneasy feeling that I’d seen something in the mirror.

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4

Mordecai

SEAMUS CLAIMED THAT MY obsession with humanity and the impulsive way I'd studied their customs and behaviors over the past several centuries would be an asset when it came to accomplishing my task. He was wrong. Mimicking what I observed seemed simple in theory. In practice, I floundered.

Of course, who was to know that the first human I was required to converse with would be utterly gorgeous, thus testing my resolve?

My awkwardness showed during the tour, and I feared Ensley suspected my… abnormalities. They hadn't given me enough time to prepare. My mannerisms and speech were radically different than other men my age, and adapting new patterns on the fly left me feeling ridiculously inept.

Although my kind lived among humans, integration was usually inadvisable. I used *usually* in the loosest sense, since I was likely the only one who abided by the old rules.

In the beginning, we existed on the outskirts of society. Segregated by choice. Forgettable by design. We moved among the humans, manipulating their memories and actions, so they didn't remember us. We fed indiscriminately off their mothers and fathers, sisters and cousins. We were never meant to befriend them, for it was dangerous. We were never supposed to invite them into our world.

We were myth and legend. We were a bad dream you didn't remember. A fable passed along through the ages.

At least that had been the case hundreds of years ago. Times had drastically changed. Full of hubris, many of my kind grew careless. Rebellious. As a result, awareness among humans had grown. Our existence was no longer a secret.

When Valerius usurped the throne fourteen months ago and banished the Great Elder Iulian, he raised an army of human hunters to systematically destroy us.

We were no longer a curiosity and wonder to humans. We were an infection to be eradicated.

I'd been led to believe that the threat in the Americas was less profound, but the casual way the handsome agent had spoken of hunting the undead made me leery. He'd called it a game. The notion of wiping out an entire species for sport made my skin crawl.

Was Ensley one of them? He'd implied as much. Yet, his demeanor didn't fit my preconceived notion of a hunter. He was too calm. Too kind and companionable. Too afraid of his own shadow.

His jumpiness in the dark humored me.

But what if I was wrong?

It was why, the instant Ensley's Jeep vanished down the driveway, I slipped through the crack in the mysterious door in the kitchen and descended into the cellar. To hide. To think.

The space reminded me of the catacombs: hard-packed dirt floor, fieldstone walls, the scent of earth and rot in my nose. It settled my jangling nerves.

I needed a plan, but I had no idea where to begin. If Iulian was being held captive somewhere in the area, figuring out where was a priority. I didn't know Owen Sound, Ontario, or Canada for that matter, and I hadn't been given enough time to study a map or a history book.

"Curse you, Seamus."

It was my fault. If I hadn't stubbornly avoided responsibility, I would be better prepared.

Ensley's enticing offer of a city tour played on repeat. I could use the helpful orientation, but was he friend or foe? If he suspected me of being anything more than a foreigner, I didn't get a vibe. The man seemed genuine. Honest. A little awkward and rambling, but I rather enjoyed the way he floundered about the mansion.

And his unexpected attractiveness…

“Not the time, Mordecai. Focus.”

Although I wasn’t opposed to seeing him again. The risk seemed low. I could take the chance. Stay on my guard. If I’d met him back home, on familiar ground, he was exactly the type I would follow and study. The kind of man I would lust after with a bone-deep yearning. When I could no longer resist, I might satiate that yearning, if he was interested. Ensley’s covert glances seemed to suggest he was.

But was he a hunter? Did I care?

Seamus’s warning rang in my ears, reminding me this wasn’t a suicide mission.

The agent was attractive in an unsuspecting sort of way. His looks reminded me of a boy I’d known a lifetime ago. In another time. Another place. He too had worn his hair long, tied in a knot at his nape. Ensley’s slicked-back bun sat higher, revealing a shaved underside. The bold cut was both edgy and dramatic, complementing his quirky character. It had taken plenty of willpower not to stare.

No matter the effort, I’d been caught several times.

Had he noticed the lust in my eyes? Had he sensed what I did not say aloud?

I’d taken many lovers over the past few centuries, but those encounters occurred on a superficial level. One night, rarely two. Every partner was left with a muddled mind and memories too hazy to fully recall. Leaving an imprint in their lives was too dangerous. Falling in love with a mortal would be unfair. Endless broken hearts were not worth the price of temporary happiness, and that was all it could be. Temporary.

Others like me didn’t follow this practice and considered it antiquated. I’d always been different. Stubborn, Cristofer called me.

Say what they might, I would *never* contribute to the growth of my kind. My existence was a curse, not a blessing.

Ensley’s boyish charm and easy smile made it hard to determine his age. I suspected he was older than my human presenting years, but I’d never been good at judging those things. If I was more like Cristofer, I might have asked casual questions and flirted, but my social skills with humans were underdeveloped. Regardless, I’d spent the entire tour admiring Ensley from the corner of my eye.

It couldn’t be more.

I had a mission, and it did not include Ensley Elowen.

Cristofer had secured me a pitiful excuse for a home base, and the mansion's disrepair had left the poor, baffled agent perplexed, particularly when I mentioned I would be staying the night. My basic needs were not the same as a mortal's. The accommodations, although lacking, were adequate. If I was to blend with the humans, however, I would need to make some changes—not that I expected visitors.

Unsure where to begin with regards to my task, and with the night young and promising, I left the mansion to explore Owen Sound and familiarize myself with the streets and districts. If Seamus's information was correct, Valerius had hidden the elder somewhere in the waterfront city.

The Friday night crowd wasn't nearly as robust as I'd seen in larger urban areas. Keeping my head down, merging with the shadows, I wandered through what I assumed was the main part of downtown, mentally recording details. Valerius would have chosen somewhere secluded. Somewhere away from residential areas. A place where the average citizen wouldn't stumble accidentally.

I discovered several museums, a theater, numerous parks, an art gallery, schools, churches, two cemeteries, more than a few inns, restaurants, and various historical sites. Owen Sound was nestled on the southern shore of Georgian Bay. A winding river bisected the city. As I peered along its passage from the 9th Street bridge, my skin itched and my muscles cramped.

Avoiding the discomfort, I took to the sky, but my aerial tour ended quickly since there wasn't much to explore. I returned to the mansion and strolled her vacant halls, deciding how to handle my situation. I needed proper information about the city if I was going to locate Iulian.

Debating how to acquire that information brought me back to thoughts of Ensley. It was an option, but an option I wasn't sure I should exploit… for more reasons than one.

When the sun rose the following morning, I retreated to the underground cellar to ride out the day. I couldn't properly rest until Seamus's promised containers arrived, which meant I couldn't regenerate. I could feed, but I didn't want to. Not yet. My concern over restoration was usually slim, but I'd been warned by both Seamus and Cristofer not to allow myself to become depleted.

Weakness was grounds for failure, and failure was not an option.



Monday, three days after my initial tour with Ensley, the purr of an engine on the winding road leading to the mansion announced the arrival of a visitor. The noise disturbed my slumber, which suggested it was nearing sundown. Otherwise, nothing short of physical harm would wake me. I lay still, listening from the cellar, ears tuned and alert to every sound. The engine cut off. A door slammed. The crunch of rotten leaves under heavy footwear.

A hesitant rap sounded on the mansion's solid front door, soft and unassuming.

A lull.

Another knock.

The visitor persisted several more times before I found my way to the main level and answered.

It was shortly past six, the golden hour before the sun set. Diffuse light filtered through the canopy of branches overhead, speckling the carpet of colorful fall leaves on the ground. Birdsong echoed through the trees.

I inhaled the end of a crisp autumn day, savoring every nuance.

The discomfort of the fading sunlight was minimal, nothing more than a faint murmur under my skin I could ignore. Regardless, with sensitive eyes, I squinted at my company.

Ensley stood on the stoop, hands stuffed in his coat pockets, shoulders near his ears, and with a shy smile.

"Good evening, Mordecai."

"Mr. Elowen. This is a surprise. How may I help you?" Sunlight forgotten, a new sensation assaulted me. A flutter of anticipation behind my ribs, the shadowy remembrance of a heart beating too fast.

"I thought we agreed to call each other by our first names."

"Ah, yes. I remember. Forgive me. How may I help you, *Ensley*?"

"Would you believe me if I told you I was terrible at my job?"

I tipped my head to the side. "Oh?"

"Between house tours and endless paperwork, it took me until today to realize I hadn't fulfilled the promises I made to a certain newcomer to town. Also, I didn't get your phone number, and there wasn't one in your file. I had no way of contacting you about that missing key or the property

cleanup people. Heck, I wanted to be sure you survived the weekend in this supposed haunted house or if an evil spirit condemned you to hell."

Fighting a smile, I spread my arms. "Still in one piece, it seems."

Ensley's gaze toured my body, slowly and purposefully. The upward turn of his lip was more pronounced. "I see that. I'm glad."

We shared a silent moment of expectation, neither of us seeming to know what to say.

"So, did your furniture arrive?"

"My furniture?" The stumble cost me.

Ensley peered over my shoulder into the dark house. "Please tell me you have a bed at least. If I thought for one minute you planned to sleep on the floor all weekend, I would have forced your ass into my Jeep and checked you into the nearest BnB."

I wouldn't have argued if he'd dragged me home, but I wasn't about to say that.

Seamus's shipment had arrived Sunday evening as scheduled, but since it didn't contain typical household adornments, I went with, "It's… been a process. I'm getting there."

"That was appropriately vague. A bed, Mordecai. Tell me you have somewhere to sleep at night?"

My name on his lips was like honey, luxuriously sweet and tantalizing. It had been four centuries since I'd tasted the candy-like nectar, but I had the distinct feeling Ensley's mouth would awaken the memory, and I had the sudden urge to find out.

But four centuries had also taught me restraint, so I stayed my feet and returned his smile.

"Fear not. I have a place to rest."

"'*Fear not,*'" he mimicked and chuckled. "You're funny. I'm glad you have a bed. What about heat?" His shoulders climbed to his ears as though punctuating the statement. "Tell me you got the heat turned on."

"The fireplace works wonders." I hadn't lit the fireplace, nor did I require heat. "I'll sort everything in good time. You needn't worry."

"'*In good time.*'" Another chuckle.

"Are you mocking me?"

"No. I love the way you talk. It's… different."

"I see." But I wasn't sure if he meant my accent or speech patterns.

Another silence ensued. Ensley took me in with less reservations than the first few times. He shifted his weight, and for a heartbeat, he seemed as awkward as I felt.

“Oh.” He jolted to attention. “I almost forgot. The key to the basement. Bad news. I didn’t find one. But…” Ensley withdrew two business cards from a pocket. “Here are the numbers for a locksmith and that cleanup company I mentioned.”

“Thank you.” His fingers were red from cold when he handed them over.

I studied the cards for a moment before tucking them away.

More silence.

More lingering stares.

I got the sense he was trying to read me as much as I was trying to read him. No matter how plausible, I couldn’t picture him as a hunter.

“Well, only one thing remains on my agenda.”

When he didn’t elaborate, I raised a quizzical brow. “And what would that be?”

“Your phone number.” He smirked, coy and flirtatious. “I was wondering if I could get your phone number.”

“I see. Haven’t you accomplished your task?” I patted my pocket where I’d placed the business cards.

“Yes, but if I had your number, I would be able to call you sometime. Maybe we could… do something.”

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been on the receiving end of a romantic advance. As a mortal in the 1500s, it was unheard of. Not so today. I’d spent the better part of the last century watching the escalating fight for human rights, for the freedom to love openly. The advancements astounded me.

“I’m afraid I have yet to acquire a device, though it’s on my agenda.”

My answer must have sounded strange. Ensley’s quizzical expression was not one I could interpret.

Technology was not something I’d adapted to. The younger generation, or newly turned, tended to cross those barriers with ease. Those of us who had been around for eons struggled to trust the digital age.

Cristofer thought it crucial that I have a means of communicating and had hence instructed me to familiarize myself with cell phones or at least the internet. Seamus deemed it necessary to facilitate communication, but it relied on me doing my part on this end of the world.

With that thought in mind, and a growing desire to connect with the handsome agent who had come calling, I added, “Could I request your assistance in the matter?”

“You could.” Humor danced in Ensley’s eyes. “Are you busy now? I think the phone place is open until eight. We could grab a bite to eat after if you haven’t had dinner.”

I ran my tongue along my upper teeth, salivating at the prospect. I hadn’t fed since leaving home, and although I often deprived myself for weeks at a time, the urgency was a constant buzz under my skin. Ensley’s invitation reminded me that our requirements were vastly different. We were not compatible in that regard.

“I’ve eaten,” I lied. “But I believe I was promised a tour of your city.”

“I believe you’re right.” Ensley’s grin widened. He stepped back and motioned to the Jeep. “Shall we?”



Acquiring a phone took more time than I anticipated, but with Ensley’s assistance, we landed back in the Jeep by the time the sun had gone down.

Ensley plucked the device from my hand and maneuvered the screens effortlessly before handing it back.

“There. I’m your first contact. Consider me your personal relocation consultant. If you have questions or need help with anything, shoot me a text.”

I stared at the entry. Ensley’s enthusiasm made me smile. “That’s awfully kind of you.”

“Don’t mention it. Now.” He glanced along the street in both directions. “Where to? I’m at your service.”

“You’re the tour guide. It’s me who is at your mercy.”

He dashed a coy look in my direction.

If I had the capacity to blush, I feared I might have.

“Do you mind walking?”

“Not at all.”

Ensley took me along the same streets I’d wandered the previous Friday, pointing out key restaurants and locations, indicating where I could find the best burgers, pizza, and Chinese food.

“You do not want to go to Juicy Stacks. It’s a trick. Their burgers are dry as shit and tasteless.”

“Noted.” I’d never had a burger in my life but had admired them plenty over the years.

The wind blew, and Ensley huddled inside his jacket, commenting on the chilly weather and encroaching winter. “Is it cold where you’re from?”

“Often.”

“Do you get snow?”

“Depends where I’m living.”

Around the next bend, Ensley pointed at a short building with tinted windows. “If you play pool, there’s the billiard hall, but if you like to dance, I suggest Heartwood. Bands and booze, if that’s your thing. A little country-leaning, but we forgive it. We don’t have a nightclub. Closest one is Toronto.”

The entire city felt country-leaning, but I wasn’t complaining. In fact, Owen Sound felt more like a town than a city. Besides, I didn’t need nightclubs and dance bars. I needed to find Iulian and go home, where I could return to my life on the periphery of the world.

We weaved along countless roads, Ensley marking important sites and landmarks, until he veered onto 9th Street and aimed for the bridge. He stopped midway across and peered over the railing.

Ignoring the discomfort in my bones, I moved in beside him, observing the flowing water and noting the concrete barrier shoreline encasing the channel where it ran through the city.

“Owen Sound was established in 1841 and was originally called Sydenham.”

“I didn’t know that.”

Ensley turned to face me, leaning an elbow on the rail. His attention was a physical caress, his smile open and free. It was almost enough to distract me from the uncomfortable location and flowing water.

“This is the Sydenham River,” he explained. “It empties into Georgian Bay. Our little settlement wasn’t officially named Owen Sound until the 1850s. I did some research after showing you the house. Apparently, it was built in 1856 by some rich guy named Sebastian Branson, an entrepreneur who relocated to the area because of its growing industry. The harbor became a prominent hub for shipping. Timber, limestone, agriculture. I don’t know. This guy had his fingers in the pot and earned a pretty penny.”

“Branson. It’s called the Branvilla Estate, correct?”

“It is. I love history, and after we found all those paintings upstairs, I was curious. I had some time on my hands today, so I checked the chain of title, which is a house genealogy, if you will. From there, I researched some key players in the Branson family tree, hoping to identify some of the portraits. Want to know what I found?”

“Sure. Can we keep walking? It’s rather cold by the water,” I lied.

Standing over a river, secure bridge notwithstanding, made it hard to concentrate, and I enjoyed listening to Ensley talk. I didn’t want to miss a word.

“This way. We’ll find the Jeep, and I’ll show you where I live.”

We strolled back the way we’d come, and Ensley regaled me with the mansion’s history.

“Sebastian Branson had nine children and died in 1881 at the ripe age of sixty. Since his wife passed on earlier the same year, the house went to his oldest son, Robert. He’s the guy in the portrait holding the hat. The one with the wild mustache. Robert moved in with his wife and five children. I believe the picture of the woman was her. Isabelle. Robert and his family lived there until 1897 when he died of tuberculosis. He was fifty-one.

“The house then passed to his oldest son, Caspian. Caspian was apparently an odd fellow. I strongly suspect that was a euphemism for gay. He lived in the mansion alone until he died in 1955. He never married or had children. From what I read, he had regular male visitors who stayed for long periods several times a year. I suspect, although I couldn’t confirm, that the portrait of the boyish, younger man was his lover.”

When Ensley paused for effect, I smirked. “How… riveting.”

“Right?” He laughed. “Anyhow, none of Caspian’s siblings wanted to take over the mansion, so it sat empty. The deed passed to his sister, Fiona, who was ten years his junior. She had two sons. One died in the First World War, and the other, Peter, fought and came back injured. He took over the estate, living like a recluse until his death in 1984.”

“Another recluse. Did he take after his uncle, perhaps?”

“Possibly.” Ensley hit me with a wide grin. We’d made it to the Jeep and got in. He continued his story as he drove.

“Peter didn’t marry or have children, but I couldn’t find mention of secret visitors, either. The Branson family estate was never reclaimed by relatives after that and ended up in the hands of the bank.”

“Unfortunate.” I thought of my family and the abrupt uprooting of our family tree.

“It was. Uncared for, the house fell apart and was condemned in 1991. Foundation issues or something to that effect. A failing development company bought it in 2001, hoping to turn a profit. They managed to finish the structural repairs before filing for bankruptcy eight months after purchasing it. It ended up in the hands of the bank again. It’s sat empty for over twenty years, and now, my new friend, Branvilla Estate and all her ghosts belong to you.”

“Fascinating.”

I thought of the quiet village where I’d once lived. Chasing my siblings through the boggy swamp. The smell of juniper in my nose. The stone house my grandfather built with his bare hands, and the ramshackle barn where I worked alongside Father.

Nothing remained except memories, and even those were time-faded and full of holes. Deteriorated, like the mansion.

Ensley parked on the side of the road and killed the engine, jarring me from my musing. While listening to him recount the mansion’s history, I hadn’t taken note of our surroundings. He was a natural storyteller with a warm tone and engaging cadence. It was rare for me to be directly involved in conversations and not eavesdropping in the background. The pleasure was so enjoyable, I never wanted it to end, even when my contribution was minimal.

“We’re here,” he announced, jumping down from the Jeep and slamming the door.

I followed, scanning and trying to orient myself. It was a part of the city I didn’t recognize.

The storefronts along the street in this part of Owen Sound sported richly ornamented, two-story Victorian facades with large display windows and intricate gingerbread trim—an elegant hat-tip to the city’s history. We faced one store in particular with an overhead sign that was no longer illuminated.

KC’s Comics, it read.

Brow furrowed, I turned to Ensley. “Where is *here*? I thought you were going to show me where you lived?”

“I am.” He gestured to the tall, double-hung windows that lined the second level above the shop. “I live upstairs. Loft apartment. I rent from

KC himself. His name's Kansas, actually. Kansas Corrington. Quirky fella. You'd like him. He could give you all the spooky details about your house."

"For your information, I have yet to see a ghost."

"Don't say that too loud to the locals. They will fight you tooth and nail." Ensley laughed. "To be honest, I don't believe the ghost stories, either. Maybe if I grew up here. Everyone I know swears they exist."

"I'll keep that in mind."

We shared a chuckle, and Ensley bumped my shoulder. "I like you, Mordecai."

I wasn't sure how to respond, so I stayed silent, absorbing the companionship and savoring the lightheartedness.

"Anyhow," Ensley continued, "KC's cool. I met him at a Comic Con in London nine years ago. Not your London. We have a London too. We got to chatting, and he told me he had a place to rent. I wanted to escape my small town—I grew up in a place called Strathroy, about three hours south of here—so I took him up on the offer.

"It's a good deal. Cheap rent. I run a DnD night every Wednesday. He advertises it to his customers, but mostly it's a core group of four. Do you play?"

Ensley winced. "And yes, I realize how incredibly nerdy that sounds, but it's fun. Trust me. My buddies and I are pretty hardcore. We're always looking for new people."

I glanced from Ensley to the dark storefront window where countless strange figurines were on display. Miniature warriors and creatures battling with blades and axes no bigger than a toothpick. Board games with names like HeroQuest and Dungeon Mayhem were stacked in the corner.

A familiar weight of longing sat heavy on my chest. Nerdy or not, Ensley had a life, an existence, far better than the one I'd been cursed to live for an eternity, and I envied him.

"I don't know what DnD is, I'm afraid."

"Dungeons and Dragons? Really? They don't have that in your neck of the woods? Come on. Yes they do. You're pulling my leg."

When I continued to look baffled, he explained. "It's what's considered a tabletop role-playing game. Dark fantasy storytelling and questing combined. You run campaigns and strategize to defeat all sorts of creatures. We play in the Forgotten Realm, run by ancient deities and a thousand-year-long history with dragons, elves, and magic."

It sounded like nonsense, and I couldn’t wrap my head around it.

Ensley stuffed his hands into his pockets and cut his gaze to the store. His cheeks took on a hint of color.

“Never mind. It’s ridiculous.”

“Are you embarrassed or cold, Mr. Elowen? Your cheeks are scarlet.”

He chuckled, his eyes crinkling. “A little of both, *Mr. Ashenvale*.”

“I think your game sounds fascinating.”

“You aren’t just saying that? My mother thinks I need to give up on the fantasy and supernatural and live in the real world.” He shrugged. “I like the escape. The real world is too… real.”

Something sad flashed in his eyes, and his mind seemed suddenly far away. “Some people read books or watch TV. I escape into games. Is that so wrong?”

“No. I think that’s sound reasoning.”

I didn’t understand it, but I didn’t have to. I got the sense our tour was over, but neither of us were quite sure how to end the night. Ensley hadn’t shown me any more than I’d seen on my solo trip around the city, so I was no further ahead in figuring out plausible locations for where I might find Iulian. It would require more questions on my part, but I was unprepared.

Whatever nostalgia had taken Ensley broke, and he blinked back to the present. “I can’t believe I’ve talked your ear off for hours.”

“It’s been a most pleasurable evening.”

“A ‘*most pleasurable evening*.’” He chuckled.

“You’re mocking me again.”

“No. You’re cute.”

It was my turn to look away. It was effortless. A little banter. Casual conversation. Smiles aplenty. Was it this easy for men today? I envied them.

“Can I offer you a drink, Mordecai?” Ensley motioned to a side door that I assumed led to his flat. “I’ll shut up for a change, and you can tell me about yourself.”

“There’s not much to tell.”

“I don’t believe that. Unless…” He shifted his weight. “Unless you’d rather I took you home.”

I glanced at the door, then along the street, pondering my choices. Solitude in the dreary mansion held no appeal, but the more time I spent with Ensley, the higher the risk of him sensing our differences. At the

moment, he seemed focused on our similarities. Although flattered at the attention, I wasn't sure how to proceed.

"There's a coffee shop down the road, if you'd prefer," he said. "Open twenty-four hours. We could warm up with hot cocoa or tea. I don't drink coffee, but I'm told they make a mean latte."

Despite all the reasons why I shouldn't, I met Ensley's hopeful gaze and couldn't find the words to say no. "Lead the way."

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5

Ensley

MORDECAI WAS UTTERLY ADORABLE. Perhaps a strange way to describe a grown man, but it was true. He was prim and proper in both speech and dress, like he'd fallen from another century. And he seemed constantly wrong-footed, as though struggling to keep up.

Wearing black from head to toe, with an elegant wool coat, a cut above anything I owned, I had barely been able to take my eyes off him. When the streetlights caught in his blond hair or kissed his pale cheeks, he radiated. His lips were the same deep burgundy color as his eyes. But it was the sharp eyetooth that peeked out on occasion when he smiled that undid me.

At the café, I insisted on getting our drinks. Mordecai didn't protest, but I caught a wary edge to his gaze as he scanned the menu board above the counter. While I collected two hot cocoas, he chose a seat in a darker corner near a bay window and away from other patrons. The private table seemed intentional, and I dared to hope that Mordecai had read the intention behind my drink offer.

I slid the ceramic mug across the table, and he eyed it with a creased brow.

"It's good. I swear." I sat across from him, engaging his attention and earning a soft smile.

Mordecai wrapped his hands around the mug and pulled it closer, thanking me.

"So," I said, giving him an opening, not wanting to monopolize the conversation like I'd done all night.

“I appreciate your taking the time to show me around.”

“My pleasure.”

He didn’t speak and continued to frown at the beverage.

“Are you going to tell me about yourself, or do I have to pry it out of you?”

Mordecai managed to look both poised and shy at the same time. He twisted the mug between his palms and wet his lips. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything. Why the big move to Canada? Why Branvilla Estate of all places?” I chuckled. “No offense intended. There’s nothing wrong with the place.”

“There’s nothing right about it, either.”

“You said it, I didn’t.”

Mordecai scanned the café before his gaze settled on me. “I’m here due to… a family obligation. The estate was arranged without my knowledge. It’s… temporary.”

My hope dwindled. “Temporary? That’s vague.”

“It’s complicated to explain.”

“Family issues are usually messy. I get it.” I didn’t, but I could respect his unwillingness to elaborate. I had my own family problems, and none of my closest friends had a clue how deep those troubled waters ran.

“Do you have parents or siblings back home?”

Mordecai stared into his cocoa, a forlorn look in his eyes. He had yet to take a sip. My question earned a slight shake of the head, so I dismissed that line of inquiry too.

“How about this? What do you do for fun?”

“I…”

When he floundered again, I laughed. “You’re one tough cookie, Mordecai. You don’t have any interests or hobbies?”

“I enjoy history.”

“There we go. We have something in common. What part of history?”

“All parts?” He raked his teeth over his bottom lip, and my attention slipped to his mouth, to that sneaky tooth before it vanished. “European history, to be more precise. The Renaissance era up until modern day? No. Maybe as far back as the medieval period. The French Civil War, the Spanish Armada, the Thirty Years’ War, the English Civil War, the Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution. I don’t know.”

He chuckled and continued. “Influential people too. Alexander the Great, Leonardo da Vinci, King James, Frederick the Great, Oscar Wilde, Alan Turing—”

“Aren’t they all gay?”

Mordecai glanced out the window, a faraway look in his eyes. “I believe so. The evolution of our world is fascinating. I regret that I’m less educated about the new world. Rather, America. My studies are specific to where I’ve lived.”

“Makes sense. Did you study history in school?”

“No. Self-taught, mostly.”

Instead of elaborating on what he *had* taken in school, he rolled the mug of cocoa between his palms. My drink was nearly gone, and Mordecai had yet to take a sip.

“You’re not drinking.”

“It’s keeping my hands warm. I’m… not a fan of chocolate.” His gaze flicked to mine, then away as though ashamed.

“Well, why didn’t you speak up? They have other things on the menu.”

He brushed my concern aside and diverted the conversation away from himself. “You’re a gamer.” He said the word like it was new or radical. “What does that entail?”

“Mostly I play massive multiplayer online role-playing games. Better known as MMORPGs, but I also play DnD, as you now know. Console games too. I have Xbox and PlayStation, but they mostly gather dust nowadays. Sold my Nintendo 64. Tried the Wii but hated it. I’ve always gamed, but the true addiction started when I was in high school with World of Warcraft. You’ve heard of that, right?”

Mordecai shook his head.

“Really? What have you been doing with your life?”

“Not gaming.”

“Apparently.” I chuckled, then sobered as I elaborated. “I… lost my father in an accident when I was eighteen. Gaming became my escape from the real world. It was how I coped.”

I drained my cocoa and shoved those tainted memories and the mug aside. “I’ve played all kinds of games since then. Followed the online crowd. After moving here, I met a few local guys who played, and we clicked. Our recent addiction, outside of DnD, is Immortal Rising.”

Mordecai's gaze alighted on me. "You spoke of it the other night. Of hunting creatures. Of castles. It's a video game?"

"Of course it is. Why do you sound so shocked?" I grinned, caught up in the Bordeaux color of his eyes. "What did you think I was talking about?"

He shook his head, his shoulders loosened as he sat back. "I didn't know for sure."

Under the bright café lights, I couldn't help drinking in all the details of Mordecai. I'd assumed the reddish tone in his eyes was a trick of moonlight or shadows, that they were a shade of brown, but I was wrong. I'd never met anyone with eyes so compelling and unique.

With his alabaster skin and blond hair, I wondered if Mordecai had slight albinism. I didn't know how genes and DNA worked. Could a person have partial albinism, or was it an all-or-nothing condition? I had to assume it was possible. Although Mordecai seemed to lack melanin in his skin and hair, the shock of color to his lips was so vibrant that the contrast was eye-catching.

"You should join us Wednesday. I could introduce you to my friends. Teach you to play."

"For DnD?"

"Yes. If you're not busy. Do you have work lined up? I don't even know what you do for a living."

Somehow, the conversation kept getting diverted back to me. I'd learned little about the gorgeous man across from me.

Again, Mordecai seemed instantly awkward, his gaze cutting to his untouched drink, lips drawing into a tight line. I doubted there was much heat left in his cocoa, but he clung to the mug like it was a lifeline.

"I… don't presently work. My family is… quite wealthy. Work usually surrounds personal business. I suppose my current agenda would be considered… work."

My brows crept up, and not at the vague descriptor of his *current agenda*. What did *quite wealthy* mean? Who was this guy? Why a crumbling mansion in Owen Sound if money wasn't a factor? I had more questions but had the distinct feeling that answers wouldn't be forthcoming.

"Does that mean you're free Wednesday evening?"

"I suppose I am."

"Excellent."

We shared a smile that warmed my insides. Mordecai's rigidity and uncertainty remained, but I chalked it up to the typical adjustment period anyone experienced when moving to a new city or country where they didn't know anyone.

Mordecai never drank his cocoa. We left the café, and I drove him home, maneuvering the winding gravel drive with caution. He'd left no lights on in the mansion, and the approach through the dense trees recalled the previous Friday evening and my initial encounter with Mordecai.

The daunting mansion in such severe disrepair, coupled with a decade's worth of rumors, had left me uneasy and jumpy on that first night. Mordecai had caught me off-guard, appearing out of nowhere. No car. No luggage. Like he'd emerged out of thin air.

I never figured out how he got to the mansion. Perhaps a taxi had dropped him off by the road?

"Do you own a car?"

"No. I don't drive."

"You're awfully far in the country for that."

"There are plenty of delivery services. I'll make it work."

I didn't push.

I stopped at the end of the driveway, near the crumbling fountain. The Jeep's headlights caught on the disfigured cherubic angel with its missing arm. The mansion was no less eerie than the first time, with its yawning dark windows and deteriorating stone. The creeper vines squeezed out what little life remained.

"What time is your DnD?" Mordecai asked.

"We usually meet about six. We order food and drinks and wrap things up by about ten. Sometimes it runs later. Everyone works in the morning, so we try not to go too late. You'll come?"

"Perhaps."

"Say yes. I'd love to introduce you to my friends." I turned to face him, but the shadowy interior of the Jeep stole his features and left him as nothing more than a silhouette. Regardless, I felt the intensity of his stare.

"Yes," he whispered.

Neither one of us moved, and the eerie house and surrounding woods no longer mattered. Was I projecting interest, or did Mordecai feel the connection too? I opened my mouth to say… something, but he beat me to it.

“Good night, Ensley.”

“Oh. Good night.” I tried not to feel disappointed.

He got out, and I waited until he let himself into the mansion before putting the Jeep in gear. Instead of turning around and heading back to the main road, I stared at the windows on the lower level for a while, waiting for a light to come on.

Five minutes passed.

Ten.

The mansion remained dark as a tomb.



Hey Mom,

I don’t have long. DnD night, and my day is getting away from me. Had a last-minute showing this afternoon and a mountain of closing papers to complete. I’m sorry we missed our phone date last night. That really sucks about the food poisoning, and from your favorite restaurant too! I hope you and Grace are on the mend. Drink plenty of fluids.

Remember the handsome haunted mansion guy with the sexy accent I was telling you about? His eyes are actually red! I mean, not cherry red, but burgundy red. Rusty red? Like a Bordeaux you want to sip… or drown in. They’re so fascinating. Yes, I hear myself. Yes, I’m smitten. I can’t help it. If you saw him, you would understand. It’s like he dropped out of the pages of one of your historical romances. I can’t describe him. Lol. Go ahead. Make fun of me. I know you want to.

We had a semi-date on Monday night. I’m not sure if I’m allowed to call it that since I lured him out under the pretense of showing him around the city. Then, I proceeded to talk his ear off. He’s kind of shy, and I didn’t learn much about him, but he’s coming over tonight to meet the guys and get a crash course in DnD. I’m 80% sure there’s returned interest, but I won’t get my hopes up.

Anyhow, I’ve got to run. Feel better. Let’s plan to talk tomorrow night.

Love, Ensley



Opening my front door, I was greeted by a stack of pizza boxes, piled high with a case of beer and three bags of chips, behind which came the voice of my good friend Marsden. “Delivery.” The tower shifted, and Marsden scrambled. “No. Shit. Help! It’s going over.”

“Whoa.” I saved the beer but lost the chips, unveiling Marsden, or Mars as he preferred to be called, who saved the pizzas from catastrophe.

He grinned sheepishly. “Delivery?”

“I’m not tipping your ass. That nearly ended up on the floor, and PS, I thought we were having Chinese tonight.”

Mars shuffled past me and aimed for the kitchen. “Nope. Zig told me pizza. He said you forfeited your turn to choose dinner after ditching us Friday night. Too bad and so sad.”

“Come on. I had to work.”

“Don’t shoot the messenger. I do as I’m told.”

My loft apartment was open-concept, with an exposed-beam ceiling and windows that ran the length of one wall. They looked out on the street below and poured sunlight into the room during the day.

The main living area was divided into sections by furniture placement. The kitchen took up one wall, with a bar-top-style table nearby and stools instead of chairs. It also functioned as a counter since space was limited. The wall opposite held a massive TV. A thick rectangular rug in front was home to a couch, several cushioned chairs, and a large square coffee table I’d found at a secondhand store. We used the table for our Wednesday evening game night. It was cozier than the high-top and hard stools.

The back of the apartment was split into two levels: a walled-off lower section for a full bathroom, and a literal loft, accessed by a ladder that housed a moderate bedroom. I’d only fallen down the ladder twice in all the years I’d lived there, bruising my ego more than my body. Both times, I’d had a bit too much to drink. I’d since learned my lesson and slept on the couch on those evenings of overindulgence.

“I hear you invited a new guy.” Mars wiggled his brows as he unpacked the beer into the fridge. “Does he play, or will this turn into tutorial night?”

“He’s never played, but I thought he could sit with me and ride along the first time. I can explain the rules as we go and if he enjoys it, he can join in properly next week.”

“Who is this guy anyway?”

“Name’s Mordecai. He moved here from the UK. Bought the old Branson place.”

“No shit. The haunted house?”

“It’s in a serious state of disrepair, but it’s not haunted.”

“Oh yes it is.”

I decided that whatever happened in the bathroom five days ago was a figment of my imagination. Nerves. Nothing more.

A knock sounded, and Poet and Ziggy came in, the former dressed like he’d come straight from the office job—he likely had—and the latter wearing fitted trousers and a Henley under an open jacket, suggesting he’d not changed after work either.

Ziggy taught seventh grade at the local elementary school, and his love for gaming and anything superhero-related made him an automatic favorite teacher with the boys. His good looks and dimpled smile earned him far too much unwanted attention from his female students.

Poet carried a hefty tote stuffed with gaming supplies and dungeon manuals. Without preamble, he aimed for the coffee table to set up. Poet was the official Dungeon Master and the serious one in our group. A classic nerd through and through. Meticulously organized and rigid about rules and order, he ran DnD night like a military operation.

During the day, Poet worked as a statistician of some kind or other. I had no idea what it entailed outside of collecting and analyzing data. Poet was brilliantly smart, if not socially awkward. The only time he came out of his shell was when he gamed. He embraced the fantasy world so passionately, he became someone else. Vibrant and dramatic, he acted his role without shame or embarrassment.

Ziggy aimed for the kitchen, calling over his shoulder, “Poet, you want a beer?”

“Water’s fine.”

Poet rarely drank alcohol, claiming he didn’t like losing control of his faculties. His brain was his greatest asset, and booze hindered the thinking machine. His words, not mine.

Mars handed Ziggy a beer while I collected plates for pizza.

“The one with lactose-free cheese is marked,” Mars called to Poet.

“Thank you.”

“Is your friend coming?” Ziggy asked as he poured filtered water from the fridge into a glass.

“Supposed to be.” I checked the time. It was ten after six.

We hadn’t texted or communicated since parting ways Monday night, so I assumed he was still coming. I aimed for the window and peered along the street in both directions, looking for an approaching taxi since I knew Mordecai didn’t own a vehicle.

Not seeing one, I was about to retreat when movement across the street caught my eye. A figure stood at the mouth of an alley. Not any figure, but Mordecai. The setting sun cast long shadows and left deep pools of shade along the pavement. Coupled with the gunmetal grey clouds and the dreary autumn weather, the man, dressed in black from head to toe, blended with the coming night.

What was he doing?

I motioned for him to come up, but he must not have seen me.

The guys had gathered around the coffee table with heaping plates of pizza. Poet was still organizing the game.

“I’ll be back. I’m going to wait downstairs, so he knows where to go.”

“Ten minutes, and we’re starting without you,” Mars said with his mouth full.

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6

Mordecai

I LEFT THE MANSION at dusk as my powers slowly awoke. Protected somewhat by the heavy, low-hanging clouds, I managed to raise a dense fog, blanketing the landscape outside the city so I could move with ease to my destination. I melted into shadows along the street and swept unseen beyond the prying eyes of pedestrians. I eavesdropped on their conversations, attuned to key words and suspicious context, in case I overheard anything about hunters or Iulian.

At Ensley's building, I found a quiet place out of sight to observe and determine my approach. To analyze my predicament. One of his friends arrived, a handsome man with red hair, carrying a load of pizza boxes, drinks, and chips so high it was a wonder he managed to open the door without spilling anything.

I caught flashes of them interacting in an upstairs window, taxed my ears to listen to their banter, and suffered an unexpected twinge of envy at their obvious camaraderie.

I had a purpose in Owen Sound, and it wasn't meant to involve the charismatic Ensley Elowen. Yet, I'd been unable to turn down his offer. Something about the mortal called to me. He awoke a long-repressed yearning for connection and companionship. One that was never satisfied by fleeting and forgettable encounters. I knew better than to tease myself with impossible things, but Ensley's vibrancy and spark of life were hard to ignore.

Being around him was dangerous on many levels. I had gone weeks without feeding in the past. The impulse, the unsatiated hunger that screamed under my skin, usually rose within forty-eight hours after a feed, but I'd learned to ignore it. Over four centuries, I had challenged myself to abstain for great stretches of time. Cristofer didn't understand my petulance or my bone-deep revulsion over who I'd been forced to become.

Among my species, I was quite possibly the only one not horrified by Iulian's captivity. Iulian, a man I had once called uncle. I hated him with every fiber of my being. It was *he* who had changed me against my will. It was *he* who had left my family to die.

For four centuries, I'd rebelled and fought against my ingrained urges, hating who I'd been forced to become. For four centuries, I'd longed for the final death. For an end to this misery.

The only reason I had traveled this far and intended to rescue him was that the alternative was worse. His death, should Valerius allow it to come to that, would bring unimaginable horrors.

I had fully intended to do my job and return to my reclusive life.

Meeting Ensley had destabilized everything. The warm blood running through his veins thrummed at a decibel my astute hearing couldn't ignore. It made my teeth ache, and my skin burn. It weakened my resolve, and I was hungry to the point of madness. The cravings were always worse when attraction was involved.

I was so out of control Monday night after he'd dropped me off that I almost caved to temptation. My base urges begged to be satisfied, but I fought against the pull, refusing to feed, no matter how desperate the itch. The craving hadn't passed, but I managed it better. Seeing him again would do me no favors.

Two more of Ensley's friends arrived.

After our encounter on Monday evening, I'd contemplated various ways I might get information from Ensley without him learning of my family's affairs. I hadn't come up with a plan but felt compelled to be in his company. He was a connection to the city and her secrets, and both Seamus and Cristofer were convinced that integration with humans was the key to learning where Iulian was being held.

Except, I couldn't go inside the building.

The phone Ensley had helped me acquire the other day sat heavy in my pocket. I reached for it every so often but abandoned the idea when I

couldn’t figure out what to say. Apart from contacting Seamus and Cristofer and giving them an update, I hadn’t used the device.

Ensley appeared at the window. He glanced along the street, and I didn’t have to be a mind reader to know he was wondering if I’d decided not to come. Aware I was partly exposed, I stepped into a darker shadow in the alley, but his gaze snapped in my direction the instant I moved.

I froze, but it was too late. Our gazes caught and locked.

He waved for me to come up, but I couldn’t. The gesture wasn’t enough, and desire would not get me through the door.

Ensley retreated. A moment later, he appeared from the stairwell that led to his flat.

We stared at one another for a heartbeat. He didn’t call out or wave me over. Instead, he let the heavy door fall closed as he checked for traffic and crossed the street.

Ensley was without a jacket, and with the vanishing sun came a night chill. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans and rolled his shoulders to his ears. Goose bumps danced along his bare arms.

He stopped at the mouth of the alley. A few wispy strands of hair had tumbled from his bun and blew around his face. A day’s worth of stubble dotted his jaw. The delicious vein in his neck pulsed. I couldn’t look away. Saliva pooled in my mouth.

This was a terrible idea.

“What are you doing?”

I didn’t have an answer that made sense, so I shrugged, eyeing the window above the comic book store, where one of his friends appeared, spying on us.

Ensley followed my gaze and huffed. “Ignore him. Zig’s a nosy bastard. He’s curious who I invited. Did you change your mind?”

“No.”

But when I didn’t advance, Ensley cocked his head to the side, a pinch between his brows. “Is something the matter?”

Everything, I wanted to say. My curse prevented me from prompting him. I glanced at the window again. His friend Zig was gone.

“There’s no pressure. I told them you could shadow me tonight. Watch me play and learn the rules as we go. If you have fun, you can come back next week and create your own character.”

“I hate to be a bother.”

“You’re not. I want you here.” Ensley held out a hand, silently beckoning me with hope and uncertainty in his eyes. Then, he spoke the words I needed to hear. “Come inside. Let me introduce you to my friends.”

The invisible barrier disintegrated. The physical release was indescribable but visceral.

I reached for Ensley’s hand, knowing in my unbeating heart that developing a connection with this human was a risk. A new power took hold of me. One I didn’t have the urge to fight.

Ensley clung and offered a light squeeze as a smile touched his lips. “You’re freezing. How long have you been standing out here?”

“Long enough.”

The flat was warm, a kiss of fire against my perpetually cold skin. The instant Ensley shut the door, three heads turned in our direction.

“Hey, everyone. This is Mordecai.” I was all too aware of Ensley’s fingers still wrapped around mine and the implication it projected. None of his friends seemed to notice or care. It was easy. Simple.

Baffling.

Ensley gestured to the redhead. “This is Marsden, aka Mars.”

Mars jumped up and shook my hand. Only then did Ensley let go of my fingers.

“Nice to meet you. I hear you’re camped out at the old Branson house.”

“I am.”

“We have got to talk about it. I need to know if Caspian is still walking those halls.”

“Later.” Ensley shoved Mars aside with a laugh. “Let me finish introductions so we can play. The guy with the glasses who isn’t paying attention is Poet.”

The man in question offered a wave but didn’t lift his gaze, too engrossed in the stack of books spread out before him. “Nice to meet you, Mordecai.”

“And that’s Zig or Ziggy. Siegmund, if you really want to piss him off.”

“Don’t ever call me Siegmund, and we’ll get along fine.”

“How about Freud?” Mars asked.

Ziggy gave him the finger before addressing me. “Nice to meet you, Mordecai.”

We shook hands.

Ziggy motioned to a high table across the room. “There’s pizza, and the beer is in the fridge. Help yourself. We usually kick in for food and drinks,

but since it’s your first night, we’ll give you a free pass.” He winked.

“Thank you. I’ve already eaten.”

“How about a beer?” Ensley asked.

“I’m not one for alcohol.”

“Water? Pop?”

“Um… water, if it isn’t too much trouble, I guess.” It was easier to dispose of or leave behind without drawing unnecessary attention. No one typically monitored water intake, and frequent trips to the sink to fill an already full glass left the impression of consumption.

Ensley headed to the kitchen area while I stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, taking in the flat and his friends. I’d spent hundreds of years observing humans from a distance, watching them interact, listening to them banter or argue or fall in love. Being in the middle of it, part of it, left me feeling like I had two left feet. I knew all the dance moves but not how to execute them.

Ensley returned with a full glass of water and a plate of pizza. He handed me the former and waved me over to the gaming area. I joined him and his friends around the coffee table, admiring the setup. A three-dimensional map took up the entire surface with castle walls denoting rooms, figurines of various creatures, cannons, iron gates, and wooden bridges. Various textiles represented sand and stone, grass and mud. The intricacy was fascinating.

Poet took up most of the couch with his thick books and countless notepads. Mars sat on the far end, eating and scanning a chart of some kind. Ziggy occupied a cushioned chair. Ensley offered me the remaining chair and asked if I could hold his plate while he fetched an oversized beanbag for himself.

My worries over being singled out and questioned were unfounded. The instant Poet got himself food and a drink and checked to ensure everyone was ready, the game began with a flourish. I didn’t know what to expect but was enraptured by the sheer detail and creativity involved.

Poet began by narrating a storyline, using a craggy voice I assumed was meant to depict a fantastical creature of some kind. A wizard? A mythical elder? In his business attire and with glasses perched on the end of his nose, the image was incongruous with who I expected him to be.

I smothered a smile, but it didn’t go unnoticed. Ensley nudged my leg, grinning back, and an impossible warmth seeped through my veins, pooling

in my belly. He sat close enough that the heat of his body radiated against my thigh. His scent permeated the air without my having to use enhancements. Crisp green apples and clean laundry hung in the midday sun. A summer breeze. Chamomile. A rain-speckled field of grass. He smelled like life and longing and dreams that would never come true.

My smile disintegrated, and I shifted my leg so we no longer touched.

Poet gave a short history—lore, Ensley called it—detailing the perilous quest for the evening, something about acquiring a stolen treasure hidden somewhere in a dangerous fortress.

Once he finished the preliminaries, the gaming began.

It involved odd dice and manuals. Strategies and risks. They battled creatures with strange names and even stranger abilities. They found treasures, cast spells, and grew loud and rambunctious, shouting at one another good-naturedly as they decided on the best course of action.

Ensley's character was a priest. The health and well-being of the group was in his hands, and he seemed to take that responsibility to heart.

After a time, they paused to fill their plates, refresh their drinks, and use the facilities.

"What do you think?" Ensley asked.

I thought it was utterly ridiculous, but didn't say so, figuring too much honesty might hurt his feelings.

"The storyline is engaging. The details… Did Poet create the entire history of these creatures, this *lore*, simply for a game?"

Ensley glanced at Poet, who scribbled on the notepad he'd been referencing all evening. "The lore for the Forgotten Realm, which is where this campaign setting is based, is already established." Ensley motioned to the stack of manuals piled on the couch. "The multiverse mythology and the histories are pre-written. What Poet does is write his own modules into the already existing storyline."

"So, he made this quest up?"

"In essence. There are preexisting locations and quests in each realm, but sometimes we like to create our own."

"*We?*" Poet shifted his attention from the notepad.

Ziggy chuckled.

"Correction," Ensley said. "Poet likes to create his own."

"He's writing his own DnD universe. Someday, we might get to explore it," Ziggy said.

Poet *tsk*ed and sighed. “Zig sorely misunderstands what I’m doing.” But he did not elaborate and resumed jotting notes.

Mars returned from the kitchen with a fresh beer and sat. “I have an idea for your next project. How about a full questline that takes place at Branvilla Estate? Mordecai will let us visit his ghosts, won’t you?”

“There are no ghosts.” My protest got me nowhere.

“Lies,” Mars said. “I’ve seen them.”

“I swear I saw something weird in the bathroom when I was giving you a tour,” Ensley said.

Ziggy sat upright, eyes brightening. “Oh hell. You guys. Halloween is a Saturday this year. We should play DnD at Mordecai’s. I’m thinking Death House from the *Curse of Strahd* campaign.”

“House of Lament,” Mars shouted, slapping his thigh. “Séances and everything. We should do it.”

Ensley met my gaze and shrugged. “How about we give Mordecai tonight to decide if he’s interested in DnD.”

I shyly smiled, not agreeing or disagreeing and certainly not announcing that the only supernatural being in the mansion was me. Besides, I didn’t know if I was the only one. Perhaps I shared my dwelling with Caspian after all. Before my change, I hadn’t believed in the undead or paranormal phenomena either, but if one cursed being could exist, why not others?

The game resumed, and although I followed along, Poet allowed me to browse his game guides. The thick manuals were adventure modules, he explained. Pre-written scenarios with full narrative frameworks any Dungeon Master could use to run his team through quests.

The depth of the game astounded me. As I read and listened to them play, an idea germinated and grew. It was silly, but would it work?

I set the book aside and considered the make-believe worlds and all their intricacies. Ensley’s passion for fantasy. I thought of why I’d been sent across an ocean against my will and what I had to accomplish in order to go home.

I would make it work. I had to. This was my quest:

Find and free Iulian while avoiding Valerius’s hunters. Bring him to Romania so he could restore order before the usurper king destroyed us all.

I needed an Owen Sound local, familiar with the area. Someone willing to dig into the city’s history and provide me with clues about where I might

search for Iulian. I needed a way to ask unusual questions without drawing attention to my task.

Ensley was my Owen Sound local, and I'd discovered a way to get the answers I sought without him being any wiser to my personal quest.

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7

Ensley

I COULDN’T STOP THINKING about Mordecai, so when my phone chimed in the middle of a house showing Friday night and his name appeared on the screen, I wanted desperately to shoo the potential buyers out the door and open the message.

His participation in Wednesday night’s DnD had been minimal, not that I’d expected him to jump in with both feet. The guys could be overwhelming, and Mordecai was reserved, if not shy. He didn’t speak much but politely responded when anyone tried to involve him in conversation.

When Mars brought up the haunted mansion more than once, pushing for a Halloween game night, Mordecai seemed nothing more than amused. He confirmed the existence of mutant spiders and rabid dust bunnies but doubled down on the absence of ghosts.

“If Caspian resides in the mansion,” he’d said. “I have yet to meet him.”

Mordecai spent most of the time observing from the sidelines. He’d refused pizza and spent an exorbitant amount of time studying Poet’s modules with what seemed profound curiosity. I would make a gamer out of him yet, and I’d said as much to Ziggy.

At the end of the night, Mordecai hadn’t stuck around like I hoped. The guys lingered and chatted, but Mordecai bowed out before I had a chance to ask when I’d see him again, and I desperately wanted to see him again—preferably before he met the growing population of Owen Sound and found someone better.

After crawling into bed, I'd sent him a text, asking if he was busy on the weekend. He didn't respond.

Until now.

The young couple meandered through the kitchen and dining area, inquired about the inclusion of appliances, wondered at the septic system maintenance schedule, and asked about the approximate cost of utility bills. I showed them the yard and equipment shed, then talked about the in-ground pool and its recent upgrades. The couple discussed the distance to local schools, the wear of the roof shingles, and what color they might paint the walls.

The entire time, my phone burned a hole in my pocket.

Twenty minutes later, they drove off. I locked the house, tumbled into the Jeep, and opened Mordecai's text.

Why a priest?

I frowned. The non sequitur might not have answered my question about his weekend plans, but at least it was communication. Chewing my bottom lip, I debated how to reply.

Was I imagining the returned interest? No. We'd shared countless secret smiles on Wednesday evening. He'd taken my hand and allowed me to guide him inside. Upstairs, among my friends, he hadn't released it.

No straight man would have done that.

I went for broke and texted back. *Have dinner with me, and I'll tell you.*

My phone remained silent for so long, I put the Jeep in gear and headed home, mildly concerned that my bold invitation didn't land the way I hoped. I'd accumulated a long string of hookups over the past ten years, but I hadn't been on many dates, so I was clumsy when it came to initiating.

The time on the dash read ten to seven. Maybe he already ate. Maybe it was last minute, and he had other plans, or he needed more time to prepare for a date. Maybe he had a boyfriend back home and wasn't on the market.

As I climbed the stairs to my apartment, my phone buzzed. I smiled as I read his text and nearly tripped when I hit the landing unexpectedly and tried to take an extra step that wasn't there.

You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Elowen. I'll dine with you, but I have restrictions. Should I meet you somewhere?

Restrictions? The revelation didn't surprise me. Mordecai had turned down hot cocoa, pizza, and beer in the short time I'd known him. The only thing I'd seen him ingest was water. Thinking back, I wasn't sure he drank

the water. In fact, I distinctly remembered dumping the entire glass when cleaning up Wednesday night.

“Huh.”

Mordecai didn’t elaborate, so I assumed it was a religious thing or he had severe allergies. If he had dietary restrictions, it might explain his paleness. What did I know?

I unlocked the apartment and headed for the bathroom to shower as I responded. *How about I pick you up and save you taxi fare? Is eight too soon? I just got home. I need a shower and clean clothes, and I’m set*.

His text landed as I stood naked, adjusting the water temperature.

Eight it is.

I imagined the words in his sophisticated tone, with his adorable accent, and smiled.



I arrived fifteen minutes early and chalked it up to eagerness. After finding my way along the winding drive and parking next to the crumbling fountain and her suffering angel, I stared at the mansion and the yawning black pits marking the various windows.

Not a single one was illuminated.

Leaning forward and squinting, I caught sight of curtains, but even then, light should have bled around their edges, right?

Was he sitting in the dark, waiting for me?

How odd. I certainly wouldn’t be sitting in that creepy house at night unless every light was on high.

Heavy low clouds hung over the city, making the shadows deeper. The woods were especially dark and gloomy. In the week since I’d been to the mansion, the trees had shed more leaves. The gnarled branches overhead clawed at the sky with only a few stragglers remaining.

When Mordecai didn’t immediately appear, I got out of the Jeep.

My shoes crunched over the thick ground cover, stirring the earthy scent of damp soil and rotting pine needles. Those hints of decomposition tangled with a trace of woodsmoke, and I craned my neck, seeking signs of a chimney above the mansion. I’d seen a fireplace. Maybe Mordecai had it lit. I couldn’t imagine the cost of heating a house of this size.

But the mansion was too high to see the roof, so I abandoned my search and approached the front door, uneasy with its illusion of vacancy. The place felt as abandoned as it had on my first visit, and my skin prickled anew.

The door swung open before I could knock. The creaking whine of hinges and tired wood sounded loud in the quiet forest. I startled, my heart lurching to my throat. A figure stood on the other side of the threshold, the looming outline of a person. Although I knew in my head it was Mordecai, I cried out in surprise.

Then, I immediately laughed at my ridiculousness and clutched my chest.

"You scared the shit out of me. It's so freaking dark out here that it messes with my head. Fucking Mars and his stupid fucking ghost stories. I'm going to kill the bastard. Why don't you have a light on? I almost thought no one was home."

Mordecai stepped from the shadow, his pale skin nearly glowing, even in the depths of the woods. A smile touched the corner of his ruby mouth. "You're not scared of ghosts, are you, Mr. Elowen? You who plays games with devilish creatures and mythical beasts. Astounding."

"Why are you last-naming me? We had a deal, *Mr. Ashenvale*. And no, I'm not afraid of ghosts. I'm… jumpy."

I earned a peek of his sharp eyetooth before he drew his upper lip tight over his teeth, as though doing his best to smooth the smile.

I scoffed. "Whatever. Be a smug bastard. You'd better hope ghosts aren't real because if they're going to live anywhere, it will be out here in the woods in this creepy fucking house."

"I welcome them."

"You would."

The wind blew through the tops of the trees, the branches creaking and clattering together as though in agreement. I shivered and wrapped my arms around my middle. Not intending to spend time outside, I'd left my coat at home.

Mordecai seemed unaffected by the weather. He'd donned a black dress shirt that evening and paired it with black trousers and his long black coat. Shocking. His hair was impeccably styled, not a strand out of place. Always formal. Did he own jeans? Colors of any kind? Was he ever wrinkled?

An enticing image of a bed-rumpled Mordecai sent a shot of warmth through my veins. That I would like to see.

I glanced behind him into the black hole beyond the front door and wondered at the mysteries that lived inside. Although curious what he'd done with the place over the past week, I wasn't about to invite myself in. Maybe after dinner, when I dropped him off.

If things went well.

"I have a few options for restaurants. How about we get in the Jeep where it's warmer, and you can help me decide."

Mordecai chose a steakhouse, which surprised me for some reason. When considering what sort of dietary restrictions he might have, I assumed he might be vegan, gluten-free, or suffer from a severe nut or seafood sensitivity. The latter often made sufferers extremely cautious about eating out due to the risk of cross-contamination.

"Do you have food allergies?" I asked once we were settled at our table. The later hour meant a quieter atmosphere, even on a Friday night.

It also meant the wait staff was efficient, and our server showed up with menus before he could answer, rhyming off a slew of specials and taking our drink orders.

Mordecai agreed to a bottle of wine, but the moment we were alone, instead of answering my question, he opened his menu and asked, "Have you eaten here before?"

The man had a knack for dodging. I let it go. It wasn't that important.

"Not for a while, but they do a mean steak."

"I should hope so, being a steak restaurant."

I laughed at my stupid comment and earned a smile in return.

I ordered a ribeye with mushrooms, a baked potato, and grilled asparagus. "Steak done medium. Only a hint of pink," I told the server. "If it bleeds on my plate, I'm sending it back."

"Of course." The man made a note on his pad and turned to Mordecai, who seemed undecided.

"New York strip, I suppose." He frowned at the menu. "Blue?"

I nearly choked on my first sip of wine.

The waiter's brows rose. "I apologize, sir. We can only do rare. Health regulations don't allow for blue."

"That's fine."

"Sides?"

"Oh." More frowning. More scrutinizing. "Um… Creamed spinach and mashed potatoes will be fine."

When the server left, I leaned across the table and lowered my voice. “Blue? Was that a joke? Isn’t that practically raw?”

“They sear the exterior.” Mordecai rotated his wine glass, the liquid circling precariously close to the lip. He sniffed it and set it down without taking a sip. “Why? Is that a peculiar order?”

“No. I mean. Well, yes. It’s… a choice, I guess.” I was about to revert to my question about his food restrictions when he steered us elsewhere.

“Why a priest?”

Momentarily befuddled, it took a beat to regain my composure. “A priest. Oh, um, I don’t know. I’ve always played a healer.”

I self-consciously touched the St. Christopher pendant I wore around my neck, tucked safely under my shirt collar. “Keeping the people in your group alive is one of the most important roles in gaming. Without a healer, you can’t run dungeons. I take the position very seriously. No one dies on my watch if I can help it. I heal wounds. Shield vulnerable players against danger. Cure poisons and disease.”

I took a long drink of my wine and quietly added, “If I fail… If someone dies in game, I can bring them back to life.”

Not so much in real life.

A lump grew in my throat. Visions of a snow-slick road and blinding headlights flashed through my head. Screeching tires. The crunch of metal.

“Are you religious?” Mordecai asked.

The memory vanished as quickly as it surfaced.

I huffed and offered a sad smile. “There’s a lot to unpack there. It’s not really a first date conversation.”

A stitch appeared between his brows. “Fair enough. I meant no offense.”

“I know. It’s…” I sighed. “I lost my father when I was in high school. It profoundly tested my beliefs, and I’m not sure where I stand anymore.”

Mordecai thumbed the stem of his wine glass as he stared down at the table. His voice, when he spoke, was strained and quiet. “I understand your suffering.”

He didn’t elaborate, and I didn’t ask. I felt the depth of his pain in the spaces between the words. I saw it in his drawn features and slumped shoulders.

Without thinking, I reached across the table and brushed his hand. He released the wine glass and clutched my fingers, his cold, mine warm, as he peered from under long lashes.

Eyes the color of Bordeaux. Fathoms deep.

So unusual.

So alluring.

“Are you ever warm?” I cupped my hands around his, rubbing to encourage blood flow.

His shy smile returned, and he shrugged. “It’s a curse.”

“I guess so. I won’t make fun of your practically raw steak anymore. You clearly need the iron.”

Instead of laughing, like I hoped, his attention slipped to my collar. It roamed my face and settled for a short time on my mouth. “Indeed,” he whispered.

The mood shifted.

We didn’t let go of one another. The blooming silence held weight. Suggestion. Understanding.

The waiter arrived with a basket of bread, shattering the moment. I was forced to release Mordecai’s hand.

He balanced his chin in an upturned palm and examined me with a spark of mischief.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

“About modules.”

I blinked and tipped my head to the side, not following. “Modules?”

“Game modules, like the one your friend Poet invented.”

“You’re… thinking about games?”

“You like games. Why not? Mars suggested writing one that revolved around my supposed haunted house.”

I huffed. “He was being an idiot.”

“It’s a creative suggestion, but why not expand it to incorporate the entire city? Replicate historical areas and turn them into individual dungeons. Do you think Faulkner would mind if we borrowed his title? The realm could be called The Sound and the Fury, or Owen’s Fury. I’m terrible at naming things, but Branvilla Estate could be one part of it. A level, if you will. Is that what you call it? Or a dungeon quest?”

I couldn’t stop grinning as Mordecai muddled through his slim knowledge of DnD lingo.

“I bet if you presented the idea to Poet, he’d run with it.”

“Me?” I laughed. “No way. I think you should tell him. It was your idea.”

Mordecai peered into the middle distance, eyes bright. “Not before we’ve thoroughly explored the nuances.”

“We?” I plucked a piece of bread from the basket and offered it to Mordecai. He reluctantly accepted it but set it aside before continuing.

“I can’t do it alone. I don’t know the city well enough.”

I didn’t know if he was serious or simply redirecting the conversation because I’d brought up food again, but I went with it. “Okay. Where do we start?”

“Well, I’d need a city map for starters, then we can consider locations where a boss… Is that what you call them? Where a boss might make his lair.”

Mordecai’s Bordeaux eyes shone bright.

“My god, you’re adorable.”

He didn’t flush but cut his gaze to the table and gnawed his lip. “I find you quite charming as well.”

I almost teased him for his verbiage but thought better of it.

“Did you have fun the other night?” I never expected this level of enthusiasm. It was the most relaxed and expressive I’d seen him, and I loved it.

“It was… an experience.”

The waiter arrived with our food, so we bookmarked the conversation.

Instead of revisiting it when we were alone, Mordecai took us elsewhere. “Tell me about your friends? What do they do for a living? How did you meet? Poet’s appearance is so contrary to his temperament, don’t you think? At least from what I saw.”

“It is.”

I shared enthusiastically, thrilled to invite Mordecai into my circle, not realizing until much too late that his question was meant as a distraction.

Too engrossed in my meal, chatting about Mars and Ziggy and Poet and their vastly different personalities, it took me a while to notice that Mordecai wasn’t eating his meal so much as cutting it into tiny pieces and moving it around his plate. He sat tall, his posture impeccable, manners precise, and his attention rapt. He asked involved questions and responded with interest.

Mordecai was the perfect date. Engrossed in my every word.

But he wasn’t eating.

Frowning, I motioned to his plate. “Is your dinner okay?”

“Oh, yes. It’s wonderful. Isn’t it wonderful?” He made a show of putting a morsel of severely undercooked steak into his mouth and chewing it to excess.

We shared a smile, but the minute I returned my attention to my meal—spying surreptitiously from under my lashes—he used a napkin to wipe his mouth. I strongly suspected he disposed of the masticated meat.

After that, Mordecai *ate* several forkfuls of food, making a show of it, ensuring I saw. Like the gentleman he was, he dabbed his mouth between each bite. I wanted to believe he was eating because the alternative was too bizarre. In the end, I refused to draw attention to it. What would I say? I didn’t want to throw a wrench in our evening. It was easier to pretend I didn’t notice.

If Mordecai had some sort of eating disorder, a first date might not be the time for a discussion.

By the end of dinner, more than half the food on his plate vanished, so too did his wine—although I never saw him take a single sip. He allowed me to refill the glass, but it remained untouched.

We turned down dessert, and Mordecai insisted on paying. He used cash and left a generous tip, reminding me of his earlier comment about coming from a wealthy family.

We wandered into the cool night, neither of us rushing. Our shoulders brushed as we walked side by side, enough that it felt meaningful. Mordecai tilted his head and studied the sky. October had her claws in us, and heavy clouds hung low over the city.

“No moon tonight,” he said, sounding almost forlorn.

“It’s hiding. I think it’s supposed to rain.”

Mordecai hummed.

Once we were snug in the Jeep, I cranked the heat. The time on the dash read quarter to ten. I didn’t know if Mordecai expected me to take him home, but I wasn’t ready for the date to end. Owen Sound didn’t have much in the way of nightlife, so I was at a loss for suggestions.

Instead of driving, I blurted, “Museums. We have a few museums that could be featured in a game. Heritage sites. There’s Moreston Village, too. I could envision it being overtaken by goblins or something. Harrison Park might be swarming with Naga or Murlock.” I chuckled. “Those bastards always crawl out of the water and cause trouble.”

“Oh!” I spun to face him. “The Sherman tank. It would make a cool boss. An engineering monstrosity. Poet would have a blast building its stats.”

I racked my brain, squinting at a mental map of the city, and snapped my fingers. “Jubilee Bridge would be a good boss location too. We could fight a troll that lives underneath, like in the fairy tale. He might have rabies or undead baby goat mobs surrounding him.

“There’s an Underground Railroad thing, but it’s not underground or a railroad, per se. It’s a terminal linked with a lot of the town’s Black history, and… Well, there’s a driving tour. We could create something around that. Or… I don’t know. I’m rambling.”

The streetlights didn’t stretch far enough to highlight Mordecai’s face. Still, I felt the intensity of his gaze, and I had the horrible sensation that he thought my ideas were stupid.

“You weren’t serious about making that module, were you? I’m embarrassing myself, aren’t I?”

I caught the barest reflection of an eyetooth. A smile. “I was dead serious. I would love to explore your ideas.”

“Really? I didn’t think you would be interested in gaming.”

“I’m interested in you, Ensley.”

My heart skipped a beat. “I’m interested in you, too.”

I couldn’t properly gauge his expression or know if it was safe to make a move. I desperately wanted to lean in and kiss him but feared overstepping.

I waffled for too long, and as I came to a decision, prepared to act, Mordecai turned and peered out the windshield, destroying my momentary confidence.

“Where would a final boss hide?” he asked. “The big guy at the end. It would have to be somewhere tucked away. Somewhere people don’t normally go, or they forget exists. Either that, or somewhere protected. Restricted. Perhaps if—”

“Mordecai.”

He stopped talking, his gaze falling to his hands. Was he nervous? Did he think I wouldn’t like him if he didn’t find the same joy in gaming? Was the module idea simply to get my attention?

“Fuck it,” I said under my breath.

Life was too short not to take risks.

Mordecai glanced up at my exclamation. Before he could ask what I meant, I leaned across the console, cupped his jaw, and drew him against

my mouth.

He squeaked in surprise but didn’t protest or pull away. The noise dissolved in the intensity of the kiss. Mordecai wasn’t shy. All my worries and uncertainties about returned interest went out the window, the instant we connected.

The first thing I noticed was the temperature of his skin. His lips were as cold as his hands, reminding me of long winter nights, skating on a frozen pond, icicles, and snowflakes. The wind against my cheeks as I raced Dad down the ski slopes.

The observation was fleeting, erased by a raging fire of lust that quickly burned between us. Mordecai kissed with equal fervor, half crawling over the console to be closer while scrambling for purchase on the dash. He snagged my hip and pressed a palm to my abdomen before gliding it higher. My shirt bunched under the assault, revealing a bare patch of skin.

He snaked his hand under my shirt, and I shivered at the icy touch. When he tried to pull away, I whispered against his lips, “Don’t stop.”

He didn’t. Moving his hand higher, he brushed a thumb over one pec, then glided it toward the other when, in the center of my sternum, he gasped in pain or surprise and withdrew like he’d been burned.

“What happened?”

He stared at his fingers for a moment, brow furrowed as he rubbed their tips together. “Nothing.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” As if to make his point, he secured hold of my hair and tugged me against his mouth once again.

I wanted to tell him I wasn’t going anywhere. That I wanted this desperately.

When I traced my tongue along his lips, he opened, and we explored deeper. The silky entanglement thrummed in my low belly, bleeding heat through my veins and pooling in my groin.

Mordecai tangled his fingers in the knotted bun at my nape and raked his nails over my scalp, making me shiver with lust. I touched him back, wanting to feel every part of him. The confines of the Jeep worked against us. I fought to untuck his shirt, losing the battle against coats and belt buckles, until we dissolved into laughter.

Giving up, I focused on kissing him. When he scraped his teeth along my bottom lip, the sharp point of that sneaky eyetooth snagged the skin. He

applied faint pressure, and I groaned.

But as things were heating up, as I finally snuck a hand under his shirt and his mouth moved to suck on my neck, Mordecai jolted again with a pained gasp and broke free.

Burgundy eyes ablaze, he stared at me in confusion.

My heart raced out of control. My cock ached.

He was a deliciously rumpled mess.

“Why did you stop? What’s wrong?” I didn’t want to break the delicate bubble surrounding us, but something had thrown him off.

Forehead creased, he ran his tongue along his lips. “I’m… I’m afraid I can’t control myself.”

“What if I don’t want you to?”

With a ghost of a laugh, Mordecai drew back and returned to his side of the vehicle. My skin was on fire, and I still tasted him on my lips, a rich fusion of flavors I couldn’t describe or identify. All I knew was that I wanted more.

The following few minutes passed in awkward silence. Mordecai seemed off-kilter, but not in the same way as me. He stole a few glances in my direction, scanning my person like he was looking for something. For a time, he studied his fingers, rubbing their tips together in the same fashion as earlier.

“Is something the matter?”

“No. Everything’s grand.”

As he straightened his clothes, I reluctantly asked, “Should I take you home?”

He offered a subtle nod and faced forward, no longer seeming able to meet my gaze.

Disappointment reigned.

The drive passed swiftly, neither of us commenting on the fiery exchange. I had no idea what had happened or why he’d stopped so abruptly.

I parked by the fountain and stared at Mordecai, who stared at the sleeping mansion, his thoughts seemingly a million miles away.

“It’s an awfully big place for one person,” I said into the silence, hoping to kickstart a conversation or at least bring us back to neutral ground.

“Yes. Cristofer chose it. He has an extravagant nature, like the others. He also thinks he’s funny. He’s not. I’d have been happy with something more… modest.”

“Believe me. There’s nothing affluent about this money pit.”

Mordecai smiled, but it seemed sad.

“Are you… settled?” It seemed unlikely, considering the state of the place and the timeframe, but I was scrambling.

Mordecai’s attention shifted to me. My eyes had nearly adjusted to the dark, so when he freely and openly roamed my body, it was like a physical caress. I tingled from head to toe.

“Would you like to come in, Mr. Elowen?” His voice was barely a whisper.

“More than anything.”

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8

Mordecai

I’D GONE A WEEK without feeding. I should not have invited him inside. I knew better, but the words were out before I could stop them. Impulse. Desire. It was a horrible idea. Dangerous. My precarious self-control when it came to Ensley Elowen risked ruining everything. I might have had a mission and over four hundred years of practice when it came to controlling my libido, but one kiss, one godforsaken kiss, and I’d nearly ruined everything.

Ensley was a temptation unlike any I’d experienced in centuries.

No, he didn’t have the answers I needed, but he would be a huge asset when it came to finding Iulian. My plan, in all its feebleness, was working. I didn’t have another to fall back on. Alone, it might take far longer to complete my task. The quicker I could get home, the sooner I could return to my morbidly isolated life, drifting on the outskirts of humanity where I belonged. Unlike the newer generation, immersion was not my forte.

Dinner had turned into a catastrophe. Ensley wasn’t stupid, and my veiled attempt to appear as though I was eating had failed. I was not sly. I was cocky and failing.

And now, I’d invited him into my domain with no prepared explanation for all the questions that would surely surface, and an insatiable hunger driving me out of my mind. My desire for Ensley was a greedy thing, and I couldn’t afford to fog his mind or muddle his memories. I needed him present. Aware.

I couldn’t risk him discovering the truth.

We entered the mansion, and I searched for a light switch, remembering he required illumination and that forgetting these human necessities would only trigger his suspicions.

In the Jeep, Ensley asked if I was settled. My effort, however minimal, should prove satisfactory, considering I'd only been in residence seven days. I didn't see the point in decorating, and I didn't want to settle. My hope was to be in and out of the country as swiftly as possible. I was here out of obligation, nothing more.

Cristofer and Seamus held different opinions and suggested my arrival in Owen Sound might come under the scrutiny of hunters. I didn't usually heed others' advice—they held no authority over me—but this time, I thought it wise to play along. Therefore, I'd spent the past week tidying and furnishing a handful of rooms to make the miserable mansion more livable.

We entered the parlor, where I found another light switch. It illuminated an enormous brass chandelier that I'd found in a storage area and hung. The bulbs mimicked candles, casting a soft yellow glow over the room.

Ensley's brows rose as he spun in place, his gaze skipping over the fresh layout. The furniture that had once been piled against a wall was clean and arranged to the best of my floundering abilities.

"I'm not finished. Obviously. There's a lot to tidy."

I'd eliminated the dust and insect carcasses, polished wooden surfaces, washed the fabric covers on the settee and chairs, arranged the books on the shelves, and hung a few of the paintings we'd discovered in the upstairs bedroom. The Branson family portraits had cleaned up nicely.

The portrait I favored, the one of possibly gay Caspian's lover, earned the spot over the stone fireplace. It seemed fitting. The replica of plate armor gleamed on its stand, displayed in a place of honor next to the piano.

I'd discovered a stack of National Geographic and set them on a side table. In the long hours of the night when I wasn't missing my home or thinking about Iulian, I read about history from the perspective of people who hadn't lived in those times.

"I must say. It's gone from creepy to almost cozy." Ensley hit me with a cheeky smile.

"Are you having a laugh at my expense?"

"Only slightly. It's a bit musty still."

When he shivered, I glanced at the fireplace. "I can light a fire if you want. I'm afraid the furnace isn't working."

I had no idea whether the furnace was functional, but it seemed like a feasible excuse. The chimney flue was clear. I knew that much. I'd used the fireplace earlier to burn broken furniture and clean out decades of debris. Its heat would never properly warm me, but again, I had to think about human comforts, not my own.

"Sure."

While I coaxed flames to life, Ensley sat on the edge of the settee and watched. We shared a few meaningful glances, and the impulse I struggled to control in the Jeep resurfaced. My skin had never felt more alive, and if I didn't know for a fact that it was impossible, I would have sworn the blood ran hot through my veins every time he looked at me.

The flames roared to life, and I babied them for a few minutes to ensure they were stable enough to leave on their own. A hypnotic play of shadows and light danced along the hardwood floor at my feet, where I squatted near the grate.

The heat radiating off the burning logs might never warm my insides, but I liked the way it felt against my fingers and face. The way it drew patterns on the ceiling and walls was mesmerizing. It made me remember a time long gone when my family would huddle together on the stone hearth during a blizzard, sharing stories as wet snow lashed our rickety homestead. Father would regale us while Mother sewed or knitted.

I pushed the thought away. Those days were centuries gone.

"That should help." I stood and faced Ensley, expecting a smile or a spark of mischief, as was his character.

I saw neither.

A deep frown turned his mouth. His gaze remained riveted to the floor at my feet. I followed his line of sight. For the second time, I admired the swirling tango of firelight and shadow, made more intricate by the decorative pattern on the cast iron fire door.

Then, I realized what had caught his attention.

The question hadn't formed on his lips. Perhaps the incongruity had yet to reach his intelligent mind. Aiming to distract him, I stepped forward and joined him on the settee, sitting close enough that I jostled his leg and drew his focus.

A pinch remained between his brows when he glanced up, so I hit him with a flirty smile and shamefully snagged his mind, tugging his thoughts away from dangerous realizations. I hated doing it. A tiny nudge. A bump. A

diversion. Nothing more. When the worried crease vanished, I released my hold.

“Are you warmer?” I asked.

“Getting there.” He shuffled to face me and rested a hand on my knee. “Is this okay?”

In response, I laid my hand over his. Our fingers automatically entwined.

“I was thinking.” Ensley stroked his thumb over mine, staring at our joined hands. “If you aren’t busy tomorrow, maybe we could visit a few local museums.”

“Oh?”

He shrugged. “They aren’t fancy. It was an idea.”

“And might we discuss a module, perhaps?”

He chuckled. “We might. That would be fun.”

Daytime excursions left much to be desired, but I would sacrifice comfort to expand my knowledge and have the freedom to ask veiled questions without garnering suspicion.

“I’d like that.”

“Me too.” Ensley’s attention drifted to my mouth and lingered.

For a long time, we stared at one another in the low light of the quiet room. The fire crackled and popped. Flames danced in his eyes.

I scraped my teeth over my bottom lip, and Ensley’s pulse jumped. Only then did I realize how focused I’d become on his breathing, on his heartbeat, and on the faint flutter of skin at the side of his neck near his jaw.

Saliva pooled in my mouth, and I wanted to lean in and lick the throbbing artery, feel it thrum under my tongue, and taste the essence of his life as it flowed through his body into mine.

I didn’t move, didn’t trust myself not to sink my teeth into that tender, vulnerable spot and drink from him. The mind-bending pleasure would only be amplified if we were joined—or so I had been led to understand. I’d never yearned for both at once. One was pleasurable. The other was a necessity I tended to dislike and avoid for as long as possible.

So why did this desire rage to the surface now?

The blended temptations had never been a weakness of mine. Not like it was for others.

Why was Ensley so hard to resist?

As I tore my gaze from his trembling pulse, a glimmer of metal peeking from the collar of his T-shirt caught my eye. The incidents in the Jeep came

back to me. The jolt of pain when I'd moved my hand over his pec toward the center of his chest, like I'd touch the element on a stove or put my hand in fire. The second burst of pain when I'd gone to kiss his neck.

"Your necklace. What is it?"

Although I had my suspicions, when Ensley plucked the chain from under his T-shirt and displayed the pendant, I retreated a few inches on instinct. My skin crawled.

"It's a St. Christopher medallion. For protection." He rolled it between a thumb and finger. "My mother gave it to me after my father died. I wear it for her, but I'm not sure I believe in its power."

An invisible aura surrounded the pendant, triggering repulsion, fear, and extreme discomfort. Oh, it was powerful all right. The religious symbol was influential enough to cause pain when I touched it, and my skin pulled taut in its presence, itching and burning.

It wasn't as dynamic as a cross, holy water, or communion wafers, but it was enough to disrupt energy. Enough to make me draw away during our encounter in the Jeep.

If Ensley had a cross on the chain, I doubted I would have been able to kiss him at all.

Regardless, when he tucked it away, a quiet fear remained. It was deeply ingrained in the curse. The irresistible urges that had taken me hostage a moment ago simmered. I still wanted Ensley with an urgency I couldn't describe, but the medallion was a mental and physical barrier I couldn't ignore.

Just don't touch it, I told myself. It was an avoidable obstacle. An annoyance, nothing more.

As I struggled to shed the disquieting thoughts, Ensley touched my face, drawing me from my stupor. His skin was so warm against mine. I leaned into the touch, sighing and longing for something I would never get back.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "You got lost in your head for a second."

"I'm marvelous."

His smile was a thing of beauty.

"'*Marvelous*,'" he mocked, using my accent. "May I kiss you, Mordecai?"

"There's nothing I want more." *But*, I didn't say. *But, but, but.…*

His lips touched mine, a tentative caress that had the power to stop my heart a second time had it been beating. Pendant momentarily forgotten, I

melted against his mouth, seeking the hot brush of his tongue. His sweet flavor was all the nourishment I wanted. Something told me that his blood would carry a potency unlike any I'd tasted previously, and that was dangerous. Severing the connection when my task was over would not be as easy as it had been for the multitude of centuries before.

Was it worth the sacrifice? Who would erase *my* memories? Because I doubted this man would be easily forgotten. A thousand years from now, he would be dust, and I would still remember.

I closed my eyes and drifted on a timeless current, away from a reality where humans were mortals and desires like this were unsustainable.

For a fleeting moment, as he untucked my shirt, released the buttons one at a time, and guided me to lie on the settee, I could almost pretend I was human again, born in a time when secret rendezvous were unnecessary. Where men held hands in the open and went on dates to restaurants. Where they loved freely.

But when Ensley shed his tee and bent to kiss a tender path over my bare chest, a searing pain made me cry out and buck him off. He tumbled to the floor, hands splayed, terror in his hazel eyes. His hair had fallen from its bun and framed his face in wispy strands.

"Whoa. What did I do?"

I clutched the area over my sternum where his pendant had momentarily rested. I knew without looking that the skin would be marked. Floundering, I stammered, "It… it was… indigestion."

I swung my legs to the ground and sat, keeping my palm flat against my chest as my senses realigned.

Ensley cautiously stood, snagging his shirt off the ground, a wary look of disbelief haunting his gaze. He didn't believe me, and I couldn't come up with a better excuse. So, for the second time that night, I broke my rules and reached out, calming his mind and stealing his apprehension.

Blurring the memory.

I'd heard from Cristofer that a small percentage of humans felt the intrusion but couldn't identify its cause, often mistaking it for something environmental. Based on Ensley's sudden attentiveness and the way he scanned the room as though trying to figure out what he was feeling, I suspected he was one of those rare cases.

He huffed an embarrassed laugh and refocused on me as though unsure why we'd stopped. During his distraction, I'd checked the mark on my

chest and deemed it minor enough that it wouldn't draw attention.

"It's getting late." I put forth the suggestion in the hope that he would leave. Guilt and regret, two devilish fiends, sat heavy on my shoulders.

Ensley wet his lips and nodded. I read the disappointment in his eyes and suspected he thought himself responsible for whatever happened. He fit his shirt over his head and tugged it in place. I did the same, not bothering to secure the buttons, and followed him to the front door, where he paused and faced me.

His uncertainty filled me with remorse. If only I could explain. If only I could exist as he existed. If only, if only, if only.

I cradled his cheek and pressed a soft kiss to his lips so he wouldn't go home and worry over things he couldn't quite figure out.

He sighed against my mouth, and because I had no respect for my sanity, I grazed my teeth over his bottom lip, toying with urges I refused to satisfy. My desire for him thrummed like a heartbeat under my skin.

Ensley made a noise in the back of his throat, and before I could pull back, he deepened the kiss.

We didn't come apart for a full minute, and I was ready to drag him back into the parlor and try again. But no. Danger lay in that direction.

I broke from his mouth, lingering close enough that his breath feathered my lips. "I enjoyed tonight."

"Me too. Are we still on for tomorrow?"

"Of course."

"What time do you want to head out? The majority of places are open at nine or ten."

"How about the afternoon?" If I could avoid stressing over a meal I couldn't eat and secure a few hours of rest, it would help me endure the suffering.

"Let's aim for two. I'll text you."

I stood on the threshold as Ensley headed to his Jeep. The crunch of his tires following the gravel drive sounded long after his headlights vanished around the bend in the trees. At the highway, the whine of the engine suggested an increase in speed.

Then, I was alone with the sounds of night in a forest.

Before retreating inside, I glanced at the ground beyond the door where the light from inside spilled in an unbroken luminescent puddle on the stoop, reminding me I was not part of Ensley's world.

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9

Ensley

I DROVE HOME IN a haze, unable to quite piece together the night. It carried a dreamlike quality, lacking fluidity. Snapshot moments that connected but didn't. I had the oddest sensation that I'd fucked things up, but our goodbye kiss seemed to contradict that conclusion.

Mordecai had agreed to spend Saturday with me. If things had gone poorly, we wouldn't have another date planned, or so I assumed.

I parked in my designated spot behind the comic book store and rounded the building to the front entrance. Before heading upstairs, the wash of streetlight painting the sidewalk stole my attention. I stood under its glow, my shadow stretching disproportionately long and climbing the brick storefront, making me look fifteen feet tall and monstrous.

When I moved my fingers, the shadow puppet copied.

A strange sense of déjà vu tried to surface. Frowning, I did all I could to tug it forward, but the harder I focused, the farther away it got. No, not déjà vu. What was it?

I waved my arm and kicked a foot, trying to nudge the thought forward. My shadow mirrored the action. It was the oddest thing, but I could have sworn I'd forgotten something important. The lingering memory, whatever it was, felt recent.

For ten minutes, I stood on the sidewalk under the streetlight, fighting to remember, but the void persisted. Whatever I'd forgotten fluttered anxiously behind my ribs. I couldn't explain it, but I knew it was imperative that I remember.

Eventually, admitting defeat, I headed upstairs. The hour was late, and I'd had a few drinks, albeit hours ago and not enough to give me a buzz. Perhaps in the morning the absent thought would come to me.

I performed my usual bedtime routine. As I stood over the sink, brushing my teeth and examining my face in the mirror, as one does when he meets someone new and needs to see their face through someone else's eyes, the strange sensation returned.

With the toothbrush dangling from my foamy mouth, I stood perfectly still and stared at my reflection, fearing any movement might chase it away.

The same disquiet I felt in the street tickled the back of my brain. I was supposed to remember something, but I didn't know what that something was. The incident in the mansion's bathroom came back to me. The mirror. An apparition? No. Impossible. Ghosts weren't real.

The hair on my neck stood on end. Goose bumps pebbled my skin.

I thought back on my night with Mordecai in the mansion. At no time did I feel the same haunted unease as when I'd shown him the house. Not once had I felt a spectral presence. Yet, I couldn't shake the idea that something strange had happened. Something… otherworldly.

I spat toothpaste and jerked the tap on to rinse my mouth. "You are clearly overtired and need to sleep."



"It was one date, Mom. I'm not even sure it went well, so maybe don't send out wedding invitations, okay?"

My mother's *tsk* came through the speaker on my phone. The device sat on the bed, while I dressed for a second date with Mordecai.

"What do you mean you aren't sure it went well? You didn't bore him with all that gaming nonsense, did you?"

"It's not nonsense, and he's interested."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I don't know. He's… not from around here." I selected a retro Nintendo T-shirt to pair with my jeans, second-guessed my decision, then tossed it on the bed anyhow. It would be covered by a hoodie and jacket. Mordecai wouldn't see it.

"He's still adjusting." Or, at least, that was the excuse I'd made.

Mordecai was different than other guys I'd known or dated. I didn't know if it was his supposed wealth combined with his odd living arrangement or what, but the man seemed out of place. Off-balance. Like he was trying to fit in but didn't know how.

"Where's he from?"

"The UK? It sounds like he's lived all over Europe. We're exploring museums today. He wants a taste of Owen Sound history." I'd spent all morning online, so I would be as knowledgeable as any local.

My mother laughed. "That should take all of five minutes."

"Be nice." I finished dressing and checked the time. "I've gotta go."

"You haven't answered my question."

"What question?" I winced, knowing precisely what she was asking.

"Are you coming home on the thirty-first? It's the fifteen-year anniversary."

I hesitated, not wanting to upset her but unable to come up with a good enough excuse to bail. "I don't know, Mom."

"He was your father."

And I'm the reason he's dead, I didn't say. "I'll have to check my work schedule and get back to you."

She sighed but didn't push. I'd left my home for a reason. Attending a celebration of life where the whole town would gather and glare at the irresponsible son of a great man who had died before his time wasn't my idea of fun.



The mansion looked different in the daytime. Older, wearier, and sadder instead of creepy and haunted. Crusty leaves filled the fountain basin, and a few squirrels scavenged inside, while two black crows perched on the angel's head, watching the spectacle with marbled onyx eyes.

Mordecai emerged from the front door the instant I pulled to a stop. He wore the same long wool coat, black trousers, and a rich burgundy shirt the same color as his eyes. Something other than black or white. Amazing. But, formal as always. It made me wonder if the man owned casual clothing.

Another variation in his wardrobe that morning was a dark pair of sunglasses. Considering the dreary and overcast sky, the accessory seemed unnecessary.

He was a strange character, yet I couldn’t pinpoint exactly why. The noisy thoughts I’d brought home the previous night had abated with sleep, and apart from the unsettling conversation with my mother that morning, I was excited about the day.

Mordecai settled in the passenger seat, and we shared shy smiles of the newly intimate variety. The kind where both of us seemed to ask one another if all was well. The kind that made those few stolen kisses impossible to forget.

I still couldn’t shake the odd feeling that I’d done something to upset him the previous night, but without asking directly, I could only hope we were on the same page.

“You’re styling today,” I said for lack of a better opening line. “Snazzy sunglasses. Kinda hot.”

“Thank you. I have a lingering headache.” He touched the frames self-consciously. “They help with light sensitivity.”

“Oh. Shit. Should we reschedule?”

“No, no. It’s a minor nuisance. I’ve been looking forward to this.” His smile was slightly more reassuring, if not a touch strained.

“Me too.”

I put the Jeep in gear and took us back into the city. In all the years I’d been in Owen Sound, I hadn’t visited the historic sites.

Despite my research, I’d forgotten to check business hours. It turned out that the Billy Bishop Museum was closed on the weekend.

The Marine and Rail Museum, our second stop, was an important part of the city’s history. It consisted of one small building with a handful of rooms and outdoor exhibits that suffered from a lack of audience on the damp October day.

Regardless, we parked in the mostly vacant lot and paid the nominal fee to look around.

A brisk wind off Georgian Bay buffeted us as we circled old railcars and read information plaques. Mordecai was tense, muscles taut and posture rigid. Strain creased his face and stiffened his jaw. He bypassed most displays and barely engaged conversationally. Considering his desire to learn about the city’s history, he seemed uninterested.

My remarks on the artifacts earned nods of acknowledgment, but he wandered ahead, astutely scouring the landscape with a frown. Maybe his head was bothering him, and he was too embarrassed to say anything.

When the first splatters of icy rain hit my face, I suggested we move on.

In the Jeep, I cranked the heat and peered at the dreary day. October was not a month for sightseeing, and I wasn't sure where else to go. The local historic parks were out of the question, and I was hard-pressed to suggest a café, considering the debacle that was food.

"Oh. There's an art museum we can try." I shifted to face him. "But you don't seem to be having fun."

I wanted to believe it was his headache dampening the mood but sensed it was more.

Mordecai stared for a long time out the window at the railcars and the extension of the bay in the distance.

"Mordecai?"

"Sure. Art gallery. Sounds fabulous." The sentiment couldn't have been delivered with less enthusiasm.

Sighing, I reached out and removed his sunglasses, drawing his attention. He seemed paler than usual, and that was saying a lot considering the guy had limited pigmentation, but even his lips lacked their usual vibrancy. It could have been the poor lighting, but his hair seemed to lack its customary shine.

Despite the cloudy day, Mordecai squinted, a mark of pain pinching the skin beside his eyes.

"I'm sorry." I went to fit his glasses back on, but he removed them from my hand and set them on the dash.

"It's fine. They don't help much anyhow."

"Headache?"

He made a humming noise that could have meant anything.

"I thought this was something you'd like. You asked about the city's history."

"I know." He raked his teeth over his lower lip and shook his head. "Forgive me. It was the wrong question. Oh, Ensley. I fear I've led you astray."

I wanted to tease him about his formal speech but was no longer in a joking mood. "Astray? I don't know what that means."

Mordecai glanced out the rain-spattered window. His energy seemed low. His posture was less adroit.

"Should I take you home?"

“No.” He pinched his eyes closed for a moment before gifting me with a pained smile. “Could we… drive around?”

“Sure… Where am I driving?”

“Somewhere… less populated.”

Quirking a brow, I side-eyed the empty parking lot and rain-drenched streets, absent of pedestrians. Without a clue what he meant, I put the Jeep in drive and took us away from the museum.

I followed the Sydenham River via 2nd Avenue East, took 8th Street to cross to the other side, and continued down 2nd Avenue West until I got to Jubilee Bridge.

I parked on a side street and studied the sky. It wasn’t pouring rain, but a steady drizzle made getting out less than appealing. “Ordinarily, in the fall, with all the colorful leaves, this bridge is quite scenic. If it wasn’t pissing rain, I’d show you.”

“I say we risk it.”

I chuckled at his complete disregard for the shitty weather. “If I catch my death, you’ll explain it to my mother, okay?”

He stared at me with an indecipherable look in his eyes and a slight quirk in his lip.

“What? You think I’m funny?”

“No.” He touched my leg, stroking gently with his thumb. “If you catch your death, Ensley Elowen, it won’t be from a bit of rain and cold.”

I bit back a grin. “Oh-oh. Are you suggesting there’s a troll underneath that bridge, ready to gnaw my bones?”

“Only one way to find out.”

Mordecai popped the door and got out. His mood had shifted since leaving downtown, so I didn’t question him and followed. Jubilee Bridge might have been marked as a historic site on Owen Sound maps, but it was just a bridge like any other.

We found a spot midway across and leaned on the hard metal rail overlooking the Sydenham. Even rain-soaked and under an ashen sky, the brilliant splash of fall colors along her banks managed to erase the depressive atmosphere.

I glanced at the rippling, pockmarked water below. “No troll in sight.”

“Must be your lucky day.”

“I think they’re afraid of the rain.”

He chuckled.

Cars passed along the road behind us, but traffic was sporadic at best, so for long stretches, we were alone with the weather and our thoughts.

Shoulder to shoulder, I watched Mordecai as much as I took in the landscape.

“What are you thinking?” I asked. “You seem… contemplative today. Are you homesick?”

A wistful smile turned his lips. “All the time, but not in the way you imagine.”

“What does that mean?”

He turned, leaning an elbow on the railing. “I’m homesick for a time I can’t get back. A time when my family was whole, and life was simpler.”

I thought of my dad—family vacations, Christmas mornings, playing catch in the field behind the school—before life fell apart and everything changed.

“Me too.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

But he hesitated like he didn’t know where to begin. Eventually, he shook his head with a huff. “I spent all night trying to figure out the right way to approach this. Perhaps it’s best I come right out and say it.”

“All right.” I cocked my head to the side, curious where this was going.

He wet his lips, huffed a self-conscious laugh, and spoke. “My initial plan was flawed. It turns out that I can’t pretend to enjoy your silly games simply to procure answers. It’s dishonest, and good gracious, Ensley. The language confounds me. Every time I try to write scenarios, I sound like a buffoon. It’s far more complex than I realized. I’ll give you that. The point is, pretending leaves me feeling utterly ridiculous, so I’m done pretending.”

I snorted, unable to contain my laughter. It earned me a look of petulance.

“Oh, stop,” he continued. “It’s me who should be laughing. Seriously. Do you see yourselves? You fight with dice and pencils. Not a single one of you would survive a real battle. If there was a troll under this bridge, you’d wet your pants.”

I laughed harder as he doubled down, crossing his arms and glaring along his nose.

“Are you quite finished?”

“Yes.” I pinched my lips under my teeth and hummed as the urge passed, but it was no use. I howled. “No.”

Mordecai scoffed and turned back to the water. “To think I felt bad for misguiding you.”

“I’m sorry. I’m done.” But it took a second longer to regain my composure. “Oh god. I hate it when my mother’s right. We won’t tell her. That secret goes to the grave. She harasses me enough about my gaming.”

“As she should. What nonsense.”

I snorted and earned another glare, but Mordecai’s lips twitched, and before long he laughed with me.

The rain petered off, but Mordecai’s hair dripped into his face. I wiped at a stray drop as it rolled down his cheek, catching it before it vanished in his trim facial hair. Taking the opportunity, I cradled his cold jaw.

“So you hate my games?”

“I don’t understand their necessity.”

I shrugged. “It’s entertainment. Nothing more. Did you pretend to like them because you thought I wouldn’t notice you otherwise?”

“No.”

“Liar.” I leaned in and stole a kiss. He didn’t resist. Like always, Mordecai’s lips were much colder than mine and addictive in a way I couldn’t describe.

He tasted like fall rain and morning dew. The seductive combination was a heady rush that turned the sidewalk soft beneath my feet. I balanced on a dreamlike cloud. Every time we connected, my world spun in dizzying circles, but instead of nausea, it stirred lust and desire and need.

We came apart, and I leaned heavily against him from the unexpected vertigo. I momentarily forgot what we were talking about and recalled the abrupt end to our night the previous day and my confusion.

“Did I upset you last night?”

Mordecai frowned. “Not at all. Why do you ask?”

The memory was right there. I could almost grasp it. “No reason.”

Mordecai touched my arm, popping the bubble of recall as it was about to surface. “Ensley, I need your help.”

“Okay. Of course. Anything.”

And I meant it. We hadn’t known each other for long, but Mordecai had done something to me. For all my past relationships, this was the first time I felt so utterly incapacitated in the presence of another man. I wanted to be near him all the time, touching him, kissing him, listening to him laugh, and stealing glimpses of his peekaboo eyetooth.

I brushed our mouths together teasingly as a more primal desire surfaced. Mordecai didn’t object, glancing his tongue with mine. A vision of his bare chest appeared inside my mind. Mapping his smooth, pale skin. Kissing his collarbones. Removing my shirt. Laying him out on the settee. Leaning over him.

A horn honked, and the spell broke. The haze that had nearly cleared descended on my memories once again.

I glanced at the passing Ford as the driver yelled out the window, “Get a room.”

A moment later, they were gone. Mordecai and I were alone on the bridge in the rain.

I glanced at the man in question, trying to retrieve those lost moments, but they were gone.

Mordecai studied me with such seriousness and concern that I refocused on what he asked a moment ago. “Help? What kind of help?”

His Bordeaux colored eyes shifted from side to side as he studied my face. He seemed to be seeking the right words or searching for answers. I wasn’t sure which.

“Can I trust you?”

“Of course.”

His lips flattened into a tight line before he asked, “Are you a hunter?”

“Am I a… What?” I frowned, unsure what he meant. “I play a priest.”

He waved a dismissive hand and huffed. “Never mind. I didn’t think so, but I wanted to see your reaction first.”

“What are you talking about?”

“It’s not important.” He nodded, stood straighter, and lifted his chin. “All in then. Enough dallying. Ensley, my uncle has been… kidnapped. I’ve been sent here to find him.”

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10

Mordecai

THE PREVIOUS DAY, I determined the likelihood of Ensley being one of Valerius's hunters was slim. I sensed his purity and innocence regarding the evils of the world. Monsters and magic were part of his games, not his reality.

I missed those simplistic beliefs.

Bluntly asking was risky, but if he'd shown signs of knowing what I was talking about, I would have played my cards differently. Who was to say I wasn't interested in joining their ranks?

Regardless, that avenue proved unnecessary.

My initial plan of using Ensley's interest in gaming to my advantage wasn't sustainable. After his departure the previous night, I called home and endured headache-inducing hours of listening to a fledgling give a crash course in gaming lore while directing me through plausible scenarios that might encourage Ensley to share valuable information about his city to help me locate Iulian.

It was mind-numbing, and Cristofer's laughter in the background was enough to make me want to fly home and punch him, and I wasn't a violent man.

The whole plan was falling apart. I hated technology and couldn't grasp the purpose of video games no matter how many times the fledgling explained it. In the end, I succumbed to the fact that I was not cut out for this level of subterfuge. I lived a simpler life and required a simpler plan. A

certain level of honesty was necessary if I was going to get information in a timely manner.

So, I'd gone with a modified version of the truth, knowing when this ordeal was over, I would have no choice but to leave Ensley with a gaping hole in his memory—like all the men who had come before him, only worse.

I didn't want to tinker with his mind. The mere idea of using my powers on him made me sick. Twice already I'd been forced to fog his brain. For protection, but they were minor incidents. Inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. Those uses I didn't mind so much, but what I intended to do was extreme.

In the end, he wouldn't remember me or the time we shared. I liked Ensley, but no matter my feelings, we couldn't have anything sustainable.

I would not share my curse, and his mortality was an unsurpassable barrier.

"I'm sorry…" Ensley blinked several times in evident confusion. "Did you say kidnapped? Your uncle was kidnapped?"

"Yes." The rain started again, a steady downpour that plinked off the metal railing and soaked us through. Ensley didn't seem to notice. "All I know is that he's in the city and well-guarded."

Ensley gaped, seemed to absorb the information, then turned his gaze inward and huffed. "Temporary." The single word was uttered more to himself than to me. "I get it now."

"I'm sorry?"

"Nothing." But he pulled away, and I wasn't sure why.

A soft rumble of thunder gently rolled across the land, and I glanced skyward as angry storm clouds moved rapidly over the city. "We should get inside."

Ensley didn't respond, so I tugged his arm, encouraging him to walk. He planted his feet and refused to move. Ordinarily, I could nudge a human into doing my bidding or implant a suggestion they automatically obeyed without question, but not while the sun was up. Storm or not, daylight hours rendered me weak or useless where my powers were concerned.

"Ensley?" Every intimacy would make severing our connection harder. Regardless, I threaded my fingers through his and gave a gentle tug of encouragement. "Come, love. Get out of the rain before you do catch your death."

That got his attention. Alert and gazing deep into my eyes, Ensley's confusion seemed to deepen.

Let me have this for a short time, I thought, but I wasn't sure to whom I pleaded.

With another gentle tug, Ensley followed me to the Jeep and unlocked the doors with the fob. He didn't start the engine and stared blankly at the pattering rain obscuring the view out the windscreen, a stitch in his brow.

"It's cold," I said, encouraging him to turn over the engine—for his benefit, not mine.

"Oh. Sorry." He started the Jeep and angled the vents in my direction. "Better?"

"Thank you. Have I upset you?"

"No. I didn't expect it."

"Understandable. May I explain?"

"Tell me this first." He shuffled to face me. "Are *you* in danger?"

I considered my words carefully before speaking. "So long as my uncle's captors don't discover my presence in the city, I should be fine. However, when they do…" I shrugged.

The rest of the sentence felt unnecessarily complicated, so I let him fill it in as he saw fit. Ensley didn't have to know how great the risks to myself and potentially my kind were should I fail. In fact, I would have a small, perilous window to aid my uncle in regaining his strength. Once rejuvenated, Valerius and his hunters would be the ones at risk.

But if the ritual was interrupted…

"Have you gone to the police?" Ensley asked.

"I can't involve the police. It's… complicated."

"Who took him? Why? I don't understand."

"My uncle is an important man in a position of authority."

"Like, government? Oh my god, are you some kind of top secret official sent to hunt him down? Are you military? Secret Service? What's the UK equivalent? Do you have one?"

I couldn't contain the smile. "No, Ensley. Nothing so glorious, but I am his rightful heir, and—"

"What? Are you royalty?"

I waffled my head from side to side. "In a manner of speaking, but here's the thing. I don't want to succeed him. I want to return him to power so I can resume my quiet life away from the spotlight."

I'd told no lies but omitted many truths. It was the things left unsaid that were the real bones of the matter, but even with a layer of secrecy, I felt vulnerable. Exposed.

The deluge of rain offered a layer of privacy from the outside world. I didn't like the way Ensley studied me, as though he didn't know me at all. As though I was a mystery he wanted to solve. In essence, I was, but he couldn't know the whole truth. What we'd shared the past few days was nothing more than a blissful reprieve. A taste of a life that was no longer mine to live. Glorious in its simplicity and crushing in its impermanence. Ensley would not be easily forgotten.

This was what happened when I allowed myself even a small dose of normality. I became addicted. I craved. I yearned. I longed for so much more.

"How do you know he's in Owen Sound?"

"I have people who were able to track his location this far. Where in the city is unknown, and I was hoping you might help me locate him."

"And when you find him?"

"It's best I don't share that part. It will not be a task you're involved in."

"It sounds dangerous."

Extremely, I didn't say.

"Why you?"

"It's required."

"What does that mean?"

"Will you help me brainstorm places where he might be held?" I asked instead.

"Why me?"

That was a question I could answer. "Because I trust you, Ensley."

Because I want to know what could happen between us if we had one more hour, one more day, or one more week. But I couldn't voice those truths, so I simply returned his smile.

On my suggestion, and because being outdoors during the daytime hampered my ability to concentrate, we returned to the mansion. Ensley didn't question it, and I suspected he was still absorbing the bombshell I'd dropped on his head.

Having failed so tremendously at playing host the previous night, I'd grabbed a few items to perpetuate a human ruse.

"Would you like a beverage?"

“Um. Water would be great, and a towel if you have one.” Ensley removed the hair elastic from his bun. Wet strands hung in clumps around his face.

“Oh. Yes.”

Ensley followed me to the kitchen at the back of the house. He sat at the worktop island while I retrieved a bottle of water from a case, then excused myself to fetch a few towels.

When I returned, he motioned to the door leading to the basement.

“Did you find anything interesting down there?”

“Decades of filth, a few spider’s nests, and a chest of moth-eaten clothes.”

“Lovely.”

I took a seat instead of fetching the map of the city I’d purchased. Ensley’s uneasiness hadn’t lessened, and if I didn’t reassure him, I feared he might head for the door and never look back.

“Forgive me.” I touched his hand. “I never meant to be deceptive.”

“No, I… I get it.” He chuckled, but it was strained. “I’m still absorbing the shock. This is serious stuff, and I can see why you wouldn’t blurt it out the day we met. It does explain a few things.”

“Oh?”

“You’re not like other guys, Mordecai. I noticed it from day one.”

That was unnerving, especially since I tried so hard to act a part. “How so?”

“You’re… sophisticated.” He used my accent and smiled. “Um… refined? I don’t know.”

I scoffed. “Hardly.”

“You are. Even the way you talk is cultured. Old-fashioned, I guess. I don’t know if that’s the right word, but I get the sense we don’t move in the same social circles.”

“That we don’t, and be glad for it.”

Ensley slumped, every ounce of good humor evaporating. “I should have known you were too good to be true.”

“What does that mean?”

“Why would a guy like you be interested in a guy like me?”

“Why on earth wouldn’t I be?”

“I’m not exactly a catch. My dating history is… sad.”

“Then those men didn’t see what I see. You’re down to earth, Ensley. You don’t put on airs. You’re not pretending to be someone you’re not. You’re funny, sensitive, honest, and…” A plethora of other adjectives I couldn’t summon the courage to say.

The words drifted away as an ache bloomed in my chest. Encounters with men in the past had been impersonal and fleeting for a reason. I couldn’t afford to bond… or fall in love.

Ensley weaved his fingers with mine. He wore such a sincere expression that I wanted to bear my unbeating heart and tell him the truth about my life.

“What can I do?” He stroked his thumb against mine. “How can I help?”

Pushing moral dilemmas and pointless yearning aside, I retrieved the city map I’d acquired and laid it out on the table. “I haven’t much information. So far as I understand, my uncle is being held somewhere in the city. It will be some place remote and soundproof with limited entry points. Potentially underground, but without access to soil. Concrete reinforced, like a bunker, perhaps? A storm shelter. He’ll be heavily protected by civilian guards who won’t be easily identifiable.”

“That’s… oddly specific. Do you know those parameters for a fact or are you guessing?”

“It’s… the only thing that makes logical sense.”

“Meaning?”

I couldn’t explain the particulars without raising suspicion. Killing Iulian wasn’t an option, or he’d be dead. Valerius knew this. We might be immortal beings, but that only meant we were hard to kill, not invincible. What Valerius needed was to contain and control Iulian indefinitely. It meant keeping him in a state of torpor. It meant applying barriers that would make my job difficult, if not impossible. It was the whole reason he’d raised an army of human hunters. The protections involved could not be carried out by our race.

At least it was the conclusion I’d come to during my travels.

The logic was sound. When I’d shared my concerns with Seamus and Cristofer, they were convinced I could figure it out. *There is no other way*, they’d said.

“I can’t help if you don’t give me all the information, Mordecai. What aren’t you telling me?”

Biting back a response, I concentrated on the map, narrowing my focus to the rail museum we'd visited earlier. "You mentioned an underground railway. I didn't see evidence of this."

Hearing of its existence had sparked hope until we'd walked the grounds and entered the historic building.

"Yeah, it's not underground. The term is deceptive. It's… When Owen Sound was known as the Village of Sydenham, many escaped slaves from the southern states settled here. It was part of the largest North American freedom movement, and this was the last northern terminal on the railroad."

"Oh." My disappointment wasn't hidden.

Ensley studied the map and pressed a finger over a specific spot. "This is the Great Lakes Elevator Company. Massive grain elevator. It's about the only industrial building this city has, but I wouldn't call it remote. It does have some of the qualities you're looking for.

"The huge supermarkets and furniture stores have significantly large warehouses, too." He pointed to several around the city. "But, again, not remote. Does it have to be?"

"Ideally. I suspect it would be a place away from the general population. Not typically accessed by the public."

"So, not some random Joe's basement? Because that makes more sense to me."

"No. Too risky." I raked my teeth over my bottom lip. "Consider how you might house a rabid bear without anyone the wiser. Even tranquilized, he would be dangerous. Extreme caution would be necessary, and you wouldn't want to be too close to other people lest they hear something they shouldn't or be near enough to note the comings and goings of armed guards."

"Armed guards who are civilians?"

"Yes."

Ensley studied me with a skeptically raised brow for a long time.

"You're the gamer, Ensley. Consider it a quest."

Clearly humored, he nodded before scowling at the map, lips pinched in a thin line. I could only imagine what he was thinking.

He pressed fingers over two separate spots that were located close to one another. "Cemeteries? Greenwood has a mausoleum. Also, if memory serves, there's an old boarded-up church or something on the property. Might not be a church. It's small. Whatever it is, they clearly don't use it

anymore. I haven’t been to St. Mary’s, so I’m not sure about it. Would that be more along the lines of what you’re thinking?”

I rolled the idea around my head. Seclusion. Stone enclosures. “Possibly. What kind of cemeteries are they?”

“What do you mean?”

“Secular?”

“I have no idea. Does it matter?”

“Yes.” I didn’t elaborate.

Ensley’s gaze bore into the side of my face, but I refused to meet his eyes. A cemetery held potential, provided the ground wasn’t consecrated. Valerius wouldn’t risk killing Iulian. Prolonged exposure to consecrated ground would be a death sentence. A nondenominational, municipal cemetery, however, would be an ideal location. It would be quiet, infrequently populated, and provide the level of security required to hold an elder. In the absence of bunkers or abandoned warehouses, a mausoleum might be our best bet.

“I’m not sure,” he said.

“Can we discover what type of cemeteries they are?”

Ensley withdrew his phone and spent a minute searching. “According to my trusty friend Google, Greenwood is owned by the city, so it’s open to any denomination. St. Mary’s is Catholic.”

“I assumed. There seem to be a lot of parks in your city. Any chance of remote buildings there in?”

“None that I can think of. What about a sewer?”

“Not likely. Too many access points.”

“Oh! Wait. I’ve got it.” Ensley spun the map and stabbed a location. “Mill Dam. It’s perfect. Not only is it semi-secluded, but there’s a whole concrete structure underneath the falls. The powerhouse or hydroelectric generator or whatever the fuck they call it.”

The hair on my nape prickled. A contained concrete structure, likely with one entry point. Noisy falls to mask any unwarranted sounds made by an angry elder. Flowing water to destabilize him should he become unruly. Even without being in its presence, a sense of spiritual dread enveloped me.

“That’s it,” I breathed. “Ensley, you’re a genius.”

A trace of apprehension dampened the usual sunny qualities of his smile. “Now what?”

“Now I find out if you’re right. What time is it?” I sensed the continued presence of daylight beyond the heavily covered window and knew subconsciously that nightfall was still a way off.

Ensley frowned at the thick drapes before tapping his phone screen. “Twenty after four. Is it still raining?”

“Yes. Can’t you hear it?”

He stilled, cocking an ear, and it was then I realized the light drizzle was too quiet for his human hearing.

I studied the map as I considered my next step. “I’ll investigate after sundown. If I find evidence that it’s the correct location, I’ll need to survey for a time to determine the best approach and what I’m up against before I attempt extraction. Either way, you can’t join me.”

Silence.

The weight of Ensley’s gaze held me captive. I wouldn’t tamper with his mind. Not yet. Not until I knew for sure I wouldn’t need his assistance again.

Not until…

My gaze slipped to his mouth, to the pulsing artery in his neck, to his sad hazel eyes and crinkled brow. Oh, these selfish desires. I was a fool to take it further. To tease myself with something I couldn’t have.

“Mordecai?”

My name on his lips was sweet honey. Hunger bloomed in my belly, but whether it was the need to feed or the desire to satisfy another craving, I couldn’t be sure. Containing and controlling my loneliness was a chore, and I was weak.

Tonight wasn’t the night to erase myself from his life. Tonight, I wanted nothing more than to cherish his still-beating heart, feel the warmth in his veins, and entwine myself into his soul, so for a moment in time, I could pretend we were the same.

I wanted one memory to carry me through the centuries.

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11

Ensley

TINY FLAMES OF LUST burned behind his burgundy eyes. My heart skipped a beat. I had a thousand questions about this mysterious man and his missing uncle, but not one of them mattered. They would wait. Mordecai said he would investigate at night, and night was hours away.

He approached, moving to stand between my legs. I hadn't retied my hair after our rainy adventure outdoors, and Mordecai threaded his fingers through the damp strands as he tilted my face to meet his.

Something in his presence commanded the moment, and I would willingly surrender to anything he asked. His slightly parted ruby lips offered a peek at those pronounced eyeteeth I couldn't help obsessing over.

"I'd very much like to show you what I've done in the master suite," he said.

"I'd very much like to see."

Mordecai wet his lips with a languid drawing of his tongue and stepped back, presenting his hand. His gaze never left mine.

I clasped the offering and let him tug me to my feet. Our chests collided. Our fingers weaved together. He leaned in like he was about to steal a taste but stopped before making the connection.

"Come. This way."

I followed him from the dimly lit kitchen into a darker hallway. The air was heavy and still tinged with the faint smell of damp earth, like the mansion hadn't been aired properly. From the hallway, we ascended the stairs to the mezzanine, Mordecai's footfall barely issuing a protest from the

aged wooden boards. Mine seemed to echo hollowly all around, no matter how lightly I stepped.

Not once did he stop to turn on a light. Not once did he stumble or hesitate. The deeper into the house we went, the more turned-around I became.

Every window we encountered was covered in heavy drapes, admitting the faintest strips of light around their edges or none at all in some cases. We remained cloaked in shadow. From what I could see, nothing much had changed on the second-floor landing. The same bare walls. The same grand chandelier looming crookedly overhead. The same dark hallways leading east and west.

Mordecai walked swiftly and soundlessly. I hustled to keep up, lest he accidentally release my hand and I lose him in the dark. Partway down a hall, he paused, and I recognized the bathroom, although I couldn't see beyond the threshold. A residual chill tickled my spine at remembered ghosts in mirrors that I didn't actually see.

Mordecai slipped inside, leaving me in the hallway. No impression of a window shone from within, although I could have sworn I'd seen one during the tour. Perhaps I misremembered. I heard him shuffle through drawers as though seeking something he couldn't find.

"I'm on PrEP," I blurted, figuring he was on the hunt for a condom.

The sound of rummaging stopped, and Mordecai materialized in the doorway. I couldn't get a read on his expression, and for a beat, wondered if he'd heard me.

"Do we need a condom?" I asked. "Are you—"

"It won't be necessary. It was lubrication I was after."

"Ah. And?"

"No luck."

"We'll figure it out. Lead the way. It's too dark up here. I'll get lost otherwise."

Mordecai glanced along the hall. "Oh, right. I forgot you couldn't see where you were going. Apologies."

"None needed. I don't need light for what we plan to do." Wiggling my brows, I snagged his waist and found his mouth in the dark, kissing him as I backed him against the door frame.

Mordecai didn't protest and moaned.

I roved his body, exploring edges and contours, hills and valleys. I couldn’t get enough. Too many clothes in the way. I wanted him naked. Journeying lower, I located the confined swell of his fast-growing erection and palmed it, urging it to grow.

A strangled noise left his throat, and he pressed his hips forward, clasping hold of my upper arms. Encouraged, I continued until we were nothing more than dueling tongues, wandering hands, and clashing teeth.

Another grunt and a soft nip, then Mordecai shoved me away with a growl. “Enough, Ensley. I will fuck you in a proper bed, not a corridor.”

I chuckled, still fondling his erection while gnawing his shapely jaw. “Such a gentleman. I’m not picky.”

Tipping his head, he allowed the assault for another minute before clamping a hand around my wrist. “I am. Stop before I come.”

“That’s the goal, isn’t it?”

“Devil take you. You’re a handful.”

“You’re smiling, so I don’t think that’s a bad thing.”

“Come now.”

He dragged me in the direction I assumed was the master suite. My eyes were adjusting to the dark, but I had no sense of depth and couldn’t predict how far we had to go to our destination. My memory of the one and only time I’d been to the second floor was skewed.

In no time, we entered a room. It was chillier than the rest of the house, and a sweet, minerally aroma of rain hung in the air. The heavy drapes covering the window billowed, emitting broken daylight around their edges as a soft breeze blew.

Shapes I recognized took form in the dimness. It was the room where we’d discovered the collection of paintings and artifacts. Those items seemed to have been relocated. In their place was an elegantly adorned king-size canopy bed, an oversized dresser, and a freestanding wardrobe. Even without proper illumination, I could tell they were finely made.

Mordecai did not turn on a light. He spun to face me, his pale skin luminescent, his eyes captivating, almost glowing in the dark. “Undress.”

“You don’t want to help?”

“I want to watch.”

So, I undressed, slowly and methodically, ignoring the brisk temperature of the room and the way it pimpled my skin. I wouldn’t be cold for long. First, I removed my shirt, then my pants, underwear, and socks. Naked,

blistered with goose bumps and trying not to shiver, I waited for instructions.

Mordecai wet his lips, leaving a glistening trail. Without my having to ask, he unbuttoned his dress shirt, one tiny loop at a time, revealing a path of porcelain skin, hairless but for a faint trail leading from his navel south.

Next, he unbuckled his belt, lowered the zipper on his trousers, and pushed them down. He kicked his shiny dress shoes aside and stepped out of the pants, leaving him in underwear. The briefs hugged his body in all the right places, cradling the promises of a wonderful night ahead. I couldn't help drinking him in, mouth pooling, fingers twitching to touch every part of him.

If he was cold, I couldn't tell.

Mordecai's gaze caught mine.

Lust, desire, and need reflected back at me.

I indicated his unshed drawers. "Are you stopping there?"

"No." He reached for the band of his underwear as he took me in with the same intensity he had in the kitchen, but before he shed the final article of clothing, his gaze stalled on my sternum.

Tension stiffened his spine, and a deep frown pushed his brows together.

Confused, I reached up and touched the St. Christopher pendant. A flash of memory surfaced. Mordecai jerking back. A cry of pain.

"Remove it," he growled, startling me from the unexpected recall.

Ejecting those thoughts from my mind and without questioning the unusual demand, I reached behind my neck and undid the clasp. Locating my pants, I slipped the necklace inside a pocket for safekeeping.

"Better?"

"Yes."

The strange request sparked curiosity and more questions, but I didn't want to engage in a conversation. I wanted this peculiar man who'd appeared in my life unexpectedly to take me to bed.

I stepped forward, intent on helping him remove the last piece of clothing, but Mordecai retreated, a wicked smile curling his lips.

I followed, matching his retreat. When he was within a foot of the bed, I snagged his waist, and we toppled onto the mattress. Our mouths collided in a bruising kiss. I wanted to devour him, drink him in, drown in the moment.

Before I could guide the encounter, Mordecai took control. With more strength than I expected, he secured his legs around me and rolled us until I

was beneath him. He pinned my arms over my head.

His blond hair hung like a curtain between us, eyes like fire and ice. He feathered his lips over mine without kissing, then slid them along the curve of my jaw.

Next to my ear, he hissed, “It’s best if you let me take charge, Ensley. You don’t want me to lose control.”

He flicked his tongue over my earlobe, stealing a taste.

I chuckled, curling my shoulder at the tickling sensation. “I do, actually. Desperately.”

Mordecai raked his teeth over the same spot before drawing the delicate skin into his mouth and sucking. “Behave, Ensley. Lie still a moment and let me taste you.”

“Will I get a turn?”

He didn’t respond, but in the next breath, Mordecai was everywhere. I had to close my eyes from the dizzying overload of sensations. His tongue and teeth marked a path over my shoulder, danced across my collarbones, and traveled lower. He trailed the tip of his nose between my pecs as he released my hands and raked his fingernails down the length of my arms, not hard enough to break skin, but enough to leave a sting of scored flesh.

With my arms free, I threaded my fingers through his silky fine hair and encouraged him to lift his head. “I want to kiss you.”

He didn’t listen and dipped his tongue in my navel as he spread my thighs.

“Or… that’s good too. Carry on.”

Mordecai buried his nose in the crease of my leg, inhaling before raking his teeth over my inner thigh. His nips were gentle, and I shivered from the contact, trembling with need.

Before I knew what was happening, he licked a path up my cock and swallowed me to the root. I bucked and cried out at the sudden explosion of pleasure. “Oh fuck. Jesus. Yes. That’s so good.”

Mordecai came up slowly, applying suction and grazing ever so lightly with his teeth. The euphoria scrambled my brain. A hint of pain. A metric ton of pleasure. Maybe I imagined it, but I swore his eyeteeth bracketed my cock, cradling it. It was ludicrous. It was luxurious. It wasn’t possible. Although more pronounced than the average person’s, Mordecai wasn’t a cat with razor-sharp fangs, but fuck if it wasn’t the best sensation I’d ever felt.

I wanted him to do it again, so I could judge it properly, but he released me with a pop.

Mordecai climbed my body. Lustful pools of Bordeaux took me in. I was drunk on him, a desperate fool who was ready to beg. Even in the low light of the room, Mordecai's flaming lips stood out against his pale skin. Wet and wonderful. I wanted to kiss them, but curiosity made me raise a finger instead.

I traced the digit over his swollen mouth. He parted his lips and flicked the pad with his tongue. Taking the opportunity, I dipped my finger inside, tracing it over his teeth. Normal fucking teeth. A slight protrusion on either side, pointed, but nothing outrageous. I was losing my mind.

Alight with humor, Mordecai gently clamped down before sucking my finger all the way into his mouth, hard enough it drew a direct line of pleasure to my balls.

An embarrassing groan left me, and I closed my eyes. "You're fucking intense."

He released my finger and hovered over my mouth. "And you, Ensley, are irresistible." He kissed me, sucking my tongue with the same vigor. I couldn't remember my name, let alone why I gave a shit about his teeth.

The kiss was wet and sloppy and invigorating. Mordecai tasted like fire and lightning and salty oceans. It stirred my blood, leaving me spinning. It was the intoxication of alcohol. It was mulled wine and decadent chocolate on a cold winter night. I didn't know if I was flying or falling or floating, but I was lighter than air, coasting on a dream.

Hazy with lust and burning with need, I took the opportunity to remove Mordecai's underwear before drawing his naked body against mine. His smooth, tight skin felt utterly flawless under my hands, like cool marble, an untouched snowy landscape, a piece of art in a museum. I mapped the soft curves of his shoulders, followed the arch of his spine, and clung to the globes of his ass as I rutted against his steely length.

He pushed his cock against mine in return, and I whimpered.

The friction was fantastic, but it wasn't enough, and Mordecai seemed to come to that conclusion as well. He broke from my mouth, his half-lidded gaze smoldering.

"This is dangerous, Ensley."

"You keep saying that."

"Yet you don't believe me."

“Nope, and if I’m wrong, I’ll risk it.”

He didn’t argue and positioned himself between my legs again, where he proceeded to suck my cock like it was an Olympic sport and he was going for gold. Mordecai had skills and tricks I didn’t know existed, like he’d been perfecting the art of blow jobs since the dawn of time. How was it this good?

He was my own personal nirvana. I wasn’t sure I’d ever felt this out of my mind with sex before. The urgency was unfamiliar. The heady mix of senses was out of control. Christ, if this was what sex with Mordecai was like, I never wanted it to end.

His attention turned to my ass, and he used a combination of fingers and his tongue to prep me. The assault went on for far longer than I expected, until I was seeing stars. Until I couldn’t form sentences, and every cell in my body was set to explode. Only then did Mordecai stop and position himself.

He used plenty of saliva, rubbing it over his length and covering my hole.

“I won’t hurt you.”

I nodded furiously, too beyond myself to make words but fully trusting him. I scanned his gorgeous body. Refractions of light danced over his beautiful skin from the gently fluttering drapes. Porcelain. Ivory. A flawless work of art.

He stroked himself, and I admired his uncut length as he instructed me to hold my legs back.

Then, he was there, pressing inside, entering me in one long, delicious glide.

My toes curled, and I moaned.

His first thrust sent a surge of electricity through my veins. Mordecai took his time, building the pace and watching my reaction with a captivating intensity I couldn’t look away from.

As the pleasure mounted, he joined our mouths. We kissed for a time until our coordination faltered and the race grew serious.

I trembled.

He whispered my name.

As the crest of my orgasm neared, Mordecai buried his face against my neck, the ghosting impression of his mouth resting hot against my skin. His tongue danced over the pulse point, licking, sucking, and tasting.

He drove his hips faster and harder, thrusting with such ferocity and determination that the bed knocked the wall.

I cradled his head. Clung to his hair. Sputtered words of encouragement when I could find them. Trapped between our bodies, my cock enjoyed steady friction.

“Ensley,” Mordecai murmured against my neck, his voice a quiet prayer. “Ensley. Oh, sweet bliss. You will be my demise.”

I couldn’t begin to comprehend what he meant.

A hot brush of his tongue against my overheated flesh short-circuited my brain.

His fingers dug bruises into my skin, clinging like he feared I might leave.

Then, he came on a growl, turning his face into the pillow as he cried out.

I felt every pulse as he filled me, and I gripped him firmly as he rode the high.

As his orgasm dissipated, I chased mine, getting a hand between us to aid the process. It bubbled and rose within me, tingling my nerve endings to life.

Mordecai found my mouth and kissed me with bruising force. Our tongues collided, dueling for dominance. A few more thrusts, and I unleashed on a gasp.

Foreheads together. Gazes locked.

I couldn’t catch my breath.

The entire experience left me dizzy and lightheaded. Mordecai collapsed into my arms, and I held him as my heart raced and the residual quivers of pleasure slowly subsided.

“Shit, that was good.”

He hummed in response, the vibrations tickling my skin. I felt his smile, and it fed my own.

Exhaustion hit like an anvil, and my limbs grew heavy. I stroked his hair and closed my eyes as the adrenaline drained from my system. Only then did the chill in the room return. Mordecai’s weight was a comforting blanket, but his skin was cool to touch.

“We should clean up and close that window before we freeze to death,” I mumbled.

“Another minute. Let me memorize this feeling so I never forget.”

I chuckled and held him tighter. “I’m not going anywhere. Even if I could move, which I can’t, I don’t fuck and flee. Not my style.”

“You’re a good man, Ensley.”

I thought of my dad and almost said, *No, I’m not*, but instead went with, “I try to be.”

Mordecai rolled to his side and stretched out long beside me. His fingers roved my bare chest. “Are you sore?”

“No. Tired. You wore me out.”

He pressed his palm over my heart, and despite the poorly lit room, he looked sad. Mournful.

I laid my hand over top of his and squeezed. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Perfect. I can feel your heart beating. It’s beautiful.”

“Is it still racing?”

“Not like before.”

After a lingering kiss, he moved away, slipping silently from the bed. “I’ll find a washcloth. Be back in a moment.”

He wasn’t gone long, but in that short time, I drifted. When he returned, I was nearly asleep. With a tenderness that didn’t surprise me, Mordecai cleaned the mess.

He was about to lie down again, so I muttered, “Window. Cold.”

While he closed it, I shuffled under the covers, holding them open so he could join me. It was early for bed—we hadn’t broached the topic of dinner—but I needed to rest my eyes and soak up what we’d shared. A nap would be perfect.

Mordecai lay beside me, and I drew him into my arms. We shared a pillow and weaved our legs, facing one another.

“You’re always so cold.” I tugged the covers higher.

“I don’t feel it.”

“Are you sure you’re not from Siberia or something?”

He chuckled. “No. Not so far north.”

Mordecai softly touched me as I closed my eyes, a delicate exploration that lulled me into sleep.

Without any concept of how much time had passed, I startled awake a while later with a complete loss of spatial awareness in a void so impenetrable that silhouettes and shapes no longer existed. A fog surrounded my brain, and I couldn’t for the life of me remember where I was or when I’d fallen asleep.

I wasn’t at home in bed. Then, I remembered. I was at Mordecai’s.

When the afternoon and all we’d shared came back to me, I fumbled around on the bed and reached out, seeking my lover.

But my hand met empty air and a cold mattress.

Mordecai was gone.

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12

Ensley

TIME HAD BEEN SUCKED into a void. The sun had fallen. That much I discerned from the lack of glow around the drapes. It wasn't warm. The instant I shed the covers, my skin pebbled with goose bumps. Although I had a vague sense of the room's size, being unable to see walls elicited a primal discomfort of being lost in the woods. The ridiculous notion was only amplified by the heavy scent of ozone that hung in the air. Damp wood, mustiness, and a century's worth of embedded grime were part of the mansion's DNA.

Underneath those layers, I caught the barest hint of Mordecai's essence.

I searched for a bedside table and lamp but found neither.

The house was eerily silent and still.

Where did he go?

What time was it?

Where were my clothes and phone?

With a vague sense of direction, I got up and shuffled blindly to where I assumed was the door. I'd undressed thereabouts and left my jeans in a heap in the general vicinity. I managed to find my way. My outstretched fingers brushed peeling wallpaper, then a wooden surface, announcing I'd arrived.

Instead of fumbling for my clothes, I felt along the wall for a light switch. When I didn't encounter one, I remembered the tour and having to use my flashlight in most of the upstairs rooms since there were no ceiling fixtures. A common characteristic in century homes.

Was there a standing lamp in a corner? I had no clue and wasn't about to explore. I felt around with my foot until I discovered the pile of clothes I'd discarded earlier. In no time, I located my phone—Christ, it was ten after nine—and activated the flashlight app.

A juvenile sense of relief washed over me as the four walls of the room and all its classy furniture came into view. I panned, seeking a lamp but not finding one. Leaning the phone against a baseboard, I dressed in a hurry, intent on finding a bathroom, then my absent lover.

Before escaping to the hallway, I located my necklace in the front pocket and put it on. Adjusting the pendant under my T-shirt, I paused, drawing on the forgotten memories that had flashed through my brain before we'd landed in bed.

Mordecai jerking back. A cry of pain.

What was that about? Why did it feel significant? Why couldn't I remember more? And why had he insisted I remove it?

My brain was too muddled to make hide nor hair of the broken memory, so I packed the mystery away to examine later. My bladder screamed to be emptied.

In the hallway, I aimed the beam along the walls, seeking a switch, but it was the same as in the bedroom. If memory served, the ceiling fixtures on the second floor were limited to the bathroom and the chandelier over the mezzanine.

The obsidian void swallowed the light as I advanced. I could see only a short distance. No sounds reached my ears except my own thready inhales and exhales and the odd creak of ancient floorboards underfoot. No matter how hard I strained, I couldn't hear evidence of Mordecai downstairs. Where did he go?

I found the bathroom and switched on the light. The overhead fixture flickered then glowed a steady soft yellow. The single dim bulb sported a film of dust. I scanned. The area was mostly unchanged. Tidier and with a few personal effects lying about. Mordecai was a minimalist, it seemed.

My gaze caught on a peculiar sight. The mirror above the vanity was missing. The mirror that was at the root of my initial discomfort with the mansion. The mirror that had unsettled me for reasons I couldn't explain or understand because I didn't believe in ghosts, but something strange *had* happened in this very room. Something unnatural I had yet to name.

A rusty nail and a distinctly brighter spot on the wallpaper were the only evidence that the mirror had existed at all and I wasn't losing my mind.

Instead of puzzling over its absence, I used the toilet and washed my hands before making another discovery. The window—and yes, there *was* a window—was covered in dark paper. No curtain. No means of letting in the light. I filed it away with the rest of the things I couldn't explain.

I didn't bother with the chandelier and hustled down the creaky and dangerously soggy staircase, avoiding the banister since its wobble only elevated my nerves. Shot through with adrenaline and warding off a childish panic, I aimed for the kitchen, where we'd spent time earlier.

No Mordecai.

My abandoned water bottle remained. Struck with a thought, I crossed the room and opened the antique fridge. It was bare and warm. The light didn't come on. It wasn't even plugged in. I checked the cupboards, peeking in one after another, but found no food.

Fearing he would discover me snooping, I continued the search for Mordecai.

I left the light on in the kitchen, for comfort, and followed a maze of hallways on the main level, calling his name.

He wasn't in the parlor, or any of the other rooms, but considering most were empty, I assumed he didn't live in those parts of the house.

"Where the fuck did you go?"

Already unnerved, our conversation about his uncle came back to me. His fucking kidnapped uncle. Christ, was this real? An important man in a position of authority. Royalty? Armed guards? Correction. *Civilian* armed guards. *It sounds dangerous*, I'd said.

Mordecai hadn't denied my claim.

His words came back to me. *I'll investigate after sundown.*

"Shit."

I peered at the drape-covered window in the parlor, knowing what it would reveal before I pulled it aside. Late October meant the sun went down early. I'd crashed after what was quite possibly the most intense sexual experience of my life.

For hours.

It was after nine.

"Goddammit, Mordecai."

He'd left.

“Tell me you didn’t go alone.”

I drew aside the drapes but saw only my reflection. The world beyond the windowpane, this far outside the city limits and with no streetlight for miles, was too dark to see. I cupped a hand to the glass, squinting. My Jeep remained parked beside the dying fountain, guarded by a crippled angel and surrounded by spindly trees and silence. The rain had stopped, but if there was a moon above, it must have been covered by clouds.

Mill Dam.

Mordecai had gone to Mill Dam to investigate. Alone.

Between the absurdity of his story and the prickling at my nape, I suspected it was more dangerous than he let on. Was this normal? Was Mordecai reckless by nature? I had no idea. I barely knew the guy. Was his role back home one of high-stakes risks? Was he a trained professional?

Who was this man and why did I get the feeling he was not like anyone I’d ever met before?

A sinking dread filled my belly. I’d sent him out there. I’d helped him discover probable locations. Why didn’t I ask more questions? Insist he reach out to the authorities. Why did I so readily go along with everything he said? Why didn’t I demand to help?

Visions of Mordecai suffering violence at the hands of criminals made me wince. Armed guards. Civilian guards. Would they hurt him? Kill him? Had I unintentionally sent him into danger?

I thought of my dad and the selfish phone call that inevitably ended his life. That night could have played out a thousand different ways if I’d made different choices. He would still be alive, and I wouldn’t be rotting in a cesspool of guilt and shame.

You’re not to blame, my mother frequently said.

But I was. It was my stupidity that put him in danger.

And I’d done it again.

“Fuck.”

I barreled out the door and tumbled into the Jeep, stuffing my keys in the ignition before I’d buckled my seatbelt. The tires kicked up gravel as I threw it in reverse and performed an erratic turn, skidding a donut and missing the edge of the fountain by less than a foot.

When did Mordecai leave? How long had he been gone?

Was he on foot? Did he call a cab?

Why didn’t I wake up when he left me alone in bed? I was a light sleeper by nature, yet I had dropped like a stone in a lake and didn’t resurface for fucking *hours*. I never napped that long or that hard, and I’d never woken up with such a hazy, disoriented mind.

Since I was on the east side of the Sydenham, I aimed for the pedestrian trail off 5th Street that would take me to Mill Dam. Even as I drove, the entire scenario of kidnapped uncles and dangerous extractions seemed so utterly unreal that by the time I made it to my destination, I was convinced the whole thing was a dream.

Including Mordecai.

I must have caught a flu or had a fever. I was bedridden. Hallucinating. It would explain the constant haze and bizarre episodes I couldn’t quite remember. It would explain Mordecai’s eccentricities.

Yet my ass pleasantly ached, reminding me that I’d been fucked to within an inch of my life only a few hours ago.

I parked on the side of the road and got out, glancing at the overcast sky, absent of stars and moon. Enough light pollution from streetlights, houses, and distant businesses left the city swathed in a dim yellow glow.

I looked around for Mordecai. It was a quiet neighborhood, and no one was about. A few houses showed signs of occupancy. Families went about their nightly rituals. Nothing unusual.

Mordecai had mentioned that wherever his uncle was being held, it would be well protected. So, logically, anyone I came across might be dangerous.

Or they might be the average Joe out for an evening stroll. Who knew?

Innocent people walked this path all the time. It was part of a scenic nature trail. My presence wouldn’t be any more or less suspicious than anyone else’s.

I followed the trail between the trees, the ground carpeted in fall leaves, wet from the recent rain. Rushing water from the flowing dam sounded in the distance. When the path opened at the Sydenham, I stalled.

A heavy mist lay on the water, thick and impenetrable. It spilled over the banks and curled along the bases of the nearby trees. It rose as high as the bridge, licking tendrils across the footpath. Downriver, the mist seemed to dissipate. It was like a giant cloud had fallen from the sky over one particular area.

In all my years in Owen Sound, I’d never seen fog this dense or localized. It moved like smoke, hindering my view as I scanned the other side of the

river. The access point to the concrete dam's facility was on the far side of the bridge. Was Mordecai there? Did he find what he was looking for? Was he in danger?

I wanted to shout his name but feared drawing attention to myself. No one seemed to be around, but that didn't mean I was alone.

Moving slowly, I crossed the bridge, peering over the edge on occasion to admire the misty veil hanging over the water. The quality of the vapor seemed wrong somehow, but I couldn't pinpoint why.

On the far side, I scanned what I could of the trees and bank, seeking anyone who might be lurking in the area, but mostly hoping to find Mordecai.

Not a soul in sight. Silence, but for the rushing water and rustle of wind in the drying leaves that clung to the branches overhead.

Nerves on edge, I left the path and descended the slope to the concrete structure that was part of the dam. The solid steel door was locked. No sign of tampering. I pressed my ear to its cold surface and strained to hear if anyone was inside. Nothing but the whine of mechanical gears and the hum of electricity.

"You shouldn't be here."

I jumped and cried out at the sharp tone. My heart leaped into my throat, and I spun, planting my back against the door.

Beyond the path, among the trees and framed by mist, was Mordecai. In his black clothes, he blended with the night.

"You scared the shit out of me."

"You shouldn't have followed me. It's unsafe." The comment dripped contempt.

"All the more reason to bring me along."

He moved toward me on silent feet. The fog bent and moved around him, licking his shoes and curling up his legs like a lover's caress. Like it was sentient.

"He's not in there. This isn't the correct location." Mordecai glanced warily at the river, his spine rigid and jaw tight. "It's all wrong," he muttered, more to himself than to me.

"How do you know?"

Transfixed on the Sydenham, he sighed—whether in frustration at my coming after him or his failed mission, I wasn't sure.

“In the forty minutes I’ve been here, I’ve encountered two joggers, a man walking his dog, teenage lovers, and a group of ten- or eleven-year-old boys who’d snuck off to smoke cigarettes, likely pilfered from a parent or older sibling. The path is commonly used. A practical thoroughfare. I haven’t seen a single suspicious character who might be guarding a secret. He’s not here.”

Mordecai’s attention never left the water where the fog noticeably thinned right before my eyes, offering glimpses of the opposite bank. I was no expert in weather phenomena, but there was something unnatural in the way it shifted and moved. In the sheer rapidity of its exit.

In a matter of minutes, the thick fog vanished. The final tendrils danced around Mordecai’s feet before evaporating into the night as though they had never been there at all.

I wanted to comment on the phenomenon, ask if he’d seen it too and thought it bizarre, but when I returned my gaze to Mordecai, I was met with a firm resolve that stole my voice.

“Go home, Ensley. This is not your business, and I won’t see you hurt.”

I huffed derisively, abandoning the steel door and stalking up the small embankment to join him on the path. For a long moment, I held his gaze, challenging his decision.

Mordecai didn’t back down.

We’d shared something intimate a few hours ago. Maybe it didn’t mean anything to him, and that was fine. I hadn’t gone looking for promises, and it wouldn’t be the first time I’d felt something for a guy who didn’t return the sentiment. Casual was a sadly prominent nuance of gay dating. I had yet to meet anyone who wanted to get serious, but that was my luck.

Either way, serious or casual, it would be a cold day in hell before I let someone I knew, someone I had developed feelings for, venture into danger. I had enough on my conscience for one lifetime. I would not suffer another loss, knowing it was in my power to step up and help.

Mordecai didn’t reiterate his demand, but he didn’t waver. The Bordeaux color of his eyes was lost in the night. They gleamed almost ebony under the trees and with the same intensity that had sucked me in and held me prisoner on day one.

“Ensley—”

“No,” I whispered. “You don’t get to send me away. I don’t know what’s going on, who your uncle is, or why you’ve been sent to find and rescue

him. I don’t understand why the police can’t be called or what kind of people you’re up against. But I’m helping. That’s nonnegotiable. You can tell me as much or as little as you feel is necessary, but I’m not letting you do this alone.”

“It’s not a game.”

“Too bad because my priest has skills that would have been an asset.”

“You don’t understand.”

“Nope. Maybe not. But if something happens to you…” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

Visions of flashing lights and the piercing wails of sirens filled my head. Screams. Crunching metal. The antiseptic scent of a hospital. Soft organ music. Sobbing. Burning incense tickling my nose. The judgmental glares of a whole town, silently pointing fingers at me, me, me.

Mordecai’s shoulders came down. His determination slipped. Stepping forward, he tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear before cradling my jaw. “Stubborn human,” he mumbled. “It’s not your fight.”

“I care about you. I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Oh, Ensley.” He cupped my face with his other hand and rested his forehead to mine. “I’ve made a mistake with you.”

“No.” A pull I couldn’t fight surfaced, an untethered yearning to crawl under his skin and burrow into his heart. Become part of him.

“I should not have allowed this.”

“Why?”

“Because it can only end badly.”

Was he talking about his uncle or us? I didn’t know anymore and was afraid to ask.

He kissed me, and my mind shattered into a million pieces. The fog that had lain so ominously over the Sydenham only moments ago filled my brain, erasing all thoughts and cares. Something was wrong with me. My skin felt too loose. My mind felt too sloppy. But subconsciously I understood that with Mordecai’s mouth on mine, the taste of him on my tongue, and his cool hands cradling my cheeks ever so gently, I had nothing to fear.

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13

Mordecai

“I’VE MADE A MISTAKE.”

I stood in the heart of Greenwood Cemetery among marble headstones with brain-rotting technology pressed to my ear. Cell phones were ghastly things.

A stretch of roiling clouds filled the night sky, thick and oily, blocking the moon and darkening the landscape. Every now and then lightning flashed, painting the world with strokes of artificial daylight. A light drizzle left the monuments with an unfitting polished glimmer.

It was after midnight.

I was alone.

“What do you mean?” my best friend cooed.

Disclosing my failures, especially to Cristofer, left a rotten taste in my mouth, but he was the only one who would understand. He was the only one who truly knew me.

“I wrongfully enlisted the help of a human, but… I’ve said too much about my mission. He’s… determined to be involved.”

“I’m sorry. How is this an issue? Duckie, have you forgotten how to manipulate the mortals?” Cristofer chuckled. “Honestly, Mordecai. You don’t get out enough. Learn to spread your wings. Play with the mice you catch. It’s easy. It’s fun. Mortals are feeble-minded. Spongy brains. Easily toyed with. Are you depleted? Is that it? You haven’t been gone that long.”

“I’m not, and I know my options, but… I…”

The extended pause, where I failed to explain, caught Cristofer's attention. I didn't have to see his wicked grin to know it was there, creasing his eyes and flashing his teeth.

"Oh my. There's a *but*. Do tell."

"There's nothing to tell. It was stupid. A moment of weakness."

"A moment of weakness? You? Oh, dear brother. I've known you for over three hundred years, and I've never known you to experience *moments of weakness*. You're so stuck in your ways, it honestly shocks me when you submit to your primal needs. Tell me, duck. Have you been playing with your food?"

"You know I haven't. I'm not you."

Another laugh. "I dare say not. You're the only one of our kind who doesn't seem to enjoy the rush of a feed. Strictly a lover then? So, who is he?"

I said nothing, unable to conjure a retort or rebuttal, unwilling to reduce Ensley to a mere triviality. I'd called Cristofer for a reason. He was a friend and confidant, one of the few I had. He'd taken human lovers over the years. He'd turned a few, only for them to lose interest once they were no longer mortal.

"He's…" But I couldn't find the right adjective to describe Ensley without earning ridicule.

"Go on."

"You'll laugh."

"I won't."

"He's… honest. Down-to-earth. Funny. Pure. Innocent."

"Human?"

I couldn't respond.

"Aw, Mordecai. They're all like that."

"No. He's different."

"He's not. What he does is make you long for the past."

Is that so wrong? I wanted to ask, but Cristofer kept talking, and the moment passed.

"Have you gone and corrupted him? Is that the problem? You're worried about his mortal soul. His virtue?"

"Could you stop being an arse? I've put him in danger. I've told him too much. He's determined to help. Thinks he's going to protect me."

Cristofer howled. "Oh, such a stupid mortal."

“Stop calling him that.”

“I won’t. Facts are facts, and unless you are willing to bring him into our world—”

“Never.”

“Then the point is moot. You’ve known the answer all along. I don’t see why you’re acting ignorant. Remove his memories and be done with him. There will always be another.”

“I haven’t located Iulian yet. Ensley’s the only person who can help me.”

Cristofer *tsk*ed. “You don’t need the human to assist you in locating the elder. It’s a small city, Mordecai. Where do you think you are? Jakarta? You’re making excuses.”

Was I? I pinched my eyes closed and bowed my head. Of course I was. What I wanted was for Cristofer to tell me how to make the feelings stop. Men in the past never had names. They filled a need and vanished come dawn. If they had jobs or families or hobbies or friends, I knew nothing of it. It was easier that way.

But Ensley. Ensley was flesh and bone. He had all those things and more. He laughed and joked and took men on dates to restaurants and museums.

“You know what I think?” Cristofer said, his tone demure.

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“I think you aren’t finished having your fun. I think, for once in your immortal life, you’ve found something to your taste.”

“I will not feed from him.”

“That isn’t what I meant, although I highly suggest trying it sometime. You might be surprised and decide you like it.”

Damn Cristofer. I knew before I placed the call what I had to do, but I wanted him to talk me out of it. Find me another way. Knock some bloody sense into me. By the dam, it had taken a Herculean effort to implant a suggestion into Ensley’s head and encourage him to go home. I should have blurred his mind completely, removed every memory of me and what we’d shared. I could have turned my back for good.

But every time I closed my eyes, I saw him sprawled on my bed in complete surrender. Brimming with trust. His moans and whimpers and fiery touch. The feel of his racing heart under my palm. His mouth. His taste.

The way he held me afterward, like I meant something. Like I was real and alive and human.

I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t take his memories and turn my back. Not yet. I wanted more time. Ensley might go on with life oblivious to all we’d shared, but I would carry every moment with me forever. One night wasn’t enough.

Torn between duty and selfish indulgence, the latter had won. I’d left his mind intact. For now.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Cristofer said into the silence.

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry, Mordecai.”

I didn’t have to ask why he was sorry. The fate of our kind was in jeopardy. If left unchecked, Valerius would unknowingly destroy us in his quest for power. It was up to me to return Iulian to the throne.

Ensley was a kink in that plan. Unless I was willing to bring him into our world, I would eventually need to let him go, and there was no better time than the present. Before he got hurt.

I let Cristofer go and wandered the rows of tombstones as sheet lightning filled the sky at intervals. Wet and miserable, I considered our conversation. The sharp tang of ozone filled my nose.

I’d spent an hour at the cemetery before making the call home. Iulian was not in the mausoleum. Like the cement room beneath the dam, it was empty.

Over the following hours, I took an aerial view of the city, noting secluded locations and venturing close enough to get a read of the land. I stopped at warehouses, the grain elevator, and several parks with structures that piqued my interest. For a time, I watched a few people, out on the town for one reason or another in the middle of the night, and eavesdropped on their conversations.

Was I avoiding the inevitable? Absolutely.

At three, mood sufficiently deflated, I stood on the empty street outside Ensley’s flat, peering at the dark windows above the comic book store. It shouldn’t be this hard. I’d only known him a week. A week more than any other man in four centuries. Yet, he had sucked me into his orbit, and I yearned for more, more, more.

Enough was enough.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I climbed the stairs and slipped through the thin crack between the locked door and the frame into his living space. It smelled of chamomile tea and missed opportunities. I wandered

around, taking in the pieces of Ensley's life and building the framework for a story I could take with me.

A battered laptop with gaming stickers situated on the coffee table. A pad of paper beside it, the top page full of scribbled notes and roughly sketched diagrams I could only assume were part of a quest.

A ceramic mug with a puddle of tea inside. A partly eaten bag of crisps. Headphones.

Sports socks, balled and discarded.

A pile of toppled brown folders sat askew on the high-top table, each containing a paper-clipped photograph of a house in the corner. Another notepad. Same scratchy scrawl, only that time pertaining to his work.

Dirty dishes in the sink: an assortment of cutlery, a bowl with residual milk and a few lone Cheerios, several mugs, and a plate with what looked like a smear of ketchup.

Empty cans of bubly, strawberry flavored, lined the counter beside a few empty cardboard food containers. For recycling?

A Japanese-style teapot on the back element of the stove. I lifted the lid, finding the dregs of already steeped leaves in the fine mesh strainer. Chamomile.

The fridge held several magnets and a calendar. Appointment slots for a dozen or more house showings, penned on specific dates. A circle around the thirty-first. *Dad's memorial service*, it read in the center.

Beside the calendar, a photograph of two people. An older man and a much younger Ensley. The man had graying hair and laugh lines. His youthful eyes shone bright, despite being roughly in his fifties. The boy carried a petulance that went with his age. Despite the attitude, teenage Ensley leaned against his father, suffering the side hug with grace.

They shared many similarities.

I thought of my family. My father and mother, the brothers and sisters who didn't live past childhood. Of Abeta who did, only to die bringing life into the world. I thought of grit under fingernails after a hard day's work. Of the rich scent of stewed meat cooking over the fire. Of Mother's silent concentration as she darned socks. The crack of an axe cutting wood. Sweat in my eyes. Dad collecting the pieces and lining them up at the back of the barn. Robust stacks that would take us through another winter. The bleat of sheep. The cluck of chickens. The snuffling grunts of Fat Lizzy, Father's cherished pig—Mother hated the beast.

Wind in the grass and the clop of horses down the lane.

My father's hand on my shoulder. *Give me a hand loading the cart before you go?*

Sure thing, Pops.

All of it gone.

I wanted to wake Ensley and tell him that missing your loved ones got easier with time, but did it?

Some days the pain was a fresh beesting.

I stood in Ensley's flat, taking in the aspects of his life, imagining things that could never be.

Over the years, I'd seen many of my kind take human lovers without changing them, but I'd also seen the devastation it left behind. The humans aged and eventually died, leaving the cursed one to suffer for an eternity.

That would not be me.

I abandoned the kitchen and headed for the ladder to the loft where Ensley slept. His soft breathing remained even and deep as I crested the landing. The low ceiling turned the space into a private alcove. Intimate.

Ensley lay sprawled on his stomach, arms bracketing his head. His hair, free from its elastic, tumbled over the pillow and covered his face. It was a cozy room. A double bed that sat close to the ground, a long dresser, three drawers high and two drawers wide, topped with a vanity mirror.

I hesitated out of instinct, a jolt of discomfort making me want to look away and dodge back down the ladder. The distress was entirely intrapersonal. After four hundred years, the incongruity of an absent reflection remained unsettling. I couldn't get used to it.

Ignoring the mirror, I focused on my task. On Ensley.

Standing at the foot of the bed, I watched him sleep for several long minutes, knowing subconsciously how creepy my actions were. The gentle rise and fall of his back. The whisper of his breath with each exhale.

"It might have been good," I said into the silence. "There's so much more I wish I knew about you. So much more I wish I could explain. Forgive me."

I circled to the side of the bed and crouched, carefully moving the hair off his face so I could take him in one last time. His lashes fluttered, but I didn't panic. If he woke, he woke. This was goodbye. What I wouldn't have given for a different life.

For no explainable reason, words tumbled from my mouth unchecked. “My father’s name was William. I was always told we looked alike. Tall and wiry. Blond as maple wood or pine. Mother said it was more like the golden wheat in the field. We shared eyes like sapphires, father and I, although you wouldn’t know it now.

“He was the village carpenter.” I extended my hands and studied my unblemished palms, once toughened and worn like his. “He was mostly known for his solidly built furniture, but he could do magnificent things with wood and a blade too. He taught me to whittle when I was twelve. I wasn’t very good at it. Abeta, my sister, would laugh at my attempts. Mother would scold her and tell her to fetch water for washing before she earned a swat.

“We farmed a small piece of land in what used to be rural Lambeth, on the south bank of the Thames.”

I envisioned the dock and boardwalk, the restaurants and high rises blocking the horizon. “It’s different now. I was born in 1570 and died twenty-seven years later. A devastating plague swept across England that year. I wasn’t there for it, but it killed those who remained of my family. My maternal grandparents, Mother, and Father. Abeta died a few years earlier. My other siblings didn’t live past childhood.

“I was with my uncle, fighting in France to recapture the city of Amiens from Spanish forces. I don’t remember why I wanted to be a soldier, but I remember father hating it and cursing his brother for putting the idea in my head. I was injured while fighting. Terribly injured. I should have died.”

I huffed a wet, sad laugh. “I *did* die, only I didn’t know it at the time. There was a lot I didn’t know.”

My eyes burned. Their tear ducts no longer functioned as they should. It was all part of the curse. I lowered my head and closed my eyes, warding off the memories, longing, and regret. It wasn’t like I could have saved my family had I stayed home, but at least I would have joined them in death. We would have remained together.

“Mordecai?”

Ensley’s scratchy voice drew me upright.

He shuffled to his side and rose on an elbow, confusion painting his features. “What are you doing here? How did you get in?”

“I didn’t mean to wake you. Lie back.”

He did, seeming reluctant, yet unable to resist the tiny subconscious nudge. I fixed the covers for something to do, but he stopped me and reached out, touching my hand. “You look sad.”

“I am.”

“Mordecai—”

“Ensley.” I needed to stop the momentum and do what I came to do. “Close your eyes and sleep, love. It’s late.”

“Are you leaving?”

“I have to.”

“Stay. Lie with me.”

The request was almost too much to resist. I could have one more night. Here. Now. But every shared moment would be one more painful memory I could never erase.

“I can’t.”

Before he could conjure more objections, I kissed him. It was sweet and tender and nowhere near long enough, but when I pulled back, his eyelids fluttered closed.

“That’s it. Sleep.” I stroked his slackening cheek. “It will all be right in the morning.”

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14

Ensley

SUNDAY MORNING, I WOKE up sick. Rather, I woke up with queer sensations that I could only attribute to being unwell. My entire body was heavy and tired, muscles aching. I couldn’t think in a straight line to save my life, and random bouts of unexplained panic made my heart flutter.

Concerned I had forgotten a house showing, I double- and triple-checked my day planner and calendar, but that wasn’t it. The feeling persisted. I had a nagging suspicion I was supposed to be somewhere or do something.

I move sluggishly around the apartment, disoriented and confused, while flashes of a half-remembered dream tickled the back of my brain. All night, I’d suffered what felt like hallucinations. Visions so vividly real one minute and utterly absurd the next. I must have been fevered. It had that same quality, like when I was sick as a kid.

Every time I tried to focus on the content of the weird dream-like visions, a headache throbbed in my temples.

Concluding I was unwell, I took a couple of Tylenol, made a chamomile tea with lemon and honey, and put myself back to bed, hoping to clear the cotton cloud from my brain. For a time, I stared at the ceiling, trying to relax my brain. For reasons I couldn’t explain, I kept thinking about a disgruntled pig and plagues of the 1500s. Was it lore from a recent game I’d played? But no, I couldn’t think of one with those dynamics. Part of a quest? I didn’t think so. Not that I could recall.

Eventually, I drifted off to sleep.

I woke in the early afternoon to my phone ringing. Groaning, I rolled over and found the device on the bedside table. Mom's name appeared on the screen, so I answered with a rough, "Hey. What's up?"

"Were you sleeping? Good grief, Ensley, it's nearly three o'clock."

"I'm feeling off."

"Oh no. Are you sick?"

"Maybe. Not sure. Why are you calling?"

She *tsk*ed. "I'm your mother. Do I need an excuse?"

"No. Sorry." I scrubbed my face and sat up, a lingering fog still turning my thoughts soupy. I squinted at the bright sunlight shining through the loft window. The rain had passed, and it seemed like a nice day.

"Well. I did call for a reason, actually." The prying curiosity in her tone put me on edge. Shit. This would be about Dad's memorial, and I was running low on excuses. "How was your second date?"

"I… What? Date?" I prodded my temple as I got to my feet, searching for a hoodie to throw on since the room was chilly. What the hell was she talking about?

"Don't be coy. Your handsome European with the sexy accent. What's his name again? It's so unusual. It won't stick in my brain."

I stalled in the middle of my bedroom as she spoke, her words not landing or computing on any level. Second date? Handsome European?

I've lived all over Europe. Mostly in Romania, but I've spent time in Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, Russia… My accent is likely muddled.

I dropped heavily onto the end of the bed, unsure where the random snippet of remembered conversation came from, but I heard it clearly in a soft, mildly accented tenor voice. No matter how hard I strained, I couldn't put a face to the memory, nor did I recognize the speaker's lilt.

"Ensley?"

"I, um…" A date. A second date. But no. I didn't go out last night. I… had no recollection of my evening. "Can I call you back? I'm… I need to wake up. I'm a bit nauseous."

"Sure, sweetie. I'm worried about you."

"I'm fine. Really. I just… need a shower and…"

"Oh, Ensley. Are you hungover? Is that it? Did you and your man overindulge? I thought those years were behind you."

"No." Had I been drinking? "It's nothing like that, Mom. I swear." And who was this man? My mouth didn't have the pasty quality of a night of

binging, but my memory was definitely full of holes. “Give me an hour.”

After getting off the phone, I stumbled down the ladder and pivoted in place, unsure where to put myself. Date? What was she talking about? Did I tell her I was going on a date?

I accessed my recent text thread with Mom and scrolled to see if there was any mention of a date. Nothing. Since my mother and I communicated mostly through email and phone chats, I wasn’t surprised.

As I was about to toss my phone aside and hit the shower, the conversation thread at the top of the contact list caught my attention. My most recent text exchange had been with a guy named Mordecai. Something about the name prickled the hair on my arms. A wash of déjà vu stole my breath. I knew the name. It was both familiar and not.

“Mordecai.” I tasted it on my tongue and couldn’t deny an acquaintance with those three syllables. “Mordecai.”

I opened the thread, but the content was minimal. A single conversation. The planning of a date. Dinner. I checked the timestamp. Friday night. Eight o’clock. I’d picked him up.

I have restrictions.

A spark of memory. *Pale hands holding a wine glass. A New York strip. Steaming mugs of hot chocolate. Empty cupboards in an antique kitchen.*

“Mordecai,” I said again, studying the text conversation while trying to decipher the image of a jigsaw puzzle with no picture when I hardly had any pieces.

Unnerved at the black hole in my memory, I left my phone on the high-top table and took a cold shower, figuring it would help clear the cobwebs, only to discover more mysteries once I was naked.

I’d been on PrEP for years. It took the pressure out of hookups. Some guys hated suiting up, and to be honest, it was a tiresome argument. As a vers who often found myself bottoming, I was familiar with the results of a morning after and discovering residual cum in my ass.

What had never happened was not remembering the guy who fucked me. I was not a heavy drinker. I’d never been blackout drunk. If I took a guy home or landed in his bed, I *always* remembered it the following day. Sometimes with a wash of regret, but that was my problem.

I showered mechanically, trying not to panic that I’d had sex the previous night and didn’t remember it. A date? Was this Mordecai a predator? Did he slip something into my wine at dinner?

A *second* date, Mom had said. That didn’t fit. If a guy was going to do something like that, he wouldn’t wait until a second date. He wouldn’t exchange phone numbers and leave a trail of texts.

But…

What happened on the first date, and why couldn’t I remember it, either?

Something wasn’t right.

I got out of the shower and dressed in joggers before finding my phone and calling Mars.

“Did I mention having a date with a guy named Mordecai?”

Mars laughed. “I knew you two would hook up. I told Zig it was only a matter of time.”

Unsure how to process that statement and more confused than ever, I hung up, paced, and gnawed a thumbnail. Mars called back, but I didn’t answer. He sent a few texts, but I ignored them.

I went through the motions, robotically making tea and a piece of toast.

When my phone rang and Ziggy’s name showed on the screen, I relented. “Ignore Mars. I’m talking nonsense. I’m not feeling well.”

“Rough night?”

“I… yeah.” It was the safer response. Cautiously, I added, “You’ve met Mordecai?”

“Dude, we all met Mordecai. You brought him to DnD last week. But seriously, are you okay?”

I stretched my brain, trying to recall Wednesday night. Yes. He was there. I had the vague impression of another person in my apartment aside from Ziggy, Mars, and Poet. Blond, pale, and stunningly gorgeous.

“Did you meet his ghosts?” Ziggy asked.

I snapped to attention and frowned. “Ghosts?”

“At the estate. Did you spend the night? Not sure I’d have the balls, even with a hottie in bed to distract me.”

“The estate?”

Ziggy’s playful banter vanished. “Ensley, what’s wrong with you?”

“Fever. I’m sick. I have to lie down.”

I hung up and stared at my phone and the name Mordecai in the list of contacts.

Without considering what I might say, I hit connect. It rang endlessly. No answering service.

Defeated, I tossed the phone on the coffee table and resumed pacing the apartment. Ghosts. The estate? The Branvilla estate had a reputation for being haunted, not that I believed in that shit. It was also on the market, and —

I stalled. No. It wasn't on the market. Dany had asked me to show the place and finish the paperwork.

I need you to close a deal.

The money has already gone through.

It's a matter of getting a signature and handing over the keys.

Overseas somewhere.

Hasn't seen the place… a walk-through.

The gentleman is supposed to be there around eight.

In a flash, I recalled driving out there in the dark. A crumbling fountain. Hauntingly dark windows. Empty rooms. A sense of abandonment.

A king-sized bed. Heavy, blackout curtains. A cold breeze. Hands all over me. Fire and ice. Bruising kisses.

I can feel your heart. It's beautiful.

I jolted at the sudden flash of memory, grappling for more, urgently hanging on to the bits I'd collected before they drifted away.

When nothing more came, I finished dressing, snagged my keys, and raced out the door.

Sitting in front of Branvilla estate, with sunlight bleeding through the canopy of fall leaves and dappling the ground, random and disjointed pieces of the puzzle returned.

As crisp October air brushed my cheeks, I remembered the impression of cold fingers on my skin.

"Mordecai," I whispered, letting his name penetrate the fog that had settled over my brain.

Fog.

Fog over water.

Mill Dam.

Why was that significant?

I approached the front door, the brittle autumn leaves under my boots crunching and joining the chorus of birdsong echoing through the forest. I peered along the side of the mansion and recalled walking its perimeter in search of an outbuilding or shed.

He’d appeared out of nowhere. No warning. Nothing to announce his arrival. I’d never figured out how he arrived that night. No car. No taxi. In the quiet, I would have heard the sound of an engine.

No luggage.

“Mordecai.” I repeated it over and over, fearing I might forget.

I scanned the trees, unsure what I expected, then said his name louder. “Mordecai!” The only answer was the chirping birds.

I rapped lightly on the door, knowing the place was too vast for sound to travel far, but there was no buzzer. When I didn’t get a response, I tried again, pounding with a fist.

I couldn’t explain why I did it, but I reached for the doorknob and turned. It yawned open, revealing an eerily dark and stagnant hallway beyond.

No sound. No sign of life.

“Hello?”

No reply. Not even an echo. It was like the house took my words and swallowed them.

“Mordecai?”

Nothing.

I had no good reason to enter, except to fill the blanks in my mind, which seemed reason enough. If he was around, he could answer some questions because clearly we knew each other.

Intimately.

Although I could now remember showing the house, my interactions with Mordecai were muddled. Disconnected. I couldn’t fully draw his image on the inside of my eyelids. He was a series of impressions. Emotions. Feelings.

The stirring in my chest and burning need to reconnect these severed wires suggested he meant something to me, and not knowing why I couldn’t remember was infuriating… and mildly concerning.

The interior of the mansion felt familiar. With a heavy sense of déjà vu, I wandered to the parlor and fumbled for the light switch. With the room illuminated, I noted the arrangement of furniture. The painting of a man over the fireplace. The bookshelves and piano. Heavy drapes hung over the window, and I somehow knew without looking that all the windows were covered in the same fashion, holding the sunny fall day at bay.

The settee triggered a memory, and for an instant, I tasted fall rain and morning dew. A kiss so tender and invigorating, my lips tingled with the

impression of a half-remembered moment.

Another memory stirred, but I couldn't pin it down. Subconsciously, I fondled the St. Christopher pendant I wore around my neck.

In the kitchen, I discovered a map of Owen Sound sprawled on a worktop table, a bottle of water beside it. More of the fog cleared as bits and pieces of conversation came back to me. We were looking for something.

Someone.

Are you royalty?

In a manner of speaking.

I glanced around as though the answer might lie in the details of the room.

I'll investigate after sundown.

Drawn to the fridge, I opened the door. Empty.

I opened the surrounding cupboards. Empty.

Another jolt of déjà vu. I'd done this before. Sought answers to…

"Restrictions. You have food restrictions. What does that mean?"

A steak restaurant. New York strip. Hot cocoa.

The basement door caught my attention. I stared at it for a long time. At the antique lock. When I tried to open it, I couldn't. During the tour, I didn't have a key that fit.

I wandered the rest of the house. The majority of the rooms were empty, unlived in. In the bathroom on the second floor, another memory slammed into me so violently, I had to lean on the doorframe to regain my balance.

The mirror. The missing mirror.

During the tour, I was convinced I'd witnessed a ghostly presence in that mirror. It had shaken me to the core, but no matter how hard I'd racked my brain, I could never quite figure out what I'd seen.

It was because I hadn't *seen* anything, and that was the fucked-up part. Mordecai had crossed in front of the mirror, and I *hadn't seen anything*. He'd cast no reflection. Like he wasn't there at all.

Like he was a…

"No. Impossible. Grow the fuck up."

But on the tail of one memory came another. The parlor. Mordecai had lit a fire. I'd admired the shadow cast by the grill but registered something was wrong about the impression on the floor and had been unable to put my thumb on it at the time.

Mordecai, who had stood before the flames, should have cast a shadow, but he didn’t.

Bordering hysteria, the breath exploded from my lungs in fits and starts. I squatted a moment and braced a hand on the floor as I suffered a bout of vertigo. The mansion felt both enormous and suffocating. The walls too close. The air too stale. The shadows too deep.

How many times had I listened to Mars and Ziggy talk about the Branvilla estate and how it was haunted? How many times had I laughed as they recounted tales of their childhood, of sneaking onto the property to explore, and swearing they’d encountered evil spirits?

“But it was all bullshit. Childish adventures. Stories.”

I’d gone to the mansion on Dany’s request to show the house. I remembered it clearly. Had the man who appeared out of nowhere, the man with whom I’d wandered rooms and subsequently shared relations, been a ghost?

“No.”

Memories flooded back like a broken dam. The brain fog vanished in its entirety in the same fashion and with the same rapidity as it had done at Mill Dam.

Tendrils of fog licking at his feet. I’d never seen him eat or drink. Icy skin, pale as an Arctic landscape. Flaming red lips. Burgundy eyes like a rich glass of Bordeaux. The way he walked and never made a sound, even on creaky wooden floors.

Stumbling to my feet, legs shaky, I spun and faced the bedroom, then turned toward the stairs, unsure which way to go. *Run*, my brain screamed. *Get out!* But I wouldn’t. I couldn’t.

“Where are you?” I shouted, feeling ridiculous, yet more and more certain the longer I sat with it that ghosts were real and one was toying with my head.

“Mordecai!” My heart pounded as I shone my flashlight in both directions, anticipating his arrival, yet fearing it, too. “Show yourself.”

He didn’t appear, and after several long minutes of anxious waiting, I aimed for the bedroom, throwing the door open with such force that it collided with the wall. First, I stormed to the window and tore back the curtains, drenching the room in crisp autumn sunlight.

The canopy bed and its messy covers told a story of debauchery. Mordecai had fucked me in that bed. I remembered it. The surreal quality of

our coming together. The intensity. Burgundy eyes staring down at me. Luscious kisses that I couldn’t get enough of. Sensations like I’d never felt before.

My logical mind screamed and thrashed and yelled for me to get a grip. It wasn’t real. It wasn’t possible. I was losing it. A better explanation existed, and if I looked hard enough, I would find it.

But no.

No. I was definitely sick. This was a horrible fever dream, and when my temperature came down and I was lucid, I would laugh at the stress-induced nightmare.

Bolting from the room, I raced down the hallway, clomped down the unsafe stairs two at a time, and burst into the bright light of day, gasping cold air into my lungs. Trembling, I got in the Jeep and slammed the door, tearing away from the house at high speed, determined to put myself to bed. It would all be better in the morning.

But no.

It was not better in the morning.

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15

Mordecai

I WAS WEAK.

Depleted.

It had been three weeks since I'd left home and crossed an ocean to find and rescue my uncle. Three weeks since I'd fed. My kind tended to satiate those cravings nightly or at least several times a week. I'd always been atypical due to self-loathing and stubbornness. The voracious need that crawled under my skin was usually something I could manage. It didn't get unbearable until the four-to-five-week mark.

I once went seven without feeding, but I suffered badly. My skin shriveled and dried, my hair thinned and fell out, and I was unable to use powers, even after resting in my soil. My body had shut down and was moving into a state of torpor when Cristofer dragged me out of my self-imposed isolation and forced me to eat.

I nearly killed the poor human with the frenzied way I'd fed, but knowing my repulsion for causing the change, Cristofer had stopped me in time. Because of that experience, I didn't allow myself to go more than five weeks between feeds. Four was a challenge but doable.

Three was typically a walk in the park, but not when I was supposed to stay at peak health. Not when the intent of my mission was to engage in a potentially dangerous rescue operation against human hunters. Not when using my powers was paramount to success.

The roar of cravings ripping through my system was far more intense than usual and making it hard to concentrate. My abilities were unreliable

and took more effort to use, leaving me weak and vulnerable. Resting recharged me to a point, but it wasn't enough.

Each night after sundown, when I took to the sky or walked the city in search of clues or signs that my uncle was near, I was only half lucid, my concentration shot. I found myself standing outside Ensley's flat more times than not, wondering how I got there and how he was getting on.

I entered a few times in the dead of night to watch him sleep. Often, he wasn't there, a discovery that soured my already rotten gut. Was he with someone else?

When he was present, I lingered beside his bed, regretful at what I'd done, yearning for something I couldn't have. Visiting was a terrible idea considering my voracious urge to feed and the undeniable feelings I'd developed. It only made him harder to resist. Hence, after the first few days, I stopped going inside for fear that I might lose control.

I never, *ever* fed from a lover.

By week two, I abandoned my visits altogether for Ensley's safety. With my abilities compromised, my search for Iulian was proving difficult. If I was to succeed, I would need to give in to the blasted curse.

But not with Ensley.

We couldn't come into contact again. I couldn't risk his memories returning. I'd already struggled to impose a mind block in my weakened state. At this point, it would be impossible.

I took to hanging out in crowded and noisy bars, listening to the conversations of virile youth since they fit the mold for Valerius's stereotypical hunter. Egotistical men with more muscles than brains. Ones that didn't shy away from conflict and dogmatically expressed their opinions to anyone who listened.

With a beer as a prop, I lingered for hours, attending to their complaints about wives, girlfriends, bosses, and children. Sometimes, talk veered to sports as they discussed the latest televised game. A few times, I endured tales of clandestine love affairs or moans about the government, taxes, and inflation.

Cristofer called often, demanding updates. *Seamus is worried*, he'd say. But I had nothing to share, and my miserable attitude made him suspicious.

"Are you depleted?" he asked one night as I closely followed a group of twenty-something men from a restaurant. Their quiet chatter and allusion to matters they didn't openly discuss piqued my interest.

“No.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Can I call you back? It’s not a good time.”

I’d been watching this group of six men for two days. They struck a nerve. Their cryptic conversations raised red flags. Something in their demeanor suggested further activities were on the agenda that evening. If I didn’t focus all my attention on their scattered departure, I would lose them. I was under no illusion that their night was ending at an all-you-can-eat buffet.

“Mordecai—”

“I’m fine, Cristofer. Lay off.”

“You forget I know you.”

“You forget I’m busy. I’ll call you back.”

“Fine. Stay safe, duck,” he said as I disconnected the call.

“Stupid cellular phone,” I muttered, stuffing it into a pocket. I missed the days when keeping tabs on one another was not so easy.

My instinct proved correct. The six men left in separate vehicles but headed in the same direction. Aerial travel was among the simplest of abilities, but the transformation in my weakening state caused extreme exhaustion. Recovery was an issue.

By the time I stood on a secluded part of the Bruce Trail, hidden among trees as the men disembarked from vehicles they’d parked on a vacant side street, I was ready to collapse. It was nearly as bad as standing in the midday sun. My body ached like I suffered from influenza.

I remained out of sight as they traveled single file along the trail before diverging to follow the Sydenham instead of venturing deeper into the forest. Their rambling conversations, restrained and quiet, were too difficult to discern, particularly as they were muffled by their noisy advance across the leaf-encrusted terrain.

It wasn’t long before the men drew to a stop at a rickety dock. A dozen or so planks formed a walkway, jutting from the river’s embankment. Two tall pilings at the end supported the structure. Tied to one was a ramshackle rowboat that might accommodate the six of them without capsizing if they were careful.

A few of them carried backpacks, and without preamble, tossed them into the rowboat before climbing in. Their companions followed suit. Before long, with a man fore and aft taking up oars, they rowed away under the

quarter moon, across the still waters of the Sydenham, and toward a stretch of land in the distance.

I'd registered the eyot during investigative passes over the city but dismissed the small island as unimportant. From above, it seemed deserted. Dense trees. No visible structures. Uninhabited. A forested nook in the middle of the Sydenham River, home to wildlife and nothing more.

Was I wrong?

I remained a comfortable distance from the shore, watching as the men steered toward the eyot. They pulled up next to a similar jerry-built dock and got out. Other men emerged from the forest, and the two groups converged, greeting one another with handshakes and backslaps. I caught the odd burst of laughter, but the distance was too great to hear what they had to say. Perhaps if my powers weren't so compromised.

I hated when Cristofer was right.

They spoke for a time before the second group boarded the boat and made the return trip, while the men I'd been following vanished into the trees.

A secluded eyot away from the general population.

One that appeared uninhabited.

Did I find the location?

It was the best lead I'd discovered since arriving in the country, but I was in no state to further investigate. I couldn't draw fog or mist. I was too depleted to take another form. The river's proximity had a detrimental effect on my nerves.

As the boat approached, I withdrew into the forest and watched, straining to hear every bit of conversation.

The men disembarked and tied the boat.

Laughter.

Good-natured jests.

"Fuck, I'm hungry," one said.

"Are we grabbing a beer?" another asked.

"Take this for a second." The speaker handed a burlap bag to his companion as he climbed from the boat.

As they crossed toward the Bruce Trail, the man opened the bag and dumped its contents into the brush. The repugnant odor of wild garlic made me stumble backward with a strangled cry.

The men must have heard my unquiet retreat and stilled. One man grabbed the arm of another while holding a finger to his lips. No one spoke as they peered into the forest in my direction. If I was at my strongest, I would have twisted their minds into believing they had heard nothing or implanted the suggestion that the clamor was merely an animal, but I couldn't.

Eventually, after several minutes of uncomfortable silence, they continued. I should have followed, but I couldn't, not with any expedience or fastidiousness. Not when the presence of rotting garlic all but confirmed my suspicion.

I should have fed, but my stubbornness won. One more day. Rest would help. I had a potential location, something to explore. It was a start.

The men left from a half dozen vehicles they had parked on a different side street. Once they were gone, I returned to the dock and boat—giving the dumped garlic flowers a wide berth—and debated crossing. The vessel had carried six men both ways, yet I couldn't convince myself to take the short trip across the water.

Another time. When I was stronger. I would have to eat if I was going to succeed in this task. *One more day.* It had become a mantra. *Not yet. A little longer. This isn't suffering.*

I studied the island for hours as the moon took its journey across the sky. Walking the perimeter of the Sydenham, I sought evidence of life or a structure or some kind that I'd missed, but if one existed, I couldn't see it.

At close to four in the morning, I used the last of my energy to fly over it. Still, even at low altitude and with autumn reducing the dense tree cover by half, I saw nothing noteworthy.

I headed home, fearing I would be too depleted if I waited any longer.

Collapsing in front of the mansion, my knees buckled, and I braced a hand on the ground as wave after wave of nausea blurred my vision and hunger cleaved my insides.

I smelled him before he spoke. Chamomile tea, crisp apples, and laundry hung in the summer sun.

"Mordecai?"

My brain was too rotted to question how and why he was there.

Base desires roared to life, and the thin threads of suppression were so frayed, I wasn't sure how much longer I would be able to control them. On impulse, my teeth elongated. Saliva pooled inside my mouth.

I turned and found him standing on the other side of the fountain as though he'd recently emerged from the forest beyond. Wild round eyes full of terror took me in, but he didn't retreat.

How was he here? How could he remember?

It was I who stumbled backward, hand extended. "Stay away."

He didn't listen and advanced, rounding the fountain with slow, cautious steps, his gaze never leaving mine.

"Ensley," I warned. My legs quivered with the urge to pounce. Defying those natural instincts, I tripped on my feet and fell on my ass.

He stopped several feet away when I hissed and bared my teeth, the truth exposed. Raw and unkind. I didn't want to frighten him, but I needed him to stay back. The frenzy wanted unleashing, and my control was slipping. My human side, if one remained, had withdrawn into the dark.

Only three weeks. It had only been three weeks.

"What… What are you?" he whispered.

Instead of answering, I unleashed a banshee-like scream that shattered the night before tearing into the house.

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16

Ensley

MORDECAI WASN’T HUMAN.

This wasn’t news. I’d figured it out days ago.

Before our confrontation outside of the mansion, I’d been unable to properly label him. *Ghost* never fit. People saw him. Interacted with him. He took up physical space and wore a corporeal form. *Ghosts*, if one believed in them, didn’t do that. Although the word *vampire* had tickled my mind a dozen or more times over the past few weeks, it seemed equally unreal. Unfathomable. Impossible. I had refused to accept it, despite the stacking clues.

His elongated eyeteeth, bared in threat, along with all I’d seen during my clandestine investigations seemed to confirm that these creatures that I’d once believed fantastical did indeed exist, and not solely in the pages of fiction or in the coding of a game.

The front door crashed against the wall and rebounded as Mordecai fled. He did not take a minute to close or lock it and raced away like a wounded creature in the presence of a dominant predator.

Me? He feared me? Shouldn’t it be the other way around?

The earsplitting scream echoed through the trees and silenced the nightlife. It raised the hair on my nape and chilled my blood, but it was noise, nothing more.

Mordecai hadn’t launched an attack, despite baring his teeth and warning me to stay back. He’d run.

My heart jackrabbited as I debated what to do. Peppered in sweat, I didn't feel the October cold.

Over the past week, I'd watched Mordecai come and go. He left every evening after sundown and didn't return until the blush of dawn colored the sky. He was early tonight. I hoped there might be time to get inside before he returned. I wanted to hide and learn where he went during the day. See what he did. I had suspicions, but I needed confirmation.

The first time I caught him leaving shocked me. It was three days after I woke with a cloudy brain, unable to remember anything clearly. Three days after I coaxed memories to the surface and pieced together part of the puzzle.

Those memories returned brighter than ever. Determined to confront Mordecai and get answers, I had driven to his house to discover he wasn't at home. Deciding to wait, sitting in the Jeep with the engine off, conserving gas and freezing my nads, Mordecai had appeared.

Not from down the driveway in a taxi, but from within the house.

The house I was certain had been empty.

Startled, I'd tumbled from the Jeep to challenge him when he vanished into a sudden mist. *Poof.* Gone. Stunned and confused, I'd spent an hour pinching myself and circling the area where he disappeared, unable to accept or believe my eyes.

Two weeks had passed, and I'd returned several times.

After witnessing his initial transformation, I exercised caution and no longer drove to the mansion, hiring a taxi instead. I had no idea how he missed the Jeep that first night.

Each time I returned, I remained out of sight and observed his comings and goings, gathering information and growing the balls to face him.

A vampire. Was it possible? How could it be? How did these creatures exist outside literature?

I stared at the gaping maw of darkness beyond the open front door, listening for Mordecai. After the resounding shriek subsided and the stir of nightlife returned, I tucked my fear away, bolstered myself, and went inside.

I'd been through the mansion enough times that I no longer needed a flashlight to get around, but I used one anyway, for sanity. I didn't venture into the parlor. I didn't climb the rickety stairs to the second floor. I went directly to the kitchen and the locked door to the basement, subconsciously

knowing it was where he went during the daylight hours. The cellar. If the lore I'd read was even half true, the location made eerie sense.

It was also the only place in the house I couldn't access. After searching from top to bottom for days and not finding him, despite knowing he was home, it remained the only plausible hiding spot. I no longer pondered how he accessed the subterranean level. A door was no barrier to his kind.

Could I have broken the lock and descended to the lower level? Yes, but I wasn't sure I wanted to see what I suspected might be below.

Instead, I wrenched the drapes open to let in the dawning day, sat on a stool at the worktop table, and waited.

For hours.

Shortly after three, hungry and stiff from sitting too long, my curiosity got the better of me. My mind whipped and buzzed and painted all sorts of wild imaginings of what mysteries lay in the basement.

I paced, stopped at the locked door more than a dozen times, and wiggled the knob in vain. Frustrated and impatient, I yanked open kitchen drawers one after another, seeking a tool of some kind that I might use to break through the obstruction.

Nothing.

Empty, save a single sprung mousetrap and a rusted mound of what looked like steel wool.

In the parlor, I retrieved the iron fireplace poker and tested its weight in my hand. Then, without thinking of the consequences or my safety, I returned to the kitchen and struck the doorknob over and over. I wedged the pointy end between the door and jamb and pried with all my strength. I cursed and shouted and kicked the solid structure to no avail.

I was not quiet or subtle. Mordecai would know my intent. What he might do when I approached was a problem for later. He did not get to fuck me, play with my mind, and walk away.

It took over fifteen minutes, and I nearly gave up. Sheer stubbornness and pent-up anger kept me going. With sweat running in rivulets down my forehead, my palms stinging and blistering, and my arm muscles aching from exertion, I finally managed to shatter the frame enough to disengage the bolt.

I suspected the door had been locked for decades. Swollen in its setting, it squeaked and creaked and protested as I tugged it open, releasing a wall of trapped, stagnant, and musty air from within. Unfinished wooden stairs led

below. The afternoon sun I'd permitted into the kitchen illuminated only the top few steps, but the ones nearer the bottom vanished into oily darkness.

"I'm coming down," I shouted as a warning or threat—I wasn't sure which.

With a bravado I didn't feel, armed with a flashlight app, a fire poker, and mounting indecision, I descended the stairs. The hollow *thunk* of my shoes seemed to soak into the heavy atmosphere, and I couldn't help envisioning a scene from an Indiana Jones movie. A subterranean tomb. Curtains of cobwebs. Insect carcasses. Trip wires. Rolling boulders. Flying blades ready to decapitate me.

I needed to watch less TV.

I kept the light on my feet the entire time, watching my step but also too afraid to pan, thanks to the crippling horrors of my imagination. The final step landed me on a dirt-packed floor. The air was damp and cold with the heavy scent of earth and rot. I shivered and moved the beam around the cellar, chasing away shadows.

The fieldstone walls wicked moisture from the surrounding earth. The low and exposed timbers overhead were too close, and I had to duck lest I smack my head. Old knob-and-tube wiring hung from the beams, dangerously stripped in places. An antique coal chute. A massive, rusted cast-iron broiler that was no longer in use. Rows of wooden shelves, rotting and falling off the wall where they'd been mounted. A handful of stray mason jars gathered dust. Old tools. Stacks of disintegrating newspapers that I assumed were decades old. Overturned wooden crates and rolls of wire.

The area was claustrophobic. I inched forward, taking care not to knock my head on the ceiling. Around a bend, tucked in the far corner, I found him.

He slept in a long wooden box, a simple pauper's coffin without frills and adornments. It looked like a shoddy, cobbled-together assortment of the crates I'd seen at the bottom of the stairs. Roughly built to suit his needs. It was filled with rich, dark soil, and Mordecai lay on top of it on his back as peaceful and still as a dead man in a casket.

My lungs constricted. Visions of my father's funeral came back to me, and a flutter of panic almost made me turn around and run. Squeezing my eyes closed, I vanquished the memory. This wasn't the same, no matter how it looked.

Mordecai was not dead.

Rather, he wasn't dead in the conventional sense of the word, right?

He was… *un*dead.

"Fuck." I couldn't think in those terms. I'd spent years slaughtering undead beasts in games, but those were fantasies.

This was real.

The bass drum of my heart resounded loudly in my ears. It pulsed in my throat and hands and the soles of my feet. I feared it would wake him, but he didn't stir. Approaching with caution, I shone the flashlight over his inert form as every nerve in my body jittered. Eyes closed. Hands folded on his abdomen. Hair more tumbleweed than I'd ever seen it. Skin like porcelain with flawless features more suited to a marble statue, or rather, a figure in a wax museum.

The frenzy I'd witnessed earlier was gone. He looked peaceful. Innocent.

Harmless.

With more than a slight tremble, I reached out and brushed the back of my fingers over his slack cheek. Cold, but as soft and real as human flesh. He didn't react, so I combed order into his hair, flipping the runaway strands off his forehead and reintroducing the part down the side. It lacked Mordecai's usual finesse, but it was the best I could do without gel and a comb.

With care, I pressed my palm to his chest over his heart and concentrated. It shouldn't have surprised me, but the absence of a heartbeat made me jerk my hand away.

"Can you hear me?"

He didn't flinch or respond.

"Mordecai?"

Nothing.

Unsure what to do, knowing from lore that he likely wouldn't wake until sundown, I went back upstairs and retook my spot at the island.

Shortly before seven, I was on my phone, flipping through my FYP on TikTok, when Mordecai materialized in the doorway.

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17

Ensley

I JUMPED TO MY feet with a shout, stool toppling, phone pirouetting off the end of the table and clattering to the floor. Unsure what to expect, I froze, only then questioning my choices. We stared at one another for a long time, neither of us speaking. His calmer demeanor was a contrast to what I'd witnessed earlier, so I didn't panic and run or take up the fire poker—I'd left it close by in case I needed a weapon. Decades of gaming had taught me a thing or two. Never trust the undead, especially when they seduce you into bed and try to wipe your memory.

Mordecai, mildly squinting and looking as befuddled as a child who'd woken from a heavy nap, glanced at the overhead light before taking in the poker and the splintered doorframe. It seemed self-explanatory, so I let him draw his own conclusions. Yes, I'd been downstairs. Yes, I'd seen him in his… bed—I refused to think of it as a coffin.

"Interesting place to sleep," I sputtered, with a boldness I didn't feel. "Especially when you have a perfectly functional king-size bed upstairs, or is that just where you take guys to fuck them?"

Mordecai raked his teeth over his bottom lip, his eyeteeth not nearly as pronounced as earlier. He seemed at a loss for words. As he pressed fingers into his eyes and scrubbed a hand over his face, he mumbled, "It didn't work."

"What didn't work?"

He scowled at the light, examined the uncovered window, and peered at the map still spread on the worktop. "I'm sensitive to light."

“I figured, but it’s staying on. Suck it up, buttercup.”

He didn’t argue. We’d spent plenty of time in lighted spaces. He’d been outside with me during the day. If it was uncomfortable, he could suffer. It might be the only advantage I had.

“What didn’t work?” I asked again.

“You shouldn’t be here, Ensley. You shouldn’t remember.”

I already suspected he tampered with my mind, so I ditched unnecessary questions and went for broke.

“You’re a vampire.”

Mordecai winced. His features pinched in disgust. “I’m not a fan of that designation.”

I huffed humorlessly. “Well, excuse me. Is there a more politically correct term for *vampire*?” The rich sarcasm in my tone was unintentional, but I was both terrified and annoyed, so I didn’t apologize.

Mordecai’s shoulders fell. For a man who’d slept all day, he looked exhausted. “No. The term is… accurate. How much do you remember?”

“Everything.”

My answer seemed to trouble him. He braced his hands on the worktop and leaned heavily like he was about to topple. “I don’t understand.”

“Whatever you did to me only lasted until I spoke with my mother and Mars. After that, things trickled back all on their own. Slowly at first, but I pieced it together. Cute trick, by the way, but if you wanted me to forget, you should have considered how many people in my life already knew about you.”

He hung his head. “Of course. A foolish mistake. I didn’t consider those obstacles. I’m not used to… Usually, when I… Gah, never mind. Cristofer is going to have a heyday with this.”

“Cristofer, Cristofer, Cristofer. Who’s Cristofer? You’ve mentioned him before. Is he your vampire boyfriend back home?”

With a weary sigh, Mordecai straightened. A faint smirk lifted the corner of his mouth. “No, Ensley. Cristofer prefers his lovers more… adventurous.”

I laughed derisively and indicated the map. “So, single-handedly chasing down your kidnapped uncle who is likely protected by civilian armed guards isn’t adventurous enough for him?”

“Is that jealousy?”

“Fuck you, Mordecai. I hate it when guys play games with me, but I hate it more when they mess with my head, and you took it to the *n*th level.”

“And failed.”

“Yes, you did, and if you *ever* try that again…” I floundered and didn’t finish the sentence because if he did try it again, I would never know. He would be sure of it. Whatever mistake he’d made the first time, he wouldn’t make it twice.

His expression seemed to confirm my conclusion.

“Don’t do it again,” I pleaded, suddenly terrified. “You have no right.”

“Relax. I couldn’t right now if I wanted to.”

I didn’t know what that meant or if I believed him, but I took the small reassurance and clung to it.

We were at an impasse, and I wasn’t sure what to say or do. I’d wanted answers, fiercely, but now that Mordecai stood before me, I was at a loss. Overwhelmed by the truth and unsure where to begin or if he would tell me anything.

He moved suddenly, and I startled.

Stilling, he held his hands in a placating manner and pointed at the floor. “Your phone. I’m going to retrieve it.”

Crouching, he picked it up and stared at the dark screen for a long moment. A stitch appeared between his brows. “Blast. We texted.”

“Yes. It was another clue.”

“Technology will be the true death of me.” With a strained smile, he slid the device across the table toward me. “I’m unpracticed.”

“Meaning?” I pocketed the device, unable to lower my guard.

“I lurk on the outskirts of your world, but I don’t ordinarily interact with humans. Not to this extent. It was a necessity I was unprepared for.”

“Necessity? You were using me.” I glanced at the map. “I was nothing more than a means to gather information, wasn’t I?”

“No.” The hurt in his Bordeaux eyes seemed genuine, but I didn’t trust it.

“Bullshit.”

“Okay. Yes. At first, but… I enjoyed spending time with you. Getting to know you. Pretending that… You don’t understand. What we shared… nothing can come of it. I’m not human, Ensley. We live in two different worlds.”

“So, you take me to bed, allow yourself one extraordinary night of pleasure, then erase my memory, and happily walk away?”

“Happily? I agonized over that decision.”

“Sorry if I don’t believe you.”

“I tampered with your mind for your safety. To eliminate temptation.”

“Goddammit, Mordecai.” I kicked the fallen stool, and it clattered into the wall. “Stop talking in riddles.”

“How much plainer can I be? You know what I am. You have enough understanding of my kind that you should have the answer.”

I wasn’t sure I followed, but the niggling suspicion blooming to life in the back of my brain was only nourished by the way he kept tonguing his sharp teeth and scraping his bottom lip. The longer we talked, the more agitated he became. Jerky movements, shuffling his feet, squeezing his hands to fists.

I kept the table between us, not that it would offer much protection if he decided to come after me, but it might slow him down enough that I could grab a weapon. My greater concern was whether he would let me walk out the door.

“What now?” I asked.

“Now, you leave.” He stared miserably at the window, the skin near his eyes pulling into lines, his mouth a tight slit with a downward tilt. I followed his gaze. With the deepening night, the windowpane reflected the kitchen. A perfect mirror image. Worktop table, counters, fixtures, and doors, me included.

No Mordecai.

Unnerved, I turned away and met his gaze.

“It’s not safe for you to be around me, and I have business to take care of that doesn’t concern you.”

“So that’s it? Hi, I’m a vampire. Sorry about the head thing and pretending to like you, but it’s time you fuck off. You never gave a shit about me, did you?”

“You don’t understand.”

“No, I understand perfectly. You’re trying to scare me.” I eyed the map. “Did you find your uncle?”

“Ensley—”

“Answer me,” I shouted.

“I won’t mess with your mind again. I swear on my father’s grave. Please do me the courtesy of not revealing my secret to your friends. It could have dire consequences.”

I didn’t respond and refused to leave.

His weary expression somehow aged him several years. “You’re wrong,” he said.

“About?”

“I do care about you. More than I want to. More than I should. If things were different…” The sorrow in his eyes spoke of longing and regret. “But they’re not, Ensley. Even if I wanted to explore this further, I couldn’t. It wouldn’t be fair. It’s why it’s better to end it now.”

Weeks of anger and confusion bled out of me. In that moment, Mordecai seemed no different than any other man. Tortured by something beyond his control.

Deflated, I rounded the table, but he shuffled away, hands extended.

“No. Don’t approach me.”

I didn’t listen and advanced until I’d backed him against the counter. His steady gaze, a rich Bordeaux I could get drunk on without regret, never left my face. A certain guardedness remained.

“You can’t do this.”

I cradled his face. “Too bad. I am.”

“Ensley—”

“You’ve never hurt me before.”

“And I never would on purpose.”

“Then why should I be afraid?”

“Because… I’m depleted. My control is… hampered.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“I haven’t fed in weeks. The mounting urges are increasingly harder to resist.” He wet his lips, his gaze slipping to the pulse point in my neck. “You’re hard to resist.”

A shiver cascaded along my spine as the pieces clicked. My knowledge of vampires was likely tainted by fiction, but I knew enough to understand their diet.

Restrictions, he’d called it.

No cocoa. No pizza or water. No steak or wine or potatoes. Nothing. A sleight of hand. A conveniently placed napkin.

Vampires drank blood.

“What would happen if you bit me?”

“I wouldn’t.” He tried to wiggle from my grasp, but I held firm.

“Tell me. If you… fed on me—”

“Never. I refuse.”

“Would I die?”

“Not if I maintained control.”

“Would I… become like you?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Explain.”

“Ensley. It doesn’t matter because it will never happen.”

I clamped his jaw in a vice grip and got in his face. The glistening tips of his eyeteeth showed behind his slightly parted lips. I stared at them. Mesmerized. Intrigued. Less afraid than I should have been, considering he could probably overpower me without effort.

“Explain.”

Mordecai closed his eyes as though shutting out the sight of me might help. “A human can withstand a single bite, provided they aren’t drained to the point of death. They can withstand several, in fact, if spaced strategically, allowing them enough time to recover. Repeated feedings on the same victim over the course of several nights, enough that the human cannot rejuvenate and perishes, would cause the change. Or, in a more ritualistic sense, if a human ingests the blood of the cursed. Then, at the moment of death, they would rise in their new form.”

I processed the information, considering every angle and comparing it to what I understood of the lore I’d gathered from popular television shows and games. My curiosity overruled my fear.

“Show me your teeth.”

“Ensley. My control is precariously thin. Please.”

“I trust you.”

“I don’t trust myself. You’re a temptation unlike any other. I don’t know why, but resisting you is proving exhausting.” He clamped a hand around my wrist and pushed me away. That time, I let him.

I released his jaw but remained in his space, resting my hand on his chest like I’d done in the basement. Nothing. No heartbeat.

It took a long moment for Mordecai to return my gaze. So much sorrow reflected back at me. We were close, bodies aligned, if not quite touching.

“Did you mean it? Do you care about me?”

“More than I expected or wanted. I’ve never… had this with anyone.”

I wasn’t sure if he meant the bond we’d developed or the physical act itself, but considering his skills in the bedroom, I doubted I was his first

sexual encounter.

"What makes it so impossible?"

A sad smile. "Logic, Ensley. Don't you see?"

"That's not an answer."

"It is. You're refusing to face the truth."

"Fine. Spell it out for me. Pretend I don't *see*."

"You're human."

"And?"

He chuckled mournfully. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-three."

"And every year you age. The life expectancy of a man in a developed country in this century is between seventy-five and eighty years old. My father would be astounded to hear such facts. He would call it nonsense. Lies." A wistful smile. "Care to guess how old I am?"

I shook my head, unable to even venture a guess.

"Four hundred and fifty-six. Born in 1570. I've lived through four centuries and countless wars. I've seen the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. I've observed the birth of the Industrial Revolution. The introduction of machines and steel. I witnessed the unfolding of the digital age of information and technology. I was around for the French Revolution, the invention of the steam engine, the telephone, the transistor radio. I was here for the discovery of penicillin, the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and I watched the first moon landing.

"I am an immortal being, Ensley, who will likely live for centuries more. I will see things your grandchildren will only dream about. I don't age. When you are fifty or sixty or lying on your deathbed, I will still live in the body of a twenty-seven-year-old man. Do you see now?"

"Four hundred and fifty-six?" I could barely wrap my head around it and the amount of history encapsulated in that stretch of time.

I did see, and it was depressing.

"The longer I'm with you, the harder it will be to lose you."

"You don't know that. I can be quite obnoxious. I give it a couple of weeks, and you'll gladly send me packing."

"Ensley—"

I kissed him. I couldn't take another second of his stubbornness and excuses. Fine. It wouldn't last. It would end in heartache with too many pints of Ben and Jerry's and snotty tissues scattered beside my laptop as I

attempted to bandage the pain with drunken dungeon runs and weepy calls to my mother.

But not before I had one more night. One last memory that he couldn't erase. One I could take to the grave since that was where I would wind up one day. What a morbid thought.

Mordecai whimpered and tried, pitifully, to push me away again. I refused to go. His lips moved on mine, parting when I pressed for more. Our tongues dueled, a silky, delicate battle that could never be won. I hadn't tied my hair back, and he tangled his fingers through the long strands and clung, no longer resisting.

All the elevated sensations I remembered from our first night together returned. A heady mix of roaring lust and aching need. Endorphins surging to new levels. Sensitive skin. Elevated nerve endings. I couldn't get enough, like my synapses were firing all at once.

I tugged his shirt free and unbuttoned his pants. Wrapping a hand around his length, I stroked until he groaned and bucked, grunted and growled.

"You know," I said against his mouth, "for an old guy, you're pretty spunky in the sack."

He choked and laughed, pulling back long enough to swat my arm. "You're such an arse."

"What? It was a compliment. At over four hundred, you should be happy you can get it up at all."

His eyes fluttered closed, and his head fell back as I continued to work him. "You're not funny, Ensley."

"Never claimed to be a comedian."

"And your timing… is terrible."

"I have nothing on my agenda."

He hummed, thrusting into my hand, digging his fingers into my upper arms, both grasping on and making another half-hearted attempt at pushing me away.

"It's dangerous. This… I'm… not in a good place."

"Is the counter digging into your back? We could go upstairs."

"That's not what I meant."

I chuckled. "I know."

"My control is… weak."

I nibbled his chin and licked a path to his ear. "Why is that?" I whispered.

“You… You’re a temptation. I’ve never…” Another grunt. Another curse. “I’ve never encountered anyone who has done this to me.”

“What? Given you a hand job? I don’t believe that for a second.”

A smile brightened his face, and he shook his head, silently laughing. “I can’t with you.”

“I think you can. You did fine last time.”

“Ensley. I’ve never allowed myself to…” He grunted and bit his lip when I added a skillful twist of the wrist. “Bloody hell. If you keep that up…”

“You’ve never allowed yourself to what?”

“To… to care, you bastard. Stop talking and kiss me.”

Our mouths collided. A building frenzy stole any more conversation. Jokes aside, the decision to sleep with an immortal being was not something I had on my Bingo card. Nothing about this seemed real. In fact, I wasn’t a hundred percent convinced of my own sanity. Years of gaming might have literally poisoned my brain like my mother always claimed it might.

Regardless of the risks to my heart and physical wellbeing, I wasn’t ready to walk away.

Mordecai, less resistant, fondled me through my pants. I was achingly hard and wanted to suggest finding a bed, but I also didn’t want to stop kissing him. His taste was addictive. Salty oceans and stormy skies. Feeling daring, I trailed my tongue along his teeth until I encountered the protruding edge of a sharp eyetooth.

He jerked back and scowled. “Don’t be stupid.”

“What? I was curious.”

“And if it cut you? What do you think might happen to my barely restrained self-control if I tasted your blood?”

“Oh.”

“Exactly. Don’t. Be. Stupid,” he emphasized needlessly. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“But you said—”

“I know what I said. This encounter can end now. I will not take this risk if you can’t abide boundaries.” Instead of anger in his burgundy eyes, I saw fear and heartache. Mournful regret. “Please, Ensley.”

“Okay. I won’t do it again.”

Chastened, afraid to kiss him, I moved to my knees instead, peeled his pants down enough I had access to his cock, and peered up, seeking

permission. “How about this?” I licked his length and wrapped my lips around his head, gently sucking.

He groaned. “That too… is dangerous.”

I popped off. “Really?”

“Only because I’m precariously close to coming.”

“Oh.” I snorted. “Then shut up and let me do my thing.”

Mordecai vibrated with silent laughter as I took him into my mouth and worked him until his legs trembled. He tugged my hair, guiding my movements and thrusting with enthusiasm.

“Ensley… I can’t… You’re going to… Upstairs.”

I wrapped a hand around his length, using the saliva I left behind to aid the glide as I pumped him and lavished his leaking tip. “Not yet. I’m counting on vamps having incredible recovery time. Come down my throat first, then we can go upstairs, and you can do it again in my ass.”

The noise that left him made me laugh. I resumed sucking with vigor and intention, and in no time, he choked on a cry and came in abundance. His grip on the counter slipped, and he almost collapsed. Bracing his thighs, I sucked and slurped and let him ride his orgasm to the end, when he tugged me off and hissed about sensitivity, calling me a devil.

On my feet, I pressed my forehead to his and brushed our lips together, dizzy with euphoria, even when it wasn’t my orgasm.

“Was it good?”

“Simply marvelous.”

I chuckled. “No one has ever used that word to describe a blow job before.”

“Not true. I use it plenty.”

“Don’t bruise my pride. If there’ve been other guys, I don’t want to know about them.”

“Four hundred and fifty-six years, Ensley. I’m a vampire, not a monk.”

“Yeah, yeah. Enough.” I tickled the tip of my tongue over his bottom lip but didn’t advance.

“You can still kiss me.”

So I did, more cautiously than before and all too aware that I was playing with fire. Mordecai returned the kiss hungrily, clutching my face between his hands and encouraging me past the hesitant border I’d erected.

It ended too soon.

“Come,” he said, breaking free from my mouth. “I want you naked.” He took my hand and guided me through the house and up the stairs to the second level.

I didn’t stumble as much since my familiarity with the mansion had grown during my quiet weeks of investigation, but being unable to see was unnerving.

In the bedroom, Mordecai turned, his determination evident as his hands fumbled with the closure on my pants.

“Wait. Open the drapes. It’s too dark.”

Even the dusky moon, partially blocked by dense trees, helped give shape to furniture and allowed me to read his expression.

“Better?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I forget you can’t see like me.”

“You see in the dark?”

“All my senses are enhanced.”

“I really want to talk about this because the nerd in me is fascinated, but I want you in bed more, so let’s bookmark this discussion for after.”

Clearly amused, Mordecai undressed me with precision, starting with my pants, shedding both them and my underwear. He scratched his nails through the coarse hair on my thighs and cupped my balls, massaging until I groaned.

Not once did his concentrated gaze leave my face, like he was studying or memorizing the exchange.

“Do you like that?” he asked.

“I like everything you do. Your mouth is heaven. Your eyes are—”

“Demonic?”

“No! So fucking unique. I could stare at them all night.”

With the hand not fondling, he weaved our fingers together. “You’re so warm.”

You’re so cold, I wanted to say, but I swallowed the remark, sensing the mournful tone in his voice and suspecting the contrast bothered him. The last thing I wanted was to kill the mood.

Mordecai stroked me with purpose and drew noises of pleasure I couldn’t contain. I leaned against the wall and absorbed the sensations until the seed of desire spread her roots through my low belly and bloomed out of control.

“Undress,” I rasped, stilling his hand. “I need a second, or you’ll set me off before I’m ready.”

Mordecai freed himself from his pants and worked the buttons on his shirt as I shed my tee.

He stilled, body rigid as he clumsily backed up a step.

The transformation was so jarring, I paused. “What?”

“You need to remove it.”

It took a beat to understand what he meant, and I lifted my hand to the necklace. “What happens if you touch it?”

“Pain. It’s not as debilitating as it might be if it was a cross, but the discomfort is…” He shook his head. “Take it off. Please.”

I didn’t ask further questions and stowed it safely in my pants pocket.

Mordecai’s distress didn’t immediately vanish, so I stepped forward and assisted with the remaining buttons on his shirt until he was as free and naked as me.

I nuzzled my nose in the crease of his shoulder and kissed a path up his neck to his ear. “Has anyone ever told you how gorgeous you are?”

He didn’t respond and tilted his head to give me access. I suspected the answer was no, and it made me wonder what kind of life he lived. What sort of experiences he’d had. A thousand buzzing questions fluttered through my brain, but I suppressed them all in lieu of laying him on the bed and crawling over top of him.

“Any chance you found lube?” I asked.

“No. This wasn’t meant to happen again.”

“I’ll put it on my grocery list. Either that, or next time, we fuck in my bed.”

I rocked my hips, dragging my erection over his cock. He had yet to fully recover from the blow job, but that was fine. We could mix things up.

“Hold your knees back.”

He stared ponderously for long enough that I asked, “Objections?”

“No.”

He did as I asked, and I sucked a finger, getting it thoroughly wet before circling the digit around his entrance and pressing it inside. His cock jumped and stiffened more. I opened him slowly, adding saliva when necessary, ensuring he was good and wet.

When I hit a particularly sensitive spot, he moaned and hissed. “Enough. You won’t hurt me.”

“Are you saying you’re ready?”

“More than ready.”

I spat into my hand and coated my cock, stroking several times and sending tingles over the surface of my skin. For good measure, I dribbled a string of saliva over his hole and spread it around, making him groan. Positioned by his entrance, I waited for Mordecai’s acknowledgment before pressing inside.

I clung to his raised legs, bracing as I thrust increasingly harder into his willing body. Mordecai arched his back, neck extended, mouth agape as he whimpered and moaned, taking the pounding and begging for more.

The position of power filled me with a heady sensation. Knowing what Mordecai was and understanding what he was capable of doing gave me a high like nothing I’d felt. My orgasm fizzed under the surface of my skin, precariously close. I wasn’t ready for it to be over, so I shifted us, lowering his legs and leaning over to join our mouths.

The frantic pace slowed, and Mordecai clung to my neck, keeping me in place as I moved inside him with slow, even thrusts. His cock, hard again, rubbed against my belly, leaving a wet trail behind.

“Think you can come again?” I asked, lips brushing his.

“Yes.”

“Good.” I increased my pace, ensuring his cock remained sandwiched between our bodies and got as much friction as possible.

When I moved to kiss him, he rocked his head to the side, preventing me. It was then I noticed his teeth, extended like they’d been the previous night. Sharp fangs glistening white, contrasting beautifully against his bloodred lips. The sight was mesmerizing.

I thrust with jerky, quickening movements, so delirious with the oncoming orgasm that I was unprepared when he wrapped a hand around my throat and held me at bay. It wasn’t forceful enough to restrict my breathing, but it was a clear message.

Stay back.

“Fuck me, Ensley. Don’t stop.”

The wild, spiraling control in his burning red eyes captivated me. The lust. The desire. The craving.

The hunger.

Momentarily afraid but soaring on a cloud of lust, I didn’t stop. I jacked my hips with such fervor, the bed rocked and crashed into the wall. Three

more jarring thrusts and Mordecai roared, body bowing, teeth indenting his bottom lip.

His ass clenched, tossing me over the edge into oblivion.

I came with the force of a cannon.

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18

Mordecai

“SIR ISAAC NEWTON?”

“Yes. Queer fellow.”

“He was gay?”

“No. Queer, as in eccentric. Quirky. Did you know he performed countless experiments on his own body?”

“I didn’t.”

“True story. He once stuck a sewing needle between his eyeball and the bone of its socket simply to see if it would affect his vision.”

“Oh god. That’s… stupid.”

I chuckled. “Indeed.”

Ensley grew thoughtful, head balanced on an upturned palm, elbow supported on the pillow as he drew lazy patterns on my chest. Although I could have seen him clearly without the curtain drawn, the cast of grey moonlight caressed the soft curve of his cheek and jaw in a wondrous way that made it hard not to stare.

I lay beside him, as he listed countless famous names from history whom I may have encountered.

“What about Albert Einstein?”

“Forgetful fellow. Despised wearing socks.”

Ensley’s amusement glowed, creasing his eyes. “Monet?”

“Vile temper. Only saw him once.”

“Who else?”

“I don’t know. Vermeer, Goya, and Turner. Queen Anne. King George the first, second, and third.”

“No shit.”

“You know I didn’t actually meet or converse with any of these people, Ensley. It’s hardly worth your amazement. They were important members of society in their day, so I… watched them. I’m an observer.”

We’d been in bed for hours, talking openly for the first time. My life intrigued him in ways I couldn’t fathom, yet something about sharing my experiences was both refreshing and terrifying.

I was not one to get involved or develop bonds with humans. It went against my self-made rules. I feared where this would end and how long it might take to mourn his loss when it was over.

“Did you meet or talk to anyone famous?” he asked, digging a thumb into my hip bone and sending a ripple of pleasure over my skin.

His hair blocked part of his face as he peered down the length of my chest, so I tucked the runaway strand behind his ear.

“No. I’m a recluse. I never—Drat. Scratch that. I forgot. I met Jean-Baptiste Lully. We strolled the Jardin des Plantes for an hour in late spring. It was dusk. I can’t remember why he was there, but I engineered an encounter and pretended I was a friend of his friend, or something to that effect. It was all quite clever.”

“Jean-Baptiste Lully. I don’t know that name.”

“He was a famous composer. He became a French subject working in the court of Louis XIV for a time before he was expelled. That was long after our promenade in the garden. He’s known for his operas and…” I smirked. “His affinity for having affairs with both men and women. Hence the expulsion from court… and my interest.”

“Ah.” Ensley’s eyes creased with a grin. “I see how it is. Were you one of his men?”

“No, but I’d heard rumors about his proclivities. It intrigued me, so I orchestrated our rendezvous and spent an hour in his presence. He was so… arrogant. Charismatic, sure, but all he wanted to do was talk about himself and his work. It was a bit disappointing.”

“What did you hope for?”

“I don’t know. Not sex, per se. I was curious. I don’t come from a time when homosexual relationships were openly acceptable, remember. To find

someone like me was refreshing. This was before I met Cristofer, so I was quite alone."

"And this Cristofer is just a friend?"

"Yes. Never has been and never will be my lover. We don't connect that way."

"Fair enough. Is he gay?"

"He's… impartial. He's had a broad spectrum of lovers from every walk of life."

"So he's a slut?"

I chuckled. "I won't tell him you said that."

Ensley trailed his fingers lower on my abdomen, brushing the fine hair that grew below my navel. My cock stirred, defying postcoital exhaustion, already eager for more. It was the first time in my existence that I'd ever lain with a man after sex and gotten to know him.

All my pressing responsibilities seemed distant and unimportant. Ensley asked about my family, so I told him about Mother, Father, and all my siblings. About Abeta and her traumatic death during childbirth. Although common at the time, I remembered it clearly. It had imprinted itself in my memory. The baby hadn't survived more than a few hours after birth.

I told him about the plague that took the rest of my family while I was away fighting. I recalled our quaint homestead on the Thames that no longer existed. The barn and animals. Father's carpentry. The weekly markets. About how I defied my parents' wishes and joined the militia. How I fought alongside my uncle to reclaim the city of Amiens from the Spanish. I recounted everything I'd shared the night I'd unsuccessfully wiped his memory. The stories I'd told while he slept.

"Is it the same uncle you've come to rescue?"

"Yes. Uncle Iulian. My father's older brother. Half brother. Different mothers. Uncle Iulian's from Romania. When his mother died, my grandfather traveled west with his seven living children and married my grandmother. She was a young bride. Fifteen, if I remember correctly. My grandfather was in his late forties, I believe."

"Gross."

I chuckled. "It was normal back then. They had eight children. Three survived childhood. My father was the youngest. I didn't meet Uncle Iulian until I was thirteen. He came pounding at our door one night in a dark traveling coat under the light of a full moon. I remember being terrified of

the stranger who had shown up at random. He was tall and broad. Formidable. He was already changed by then, but the family was not wise to his secret. He had a mission.

“My father suspected he was not right. My mother hated and feared him. For years, he lingered on the outskirts of our lives, showing up on random evenings. He favored me. I didn’t know why.”

Ensley’s wandering hand returned to my chest, and he flattened a palm over my unbeating heart. Ashamed and embarrassed, I clasped his wrist and relocated it to my belly. “Please don’t.”

“Sorry.” He shuffled closer and kissed the skin beside my eye. “Keep talking. Your uncle had a mission?”

“Yes. He had no children. I was the oldest boy. He wanted someone young and malleable. We grew close. He taught me to fire a musket and use a straight sword. Of course I was intrigued. Father was a gentle man who disliked fighting, politics, or war.

“At twenty-one, I joined a local militia with Uncle Iulian. Father was outraged. Mother cried and begged. They wanted me to stay home and take a wife, continue training in carpentry, but I was eternally frustrated with how I felt and who I was inside, and it wasn’t something I could explain. Joining campaigns and fighting seemed like the answer.

“Little did I know that Uncle Iulian wanted to secure the line of succession. My fate was drawn the day I left with him.”

“Wait.” Ensley’s fingers, which had resumed their wandering path over my skin, stilled. “Line of succession? Does that mean… You said your uncle was an important figure. You said you were royalty. Oh my god.”

“No. I said I was royalty in a manner of speaking.”

“You said you succeed him.”

“I said I *don’t want* to succeed him. Hence my need to rescue him and return him to his place of power. Iulian is an elder. Our rightful leader and king. He’s an immediate descendant of the great elder, our first king, and yes, I am in line to succeed should anything happen to Iulian, but—”

“What happened to your first king? I mean, I know *immortal* is a relative term, but did he die?”

“Yes. He was mortally wounded in November of 1893 outside our home in Transylvania by an uncoordinated group of amateur hunters who learned of our weaknesses and exploited them.”

“Wait. Do you mean—”

I rolled to my side and pressed a finger to Ensley's lips. "Never say his name. It is a curse to speak it."

"But… Are you serious? It's fiction."

"No, Ensley, it's history."

"No shit. Wow. But… I don't understand why *you* came to rescue your uncle. If you're next in line, wouldn't they want to protect you? Keep you out of harm's way? They should have sent others or at least given you backup. This is a ten-man raid at least. You can't solo it."

I narrowed my eyes, unsure I caught his meaning. "Is that gibberish something to do with gaming?"

"Yes."

"Well, the reality is, a group of us would attract too much attention. My presence is the only one required, so it was best I come alone."

"But why you?"

"When an elder dies or is killed, it causes a catastrophic shift of energy. If that shift isn't controlled and reassigned properly, it could trigger the demise of our entire species. Only a vampire with enough power to balance the shift and absorb the energy will succeed, meaning a direct descendant or the next eldest in line. It's how order is assured."

"And you're the next in line."

"Yes. Like I told you. It's dangerous. Iulian will likely be in a severe state of torpor. Waking him will be a challenge, and I'm the only one with the power to do it safely."

"Who did this to him? Who took him? Why?"

I weaved our legs together and kissed him lightly, brushing a thumb along his jaw. "None of this affects you. Put it from your mind."

"I want to know. If you're in danger—"

"I'll be fine, Ensley. It's my war, not yours."

The troubled look in his eyes told me he wasn't going to let it go, so I kissed him again and brought our foreheads together. My body surged with need. I wanted to take him again, sink into his body and get lost in the euphoria of his mouth and touch. But the claws of hunger scraped at my insides, itching and burning and becoming harder to control. In the throes of passion, particularly at the cusp of orgasm, it was worse, and I couldn't risk it.

I would not feed on him. It would only fortify this bond, and the temptation to take it one step further was not something I would ever

consider.

“Okay,” I said, reining in control. “I’ll tell you.”

Resting on the same pillow, mouths a hairsbreadth apart, I continued talking. “There are many clans among my people. Families. Not related, necessarily, but bonded groups. Our numbers have grown exponentially over the past few centuries. Some feel it’s out of control. Our existence has always been a point of speculation among humans. A fable or myth. Some believed, but most didn’t. When the first king died, awareness grew. Still, it was never a problem until Valerius got power-hungry and basically exposed us.”

“Who’s he?”

“Head of a lesser clan. It’s the same foundation that drives so many human wars. The main bloodline, mine, is incredibly wealthy, and Valerius wants wealth and power. He wants to rule. He wants land and assets. The greater our numbers, the worse the division.

“He developed the first tribe of human hunters in eastern Europe and taught them how to slaughter us. He exposed our weaknesses and trained them. He formed an alliance with these humans, promising them power and wealth to cull our numbers. With human hunters, he was able to set a trap for Iulian and eliminate him as a leader. Iulian cannot be killed, or Valerius risks destroying us all, so Iulian is still alive. Valerius has an army of humans at his side. Unless I bring Iulian back so he can reclaim order, Valerius’s power will continue to grow.”

“Aren’t you more powerful than him?”

“Not while Iulian is alive. If he dies, and the ancient shift occurs, I would then be superior, but as it stands, with Valerius’s growing human army, things are deteriorating back home.”

“I don’t like this.”

I smiled sadly. “Nor do I.”

What I didn’t say was that my heart wasn’t entirely in it. More than a dozen times a day, I wondered if maybe it was past time for this curse to be eradicated. Part of me longed for the final death. I was tired of this lonely existence, wandering endlessly on the outskirts of a world I no longer recognized.

I was about to change the subject and request stories of Ensley’s past when I noticed his eyelids droop. His facial muscles slackened as sleep

dragged him under. Instead, I watched him drift into slumber while we lay tangled together.

It was past midnight when he slept deeply enough that I felt safe leaving without waking him. He would be angry, but there was no help for it.

I had things to do.

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Mordecai

SLEEP REJUVENATED ME SOMEWHAT, but the strain on my body was telling. Sex didn’t help. The sheer willpower involved in not biting Ensley during the cusp of orgasm had drained me further. My abilities were weak and harder to draw upon with each passing day. If I didn’t do some reconnaissance now, I wouldn’t be able to.

I should have found a stranger, fed, and gathered my strength so I was clearheaded enough to formulate a proper plan. But my desperation wasn’t elevated enough to make the notion desirable.

Plus, I was a stubborn bastard.

I could never explain to Cristofer how the ravenous urge to feed also elicited feelings of disgust. It wasn’t that I didn’t experience euphoria. Oh, I did. In such a powerful way that made resistance nearly impossible. But the second I was satiated, waves of repulsion overwhelmed me. I hated myself and who I was. I loathed who I’d been forced to become.

Leaving the bedroom and my sleeping lover, I gently closed the door behind me. It was bad enough that Ensley knew as much as he did and that fogging his mind had failed, but the last thing I needed was for him to get involved in the rescue. The hunters weren’t likely to harm him since he was human, but Iulian was a different story.

I hadn’t shared that part.

Outside, I took to the sky, crossing the distance to the area I’d been the previous night. Instead of landing near the trail or among the trees, I aimed

for the lonely eyot, determined to explore the isolated stretch of land and learn what it contained beneath the cover of darkness.

On closer inspection, the boomerang-shaped mass was only partly tree-covered. The rest was barren, a field of dying grass. I came to rest on a plot of land near where the men had docked the rowboat the previous night. The vessel was on the other side, secured to a piling on the mainland.

Odd that they left themselves no way off, but at the same time, it made sense. On the off chance Iulian got free, which I found highly unlikely, he wouldn't have a means to cross the water—supposing he was too depleted to use any abilities. It would have been stupid to provide him with a means of escape.

Logic suggested there were six human hunters somewhere nearby, but no amount of taxing my ears told of their presence.

I braced a hand on a tree as a wave of exhaustion tormented me. Back home, extended stretches without feeding never affected me like this. I supposed it was because I rarely used my powers, so the drain was negligible. Now, as I relied on them more heavily, I understood Cristofer's warning.

My keen eyesight was an advantage the hunters didn't have, so once I was strong enough, I advanced into the forested area on silent feet, scanning for signs of life or habitation. Considering what it would take to hold a superior vampire like Iulian, I suspected the location would be underground and fortified against my kind.

I was right.

Before long, I encountered the first obstacle. In a small clearing, two men guarded what appeared to be a steel hatch set into the earth and covered in foliage sporting white blooms. Their scent alerted me to what sort of flowers they were long before I had the chance to get closer. Garlic blossoms, far more potent than the bulbs themselves.

I reacted instinctively, spine stiffening, jaw tightening. I halted my advance.

The men, dressed in black from head to toe, stood on opposite sides of the hatch facing away from one another. They didn't speak. I assumed they were meant to keep guard, but both were preoccupied with their phones and not paying attention to their surroundings.

One man had his back to me. The other faced me. Roughly thirty yards separated us. The soft glow from his screen highlighted his cheeks and the

scruff dotting his jaw. He wore a ballcap, pulled low on his brow. Both men were armed with long wooden spikes and sheathed knives. They had pouches on their belts, but what they contained, I could only guess.

Two men left several unaccounted for. I had to assume they were underground.

I circled the clearing, keeping a safe distance, but found nothing of interest. Iulian was here. That much I could confirm, but breaching the barrier and descending was impossible. I had no idea what I was up against. A laundry list of possibilities made me wonder if I would be able to do this at all.

In a secluded nook between trees, I crouched and watched the men, waiting for something to happen, although I wasn't sure what. The guard rotation I witnessed the previous night happened in the evening. I assumed a second exchange occurred in the early dawn, although I hadn't been around to witness it. How early? Was it before the sun came up? After?

The men chatted at one point, a dull timbre that I caught easily. Nothing remarkable. Woeful complaints about all sorts of things.

At three, a clanging put me on alert. The men jolted to attention and spun toward the hatch, swiping the blossoms aside with their feet. The man with the ballcap heaved on a handle, wrenching the door open. The second man clicked a flashlight and shone the beam on a third comrade who appeared from below, climbing up what I assumed was a ladder.

They exchanged a handful of words, and the new arrival wandered into the trees after announcing he needed to take a leak. One of the remaining guards descended the ladder, leaving only one standing by the open hatch.

Snagging the opportunity, I reached into his mind, implanting a suggestion that he wander the perimeter of the island to check for intruders because he'd heard something.

In seconds, he cocked an ear and frowned before fisting his spike and wandering off into the trees, guided by nothing more than an innocuous prompt. It would occupy him for a dozen or so minutes.

The man relieving his bladder hadn't gone far. I heard the heavy stream of urine hitting the underbrush. Tapping into his mind, I gave him different instructions, suggesting a cramp, a mild stirring of bowels, hoping it would keep him occupied for a few extra minutes.

Then, risking a drastic waning of strength, I raised a heavy mist over the clearing and aimed for the open hatch, cautiously avoiding the displaced

blossoms.

My plan was simple reconnaissance. I had no intention of descending or facing off with a band of hunters. I merely wanted to investigate what lay beneath the earth. A quick peek. Nothing more. In and out. Thirty seconds at most. How far down was this subterranean bunker? What was its construction? How large was it? Were there visible traps up front I should be aware of?

Unfortunately, I didn't get close enough to answer any of these questions.

Ten yards from my target, something snagged my ankle, tripping me so I staggered forward. I landed hard on my knees, skinning my palms to save hitting my face on the ground. At the same instant, blinding lights flickered and blazed to life, filling the clearing like high noon on a summer day.

Its effect was immediate. The blast of imitation sunlight seared my retinas and drained my powers, leaving me human, vulnerable, and crippled with an overwhelming discomfort that bordered on pain. It seized my muscles, and I cowered, trying to shrink away from the assault.

The mist evaporated.

Men shouted. Instantly released from my suggestive influence, the two who had wandered into the trees ran toward my explosive yelp. More startled cries of alarm rose from underground. A clamor of running feet approached.

Disoriented and partially blind, I tried to flee, understanding the imminent danger, knowing the consequences of being caught by Valerius's band of trained thugs. For all the times I'd wished for the final death, I wasn't prepared to accept it. Not now.

A wafer-thin voice in the back of my mind suggested it had everything to do with the human in my bed.

I staggered to my feet and spun, coming face to face with the man I'd sent to circle the eyot. With a rageful growl, he lunged, thrusting his stake toward me. I jumped back in time to avoid being impaled, but he was determined and followed, jabbing the air two more times unsuccessfully.

I hissed and bared my teeth.

In the distance, someone shouted, "Be careful, Lou!"

The man, Lou, laughed. "He can't do anything to me." An oily smile filled his face as he stabbed the air again, advancing with fearless confidence.

In vain, I tried to summon a shift or raise a fog, but nothing worked.

He charged again, lunging with the weapon, and I dodged a nearly fatal blow before turning to run. My retreat was foiled by a wall of armed men who had appeared from belowground. Four of them, and another off to the side, who had come from the trees, blocked my escape.

The man who'd tried to impale me came up from behind and wrapped an arm around my neck, pressing a blade to my throat. "I hear," he hissed in my ear, "that if I cut off your head, you'll be dead for good. Wanna test it, boys?"

I snapped at his arm and flung my head to the side, biting air and doing all I could to sink my teeth into his tender flesh, but he lurched out of the way, laughing like it was a game.

"He's a feisty bastard. Be careful, Lou."

"I'm not afraid. He's powerless under the lights. See?" he said to me. "We can do tricks too, you undead freak. We know your weaknesses."

The men spread out, forming a circle and closing in. I was a toy. A cornered, frightened rabbit. A plaything they would eventually slaughter.

"I say we have some fun with him," a burly guy with a full beard said. "Poke him like a pincushion and see how long he lives."

"You can't heal anymore, pretty boy. That's gotta suck," said another.

A man with a thick neck and a buzzed head dug inside the pouch at his waist and withdrew a vial. He unstoppered it with his teeth and flung its contents in my direction before I could move out of the way.

A stream of liquid splattered against my chest and sprayed my face. I screamed as it burned my skin and ate through my clothing to sear the flesh beneath. I stumbled and fell on my ass, trying in vain to wipe it off, but it was impossible.

The men advanced, weapons extended.

"That's it. Burn, motherfucker, burn. Hurts, don't it?"

I rolled to my stomach, fighting the pain, knowing I had to get away or I would die, but under the lights I was useless.

"We should fill his mouth with the Eucharist and watch him dissolve from the inside out."

"Then we'll cut your head off. How about that, buddy? You like that?"

One of them lunged with a knife, slicing a deep gash in my calf as I tried to crawl away. "Not so fast, vampy-wampy. We're just getting started."

I screamed, thrashed, and lunged to bite.

He jumped back, laughing.

Someone kicked me until I rolled into a fetal position to protect myself. When the assault calmed, I dared look.

I was surrounded. The wound in my leg wasn't healing. Tar-like black blood seeped from the cut, a slow ooze with a thick metallic odor more pungent than human blood. The pain in my face and chest burrowed deeper, blistering and eating through layers of skin.

This was it. I was finished.

As I submitted to my coming death, wondering why I wasn't more thankful, a strange buzzing sounded in the distant trees. It drew the attention of a few men who glanced around with perplexion.

"What the fuck is that?" the one named Lou asked.

Everyone stopped and listened as the static buzz intensified.

"Oh shit." A man ran into the trees. "The fucking batteries are overloading."

"What?"

"Are you serious?"

The noise intensified, crackling and humming.

"Oh no," one of them said. "They're gonna—"

The light flickered.

Then, a resounding *pop* filled the air.

Instant darkness. Night filled the clearing once more.

In a flash, I reached into the very depths of the well and gathered my nearly exhausted powers before exploding into a cloud of smoke, taking to the air, despite the agony of my wounds.

I was tapped, barely able to hold form long enough to get off the eyot before collapsing at the water's edge in human form. Bleeding, I staggered to my feet, my chest on fire and face singed. With my strength dangerously depleted, I ran for the safety of the mansion, unable to heal, unable to change forms or call a mist to protect me, knowing only that the men on the island were stuck there and would need to swim or call for backup, which would hopefully give me time to get away.

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Ensley

A *crash* woke me sometime in the predawn hours. I startled from sleep with a gasp, unsure where I was and if the sound I heard was part of a dream or reality. For a heartbeat, I was back on that winter-slick road, sleet falling, tangled in my seatbelt, pinned by an immovable object, and unable to get free.

“Dad?” My voice came out strangled and hoarse.

Only as my mind cleared and the room materialized did I realize the sheets were twisted around my legs. I wasn’t stuck. I was in bed. A dream. It was a rotten dream.

I glanced around, orienting myself.

I was at Mordecai’s.

He wasn’t beside me. Again.

What time was it?

As I scrambled to remember where I’d left my phone, a sound erupted from the first floor. Breaking glass, a *thump*, followed by a pained groan.

The hair on my nape rose.

Not a dream.

I flung the covers aside and jumped from bed, racing down the dark hallway in nothing but underwear.

“Mordecai!”

Maneuvering the stairs, clinging to the treacherous banister, I shouted his name again and again. No reply. A sweep of cold night air greeted me on the main level, and I instinctively aimed for the front door, finding it wide

open, a slumped body partway over the threshold. A nearby accent table had toppled. The artifact it had once displayed lay shattered across the wooden floor, blocking my path.

Moaning, Mordecai worked his way to hands and knees before bracing against the wall in what seemed an effort to stand, but his legs wobbled and gave out. He went down in a clumsy heap.

With the door ajar and the purgatorial grey of predawn bleaching the sky, I caught a glimpse of his face: skin destroyed, blistered and raw, an open, weeping wound that looked angry and black in the colorless world.

“Jesus. Mordecai!”

Barefoot, I danced around shards of broken ceramic and clasped his arm, tugging him to stand.

He staggered and grappled for purchase on the doorframe, nearly taking me down with him, but we managed to stay upright. He hung from my shoulder, eyes ablaze with an emotion I couldn’t interpret. His torn shirtfront fell in ruins. The exposed part of his chest showed similarly damaged skin. Black. Weeping. Raw.

“What happened?”

He limped, dragging me forward through the broken pottery. “Downstairs. I need… to rest.”

“But your face. My god. Mordecai, you—” I yowled as a sliver of broken ceramic pierced my foot.

Instantly off-balance, we crashed into the wall, and Mordecai landed on the ground once again.

“Motherfucker.” Whimpering, I carefully prodded my tender heel. Luckily, the piece hadn’t embedded itself deeply and came away easily enough. A wet spot remained. Blood.

Mordecai hissed, neck straining so the tendons showed as he lurched away from me, scattering bits of pottery in his frantic retreat.

Cautiously avoiding the mess, I went after him.

“Stay back.” He snarled, eyes like daggers, issuing a warning I didn’t understand.

“You’re hurt. Stop.” I caught up easily and, indifferent to his protests, helped Mordecai to his feet.

He struggled at first, then submitted, pinching his eyes closed. Face strained, lips retracted over elongated teeth, he allowed me to guide him toward the kitchen.

When I tried to deposit him on a stool, he protested, throwing me off and stumbling toward the basement door. “Downstairs. I must…”

“No.” I whirled him around and shoved his ass on the stool. “Sit. Let me look at you.”

He landed with a groan, nostrils flaring, eyes on fire, more red than brown. “Ensley—”

“You’re hurt. What the hell happened?”

He didn’t respond, face contorted in agony.

Foot sticking to the cold floor, I fumbled for the light switch and flicked it on, bathing the kitchen in a washed-out yellow glow.

Mordecai hissed again, shying from the assault. He squinted and curled a hand near his face, covering the injury.

Seeing it properly for the first time, my stomach sank. Mordecai had always been pale, but he was downright ghostly under the harsh light. Not for the first time, I had the sense of time having passed without my knowledge. He seemed aged. Withered. His hair was more silver than blond, lacking its usual luster. His skin was less smooth and more shriveled. His lips, usually bright and vibrant, had dulled to a soft pink. Dark patches surrounded his burgundy eyes, giving them a sunken look that disturbed me greatly.

I almost retreated. This wasn’t the man I’d taken to bed a handful of hours ago. This wasn’t the man who had kissed me and brought me beyond my senses. Who I’d joked with and teased. Whose sure hands and firm body had brought me to orgasm.

This wasn’t the man who’d lain beside me, sharing a pillow and tales of old.

This man was decades older.

“What happened to you?”

“Ensley. I must get downstairs.” Even his voice was wan and faded.

I wasn’t sure what to do, but with a racing heart, deeply embedded fear, and a furious impulse to make him better, I found a lone dish towel in a mostly empty drawer and ran it under water. My hands shook, and the life-altering accident from my youth lingered on the periphery of my mind.

I couldn’t save my father.

“Do you have a first aid kit?” I stammered, wringing the water from the towel, wishing I had alcohol or antiseptic cream.

“You can’t help me, Ensley. I need… rest. Please.”

“You’re hurt.”

“I know.”

“Are you dying?” The words quivered.

“No, love. Very weak. Don’t.”

He tried to ward me off, but I batted his hand away. The skin on his face looked severely burned, almost corroded. Blistered and raw, open and oozing something that resembled blood but was darker and thicker. It didn’t look healthy or normal.

“Jesus fuck.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Hold still. This might hurt.” I pressed the cloth to his face, and he hissed, extended teeth on full display. Their length and needlepoint sharpness made me hesitate.

His eyes blazed. A low growl emanated from deep in his chest. “This bravado is not cute, Ensley. You test my limits.”

I didn’t know what that meant and stood my ground, fighting the urge to back away, yet needing to do something.

“This won’t help.” Again, he tried to push me off. “You’re too close. Back off.”

I retreated, heartsore at his constant rejection. “I don’t know what else to do. Can I take you to the hospital? Call a doctor? It’s bad. It’s already infected.” I didn’t know that for sure, but if it wasn’t now, it would be soon.

A pained smile touched his lips. “A hospital can’t help me. I’m fine. Trust me. Let me go downstairs.”

“But…” *Fine?* How could he say that? He wasn’t fine.

Struck immobile by a thought, I took him in from head to toe. Mordecai was not human. His chest and clothes were burned. A slice through his pantleg showed an open wound surrounded by blood as thick and dark as molasses. He was in evident pain. Rapidly aging.

Something was wrong. What was happening?

Years of gaming, combined with a teenage fascination with horror novels and movies, made me step back. “Wait. Why aren’t you healing? All vampires have that ability, don’t they?”

Yet, the longer Mordecai sat before me, the worse he seemed.

“You *are* dying.” I choked on the words. “I thought… Tell me what to do.”

I had to help. This couldn’t happen.

In truth, I didn’t know a thing about his kind. We hadn’t discussed half of what I wanted to the previous night. Hell, up until twenty-four hours ago, I’d been convinced there was a different explanation besides the supernatural.

Immortal meant hard to kill, not impossible.

What if all I thought I knew was wrong? It didn’t make sense. Mordecai should be uncannily strong. He should be able to take down an army of men single-handedly. Why was he so weak?

So… human?

Mordecai took my hand and squeezed, drawing me closer. “I’m not dying, Ensley.” He met my worried gaze with his strange, inhuman eyes. “I’m depleted. It happened far more rapidly than usual. I will soon fall into a state of torpor. Your foot—”

“What does that mean?”

“It means my powers are drained, and I cannot heal.” He licked his lips, nostrils flaring and teeth glinting in the light. “I have not fed in many weeks. A mistake I must soon rectify. It has left me in a state of exhaustion. Your foot… I smell your blood, and my control is compromised. Understand that I am not rejecting you, love.”

He cradled my face, regret and something I couldn’t identify coloring his expression. “I’m trying to keep you safe. Downstairs. Please. I must sleep. I’ll be able to… rejuvenate.”

My foot. The cut. The blood that was drying and causing me to stick to the floor. He smelled it?

“Why haven’t you fed?”

“Ensley… not now. I have little self-restraint, and you are a temptation unlike any other.”

I had a million questions. The least being, *where have you been* and *who did this to you*, but I saved them for later, set the damp towel aside, and tried to help him to his feet.

“No. Stand back.”

“If you try on your own, you’ll fall and break your neck.”

He chuckled weakly, but upon glancing at the stairwell to the basement, he clamped his teeth in a vice and took my hand.

“How about upstairs? It’s more comfortable.” Plus, I knew what awaited him below, and I wasn’t keen on delivering him to a wooden casket.

“No. I require my soil.”

“Your… Okay.” More questions stirred, but I didn’t argue.

Together we maneuvered the basement stairs. I used my phone to guide me, since the subterranean level was an inky abyss. Assisting him into what amounted to a coffin left me physically ill, and a protest formed on my tongue, but I swallowed it.

The effect was instant. Mordecai transitioned from awake to asleep in the blink of an eye. Although the word *sleep* didn’t quite fit. He entered what I assumed was a coma-like state that eerily mimicked death. I kept waiting for his chest to rise and fall, but it didn’t, and I knew without feeling for it that his heart didn’t beat. In fact, not a single outward sign indicated he was alive. He could have been a corpse, and the thought unnerved me.

A mangled corpse. Under the harsh beam of the flashlight, his face was grisly, and I was reminded of horror movies and spilled acid.

I had the urge to adjust his clothes or fix his hair, so he appeared less disheveled and more like the man I’d been…

Not dating. Were we dating?

Christ, I had no idea. He’d said it was impossible. Yet, despite all I knew, I was more inclined to hang on than let him go. It figured that the first man I felt connected to in a decade happened to be a vampire. I would have laughed under any other circumstance because it sounded like the plot of a novel, a gothic fantasy, but it wasn’t.

What was wrong with me?

Mordecai wasn’t human. He wasn’t dating material. He couldn’t be healed with stitches and bandages.

Christ. He slept in a freaking coffin and subsisted on a diet of blood.

I shivered, teeth chattering, goose bumps pebbling my skin.

Unsure where to put myself, I sat on the cold, unforgiving ground in nothing but underwear and watched him, much like I’d done the previous night. The damp basement sank into my bones. The scent of rotting wood and moldering earth made my nose twitch. My nerves popped and jumped at every unusual sound until I was certain I was losing my mind.

A steady ache in the bottom of my foot reminded me of the shattered ceramic in the front hall and Mordecai’s reaction to the injury.

I smell your blood, he’d said. *My control is compromised.*

It wasn’t the first time he’d mentioned such weakness and lack of control. Why had he allowed himself to become compromised? Why didn’t he… feed?

More questions upon more questions.

An hour into my vigil, I couldn't take it. Mordecai's slack expression and aged features, coupled with his lack of a heartbeat or any other indication of life, convinced me he was dead and gone. I was sharing space with a corpse.

Bordering panic, unable to remain in the basement any longer or peer upon his waxen, damaged face, I promised to return at nightfall and scampered upstairs, desperate for fresh air.

After finding my clothes in the bedroom and cleaning up the broken pottery, I went outside, intent on waiting for the taxi at the end of the driveway, since I hadn't driven to the mansion the previous night.

The house sat eerily in bleached morning light, taking on a tragic stillness. Birds chirped cheerily in high branches, their few remaining leaves shivering in the wind, rusted gold and burnt sienna.

The air was cold in my lungs, waking me up from what felt like a nightmare.

Hustling down the overgrown drive, I pulled out my phone to arrange a ride. My days were scrambled. When I discovered three missed calls from Dany, another two from my mother, and a handful of texts from Mars, Ziggy, and Poet, I checked the date.

Thursday the twenty-ninth. How was it Thursday? What happened to Tuesday and Wednesday? My obsession over Mordecai was taking its toll.

Referring to my calendar, I winced. I'd missed two house showings, a phone date with my mother—who'd been growing concerned over my mental health—a scheduled ten-man raid on Tuesday night, and DnD on Wednesday.

By the time I got home, showered, shaved, doctored my foot, and dressed in something suitable for work, it was close to ten. Devouring a bowl of cereal—unsure when I last ate—I went through my emails and responded to everything imperative. Before heading to the office, where Dany was sure to grind my ass and call me a delinquent, I called my mother to put her mind at ease.

"Hey. Hi," I blurted the instant she answered. "I spent the night with Mordecai. I'm sorry I missed our phone date and didn't text."

Since my faux-illness-turned-memory-lapse two weeks ago, I'd avoided mentions of Mordecai or discussions of our previous dates, since the

abnormality of the situation didn't feel like something I could explain without her checking me into the nearest institution.

My mother, likely assuming things hadn't ended well, never pushed.

"Oh?" The uptick in her voice made me wince. "So, your handsome foreigner is in the picture again, is he?"

"He was never out of the picture. Not exactly. We just… It's… new." *And unlabeled*, I wanted to add. *And he's a four-hundred-year-old vampire, so it's complicated.* But there weren't enough hours in the day to get into that conversation.

"It's going well, I assume?"

Considering the morning's perils, I almost laughed.

The absence of my necklace sent me up the ladder to the loft where I searched the pockets of my dirty jeans until I found it. I'd worn the thing every day since my father died and promised my mother I would never take it off. Her superstitions outweighed my own, and she was convinced the St. Christopher pendant would protect me from harm.

Considering it caused my undead-vampire-maybe-boyfriend severe pain, she was likely onto something.

"It's going well. Things are… going well. He's… good. He's very good." Instead of putting on the necklace, I stowed it safely away, then felt instantly guilty.

"You should bring him this weekend. I'd love to meet him."

"Why? What's this—" I stilled, eyes widening. *Shit.* It was the twenty-ninth. My father's memorial was in two days. "Mom, I—"

"Don't you dare tell me you can't come. I need you here, Ensley. You promised."

I had. In a moment of weakness, after too many days of odd behavior when I feared she would make the trip to Owen Sound to check on me, I'd promised to come home for the memorial.

"Besides, I want you to meet someone."

Sighing, I submitted. "Yeah. Fine. I'll be there."

"Good. Saturday. The service is at eleven. Lunch after." Before I could end the call, she added, "Bring Mordecai. I'd love to meet him."

Only after we hung up did something she said register. *I want you to meet someone.* I wasn't stupid. Those words could only mean one thing. Sadness filled my chest. Since leaving Strathroy, I'd witnessed my mother's happiness return. She had slowly moved on with her life. She'd developed

friendships, went out several times a week, and had become an active member of the community.

It was what I wanted for her. I should have been happy. She shouldn't mourn my father forever. She shouldn't be chained to the root cause of her pain, and I was that root cause. It was why I'd left. I was a constant reminder of her loss. A stain she couldn't wash out, lingering and disrupting any chance she had at living a good life.

If she'd found love again, maybe I could let go of some guilt.



I returned to the mansion at five as the autumn sun kissed the horizon, softening the landscape with a diffused, honey-toned light that cast long, stretching shadows across the road. Under the trees, prisms danced across a blanket of rotting leaves.

Antsy and worried about Mordecai, I'd struggled to focus at work all day. Dany hadn't disappointed and gave me a thorough lecture about responsibilities. I'd escaped the office and spent the day taking pictures of two new properties going on the market and meeting with a young couple looking to buy their first home. I scheduled a few open houses, spoke with an investor, and arranged showcase furniture in an empty house, so it looked more attractive to potential buyers.

The guys weren't happy when I canceled a dungeon run. They complained that finding a healer on short notice was a pain in the ass, and what was up with me lately? I had no defense and couldn't explain my reasoning except to say I had pressing obligations. Mars asked about Mordecai, but I artfully dodged the inquiry by changing the subject.

I parked at the ruined fountain and lingered outside, stoking myself up for what I might find in the basement. Would Mordecai still be there? If so, in what condition? What would I do if he didn't wake up? What would I do if he did?

All questions I couldn't answer.

By that point, I was convinced the only reason I didn't run screaming was because I'd spent years desensitizing myself with video games, so I was operating with that mindset. Mordecai was the key quest component. I either played nice with the ancient vampire, and we remained lovers and friends, or I pissed him off, and he killed me.

“I need new hobbies,” I said to the cherubic angel, who smiled brightly despite his missing limbs and unsightly moss beard.

As I was about to enter the house, a scuffling in the trees drew my attention. I peered among the brush, convinced it was a squirrel or another creature, foraging for dinner—the wildlife was active at this time in the evening—except something about the noise held a different quality.

Pausing, I strained and listened. Again, the rustle of undergrowth. Too uniform, like someone was walking in the forest. I panned the area, alert for movement or out-of-place colors, but the waning light was its own camouflage.

“Hello?” My voice carried and vanished in the trees.

Only then did I realize the birds had gone quiet, no longer filling the sky with their evening song.

I listened for a while longer before deciding I was too jumpy and startling at chipmunks and field mice.

Entering the house, I made for the kitchen. Nothing was amiss. It all appeared as it had earlier that day. Map on the worktop table. Abandoned water bottle. Discarded towel. Broken door.

Bracing for what I might find, I descended the stairs, preceded by the flashlight beam, noting how they were sturdier than the ones to the second level.

In the cellar, I rounded the corner and shone a light on Mordecai’s human-size crate, half convinced I would find it empty.

He was there, as still and peaceful as when I left earlier… only changed.

His face was whole and well. A radiant twenty-seven, not sixty-seven. The open wound and blistered skin had healed. His chest, smooth and flawlessly pale, showed no sign of injury. A wave of relief nearly buckled my knees as I approached and examined him head to toe. No indication of his earlier peril. Not a lingering scar or blemish of any kind.

Crouching, amazed at the transformation, I pressed a hand to his face, yet flinched at the icy quality of his skin. It was not something I was getting used to. Oddly, when tangled in bed in the heat of passion, I never seemed to notice.

“Mordecai?”

He didn’t stir. I wasn’t sure I could sit by and stare at his unmoving form while my active imagination played tricks on me. I needed proof he was

alive. I wanted him to wake up and open his burgundy eyes, be privy to his reserved smiles.

I patted his face and jostled him, calling his name again to no avail.

“Come on. The sun is going down soon. Wake up.”

No response.

Frustrated, I paced the basement, unwilling to leave, yet unable to look upon him in this state. Twice more, I stopped near his… *box* and tried to wake him. Checking my weather app to see if the sun had officially set, I discovered it wouldn’t happen for another seventeen minutes.

“Is it that specific?”

It couldn’t be. We’d gone out during the day.

“Fine. I’ll wait, but you’d better wake up in a talkative mood because I have a lot of questions.”

A sound upstairs made me catch my breath and peer at the ceiling. Was I hearing things again, or did someone open the door? The creepy house liked to mess with my head. It was probably my imagination.

As I was about to dismiss the noise, the tired complaint of aged wood floors under the weight of a grown adult made my skin crawl. Someone was moving along the upstairs hallway.

“Shit.”

Darting my attention to Mordecai, prepared to shake him awake if it meant giving him whiplash, I gasped and jolted back a step.

Mordecai was no longer asleep. His wide burgundy eyes were fixed on the ceiling, moving ever so slightly as he tracked the intruder. “They found me.”

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21

Mordecai

ALTHOUGH REJUVENATED AND INJURY-FREE, my level of depletion was of great concern. A deeply seated hunger pulsed through every extremity, monopolizing my thoughts and affecting my ability to concentrate.

But I couldn't deal with that in the present moment. Someone was in the house. They had found me.

"Who is *they*?" Ensley hissed, deep lines of fear painting his features. He clung to his phone, the beam cutting harshly into my retinas. It would give us away before long.

"Turn off the light and be quiet." I got to my feet and taxed my ears, tracking the guests.

The murmur of voices overhead suggested more than one intruder, and I easily picked out their conversation. Three voices. All familiar.

"He's in here somewhere," one of them said. I recognized Lou from the ambush. "Jeep's parked outside, so he didn't leave."

"Do you think he's one of them?"

"I don't know. Possible. Be alert."

A meeker voice. "Can I suggest we come back in the morning? If that fucker has backup, we don't want to be here when the sun goes down. We need a proper plan."

"He's got a point, Lou." The husky tone belonged to the man with the buzzed head and thick neck. The one who'd thrown blessed water in my face.

“Hello?” Lou shouted. “We saw you come inside, fucker. Where are you?”

“Oh shit,” Ensley squeaked.

I snagged his hand and dragged him to a corner, knowing he was blind in the basement without a light. “Quiet.”

“I heard him in the woods,” he hissed. “I thought it was an animal.”

“Stay here.”

“No. Where are you going?”

“To get rid of them.”

“Them? There’s more than one?”

Of course, all he’d heard was Lou calling out. Otherwise, they had kept their voices down, likely forgetting my advanced abilities.

“Three.”

“Shit.”

From above, loud enough for Ensley’s human ears, the third man, whom I had yet to identify, exclaimed, “Whoa, guys. Come here. Look at this.”

He was in the kitchen.

Ensley clung to my shirt, and when I tried to peel him off, he refused to let go. “You can’t go up there.”

“I have to distract them.” The fact they hadn’t retreated and assumed Ensley was like me suggested they were properly armed for a fight, and I wasn’t in a state for confrontation.

“Are you out of your mind? If they’re the guys who messed up your face __”

“Ensley, let go of me. I’ll be fine. I won’t even show myself.”

He blindly blinked in my direction, his hands fisted around my shirt.

I stroked his cheek, pushing gently against his mind and hating myself for it since I’d promised not to do it again. “Be calm, love. You’re safe with me. I won’t let any harm come to you.”

The wild expression eased. Ensley released the death grip he held on my shirt. “Be careful.”

“I’ll be but a moment. Stay here and stay quiet.”

I aimed for the stairs but didn’t ascend. Reaching out to the more vulnerable-sounding third party who had come into the kitchen, I softly implanted a suggestion that he convince his friends to leave by any means possible. Nothing drastic enough to alert them to my manipulation. A nudge in the right direction. Something within his character.

The man immediately spoke in a harsh whisper. “Guys, we gotta split. Maybe we can take one, but not two at the same time. If he’s got backup, then they’re planning something. Can’t you feel it? They’re going to ambush us, and we’ll be fucked.”

“Would you relax.” Levelheaded Lou. “What is this?” A rustling of paper.

“A map. Look at the markings. They’ve been looking for him. We need to go. I’m serious.”

“Why’s the basement door broken?” the thick-necked man asked.

“Probably using the cellar for their lair. Christ, what if they’re down there now?”

“Vamps don’t have to break a door, you idiot.”

“I don’t fucking know. Maybe it’s been broken for years. They’re obviously using this place as their hideout, and it gives me the creeps.”

“We don’t know that the guy we saw outside is a vamp. What if he’s a squatter?” Lou again. He would be the hardest to shake.

“Squatters wouldn’t have Jeeps.”

“Vamps wouldn’t either, dumb-dumb. Pull your shit together.”

“Where is he, then? If he’s human, why isn’t he answering us?”

“Probably scared. Let’s check the basement quick and—”

“Fuck that. You want to take that risk, be my guest. But if that guy’s a vamp and there are two of them, the last place we want to go is the fucking basement. It’s a trap. I’m leaving. If you want to search this place, do it in the morning.”

The steady tick of the grandfather clock in the parlor was the only sound for a long time before Lou spoke, calmer and quieter. “Fine, we’ll come back in the morning.”

I waited for the sound of footsteps, formulating a plan in case they were communicating with hand gestures and doing the opposite of what they claimed. After several long seconds, the thump of boots on hardwood marked their retreat.

For a time, I heard the rustle of their escape into the forest, but it ended abruptly—too abruptly—and I had a sickening feeling they hadn’t gone far.

When the only sound that remained was the ticking clock, I backtracked to find Ensley, who I suspected had a million questions and would not be as easily subdued.



The mansion was no longer safe, and I couldn’t be sure the men weren’t outside, lying in wait to see if Ensley exited at some point.

“We need to leave,” I said, urging him to the main level. I refused to allow him to turn on a light, so he moved slowly and cautiously, despite gripping my arm.

“Who were they? Are they the guys who messed you up last night?”

“I’ll explain later. I need you to stay close and do exactly as I say.”

Resting had replenished my strength to a point, but I wasn’t at peak performance and needed all my faculties to enact a plan. At the front door, I crouched and pressed a palm to the wooden planks. Closing my eyes, I reached for a sub-audible frequency and sent vibrations into the earth.

Ensley shuffled, his breathing fast and uneven. “What are you doing?”

“Quiet, Ensley. I need to concentrate.”

Satisfied, I rose and faced him. “We’re leaving behind the Jeep, and we aren’t following the road. Do not let go of my hand and try to keep up. We’ll move as fast as you can handle.”

“Are they outside?”

“Yes, but soon they’ll have a distraction.”

“What does that mean?”

I didn’t need to explain as a distant, frantic howl pierced the night, then another, and another, followed by a chorus of sharp yips.

Ensley’s eyes widened as he cocked an ear. “Is that—”

“Coyotes. A pack of them. Once they’re in the area, we’re leaving.”

“Coyotes? Will they attack us?”

“No. They’re under my command.”

“They’re… No shit? Can I just say that you are hands down the coolest friend I’ve ever had?”

I chuckled. “Believe me, your praise is misplaced.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.”

The howls grew in intensity. Not one, not two, but at least a half dozen wild beasts all on a collision course with the hunters. If the men knew what was good for them, they would scatter.

Their shouts of alarm echoed through the night a moment later, giving them away.

“Ready?” I tightened my grip on Ensley’s hand, a mixture of reverence and fear blooming in his eyes.

He nodded.

Before we left, I drew a thick mist around us. It grew out of the ground and swirled around our legs, bleeding beneath the door as it became denser. In time, it would blanket the clearing in front of the house, providing a veil of coverage that would aid our escape.

“Holy fucking shit.” Ensley backed up a step, but I gave him a tug.

“This way.”

I opened the door, and we slinked into the night as a pack of coyotes burst from the tree line, chasing the hunters, who frantically retreated to the fountain and climbed inside the crumbling basin. The creatures surrounded the men but did not attack, snarling, drooling, and baring their teeth.

Meanwhile, I guided Ensley into the woods at a light jog, aiming for the distant city. Even if the hunters in their frenzied encounter with the coyotes noticed us leaving, they wouldn’t be able to pursue.

The coyotes wouldn’t harm them, but the threat would keep them immobile for a time. My influence wouldn’t last, and already the drain on my weakened system was slowing me down.

By the time we’d gone several kilometers, Ensley struggled to keep up, panting and staggering through the invisible brush, tripping more than once on tangled undergrowth and roots.

I let the mist evaporate and sharpened my hearing.

We were alone.

I stopped to let Ensley catch his breath.

He peered back, chest heaving, hair tumbling around his face. “Are they dead? Did the coyotes kill them?”

“No. I didn’t command it and never would. I have an unfair advantage, and I don’t go out of my way to exploit my abilities. Especially with humans.”

Breath calming, Ensley turned to face me, hands propped on his hips. “But they tried to kill you first. I’d say that’s a valid reason to retaliate. They’re an aggressive mob of hunters who won’t quit.”

“You play too many video games, Ensley. Come. If you don’t mind the imposition, I’d like to go to your flat.”

We needed to find a safe location because I wouldn’t be able to do the same trick twice, not in my current state. I knew where Iulian was being

held, but formulating a plan for extraction and executing it required top strength.



Ensley wouldn’t stop staring, eyes brimming with curiosity and questions. It was his flat, but he didn’t seem to know where to put himself and lingered in the open space between his living area and kitchen.

A lot had happened between us, and it wasn’t in my nature to be this reckless with a human, but I had the sinking suspicion that Ensley’s caring nature was going to be a problem, to say nothing of the feelings I’d unintentionally developed.

“I need to make a phone call. How about you make yourself a tea and relax. We can talk when I’m done.”

“No.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“No. You’re weakening before my eyes. You should see your face. Don’t take offense, but when you woke earlier, you had a… youthful radiance. A glow. You looked twenty-seven. That was a little more than an hour ago.”

“And I don’t anymore.”

He shook his head.

It wasn’t a question. I didn’t need to ask, and Ensley didn’t need to answer. I felt it in my aching teeth, in the ravenous twist of my gut, coupled with the incessant jitters that vibrated under my skin.

The escape had drained me of any strength I had upon waking, and the hunger raged inside me.

Ensley was a heartbeat that pulsed through my veins, urging me to drink his life’s essence. It was too much to bear. I thirsted for him in a way I hadn’t for anyone before, and it had everything to do with the bond we’d developed.

I’d made a wrong turn with him, and I was suffering the consequences.

“You need to eat, Mordecai.”

“Yes. It’s on the agenda.”

“First. Before your phone call. Before we chat. You look terrible.”

“Thank you. You sound like Cristofer. Trust me. I’m not in danger. I can go far longer without nourishment and still stand erect.”

Yet, my self-control around Ensley was slipping, and resistance was a growing concern.

I couldn't fight. I couldn't draw powers or protect him if the men returned. I certainly couldn't save my uncle.

"Make yourself a tea." I removed the wretched cell phone from my pocket and located Cristofer's number. Knowing the conversation would try my patience, I braced as it rang.

"Ah. It's my favorite stubborn mule. Have I mentioned I miss you?"

"Hello to you too. I wish I could say the same."

"Don't be cruel. I know the truth. You have a soft spot for me."

"I assure you, I don't."

"How fare thee with your foreign travels? Any news on the home front?"

"I've located Iulian."

"Oh? That's fabulous news. Seamus had his doubts, but I believed in you. You bitch and moan, but you get the job done."

"It's not done. There's a problem. Several, actually." I eyed Ensley, who hadn't retreated to the kitchen and listened from a few feet away.

"Go on."

"He's… well protected. On a small island. I attempted reconnaissance and fell into a trap. I narrowly escaped, and now my cover is blown. They know I'm here and where I'm staying. The mansion is compromised. Although I didn't see the conditions of Iulian's environment, I'm confident enough to say they present a challenge for… our kind, which is exactly what I said would be the case, but no one cared to listen. I'm not sure how to go about this."

Cristofer was silent for a moment. "What trap? Were you injured?"

I motioned for Ensley to go to the kitchen, but he stubbornly refused and crossed his arms, brows lowered in consternation.

"I'm fine. It was a minor encounter. Nothing I couldn't handle."

"It was not minor." Ensley raised his voice, fully intending for Cristofer to hear. "He almost died. His skin melted off his face. He's weak and won't eat."

I dashed a hostile glare in his direction, but he didn't back down.

"He looks like shit, too. His injuries are gone, but his face is falling apart in a different way, and he was barely able to summon enough strength for us to escape the mansion when those guys came after us."

"Ensley," I snapped.

“Oh, Mordecai,” Cristofer cooed. “Do tell. Is that who I think it is?”

I sighed at the annoying curl of humor in Cristofer’s tone.

Pointing at Ensley, I hissed, “You’re like a bloody child tattling to the authorities. Go make a blasted tea and stop eavesdropping on my conversation. And for your information, I did not almost die, and we made a wonderful escape from the mansion. We were not in danger. I was in perfect control. You know nothing.”

Cristofer chuckled. “Oh, duck. Is that your human lover? What happened to erasing his mind?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “It didn’t work.”

“Because you’re depleted?”

“No. Because we were too involved and I didn’t consider the uncountable layers required to make it effective. You could have mentioned that.”

“And spoil the fun of you finding out the hard way?” More laughter. “Put me on speaker. I simply must meet him.”

“No.”

“Don’t be stubborn.”

Ensley, who still hadn’t gone to the kitchen, wore a smirk that I was certain rivaled Cristofer’s, thousands of miles away.

“I’m not putting you on speaker. He is not involved.”

“Yes, you are, and yes, he is. Your lover needs a lesson, and he certainly isn’t going to learn it from you.”

I turned my back on Ensley and lowered my voice. “You are the last person I want teaching him anything. Our relationship has no bearing on my mission, and I will handle it once I—”

In my distraction, Ensley slipped in behind me and plucked the phone from my hand. I scrambled to retrieve it, but he scampered away, ducking behind the high table.

Tapping a button, the audio changed. “Hey. How’s it going? This is Ensley. Mordecai’s… bed partner? Boyfriend?”

I blanched.

Ensley shrugged. “We haven’t put a label on it. Who am I talking to?”

Chuckling came through the phone’s speaker. “You’re his lover, mate. Own it. Be proud. You have no idea the privilege you’ve been given. I, my new friend, am Cristofer. In our world, Mordecai and I are practically brothers. Not by blood, but you understand. Has he mentioned me?

Probably not. He's stubborn, that one. It is an absolute pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Yeah. You too. Maybe we can catch up another time. Look, Mordecai's lying. He's not fine. He's… deteriorating before my eyes. He's weak and —"

"Good grief, Ensley. Stop with the drama, or I'll break my promise and erase your memories proper. You can be sure they won't come back next time."

"Ignore him. Empty threats," Cristofer said. "If he's as depleted as I assume, he can't make it happen. Not effectively."

"What do I do?" Ensley asked. "He's being stubborn about… eating—I don't know what the fuck you people call it. I didn't realize how serious it was until now."

"It's not *that* serious." No one was listening to me. No one cared about my feelings.

"How long's it been?" Cristofer asked.

"No idea. He's never talked about it. Maybe since he got here? I don't know. How often should he… eat?"

"It's a matter of opinion. If you want my advice—"

"He doesn't need your advice, Cristofer. Kindly mind your business."

"I do need advice." Ensley dodged in the opposite direction when I rounded the table to go after him. "And you might talk fast. He's getting feisty."

"Simple. Seduce him. When you've got him good and stirred, offer yourself on a silver platter. He'll be unable to resist. It won't hurt, mate. A little sting. You might feel lightheaded after, but it's nothing you can't handle. My past lovers find it terribly erotic."

"Cristofer! Enough. You will never convince me to do such a heinous thing, and damn you for putting suggestions in his head. I'm going into the city right now, and I will do what I must with a stranger. Stop tormenting me. Both of you."

As I aimed for the door, intent on following through, Cristofer continued his diatribe.

"Oh, Ensley. Are you going to let him feed on someone else? Do you not understand the level of intimacy and pleasure involved in such an act? The bliss of fulfilling our nourishment is its own kind of ecstasy. It would be like him taking pleasure in another lover."

I pivoted and stormed toward Ensley, aiming to remove the phone from his hand and hang up, but he ducked away, gaze intent on mine, a crease in his brow. “Is it true?”

“No,” I shouted.

“I wouldn’t lie,” said Cristofer. “Something you should know about our dearest Mordecai…”

“Shut up, Cristofer.”

“He loathes who he is and what he was forced to become. He carries a four-hundred-year-old grudge against his uncle and would sooner see the man die than rescue him. The only problem is that Iulian’s death would make Mordecai our elder and king, which is the last thing on earth that he wants. He’s spent centuries denying his natural urges and hates how pleasurable it is to feed. It sickens him to admit he enjoys it.”

“I don’t. Stop talking.” I ducked the other way, but Ensley moved too quickly.

“He has always refused to feed off a lover because it would mean accepting the pleasure, basking in it. He knows it would only elevate the sensations, and he fears a day might come when he accepts our curse and lives like the rest of us.”

I dove over the table and knocked bodily into Ensley as he scampered backward a second too late. We collided with the kitchen counter, and a struggle ensued.

He yelped and held the phone aloft, laughing and shouting, “Thanks for the info, Cris, my man. I’m afraid we’re about to be—”

I got the phone and hit disconnect before throwing it as hard as I could across the room where it skittered and crashed into the wall. With luck, it was broken.

Ensley didn’t go after it. He leaned against the counter and howled until tears ran down his cheeks. He laughed so hard, he couldn’t catch his breath and eventually folded in half, clutching his stomach.

Indignant, I crossed my arms. “It should be noted that I despise that man and everything he stands for. Pull yourself together. You look ridiculous.”

It took time, but Ensley sobered, wiping a few remaining tears. A smile remained as he took me in. “Is it true?”

I wanted to deflect, but what was the point?

“Which part? You know what? Never mind. Yes. It’s all true. The only fact I can’t personally confirm has been verified many times by others. I’ll

take their word for it. Now…" I glanced around his flat, my insides festering from denial. "If you'll excuse me. I'm edgy, and if I don't satisfy this blasted craving soon, we'll need to part ways."

I expected a protest, a bloom of jealousy to color his pleas that I remain, but as I reached the door and touched the knob, all he said was, "Do you want to borrow a shirt?"

Part of me was disappointed that he would so readily let me go, and I had to wonder how deeply my feelings for this human ran. Everything Cristofer said was true. The craving was real. It taunted me, screaming in my ear. Was it possible that my refusal to feed since my arrival was because of Ensley? Because it was an intimate exchange, and I didn't want to feel intimacy with anyone else?

I glanced down at my ruined shirt, registering the charred hole that remained from my excursion to the eyot the previous night. Our abrupt and propulsive escape from the mansion meant I'd left the few articles of clothing I owned behind. My entire mission had been disrupted, and I didn't know how to get back on track.

A wave of exhaustion hit, and I slumped against the door, pressing my forehead to its cool wooden surface.

Why was I so scrambled lately? Why had a handful of weeks weakened me so? Why couldn't I turn Ensley off and walk away?

"Yes. A new shirt would be much appreciated."

While Ensley retreated to the loft, I took a moment to compose myself and evaluate where I'd gone wrong. He returned before I sorted it out.

"Here." He handed me a soft, smoky-blue knitted turtleneck. "I never wear it. My mother bought it for me last Christmas, but the color doesn't suit me. It would go nicely with your blond hair and…" He shrugged.

"Thank you." I ran the fabric through my fingers but didn't move to put it on.

A heavy weight hung in the air between us, and I sensed his disquiet.

"Ensley, I—"

"What am I to you?"

I glanced from the shirt, noting his creased brow and the firm line of his lips. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. Humor me. Put a label on it. I want to know where I stand."

"You shouldn't let Cristofer—"

“Forget him. Am I convenient? Am I your lover? Your friend? I’m sure boyfriend is too hopeful on my part, so I won’t even suggest it. Am I a place to stick your cock?”

“Don’t be crude.”

“Well?” He waited.

“A relationship isn’t possible.”

“So you said. Do I get a say?”

“You can have all the opinions you want, but it won’t change facts.”

“How come taking a lover is okay, but you can’t call it a relationship? What’s the difference?”

I couldn’t find an answer he would accept. “I have needs to take care of, Ensley. Perhaps we can discuss this another—”

“No. Why not me?”

I searched for the meaning behind his question, suspecting I understood but feigning ignorance. “I don’t follow.”

“What if I want you to… do it to me? Cristofer said it wouldn’t hurt.”

“I will not feed from you, Ensley.” But saliva pooled inside my mouth at the suggestion, and a quiet rumble traveled under my skin, awakening nerve endings and tingling in my teeth and groin.

“He said it was intimate.”

“Not for me.”

“I don’t believe you. If it’s pleasurable and something you require, why can’t it be something we share?”

I closed my eyes and clamped my teeth until they ached. If my powers were so weak, why could I hear his thrumming pulse? Why did I smell his intoxicating pheromones drifting in the air between us? His lust. His desire. His curiosity.

“Your heart is racing,” I murmured. “You’re afraid of me. You think you’re brave. You think you want this, but you don’t understand.”

“What is there to understand? You told me it wouldn’t change me or kill me, so long as you remain in control. I’m not afraid of you, and I do trust you.”

But it was more than that.

I stared at the smoky-blue shirt and imagined a life that wasn’t mine, where we could go on dates to restaurants and share chocolatey desserts, where we could swim in the ocean, lie in the sun, take holidays all over the

world, and celebrate the passing of time. Birthdays, anniversaries, retirement.

The truth was, Cristofer was right. I'd spent centuries convincing myself that feeding brought no pleasure. That I was different than everyone else. I loathed the bliss and satisfaction.

Strangers made it easier to dissociate from the task. I feared the level of intimacy it would bring if I allowed myself to break this rule with Ensley. I feared the connection it would create. I feared the day I would have to walk away. The longing. The guilt.

I hadn't said a word, lost in my head.

Ensley appeared in front of me, removed the shirt from the tangle of my fingers, and tossed it aside. He cradled my face between his warm hands and angled my head so we looked in each other's eyes.

"Do you want someone else?"

"No."

"Do you want me?" A hopeful note hung in the air with the question.

"Desperately."

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22

Mordecai

ENSLEY KISSED ME SO tenderly, I wouldn't have been able to walk away if I tried. No one had ever kissed me like that. Not in four hundred years. The curse had always felt so monstrously ugly and cruel, yet Ensley made me feel normal.

Human.

Like he couldn't see our vast differences or didn't care.

He reached for my ruined shirt and ripped the few remaining buttons from their fraying threads. I stopped him before he could shed the article completely and go further.

"There is one thing I need to make perfectly clear before we continue."

The lust and desire in his eyes burned bright, but he waited, hands resting on my hips, thumbs caressing the exposed skin above the waistband of my trousers. So gentle. So loving.

"You're not a convenient fuck, Ensley. I've come to care for you more than I should. More than I expected. If we do this, become lovers or whatever term you want to use, know that time will be our enemy. Our differences will become more pronounced as you age and I don't. Maybe it won't last long enough to matter, but if it does…" My unbeating heart ached.

"I understand."

"I'm not sure you can, but my real point is this. If our hearts get tangled and we… we…"

“Fall in love?” His whispered words sent a shiver over my skin because I knew with absolute certainty that I could love this man. Maybe I already did on some level. For his fearless devotion. For his keen perception and unwavering understanding.

“Yes. If we fall in love. No matter how many times you ask, no matter how often you beg or plead, I will *never* change you, Ensley.”

His brow crinkled as he searched my face. “As in?”

“I will not make you like me.”

“Oh.”

The thought must not have occurred to him, but I couldn’t move forward without drawing a line.

“Never,” I reiterated. “This… me. Who I am. *What* I am. It is not a life. It is not glorious. It is not desirable. It is an affliction beyond anything you can imagine. Do not strive to convince me otherwise. Our destiny can only be the here and now. Our future—”

“Ends when I die.”

“Yes. Or when you’ve tired of me.”

I’d seen others try to overcome the barrier between human and vampire, and no one came out the other side unscathed. Years of mourning followed a painful parting. Unless they were like Cristofer, willing to bring their lover into our realm, but even he had learned the hard way, it never worked how he hoped.

A sad smile touched Ensley’s mouth. “Kind of a morbid conversation pre-sex, but I hear you. Can’t say the thought ever crossed my mind.”

“Well, in case it does, banish it.”

He dragged his fingers across my abdomen and toyed with the button on my trousers. “May I continue now?”

“Yes.”

Ensley’s mouth and delicious tongue stole any more warnings. It dissolved my worries so completely, I couldn’t remember why I ever resisted. He fondled me through my undergarments until my cock ached. His honey-sweet taste sent vibrations through my skin, awakening the hunger I’d barely kept at bay.

I wanted him rapaciously.

Was I doing this?

His tongue lashed against mine, silky and confident, cutting a path forward to a place of no return. I fumbled to remove his shirt and clung to

his hair, drawing his face away from mine, enough that I could look at him. His rosy wet lips. His blown pupils. His staggered breathing.

The steady thrum of his pulse was a drumbeat calling me home. It echoed in my core.

A deep ache resonated through my gums and jaw as my teeth involuntarily stretched to their limits in anticipation. Saliva pooled in my mouth, and the blinding pangs of hunger screamed for repletion. I vibrated and fought for control.

If I was doing this, I didn't want it to be merely functional. Those were my experiences of the past. Dissociation. Impassivity.

This was Ensley.

I grazed my mouth over his stubbled chin and pressed our cheeks together, cooling the frenzy threatening to take over. "Upstairs to your bed. I want to savor you."

We climbed the ladder and shed the rest of our clothes. When he turned on a bedside lamp, I winced but said nothing and used the slight discomfort to calm the urge to race.

Ensley lay across the mattress, one knee raised and with his legs slightly parted. His full cock and heavy balls were on display. He reached a hand toward me, beckoning.

I took it, allowing him to pull me down. I moved over top of him, hands braced by his head, knees cradling his thighs.

He touched my face with awe and wonder. "Your eyes. They're darker. Burning like scarlet flames."

"Because I want you so badly it hurts."

"Then have me."

I lowered my head and kissed him once before burying my face in his neck and inhaling his scent. Sunshine, crisp apples, and a hot summer's day. He smelled like life and yearning and desire.

Humming with pleasure, I brushed my lips over his pulsing artery, feeling its metronomic rhythm under his skin. A heartbeat.

Ensley tilted his head to the side, giving me access, but I moved away.

"Not yet."

Resisting made my stomach coil into a painful knot, but I fought to hold off a while longer. I peppered kisses over his chest and down his sternum to his navel, earning a soft moan. Peering up, I met his lust-blown gaze and smiling lips.

“I want to be inside you first.” Because if the rumors were true…

I moved lower, mesmerized by his cock, standing proud and alert, waiting for attention. Licking his tip earned another moan, and Ensley spread his legs further, inviting me to go on. I took him into my mouth, carefully cradling his length between my sharpened teeth so I wouldn’t nick him, and sucked him down my throat before pulling up again.

Ensley gasped then groaned. “Fuck that’s good. Again.”

For the following few minutes, I used my mouth to pleasure him, savoring his flavor and stretching his hole with a wet finger until his movements turned jerky and his breathing grew staggered and uneven. Before he tipped over the edge of control, I climbed his body and joined our mouths.

Ensley broke free for a second to indicate a side table. “Lube in the drawer.”

I found it and used a generous amount to coat my length before sinking two fingers inside him, ensuring he was loose and slick.

Ensley tipped his head back on a moan, exposing his throat and that enticing carotid artery screaming under his thin skin. It was not my destination. The jugular was safer. The vein provided a slower flow, less chance of getting carried away and taking too much.

Unable to wait any longer, I sat back on my knees and tugged him closer. Lined up, I pressed inside, one glorious inch at a time.

His cock jumped, and he arched his back, expelling a long, “Yeeeeesss. Oh fuck, yes.”

Fully seated, I waited for him to catch my eye and give me the green light to continue. I stroked his calves and whispered his name.

With a blissed-out expression, Ensley nodded. Lips parted, he motioned for me to come closer.

I bent and joined our mouths. As our tongues dueled and tangoed, I moved my hips, burying myself again and again into his willing body. The heightened sensations were incomprehensible. It was unlike anything I’d experienced in four hundred years.

But I knew why.

Because I cared about him.

Because Ensley mattered more than anyone before.

If my heart still had the capacity to race, it would have been doing cartwheels. This man had broken through my barriers. I didn’t know what

love was or how it felt, but I suspected whatever we were building, however unsustainable, would destroy me in the end. The loss would be great, and I wasn't prepared.

A sweet whispering pleasure bloomed at the base of my spine and grew until it reached every part of me, tip to toe.

Our kiss faltered. Our mouths came apart. We got lost in each other's eyes.

Ensley traced his thumb over my bottom lip and folded it down to see my teeth. I flicked the digit with my tongue, playfully, teasingly.

His smile warmed me through. No fear. This man was a quandary.

My orgasm whispered a warning in the background as I entered him with a slow, even rock of my hips.

I nudged his chin with my nose, encouraging him to lift his head and give me access. He didn't resist, nor did he show signs of changing his mind.

He didn't ask me to stop.

"Are you sure?" I pressed my mouth over that sweet spot. The soft skin yielded against my lips, warm and aromatic.

"Yes. Please." The word was a murmur. A plea.

I licked his pulse point, pressing my tongue harder to feel its staccato rhythm. The heat of the blood racing through his veins was a drug I could no longer resist. An animalistic need roared through me, threatening my control.

I teetered on the edge.

Trembling and thrusting into his body, I tuned into the ever-strengthening pull of my impending orgasm, followed its climb, and anticipated its crest. At that pinnacle moment, the peak of exultation, as nature pulled the rip cord, altering the sensations from a lurching fall to a soaring climb into the clouds, I sank my teeth into his tender flesh.

A clean, effortless parting of skin.

A rush of crimson warmth flooded my mouth and threw me over the edge into an elation I could never have imagined. A narcotic tidal wave crashed through my mind and hijacked my senses. I drank eagerly, possessed by a need to fill the hollow inside.

Ensley groaned and dug his fingers into my skin as his body tightened and his orgasm ripped through him.

His quickened heartbeat increased the flow of his blood as it filled not only my mouth but the void I'd been suffering with for too many years. We

moved as one, an endless climb through the stratosphere. To the stars and beyond. To a place I didn't know existed.

Eventually, our feet touched the earth again. With my ravenous hunger finally satiated, the spell broke. I lingered, savoring the intoxicating calm that settled over my senses and soothed my nerves.

Ensley lay still, stroking my hair and pulling me closer each time I tried to move away. When he finally let me up, I licked the thin trails of blood that trickled from the matching pinprick wounds. They would close on their own and leave barely a mark.

I pressed my forehead to his temple and took a moment to steady myself, still dizzy with euphoria.

A breathless sigh escaped him as his body grew limp.

"Are you all right?" My voice rasped.

"Yeah. It was… I'm lightheaded. A little woozy. But I fucking came like a rocket, so…" He chuckled. "Wow. Is it always like that?"

"Maybe. I don't know." I searched his face. He wore a hazy expression and a lazy smile, his gaze unfocused.

He touched my mouth, encouraging me to part my lips. My teeth had already retracted, but he traced them, nonetheless.

"That was really fucking hot."

I wanted to deny it, but he was right. Cristofer was right. The exhilaration was indescribable.

We remained joined until my cock softened and I was forced to withdraw. Ensley tugged me down and wrapped me in his arms. I listened to the soft beating of his heart as the rejuvenation of a feed flooded my system.

Despite having slept the day away, I drifted, not quite awake and not quite asleep. Calm and relaxed. At peace for once.

Ensley yawned. "Feel better?"

"Yes."

"Good." He stroked my back so lovingly that I felt part of something special. Not like evil incarnate but like a man on a journey to a destiny he'd never thought possible.

"Do you really hate yourself?"

I ran my hand over his warm skin, memorizing every soft hill and valley. "I hate who I was forced to become. My uncle didn't give me a choice. It was selfish. A tactical move to ensure the line of succession was solidified. Or rather, that it stayed in the family. The loss of the great elder was not

anticipated. Our immortality was more secure when humans were ignorant of our existence. The great elder's death was the beginning of corruption. Whispers spread. Humans became wiser. Nobody quite realized how fragile our hierarchy was until the era of hunting was born. Valerius's defiance has only escalated the threat. Now, with Iulian in captivity and the great elder gone, I'm all that remains."

"What would happen if you both died?"

"The command would pass to the strongest of our kind, and only if they were able to control the shift. If they failed… we would be no more."

I lifted my head and rested my chin on Ensley's chest, peering up at him. "Sometimes, I don't think that would be a bad thing."

Ensley combed his fingers through my hair. "Is it that awful?"

"It's lonely. Integration with humans is limited, or rather, it was for a long time. Things have changed. Relationships and friendships usually end in suffering and loss. Some, like me, can't let go of the past. It's not the same for everyone, but I miss my family. I miss the simple pleasures of being human. I didn't take well to the change. Not like most."

"There must be positives. I mean, you have badass superhero powers. That counts for something, right?"

I chuckled. "Parlor tricks, Ensley. Fascinating in the beginning. But… if there's one positive, it's discovering that men like us, gay men, stand a chance in this new world. We can love openly and experience the same privileges as others."

"Not everywhere. Homosexuality is still a crime in some countries. Even here, we certainly aren't without discrimination."

"I suppose, but watching the progress has been comforting."

"Have you ever had a boyfriend?"

I shimmied up the bed so our faces aligned and noses brushed. I felt his smile on my lips. "No. You speak of impossible things."

"Not impossible. Cristofer is right. You're stubborn."

"He'd be thrilled that you took his side."

We kissed, a lazy, post-sex connection that reminded me of spring sunshine and budding flowers.

Beginnings.

I shared his pillow, the light at my back casting a delicate glow on his face. The marks in his neck remained, faint and fading. I stroked a thumb over their raised surfaces, still shaken that I'd done this with Ensley.

“My mother wants to meet you.”

His casual statement tore me from my sluggish musing of our situation. “Meet me?”

“Yes. She organized a memorial service for my father this weekend. Halloween night marks fifteen years since we lost him. I don’t want to go. Strathroy is the last place I want to be, but I promised, and… I thought, if you accompanied me, it might help me get through the day.”

It was such an ordinary, human request that I loathed to turn him down. I wanted to bask in the glow of this bond we’d created for as long as possible. Play a part. Act a role. Be the lover or boyfriend Ensley thought I could be.

“I have a mission I can’t neglect. It would be irresponsible to shift it aside, especially when I’ve finally discovered the location.”

Ensley lowered his gaze, breaking eye contact, but his lashes did not conceal his disappointment. “You shouldn’t have to do this alone. It’s too dangerous.”

“It is what it is, and I’ll sort it out.”

“Didn’t you tell Cristofer that it was impossible? You said your uncle was inaccessible.”

“His environment presents a challenge, but I’ll handle it.”

“What sort of challenge?”

I wrapped an arm around Ensley and drew him against my body. His warm skin was a comfort. “It’s not your concern.”

“It is if there’s a chance you could be hurt again.”

“I’ll be careful. You’ve given me back my strength. Now is the time for me to further explore. They won’t catch me unaware again. I’ll be alert to their tricks.”

“I want to help.”

“No. It’s too dangerous.”

“How? I’m human. They don’t care about me, and I couldn’t break Iulian out if I wanted to. You said that’s why you’re here. You’re the only one. They’re on alert for you, not me.”

“They came into the mansion, Ensley. They saw you. Even if they realize you’re human, they’ll be suspicious that you’re working with me.”

He firmed his lips. The fight in his eyes persisted.

I lazily stroked a hand down his spine and over the soft mound of his ass, drawing his leg around my waist. “Don’t be reckless, love. It’s not your

fight.”

“You told Cristofer there were barriers that presented difficulties for your kind. If I’m reading between the lines correctly, then you need me. I’m human. I’m not limited like you are. Those barriers wouldn’t affect me. I can help.”

“Ensley—”

“Don’t tell me no. I can’t sit back and watch you do this alone. I saw what happened last time, and it was terrifying. I thought you were dying.”

“None of that would have happened if I wasn’t depleted.”

That wasn’t entirely true. Even at full strength, the blast of UV lights would have rendered my abilities useless either way. My only saving grace had been the faulty batteries. I could have been killed. During those horrible minutes, while suffering at the hands of hunters, I was prepared to die.

But had I been at full strength, Ensley would never have seen my injuries. I would have regenerated and been whole again by the time I returned to the mansion.

He was right. The chances of my accessing Iulian alone were slim. Now that they knew I was around, they had likely reinforced his prison and increased their guard. The incident at the mansion would have put them on high alert.

They would be waiting for my return.

“Perhaps,” I said, thinking aloud, hoping to placate Ensley while also giving myself time to think of a solution, “I could come with you this weekend and give them time to lower their guard. They will be expecting immediate retaliation, and before I strike, I need to consider the best approach.”

“Really?”

I kissed him, lingering and savoring his taste. “Really. Now, enough chat. Your stomach is growling.”

“You heard that?”

I smirked. “Indeed.” I kissed the tip of his nose. “Stay here. Let me make you something.”

“You can cook?”

“I have no idea. Haven’t needed to learn. We’ll find out.”

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23

Ensley

TWO DAYS LATER, AT five in the morning, long before the sun was set to rise, we hit the road. My hometown of Strathroy was a three-hour drive south, and the last place on earth I wanted to be. Considering Mordecai's restrictions, I was surprised he'd agreed to accompany me.

Daylight hours were manageable, if not uncomfortable, he'd explained. Spending one or two or several nights without a proper place to rest was a minor annoyance, nothing more. Apparently, resting on his native soil acted as a means of regeneration. It was not a substitute for feeding but could restore depleted energy to a point.

The memorial service, however, was being held in a Catholic church, and my mother had planned a short visit to the cemetery afterward—owned by the same church—neither of which Mordecai could attend. His explanation made me recall an earlier conversation about cemeteries, when we'd been contemplating locations where his uncle might be held. Puzzle pieces clicked, and his questions made sense now.

The gathering following the service was thankfully at a hall. It would involve a light lunch including platters of finger foods and desserts, none of which Mordecai could eat.

Explaining these obstacles to my mother would be challenging, but Mordecai assured me I shouldn't worry. It would work out.

By Friday afternoon, the marks in my neck had vanished, and the intense exchange we'd shared felt like a dream.

Thursday evening, after the sex and the bite, after making me grilled cheese with bacon and brewing chamomile tea, Mordecai had spent the night in my bed. Although I couldn't be sure he slept, the company was nice. While I worked the following day, he returned to the mansion to inspect the property after promising he wouldn't leave himself vulnerable by sleeping in the basement.

If he fed regularly, could he go without his soil entirely? I hadn't asked, but Mordecai didn't seem concerned. After attempting another home-cooked meal, we'd spent Friday night in bed together, making love and chatting until I couldn't keep my eyes open. He woke me at four the following morning with a mug of chamomile tea and a plate of scrambled eggs and toast since we planned to leave before the sun rose.

Despite not being able to eat, Mordecai's inspiration to make meals was cute, and he glowed with pride as he watched me enjoy them, asking repeatedly if he'd done okay.

"Am I allowed to ask how your father died?" His quiet words broke into my musing.

No matter how tentatively he asked, the question punctured the peace of our predawn excursion, and I tensed.

"You don't need to share if you don't want to."

"It's fine. I suppose you'll find out soon enough."

I wrung the steering wheel, focusing on the empty highway and the sharp cut of my high beams as they lit a path through the dark. Returning to that night always stung.

"It was my last year of high school, and I lied to my parents, telling them I was going to London to the movies with a group of friends. Not your London. Obviously. Ours is roughly thirty minutes from Strathroy. A much bigger city and far more exciting for a bunch of teenagers. More to do.

"It was Halloween night, and I said the theater was playing a bunch of retro horror movies, so we were going to watch a few, and I wouldn't be home until late. It was all bullshit. We went to a massive keg party instead.

"Everyone was underage and drinking. Smoking pot. Doing other drugs. My buddy drove, but by the time two in the morning rolled around, he'd fucked off somewhere. I couldn't find him. Another guy offered to take me home, but we were all hammered, so I knew it was a bad idea.

"My parents had drilled it into my head a million times that I shouldn't get in a car with someone who's been drinking. Dad always said to call him,

and he would come and get me. No questions asked. I wouldn't be in trouble. Just call."

I shivered from the memory of standing outside in a cold October rain, waiting for him to show up. Mordecai turned up the heat and rested a hand on my thigh. The silent support made my heart ache.

Not two days ago, I'd entered a relationship with a man whose life had ended centuries before I was born. A man who couldn't make promises and reminded me that we would never grow old together, and yet, I didn't care.

I'd been drawn to Mordecai since the day we met. The idea of letting him walk away, be it for the good of my mental health or his, made me sick. Was it selfish? Considering he would be the one to suffer in the end, maybe. But I couldn't help it. I didn't care about the obstacles in our way or wonder how we would manage the passing years. I only wanted to be with him, share stories about our vastly different lives, listen to him recount history and all he'd seen and experienced. I wanted to give him a taste of humanity, since he seemed to yearn for it desperately. Would there be challenges? Absolutely. Could we overcome them? We wouldn't know unless we tried.

"Ensley?"

I blinked back to the present and blew out my cheeks. "Sorry. It's hard to talk about."

"You can stop."

"No. It's okay." I took his hand and weaved our fingers. "Dad took medication before bed at night. He used to get muscle spasms in his legs, bad enough it disturbed his sleep. The medication helped, but it was heavy stuff. Made him loopy and affected his concentration. He wasn't supposed to drive after taking it, but Mom was on the night rotation at the hospital. She was a nurse but took an early retirement after Dad died. So, since she wasn't home, and my father wasn't about to let his underage, drunk son take a ride from an underage, drunk stranger, he came to get me."

A familiar nausea stirred my gut, and I had to swallow a few times before I could continue. Regardless, a stone sat in my throat. "The weather was terrible. Raining but turning to sleet as the temperature dropped. Wind out of the north. Snow predicted before morning. It was a bitter, gross, and typical Halloween in Southwestern Ontario. Utterly miserable."

I could have told stories about trick-or-treating as a kid. How my mother forced me to wear a bulky winter coat over my costume, ruining the whole effect, but it would have been a diversion. Recalling Mordecai's vulnerable

stories about his family fortified me. I wasn't alone in my pain. If anyone could understand…

But my voice grew tight as I held back tears and continued. "He arrived around three and didn't say a word when I got in the car, like he promised, but I saw the disappointment on his face. He didn't yell or give me shit for lying or drinking. He drove us home. Sometimes I think it would have been better if he got it out. Gave me shit. The silence was oppressive. The drive wasn't long, but by the time we were halfway home, even in my inebriated state, I noticed Dad was drifting into the other lane. I shouted, and he jolted, correcting us. His medication. He couldn't stay awake, but I was in no state to pay close attention and keep him alert. I was doing all I could not to throw up.

"He drifted again when I was lost in my own world, looking out the window. A horn blared, and by the time I realized we weren't in our lane and were instead heading directly toward oncoming traffic, it was too late. I hollered for Dad to wake up. He slammed on the brakes and yanked the steering wheel so hard he put us in a tailspin. If we'd hit the other car head-on, I would probably be dead too. But we didn't. The other car clipped the corner of our vehicle and… I don't really know what happened after that. The world was upside down and inside out. I was knocked unconscious for a time. When I awoke…"

The rest was self-explanatory, so I let the sentence dangle. Mordecai could fill in the blank.

"My father died disappointed in me, and it was my fault."

"You can't take all the blame, Ensley."

"Sure I can."

"You did exactly as you were instructed."

"I was barely eighteen. I had no business drinking or partying."

"And your father should have recognized he was equally compromised and found another way to get you home safely."

I huffed, unsure if Mordecai's analysis annoyed me or hit on a truth I'd spend fifteen years refusing to contemplate. "He wouldn't have had to get me if I was doing what I said I was doing. If I hadn't lied. Everyone blamed me."

"Who's everyone?"

"The town. Teachers. Students. Dad's coworkers. Family. Deep down, probably my mother, but she'd never admit it."

“I think you’re wrong. You blame yourself; therefore, you project your guilt onto everyone else.”

“You don’t know how it was. How it is.”

“No. You’re right. I apologize. I shouldn’t judge. I harbor my own guilt over my family’s death, even when I can hardly be responsible for a plague. Despite logic, I can’t help believing that if I’d been there, maybe I would have recognized that we needed to leave.”

“It wouldn’t have helped.”

“No. Yet, that’s how I feel.”

I took his point.

We continued in silence for several long minutes, the weight of sorrow a third passenger in the vehicle. I shifted, eager to change the subject and wash away the oppressive stink from the air before I choked on it.

“What do you miss most about being human?”

“Everything.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s a perfectly reasonable answer and encompasses how I feel.”

“List the top three things?”

Mordecai huffed, a faint smile curving his mouth. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I don’t know what that means. Stop dodging.”

“Food. I miss eating food. My current diet is… revolting.”

I chuckled. “Liar.”

“It is.”

“You didn’t seem revolted the other day, and Cristofer said—”

“Cristofer talks too much.”

“Are you saying you didn’t enjoy yourself? When it was me?”

Mordecai squirmed, and it was quite possibly the first time I’d seen him uncomfortable.

“Well?”

He *tsk*ed with obvious annoyance and stared out the passenger window as he mumbled, “It was incredibly arousing, but it doesn’t change my stance on the matter.”

“If it helps, I liked it.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

“Why not?”

He didn’t answer, and I didn’t push. Maybe it was one of those things he had to come around to or would prefer we didn’t talk about. I didn’t know

how often he should eat to maintain proper energy levels, but a time would come when he needed to feed again.

I tried a different direction. “What happens if you eat human food?”

“I get violently sick. My organs don’t function anymore, or rather, not as they should. My stomach can’t digest.”

“At the steakhouse—”

“I spat in a napkin.”

“I figured. Okay. That’s one. Name two more things you miss.”

“Good grief, Ensley.”

“Might as well humor me. We still have over an hour and a half to go before we arrive.”

“Fine. I miss bathing in the river and feeling the hot summer sun on my face without suffering severe discomfort.”

“Can you bathe in a bathtub?”

“Yes, and shower, but I can’t swim in a lake, river, or the ocean. I can’t go to church, not that I believe in a merciful God anymore since I am the devil’s creation, but I do miss it.”

“Were you religious?”

He didn’t answer for long enough that I glanced across the console and caught a melancholic smile as he peered into the distant fields at the side of the road.

“Mordecai?”

“Everyone was religious in the sixteenth century, Ensley. Science hadn’t taught us otherwise. It was a simpler time.”

“I guess.”

He turned to face me. “What’s your favorite meal?”

I grinned. “Easy. Poor man’s beef stroganoff.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Basically, ground beef fried with onions, a can of mushroom soup, and egg noodles. My mother will tell you I practically lived off it from age five to eight.”

“Huh. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Will you make it for me?”

“I might need further instruction, but I’ll try.”



We arrived in Strathroy to a dreary fall morning. Slate gray clouds hung low over the town. The streets shone wetly, strewn with withered leaves from a recent rain. Skeletal trees shivered under the assault of a heavy north wind. The presence of Halloween lingered on every corner. Jack-o'-lanterns wore an array of faces, from comedic to haunting; flapping ghosts and skeletons dangled from branches and porch overhangs; cobwebs and black streamers hung with blow-up spiders, witches, or cats.

It reminded me of that night fifteen years ago. The only thing missing was the rain turned sleet, which the weather report had claimed was possible by midafternoon.

At least the dull day would ease some of Mordecai's daytime discomfort. Regardless, the minute the sun lit the world, a pinch appeared in his brow, and he put on sunglasses.

Aiming for my childhood home, I detoured to show Mordecai the high school I'd attended and the ball diamond where I'd played Little League. "Dad was assistant coach for a few years."

I pulled into the driveway of the two-story brick house where I grew up and killed the engine. Mordecai leaned forward and admired the structure through the windshield.

"It's no mansion," I said.

"How long has it been since you brought a man home to meet your mother?"

"More than a decade."

Mordecai *hmm*ed, a noise I couldn't interpret.

"Why?"

"I'm assessing the level of caution I should exercise while in her presence. I suspect I'll be closely analyzed if it's been that long."

"She has a lot on her mind with this memorial, so hopefully you won't get the third degree."

"I suppose. Shall we?"

I knocked before letting us into the house, not waiting for an invitation. Voices and the delicious aroma of frying bacon arose from the kitchen before my mother called, "Ensley? Is that you?"

"Hi, Mom."

I guided Mordecai toward the kitchen as my mother emerged, beaming a brilliant smile. She engulfed me in a strangling hug that went on for ages

before she held me at arm's length. "Look at you." She *tsk*ed. "Handsome as always."

"You're looking fine yourself."

My mother had aged well despite the years she'd spent drowning in grief over my father's death. In fact, she looked brighter and more jovial than usual, especially considering what the weekend entailed.

At five foot four, Mom was a slight woman, trim and fit from years of walking all over town and attending regular exercise classes at the local gym. Her hair was the same rusty brown it had always been, sporting a few extra silver highlights than the last time I saw her.

"Mom, this is Mordecai. Mordecai, my mother, Ann."

"The pleasure is mine, ma'am." Mordecai offered a slight bow, but my mother wasn't having it.

"None of that. You get a proper hug, so I hope you're ready." With that, she swept him into her arms and squeezed. Mordecai grunted, his eyes bulging over her shoulder.

I smothered a smile.

Mordecai had removed the sunglasses in the car. When Mom pulled back, holding him by the arms so he couldn't get away, she examined him head to toe. "Well, aren't you a handsome devil. Ensley's right. The accent is simply adorable. London? Is that right?"

"Yes, ma'am. Mostly."

She rested a hand on his cheek before sliding it to his forehead. "Are you feeling okay, sweetheart? You're awfully pale. Your skin's cool. No fever."

"Mom."

"I'm fine," Mordecai assured her. "I'm getting over a nasty cold. Took me out for several days. Forgive me if I don't have much appetite or energy. I assure you, I'm on the mend."

"You poor thing. If there's anything I can get you, let me know. Should I make tea?"

"Ann?" a male voice called from the kitchen. "Do you want this casserole out? The timer went off. It looks done."

"If you don't mind. I'll be a second."

I stared in the direction of the kitchen, then to my mother, who wore a sheepish smile. "I told you I wanted you to meet someone."

She had, and although I'd suspected she was referring to a man, I hadn't anticipated arriving at her house at the ass-crack of dawn to find one in the

kitchen. The implication was not something I wanted to consider.

“Come on. Breakfast is almost ready. Are you hungry? I’ll make tea. The water won’t take long to boil.”

Mom went ahead, and I stalled, unsure why my stomach had knotted at the prospect of meeting some new man in my mother’s life. It wasn’t like I expected her to remain single or grieve my father until the end of her days, but the alternative was a gut punch I wasn’t prepared for. After so long, I figured she wasn’t interested.

“Ensley?” Mordecai touched my hand, and I remembered myself, smiling weakly and guiding him to the kitchen.

His name was James Timberlan, and he greeted me with a sturdy handshake and a cheerful smile that somehow found its way through a speckled, salt-and-pepper beard, the same color as the thick hair on his head. James was tall and sturdy, if not a little overenthusiastic for eight in the morning. His abundant energy tainted my mood when I considered why.

James seemed at home in the kitchen, wearing an apron and wielding a spatula like he lived there or had spent many mornings cooking breakfasts with my mother.

I shook his offered hand with the utmost politeness and introduced Mordecai, who was far more authentically courteous.

Mom made tea before handing out steaming mugs. Mordecai accepted one without flinching. He did little more than warm his cold hands on it while Mom and James added the final touches to breakfast.

I watched the two dance around each other at the counter, and it was far too choreographed to be their first time sharing space. How long had James been part of my mother’s life? She had never mentioned him before. Not in texts. Not in emails. Not in the multiple conversations we shared each week.

Before long, we gathered around the dining room table to enjoy a far too extravagant meal. Scrambled eggs, hash brown casserole, bacon, sausage, *and* ham, fruit salad, French toast, and berry pancakes in abundance. It was enough to feed an army.

My tea was nearly gone, so when Mom and James were preoccupied, setting out the endless platters, I surreptitiously swapped mugs with Mordecai, offering a wink. He smiled and nudged my knee in silent thanks.

Everyone filled their plates, Mordecai reservedly so. His confession in the car came back to me, and I wondered how hard it was to smell such

savory foods and not be able to indulge.

While we ate, Mom drilled Mordecai with dozens of questions. Where was he from? Why had he relocated to Canada? What did he do for a living? Where was his family?

All questions I feared she might ask.

I shouldn’t have worried. Mordecai came prepared and smoothly answered them all without a single hiccup. He was from London but had spent a great deal of time traveling across Eastern Europe. He’d spent many years in Romania. He worked in marketing, and it required a lot of travel. He was in Canada for a project. His family, he shared, lived overseas. His parents had died many years ago, but he had a brother, Cristofer, an uncle who had taken him under his wing, and several cousins he saw on occasion.

The entire time he talked, he mimicked eating, much like he’d done at the steakhouse, cutting small bites of food and chewing them before surreptitiously transferring the mouthful to a napkin as he wiped his mouth. Smooth and effortless.

When the inquiry about my new boyfriend died off, Mom went into flowery exposition about how she and James met, what he did for a living before he retired, about his children from a previous marriage, who were both in college, the boat he’d purchased the previous year, and the tae kwon do classes he taught Tuesday nights in the fall and winter.

They touched hands and shared lovesick smiles. Mom stole food off his plate, and he accepted forkfuls of syrup-drippy pancakes. They laughed at inside jokes and talked over top of each other in their excitement to share stories. James doted, and Mom soaked it up.

For the first time in fifteen years, the heavy weight of sorrow that lived in her eyes was absent. I should have been glad, but a small part of me ached to think she no longer needed me to hold her up.

When breakfast was over, Mom and James turned down my offer to tidy the kitchen. Instead, I collected our overnight bags from the Jeep and showed Mordecai to my old bedroom.

Opening the door, expecting it to be the same as it had always been, I stalled, confused by the sight of a modified home gym. I stood dumbfounded on the threshold, gaze roaming over the various equipment. A blue mat took up half the floor space. One wall was entirely mirrors. A dobok hung from a hook, along with training pads and colored belts.

“Oh,” Mom called from the bottom of the stairs. “You’ll need to stay in the guest room. James and I turned your old room into a workout space.”

James and I.

James and I.

Without saying a word, I closed the door and proceeded to the smaller spare room, where family members stayed when they visited. My place at home had been erased, and I felt childishly hurt as a result but too old to voice my disappointment without sounding petty. Nor was I quite sure why it mattered. Moving on was good. Moving on was healthy.

Except I’d been Mom’s pillar for years, despite our distance.

Between the looming memorial service, the unexpected displacement, and *James*, the visit home was turning out far worse than I predicted, and I’d never once anticipated a good time. The real punch in the gut was realizing that her pleas for me to come this weekend had more to do with introducing James than having someone available to hold her up as she remembered her long-dead husband.

“Are you all right?” Mordecai asked as I dropped my backpack on the bed.

“I will be once this is over, and I can go home.”

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Ensley

BY ELEVEN, A STEADY rain fell, and I imagined every child under ten bemoaning another ruined Halloween.

I parked across the street from the church and left the Jeep running. The last time I was in the building was the day we buried my father, and I couldn't help tumbling into the past. The windshield wipers worked overtime, clearing the view, only for it to be immediately obstructed.

A handful of people approached the church under a sea of black umbrellas, much the same as Dad's funeral all those years ago. Mom and James stood out front, arm in arm, greeting people as they arrived, likely thanking them for coming.

James acted as her pillar. It should have been me at her side. What did he care about my dad? So far as I knew, they had never met.

"You're lost in thought again."

I sniffed and cleared the lump from my throat. "Sorry. Distracted. How are we doing this? You can't go in."

"No. I'll remain in the Jeep. Wait until the crowd disperses and your mother and James retire inside. Be sure your mother knows you've arrived but choose a spot in the rear to sit. I assume she'll be seated at the front."

"Likely."

"If she asks after me, tell her I've gone to the loo. If she repeatedly notices my absence, extend my apologies and explain that the church was too hot and stuffy. I felt nauseous and required air. Tell her I will return

when I feel better. It will substantiate my inability to eat at the reception. She shouldn't question it considering the story of illness I told earlier."

"I doubt they will spend much time at the cemetery in this weather." I stared at the roiling clouds. "Heck, she might cancel that part altogether. Plus, if you continue to be sick, it gives us an excuse to duck out early. We could go home tonight. She clearly doesn't need me," I added with mumbled petulance.

"That's not wise. I can't assist with driving, and you're knackered. You've not been sleeping well, and I woke you at four. You're not undertaking a three-hour drive home."

"The only reason I'm not sleeping well is because *someone*," I smirked, "keeps me up at night doing deliciously nasty things to my body."

Mordecai arched a brow. "Would you rather I didn't?"

"I never said that."

He studied me in such a dissecting way, I cut my gaze to the church.

"You're unhappy here."

I huffed. "That's not a secret. Too many memories."

"No. It's her friend James."

"*Friend*. Interesting word choice. It's fine. He seems nice, and she's clearly happy. That's what's important. I'll survive."

Surprising me, Mordecai leaned over the console and cupped my jaw, drawing me in for a soft kiss. "If I can offer advice. Don't regret your life, Ensley. Don't wallow in the past or burden yourself with future problems that don't exist. Savor each day as it comes because you never know when it will be your last."

The service was short and powerful. My heart ached throughout as I was forced to recall the wonderful man who had given me life. As predicted, we forwent visiting the cemetery due to the incessant rain and proceeded to the hall. Mordecai held my hand during the short drive. When I couldn't find words to translate my feelings, he offered a reassuring squeeze.

It was enough.

About thirty people joined us for lunch, but it was enough for me to go unnoticed. Several people said hello, and I greeted them amicably, introducing Mordecai. When they drifted away, I explained how I knew each person.

"He worked with my dad," I said of a fellow with a weathered face and youthful eyes.

“Her son and I went to school together. Her name’s Mabel. She and Dad were on the PTA.” A curvy woman with a swan-like grace and a warm smile.

“That’s Mom’s friend Grace. They met at the hospital. Mom was a nurse, and Grace was a phlebotomist until she retired. I believe she still works at the blood donor clinic.”

Mordecai grinned facetiously, leaning in and whispering, “We have something in common.”

I chuckled. “Yes, only Grace chose the profession because she *likes* drawing blood.”

“Vile.”

“Stop pretending you hate it.”

He eyed me, surreptitiously scraping his teeth along his bottom lip, giving me a peek of his pronounced eyeteeth. “Stop pretending you like it.”

“I’m not pretending.” Leaning closer, I added, “It was incredibly erotic.”

Mordecai *hmm*ed in a manner that suggested he would never understand.

We mingled, sticking close to one another. My gaze was repeatedly drawn to my mother, who flittered about the room with James on her arm. He brought her food, tucked her hair behind her ear, and squeezed her hand reassuringly every so often.

Was it odd for him, celebrating the life of her dead husband fifteen years after his passing? He seemed comfortable. Content. Happy.

So did she.

Despite my guilt and fears, despite having told Mordecai that people in my hometown would talk behind my back and give me dirty looks, that they would outright blame me for my father’s death, everyone was perfectly cordial. Regardless, I couldn’t help feeling disconnected. The outsider who didn’t belong. For years, my mother and I had leaned on one another, holding each other up. I was all she had left.

Until now.

In that precise moment, I recognized the distance that had grown between us over the past month. Our daily emails had petered off. We didn’t speak on the phone with the same regularity. Texts were fewer and farther between. I took partial blame. I’d been caught up in everything Mordecai, but in my defense, it wasn’t every day you found out the guy you were sleeping with wasn’t human. And yes, maybe I’d been equally preoccupied.

But Mom had found someone else too. Someone to fill the void. Someone to lean on. Someone to share time with. Someone who helped her look forward, not back. Someone who brought a smile to her face instead of tears to her eyes.

I would always be a reminder of all she'd lost.

Later that night, Mom got me alone. Mordecai had gone for a walk after sunset, and James was… somewhere.

"You don't like him." Hurt cut grooves into her forehead.

"I don't know him, Mom. How can I not like him?"

"He's a good man."

"I have no doubt. I'm glad you're happy."

And I was.

Mom must have read the pain in my heart and drew me in for a long hug. Shamefully, I cried on her shoulder.

"I love you, sweetheart."

"I love you too, Mom."

When she released me, she dried my tears and held my face. Then, with a frown, she pushed my shirt collar aside. "Your necklace. You aren't wearing it."

I touched my throat. "Oh. It's at home. I must have forgotten it after my shower." A lie. I no longer wore the necklace because of Mordecai.

"Oh, sweetie. Please put it back on when you get home. It protects you."

I wasn't sure I believed it anymore. Protected me against what? Against whom? Mordecai? Sweet, gentle Mordecai? He believed his curse was the devil's doing. That he was reborn from evil. Eternally punished for something he couldn't identify. But why? What had he ever done that was so wrong that he deserved the fate he'd been given?

What had my father done?

God, heaven, hell. It was too much to process. Who drew the line between good and evil? Who decided who suffered and who didn't? Maybe there were things in the universe we weren't meant to understand. Things we weren't meant to control. Perhaps our destinies were set, and no amount of jewelry and prayers would change the course of the universe.

It wasn't a conversation I could have with my mother. Her faith was too deeply embedded, and mine had long since fallen to pieces.

"I'll put it on when I get home."

Mordecai and I left the following morning after a smattering of goodbyes and well wishes from my mother and James—who had spent the night.

Driving away from my hometown, I was assaulted by a strange foreboding. I couldn't help thinking that I might never return to Strathroy, that I would never see my mother again, that I was leaving it all behind for good. The past, the pain, the memories, the guilt. A door had shut on all of it without my notice or permission.

I was adrift.

November started much the way October ended, under a moody, overcast sky, with a blanket of fine rain, a muted landscape, and a chilly north wind that sank into my bones and made me think I would never be warm again.

Something ominous hung in the air, foretelling of a future I had yet to understand.

Recognizing my disquiet, Mordecai took my hand. For the first time since we met, I sensed no difference in our body temperature.

Maybe, I too, was dead inside.

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Mordecai

UPON RETURNING TO OWEN Sound, my goal was to formulate an ironclad plan to rescue Iulian from the hunters. It meant further reconnaissance. It meant studying the comings and goings of the hunters to learn how many protected the elder, when they switched shifts, and what kind of challenges I might face. Who was their leader? How closely involved was Valerius? I wanted to examine their weaknesses and discover any and all traps, so I didn't spring them again. With my powers strengthened, I would be wiser and hopefully go undiscovered.

What I didn't anticipate was a human distraction. A melancholy human distraction who had somehow wiggled his way into my life and warmed a spot behind my ribs that hadn't been warm in four centuries.

Ensley wasn't himself, not since our visit to his hometown. It had been eight days, and I suspected his despondent mood had everything to do with the new man in his mother's life and not the events that had taken him to Strathroy in the first place.

He ate robotically, went to work, and came home with barely a smile. At night, we shared a bed and our bodies, and his lovemaking was raw and borderline sacrificial. I wasn't sure how else to describe it. He often arched his back and presented his neck, enticing me and whimpering for something he wouldn't articulate.

Sometimes I thought his craving for me was on par with my craving for him. Resistance was a challenge. My insatiable needs were harder to control

each day. Staving off hunger when we were so ravenously engaged tested my limits, but I swore to myself I would not feed on him again.

A promise that was quickly crumbling with my weakened will.

In the short time I'd known Ensley, I'd admired his caring nature and gentle soul. In the car, listening to the story of the accident that had taken his father's life, it was all too clear how he'd come to be the kind and compassionate man I'd been slowly getting to know.

Ensley carried a mountain of guilt and blame on his shoulders. His youthful lies and their consequences had tormented him for years. After that fateful Halloween night, he'd taken full responsibility for his mother's happiness, even when he couldn't live in the same town anymore from a perceived notion that everyone judged him. Even when his own suffering dragged him under and threatened to drown him.

He'd caused her pain; therefore, he would do all he could to mend her broken heart.

Except James had taken over, leaving Ensley a martyr without a cause.

I didn't believe he had failed. If anything, his love and dedication to his mother had likely been the foundation of her healing journey. Without Ensley's compassion, there might not have been a James, but he couldn't see it, and I wasn't in a position to convince him. It was a truth he needed to discover on his own.

As a full week came and went, my loyalties wavered. I understood my responsibilities and how imperative it was that I rescue Iulian for the good of my people and our future, but I had also grown close to Ensley, far closer than I planned.

My unbeating heart ached for this tormented man. I'd given him as much as I could, knowing it would never be enough, knowing this beautiful thing we shared would inevitably end in ruin.

Our destinies were not meant to cross. Our worlds were not the same.

Determined to draw him from his depression, I'd spent the evening concocting a trial version of his favorite childhood meal while he attended an open house. Intoxicating smells filled the flat, and if I didn't know how violently sick it would make me, I would have savored a bite. My goal was to put a smile on Ensley's face, spark life into his shadowed eyes. Watching him eat had become one of my most favorite activities in the world.

I hadn't returned to the mansion since visiting his hometown. The temptation arose that afternoon as recognizable signs of depletion surfaced.

The savage hunger that made my bones ache grew worse with each passing day. Resting on my soil would stave off the need to feed, but the hunters had discovered my lair, so venturing there and descending into a state of torpor would be risky.

I needed to investigate the eyot again and soon. It would have to be that evening, before the depletion dulled my sharp wit and dampened my skills. After Ensley slept. He couldn't know. I worried he might try to stop me. Worse, I feared he would insist on joining the cause.

The distinct sound of plodding footsteps climbing the stairs to the flat reached my ears. I hastily plated Ensley's food and set it on the high table between utensils and a neatly folded napkin. Retrieving the glass of wine I'd recently poured, I aimed for the door to greet him.

Ensley entered, and I studied him, alert to his ever-changing mood, reading his face and body language to see how his day had gone. He seemed weary and sullen, but when his gaze landed on me, a content smile took shape on his lips and brought a spark of life to his eyes.

Warmth bloomed in my chest. "Welcome home."

Ensley sniffed the air and peered toward the kitchen area. "You cooked again."

It had become my favorite pastime. My ingrained nocturnal habits had been impossible to kick. I spent many hours asleep while he worked, and often lay awake beside him at night, watching him sleep.

"I did. Something special this time. I can't promise perfection since taste-testing isn't an option, but it smells divine. Are you hungry?"

"Starving." He shed his coat and hung it on a hook by the door before tipping his head to the side to examine me properly. I wore a silly apron with a frilly yellow border. It read *Queen of the Kitchen* in pink cursive across the front. A bejeweled crown was emblazoned above the words. I'd found it in a drawer that afternoon while hunting for a colander.

Chin high, like a queen, I held the glass of wine aloft for him to take. "What?"

He accepted the wine and thumbed the ruffled edge of the apron. "It was a gag gift from Mars last Christmas."

"I quite fancy it."

He chuckled. "You've turned into a domestic queen."

"Laugh all you want. I think it suits me." I took his free hand and drew him against my chest. "It made you smile. That's all that matters. You've

been sullen lately."

"Some." He cut his gaze to the wine, his humor fading.

"Is it your mother?"

"Among other things."

"What other things?"

He didn't answer right away, so I brushed my nose along his cheek and kissed his temple. "Come on, Ensley. Talk to me. What other things?"

"You." I half expected the answer, so I remained quiet, embracing him as he continued. "I know you're working on a plan to extract your uncle from that… underground whatever it is. And I know you'll go behind my back to do it, risks be damned."

"It's not your war. Why would I put you in danger?"

"See? I'm right. *You're* in more danger than I am. They're vampire hunters."

Sighing, I gave his hand a tug. "Come eat." I guided him to the table. The conversation was too heavy. We'd discussed my position numerous times, and he wouldn't change my mind. The last thing I wanted was to upset him.

When Ensley observed the single place setting and the food, whatever irritation he felt at my avoidance vanished. A wide grin filled his face.

"Is that poor man's beef stroganoff?"

"Yes. Or, rather, that was the intent. I hope it resembles what you've had in the past. I'm hopeless when it comes to choosing spices for seasoning, so I stuck with the basics. Salt and pepper."

My research had suggested fresh garlic or garlic powder, but that wasn't an option, so if it was lacking in flavor, I could hardly be blamed. I'd asked Ensley to dispose of all garlic a week ago, since my sensitive nose picked up traces, no matter how faint. Garlic could have a paralyzing effect in large quantities. Even trace amounts could petrify my muscles.

"Poor man's beef stroganoff isn't supposed to be fancy."

"Good. Sit. Try it."

He sat and filled his fork by stabbing the noodles. I hovered by his side, waiting for the verdict. His first bite left me on the edge of my seat. He chewed for several long seconds before tipping his head back on a groan.

I beamed.

"This is so freaking good. Holy shit. I'm eight years old again."

Encouraged, I took a seat caddy corner and propped my chin in my upturned palm to watch.

Ensley ate with gusto, shoveling food into his face between moans of pleasure. Observing his excitement and the delight he took in the simple meal satisfied a century-long yearning for the foods I could no longer enjoy.

Halfway through the large serving, Ensley slowed and set his fork aside to indulge in a sip of wine. He eyed me skeptically over the glass's rim. "Don't think I didn't catch your clever diversion."

"You're an intelligent man. It would be foolish to think I deceived you. I wanted a reprieve from the same argument we've had numerous times."

"Why do I get the feeling that you're going tonight?"

"Strictly reconnaissance. Nothing more."

"Are you strong enough?"

"Yes."

"It's been over a week. Cristofer said—"

"Cristofer isn't the authority on feeding schedules. What works for me doesn't work for him."

He drank more wine and set the glass aside. "I'd let you. If you wanted or needed…"

"I know you would. It's a dangerous habit."

"I'd rather you be at full strength and not risk your life by going about this in a state of… depletion? Is that what you call it?"

"I'm not depleted, Ensley. I'm fine. Perhaps in a few days we can revisit your offer."

He picked up his fork and continued to eat with less enthusiasm. "What's the end goal?"

"What do you mean?"

"What happens when you free Iulian? Will you leave? Go back to London or wherever you're living in Europe?"

"That was the original plan, but now… I don't know. Leaving feels impossible. The thought of walking away from you, from this…"

Ensley no longer ate. He pushed the noodles around his plate, lost in his head. I removed the fork and set it aside before taking his hand and squeezing it.

He wouldn't meet my eyes.

"I can't leave, Ensley. Moreover, I don't want to. I didn't think this could ever happen. Not to me."

He cut his gaze from his plate and studied my face like he didn't believe me or was afraid to hope.

“This is new,” I continued, “and I’m scared for what it will do to me in the end. For centuries, I’ve been firmly convinced that my kind should not mix with humans. We are a stain on the earth. We deserve to rot in misery for a million years.”

“No.” The word was barely a whisper. Tears brimmed his eyes.

“Believe me. Not everyone feels the way I do. I’m in the minority. Cristofer has taken many human lovers. He’s even changed a few, an action I vehemently oppose. He doesn’t suffer from this curse. Not like me. He embraces it.”

“If you went back—”

“Didn’t you hear me say I can’t? Don’t you understand, love? My heart, or whatever remains of that rotten organ, is already entwined with yours. Be it next week, next year, or sixty years from now, our parting will be a devastation I may not survive.”

His lips parted, and his eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “I love you, Mordecai.” The words, spoken so softly they might have gone unheard if not for my enhanced hearing, struck a chord. That was it.

“I think that’s what I’m trying to say too. Forgive me. I have no experience in matters of the heart. You’ve awoken something in me. I can’t go back to how I was before. I don’t want to. I love you.”

Ensley shoved his plate aside and leaned over the table, joining our mouths in a kiss that echoed across centuries. I’d often wondered why I’d been cursed. Why I’d been forced to endure a life so undesirable and wanting. Perhaps it was God’s plan all along. Perhaps I was born in the wrong time, and I was meant to take this journey through hell to reach my nirvana.



The clock on the bedside table changed. The highlighted numbers marked the hour of ten past two. Ensley’s slowed heart rate indicated he’d entered a deep slumber. Torn between staying with my lover and my duty to my king and kind, I struggled to untangle our limbs and leave.

We made love after dinner. Twice. Each time, Ensley had pushed my boundaries, extending his neck in a silent plea. He wanted me to bite him. To feed. I’d pressed my tongue against his fluttering pulse as the savage desire screamed through my body.

“Yes,” he’d whispered. “Please.”

Somehow, *somehow*, I resisted.



The frosty November night turned the air crisp. The clear sky sported a moon so full and bright, its spots and streaks stood out against the darker volcanic plains. A hazy ring surrounded it. There it hung, a fixture among a sea of stars. For a long time, I stood on the pavement outside Ensley’s flat, mesmerized by its opulence. Its lure was a near physical sensation that tugged at something deep inside me. It called to me. We were kin.

Instead of heading to the eyot like I planned, I aimed for the compromised mansion. It was night, and the advantage would be mine should I run into hunters, unlike the fortified island, with its underground chamber meant to hold the greatest of our kind captive. I hoped I could box my soil and transport it back to Ensley’s.

This particular racial need made him uncomfortable, but it was a fact he would need to come to terms with if we were to pursue something long-term.

Unsurprisingly, the hunters had tampered with the mansion. The fine cracks around the front door and first floor windows had been filled with a substance that repelled me, although I wasn’t sure what it was. A bed of white garlic blossoms lined the porch, emitting their stench into the air. A wooden cross had been nailed to the door.

Effective strategies, if not for their oversight.

Either Valerius’s hunters were imbeciles, or the usurper had failed to pass along vital information because the second-floor windows were untouched, allowing me entry. Scaling the rough side of the mansion was child’s play. Dissolving into smoke and easing through the poorly sealed frame took no time and little effort.

I entered the bedchamber I’d shared on a few occasions with Ensley and scanned so as not to be caught off guard. Nothing was amiss. Following the dark corridor to the stairs, I descended on silent feet, hearing sharply attuned to any noise outside the ordinary. I scented the air and scanned the ground for traps.

The parlor and kitchen remained untouched, so far as I could tell. The broken door to the cellar hung ajar. I descended, convinced the hunters

Valerius had hired were amateurs. If that was the case, extracting Iulian might be easier than I feared.

Unintelligent, maybe, but they'd known enough to compromise my soil.

I felt it before I approached the wooden crate. A hum under my skin. A poisonous itch that slithered through my veins. The same sensation that had accosted me at the front door. From several feet away, I peered into the crate, expecting it to be filled with the Eucharist, but it appeared visibly untouched.

I knew better. The repulsion told me so.

If I had to guess, they had doused my soil with holy water, rendering it useless. Simple wafers could have been removed. It would have meant employing Ensley's aid, but they didn't want to take that chance, likely suspecting he was working with me.

Disappointed and frustrated, burning with the need to rejuvenate or feed, I left the mansion the way I'd come. Taking to the air, I headed for my next destination.

On the eyot, I spent an hour observing three men on guard by the trapdoor that led underground. More garlic blossoms littered its surface. The trip wire I had missed on my first excursion was fixed, a fine, barely visible fishing wire that stood out with my enhanced vision. I would not trigger it twice.

Perched in a tall evergreen, in an inconspicuous form, I considered my options and how long I had until the next group of hunters arrived. Dense trees surrounded the clearing. When I tried to raise a wind to push the pungent scent of garlic in a different direction, I did not succeed. I had no hope of blowing the blossoms from the trapdoor's surface.

Although spread across the entrance, the foliage did not cover it completely. Enough gaps existed around its edge that I could slip between one and enter. It would require transforming into mist or shadow, an event that a skilled hunter would be trained to anticipate and watch for.

On the other hand, skilled hunters would know that sparsely scattered garlic blossoms were not enough of a deterrent. I did not sense the discomfort of a holy seal. They likely thought it would be too much work to fill the cracks each and every time they had to enter or leave.

What I needed was a distraction, something inconspicuous enough it wouldn't alert the hunters to my presence. Something that would keep them busy for long enough I could slink below and see what I was up against.

An owl hooted from a distant tree, giving me an idea. I relocated to the ground a distance from the trip wire barrier and reassumed human form. Pressing my hand to a tree, I reached for the same sub-audible frequency as I'd done at the mansion over a week ago and sent out a series of vibrations.

Surrounded by forest, their preferred habitat, the response was immediate. I heard them coming from a mile away. A gentle murmur at first before it accumulated and grew louder. Their beating wings were a sonic pulse radiating through my skin and singing in my bones. The disturbance grew as did their numbers, and I witnessed the moment the first hunter registered an approaching commotion.

"What is that?" Frowning, he craned his neck and peered into the treetops. "Do you hear it?"

His companions didn't have to answer. Frantic chirps and caws breeched the island, a layered wall of sound advancing like a tidal wave. The deep, resonant rumble grew in intensity as they approached. The atmosphere vibrated. The few remaining leaves in the trees shivered as a sudden, sharp burst of wind disturbed the air.

Then, they burst from the dark sky and descended on the clearing, a murder unlike any Owen Sound had ever seen.

Dozens of crows, fifty, sixty, a hundred or more. Screeching and blustering, dipping and diving.

One of the hunters shouted in alarm as the flock circled his head, close enough that a wing smacked him in the face. Another shouted as a sharp talon tore his clothes. The men lifted their arms, protecting their faces, swatting at the assault.

It was exactly what I hoped for.

Chaos.

The panic of countless birds disturbed the play of moonlight on the ground, making it possible for me to slip through unnoticed.

I liquified, turning into shadow form and slithered under the trip wire and to the entrance of the underground cell where my uncle was being held. Although intensely uncomfortable that close to garlic blossoms, I found an unprotected edge and melted through the crack until I was inside.

The birds would give me a short reprieve. The subterranean chamber was all but soundproof—to humans anyhow. Their companions would be none the wiser.

I found myself ten to twelve feet underground in a narrow cavern with walls of cracked and dripping bedrock. The air was thick and suffocating, tinged with a harsh chemical scent I couldn't identify, and another I could. More garlic. It burned my skin and eyes, but it wasn't strong enough for a retreat. Not yet.

The passage sloped at a gentle downgrade, and although the initial tunnel was swamped in darkness, a blazing light emanated from a short bend up ahead.

It would knock me from my shadowed form in an instant, so I reverted to human. The ceiling was low. The walls were close. I proceeded cautiously, ready to retreat at the first sign of trouble. Senses alert, I was prepared to absorb as much information as possible.

Voices rose from somewhere in the distance, their tone light and bantering. Three men, relaxed after an uneventful night, not nearly as alert as they should have been. They relied too much on poor layers of protection, not realizing I was already in their domain.

I followed the descending tunnel to the slight bend, stopping midway and gagging on the overpowering scent of garlic permeating the air. It was steadily growing worse. It originated from whatever room lay ahead. Not a good sign.

Fighting through the inborn urge to retreat, I continued, remaining in shadow as I peered around the corner to see what was beyond. It took a full minute to absorb what I saw.

All hope of success vanished.

The centerpiece of this underground lair was a massive chamber. Concrete floor and walls. A high ceiling where powerful UV floodlights hung in every corner, powered by a collection of car batteries. Other floodlights were mounted in between. All of them were aimed at a stone sarcophagus in the center of the room.

Circling the sarcophagus was a thick, unbroken line of what appeared to be salt or chalk. I could only assume it was consecrated and impassable. Affixed to the four corners of the sarcophagus were strange mechanisms that released puffs of mist at regular intervals, and I knew with eye-watering certainty that they were the source of the unbearable garlic scent. If that dewy mist touched my skin, it would burn me the same as the holy water and render me paralyzed.

Strewn over the top of the sarcophagus was a practical bouquet of garlic blossoms.

The final nail in the coffin was a giant wooden cross hanging from the ceiling. Its base skimmed the surface of my uncle’s stone prison. I felt its effect from ten yards away. It alone was a crippling deterrent.

I barely had time to process the scene when a shout of alarm sounded from behind me. The trapdoor was open, and the men from outside were descending, calling out frantically to their companions. I’d lost control of the crows, and they’d fled with my inattention.

I backed into a dark corner of the tunnel out of reach of the UV lights and dissolved into shadow. As the men raced toward the open chamber, I moved past them unseen and escaped into the fresh night air.

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26

Mordecai

“IT’S IMPOSSIBLE. I CAN’T do it.”

The sky in the east glowed a soft indigo announcing the imminent sunrise. The air was damp, heavy with dew. The city slept peacefully on the cusp of a new day, but I was anything but calm. My night had proven the mission was futile. With no feasible resolution and agitated by what I’d learned, I called Cristofer.

“Are you being dramatic?”

“No, and since you seem to have all the answers, I’d love some direction.”

I paced in the alley outside Ensley’s flat, phone pressed to my ear, impervious to the bitter cold that blew across the city. The fact I’d been able to connect with Cristofer at all was a testament to his lifestyle and our differences. When entertaining a human lover—which happened often—Cristofer sacrificed his rest, going days without, to either hide his vampirism or share a bed with his current conquest.

Of course, Cristofer wasn’t against feeding, so he had other means of rejuvenation to fall back on. Romania was seven hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time, which meant it was nearly two in the afternoon on his side of the world. I could only guess where he might be or who he was with.

“Describe impossible.”

I detailed my investigation into the underground chamber, about the UV lights, the garlic mist, the blossoms, the unbroken line of salt or chalk that I knew, without testing, couldn’t be breached. Lastly, I described the ten-foot-

high wooden cross hanging over the concrete sarcophagus that must have weighed no less than a hundred and fifty to two hundred pounds.

Did my friend show an ounce of sympathy? No.

Cristofer laughed. “Birds? Really, Mordecai?”

I ground my teeth and scowled. “What would you have me do?”

“A murder of crows. It’s ingenious. You should have had them pluck their eyes from their sockets. Filthy hunters deserve no less.”

“Shut up. It worked fine. There was no need for violence. I got in and out safely.”

“A missed opportunity. Next time.”

What I didn’t mention was the drag on my body after such intense use of my powers and how it had been well over a week since I’d rested or fed. Reconnaissance had taken its toll. Those were my issues, and I would handle them in due time.

“I can’t get Iulian out, and manipulating the minds of six hunters at once is nearly beyond my capability, which is likely why they have so many guards. Valerius made sure of that lovely aspect.”

Cristofer hummed in agreement. “That’s quite the setup. You have to give it to the bastard. He thought it through.”

“Suggestions?”

Cristofer scoffed. “Really?”

“Yes. Really. What part of impossible didn’t you understand?”

“It’s not impossible. In fact, the solution seems obvious.”

“Oh, does it? Care to enlighten me?”

Cristofer’s tone changed to a seductive purr. “So, Mordecai. How’s your delectable human? Did he take well to your bite? Is he begging for more?”

My skin prickled, but I said nothing. My silence was answer enough.

“Ah. You finally caved, didn’t you? I knew you would.”

“No thanks to you putting ideas in his head,” I snapped.

Another chuckle. “You needed a push. Tell me, how glorious was the experience? I was right, wasn’t I?”

“Can we focus on the problem at hand?”

“I am, duck. Like I said. It’s rather simple. What you need is a human companion.” Cristofer dramatically gasped. “Well, I’ll be. It just so happens that you’re sleeping with one.”

“No. I will never—”

“Oh, Morty boy—”

“Never call me that.” With a spike of anger, my voice rose to unsafe levels. I glanced around to be sure I hadn’t called attention to myself. The streets were as bare as they’d been when I arrived.

“You’re too defensive.”

Lowering my voice, I hissed, “I won’t put a human in danger.”

“You won’t put *your* human in danger, you mean. Aww. Is the ancient ticker trying to restart after all these years? I knew a day would come.”

“I need a better solution.”

“Where are you?”

I glanced at the high windows above the closed comic book store. The soft morning glow that grew steadily brighter reflected off their dark surfaces, obscuring the flat beyond. I didn’t sense Ensley’s presence, but his alarm usually went off before the sun fully crested the horizon, and based on the diffusion of light, we weren’t far off.

“At Ensley’s.”

“Ask him.”

“I can’t.”

“You mean you won’t.” Cristofer sighed. “Shall I come? With two of us, we might be able to manipulate them into removing the wards and allowing us access, but…”

He let the suggestion hang. We both knew it would never be that simple. Valerius would have considered that. His guards would all be under his influence. He would have commanded that they go to their grave protecting the wards. Under no circumstances should they remove them, and overriding another vampire’s compulsion was impossible. It wouldn’t have mattered if a thousand of us combined our minds and power. Valerius’s suggestion wouldn’t break.

“It’s possible. He’s made a lot of mistakes.” I didn’t mention the mansion, but it was a perfect example of oversight. “We can hope he made this one too.”

“And if we’re wrong, you need to consider the alternative.”

The sound of a door opening drew my attention to Ensley’s building. He emerged from the lower entrance with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders, wearing nothing but undergarments and a T-shirt. Sleep-rumpled and with his hair skating his shoulders, he peered questioningly across the street to where I huddled in the alley.

“I have to go.”

“Am I coming?”

“Please. We need to try before I consider other options.”

Cristofer sighed wearily. “You owe me.”

“And Cristofer?” I said before he hung up. “The soil is compromised.”

He was quiet for a long minute. When he spoke, his light teasing and banter vanished. He was as serious as I’d ever known him to be. “I better not find you in a state of depletion when I get there.”

I disconnected the call, projecting my feelings on that matter. Knowing my best friend, he was calling me an arse and preparing for war. I didn’t need a lecture or someone to force my hand. I knew what was required. If I had any chance of pulling Iulian from a severe state of torpor, I had to be in top form. Failure was not an option.

I crossed the street to Ensley, who shivered in the frosty morning, his breath clouding the air with every exhale.

“You’re frozen. You should be inside.”

“Why are you out here?” His teeth chattered.

“I had to call home. I didn’t want to wake you.” I had yet to decide if I was going to disclose my night. Ensley already worried about my mission, and sharing the details of what I found would only make things worse.

I wrapped him in my arms and pulled his trembling body against mine, not that I could offer him any warmth. My body was as cold as the air around me, and it was the chilliest morning I’d experienced since arriving in the city.

Regardless, Ensley nuzzled against my chest, burying his face in my neck. I kissed his temple—his skin a furnace in comparison—and inhaled his sweet scent. Closing my eyes for a moment, I absorbed his living essence, his heat and heartbeat. So pure. So perfect. So alive.

“Was that Cristofer?”

“Yes. He’s coming to help. You’re right. I can’t do it alone.”

Ensley pulled back to study my face. His lips had turned a bloodless blue. “You were out there tonight. I knew you’d go.”

I scraped my teeth along my bottom lip and nodded. Deception was not my goal. Keeping Ensley out of danger was.

“And?”

“It went smoothly. I clarified a lot of details and discovered some obstacles that will stand in the way of the mission’s success, which is why Cristofer is coming. Two of us might have an easier time.”

“Are you going to tell me about it?”

“Not right now.” I stroked his cheek. “You’re frozen, love. Let me take you inside.”

He nodded but didn’t move from my arms. Squirming to get a hand free from the blanket, he brushed his fingertips over my lips. He exhaled with purpose, forming a thick cloud of warm air between us. It dissipated in seconds.

“You do it,” he said. “Exhale.”

Breathing was voluntary, usually reserved for times when we needed to blend with humans or scent the air. Even after so much time, I often forgot it didn’t happen automatically. I filled my lungs and pushed the air from my mouth, forming an *O* with my lips in the same way Ensley had done. He kept his fingers up, so the current flowed over them.

Nothing. No steam. No cloud. No fogging mist. I could have created one as a parlor trick, but why?

Ensley didn’t seem surprised, but he also didn’t hide his pity.

I clasped his wrist and lowered his hand, tucking it into mine. Showing him I was unbothered, I smiled. “I guess I’m not full of hot air like you.”

He chuckled. “Just a coldhearted bastard.”

It was a joke, a counter to my comment, but it stung.

“Is it weird for you?” he asked.

“Not anymore. Is it weird for you? My frigid skin? My unsightly pallor?” *My cold, unbeating heart,* I didn’t say.

“Not anymore.”

He placed a delicate kiss on my lips and brought my hand to his chest, like he’d heard my unspoken words anyhow. He pressed my palm over his heart, somehow knowing that I mourned the simple pleasure.

The organ thumped a gentle rhythm beneath, and it would have brought tears to my eyes if I were capable.

“Mordecai?”

I removed my hand and cleared my throat. “I’m fine. Come. Upstairs.”



I had a responsibility, which was how I justified it.

Cristofer texted later that day—while Ensley was at work and I slumbered in his bed—to let me know that his plane would arrive the

following day, Wednesday, in the afternoon, which meant our rendezvous would happen in under twenty-four hours. It also meant I had no choice but to cave to my desires.

Such a travesty to subject myself to a yearning I'd been barely able to control for a week. When did I start lying to myself? When did I stop caring and start craving? Where did my long-held morals go? The disgust? The repulsion? Part of me was relieved to have the choice taken away. Still, another part felt guilty at the pleasantly rising bubbles of anticipation.

For half a heartbeat, I considered going elsewhere, feeding on a stranger and keeping it impersonal, but the mere idea disgusted me. It was a betrayal.

Dictating the course of our evening, I planned a nice meal for when Ensley arrived home. Never had I taken such a keen interest in the internet or technology as after I discovered a love for cooking. I could find any recipe in the world within seconds. I could order food from a local supermarket and have it delivered, saving myself a brutal daytime excursion for ingredients. Seeped in misery for four hundred years, I never knew these pleasures could exist, or how gratifying the sense of humanity could be.

My skills, left much to be desired, but Ensley never complained about the finished product. What he didn't like was dining alone, or rather, not having someone to share the experience with. I would have given my left arm to partake but was sadly relegated to observer.

That night on the menu, Ensley would enjoy grilled sirloin, spinach and walnut gnocchi, and a zucchini and red pepper salad with a light vinaigrette. I'd allotted one glass of wine and a hearty fruit salad for dessert with chunks of kiwi, strawberries, bananas, and oranges. Every item was explicitly chosen with Ensley's health in mind.

I, on the other hand, would sup on him. My mouth watered in anticipation.

Attuned to his arrival, I poured a glass of wine and put on soft classical music the instant I heard the Jeep pull into the parking space behind the building. The lights had been off all day, and since the sun went down, I'd drawn the blackout curtains aside, letting in the night. Quite the opposite of what a typical human might do.

With Ensley's imminent arrival—he was on the stairs, climbing slowly—I closed the curtains, for his benefit, and lit the few candles, arranging them

around the flat. The soft yellow glow was a compromise that didn't assault my senses and allowed Ensley to see.

He entered and paused as he noticed the display, gaze trailing the delicately lit loft, ear cocked to the velvety music pouring from the speaker system. A smile formed as we locked eyes.

"Welcome home, love."

"I think you're a hopeless romantic."

"Suppose I am. Is that a complaint?"

"Heavens no." He dropped his keys and a stack of folders on a table by the door, kicked off his trainers, and shed his coat.

As he approached, he spied the carefully prepared meal, artfully plated and waiting. "Damn. A guy could get used to this. Is that steak?"

"It is. How was your day?"

"The usual. Dany left the office early, so I spent most of the afternoon being lazy and texting with the guys. I haven't been on a dungeon run in weeks, and they're afraid I've quit. I assured them it was only a small break. DnD tomorrow?" He raised hopeful brows. "I canceled last week since I was miserable after visiting Mom, and the week before that I forgot all about it and wasn't home when they showed up. I owe them."

I thought of Cristofer's arrival and figured if Ensley was busy, it would allow us time to confer. We could visit the mansion, and I could show him the eyot and all that was in store.

"It sounds like a wonderful idea. You should catch up with your friends. Don't let my presence stop you. I'll make myself scarce. Besides, I have business to attend. Cristofer will be here tomorrow afternoon, and I need to catch him up properly."

Ensley's face fell. "Oh. I thought you'd join us."

"Waging war against fictitious monsters hits too close to home. Especially since I'm the enemy."

"Don't say that. You're no different than the rest of us."

"We are worlds apart, love, and you know it. Besides, show me a single instance when your fabled vampires aren't on a mission to destroy humankind, and I will happily roll your dice and play your silly game."

"It's not silly." But it must not have been a battle worth waging. Ensley let it go and admired the table and single place setting. "It looks incredible. I only wish I could share it with you."

I bussed his cheek and guided him to his chair. Once he sat and I tucked him nice and close, I clasped his shoulders and leaned over to whisper in his ear. “Do away with your sulk. You won’t be dining alone tonight.”

The message was clear, but to drive the point home, I skated my lips down his neck until my mouth rested over the ideal point of entry, where his pulsing artery sat close to the surface. I grazed my tongue over the spot in question, tasting his skin and savoring the hitch of his beating heart as his adrenaline spiked.

“Oh,” he breathed, tilting his head to the side.

My teeth ached and saliva filled my mouth. Dancing the edge of ecstasy, I extended my fangs and scraped them carefully over his soft and pliable flesh. “Not now,” I whispered. “You need energy. I can’t have you collapsing from weakness.”

I’d planned the evening accordingly. The wine to slightly thin the blood—easier flow meant less time to fulfillment. The steak, spinach, and vegetables for iron fortification. The fruit salad in fruit juice for a heavy hit of vitamin C.

If I was doing this, I was doing it right.

We didn’t make it to the bedroom, however, and the decision to have a playful romp on the couch nearly had fatal consequences.

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27

Ensley

ABIDING BY MORDECAI'S REQUEST, I ate every bite of the delicious meal while he watched, practically salivating. His appetite was elsewhere, and the thought thrilled me in a way I couldn't explain. Why the experience had affected me so profoundly was a mystery, but ever since Mordecai had broken his rules and fed on me, the itch for him to do it again was insatiable. The connection. The exhilaration. The pleasure that had found new depths I'd never explored. It was as heady as a powerful drug, and I was instantly addicted.

We played footsies under the table, touched hands, and shared countless smiles and kisses that hardened my cock to the point it ached in the confinement of my pants.

I suspected that, with the number of times he readjusted himself, Mordecai was in a similar state of discomfort. His Bordeaux-colored eyes flared with their own kind of hunger, and a gratifying chill raced up my spine when I considered the trajectory of our night and what was in store. My balls tingled and ached, and I still had my clothes on for crying out loud.

Shoveling the final bite of fruit salad into my mouth, I pushed the plate aside and scrambled to my feet. Draining the last of the wine in one long gulp, I carelessly slammed the glass on the table and dragged Mordecai by the hand to the couch.

Fuck the bed. Too many steps away. No more delay. I wanted him now.

I shoved Mordecai over the arm, and he toppled backward with a laugh, landing gracelessly on the cushions. Before he could right himself, I tumbled on top of him, fusing our mouths in a wine-laced kiss. If it bothered him, he didn't complain. Perhaps the rich flavor on my tongue was the only way he could indulge in those lost pleasures.

Tearing at his clothes, I undressed him swiftly as though time was a factor, and someone might interrupt. Worse, I didn't want to give Mordecai a chance to change his mind. I had been begging without words for a repeat, presenting him with the opportunity several times, hoping to catch him when his defenses were down, but the man was stubborn and resilient. Four hundred years meant he was immune to temptation and bribery.

Catching him off guard, I swallowed his cock, and he cried out, arching into the warm cavern of my mouth.

"Ensley! Gah… You… miscreant."

I chuckled with my mouth full—*miscreant*—and increased my effort, sucking with passion and all the skill I'd acquired from hookups over the years. When I squeezed him with my throat muscles and increased the suction, Mordecai took a firm hold of my hair and tried to slow the pace.

I would not be stopped.

Digging his fingers into my scalp, he gave up and matched my rhythm, chasing his pleasure. When I brought him to the edge of orgasm, he tugged hard, drawing me off with a sputtered, "Stop, stop, stop. For the love of your sweet life, Ensley, do not make me come yet. I'm not ready."

Taking pity, I left his cock wanting and swollen, twitching from a deprived orgasm.

While he regained composure, I hastily shed my clothes and crawled over top of him, bracing a hand on either side of his head.

He wasn't flushed from exertion or panting laboriously from being sent half out of his mind, but the uninhibited love in his burgundy eyes wasn't masked, and my heart swelled. Every day was a strange experience. I never knew what tomorrow would bring or if Mordecai would someday decide that loving a human was too painful an endeavor and not worth the eventual heartache. He didn't see a future of possibilities. He saw a dreadful finale. A separation. A parting that would shatter him.

I had fallen head over heels for this extraordinary man. Unlike Mordecai, for the first time in my life, my future took on color, no longer a bleak and destitute landscape paved with guilt, sorrow, and misery.

I touched my nose to his. Our erections rested flush against one another, patiently—or impatiently—waiting for us to continue. “How do you want me?”

So taken by this beautiful creature of the night, so utterly under his spell, I would have done anything he asked without question.

“Let me sit up.”

Mordecai sat on the couch, legs sprawled, cock at attention. He invited me to straddle his lap, so I did. He cupped my ass, preventing me from sitting, and urged me closer, nuzzling the area between my cock and thigh. The wet press of his tongue made me shiver.

I closed my eyes, bracing my hands on the back of the couch as I savored the sensations.

Mordecai’s attention was deliberate. Slow and methodical. The opposite of my rushed exodus from the kitchen table. He took his time, kissing the base of my cock before dragging his tongue up my length. While he lavished a wet path around my tip, he massaged my balls and applied gentle pressure to my perineum.

Mordecai wet two fingers and set to work preparing me. At the same time, he continued to tease my cock, never once taking me into his mouth, yet elevating the pleasure all the same with his focused attention.

By the time I was moving on his fingers, encouraging them deeper and grunting with frustration because they weren’t enough, he removed them. With a healthy amount of saliva, Mordecai coated himself. He added more slickness to my entrance before holding himself upright and encouraging me to take control.

At that point, I was too far gone for caution, and once lined up, I sat with a groan, driving his cock deep into my ass.

Mordecai hissed, digging his fingernails into my hips. “Mercy, Ensley. Slow down. You’ll be the death of me.”

Settled, I judged the playful look in his eyes before teasing back. “How’s that possible? Aren’t you dead already?”

He groaned. “You’d make a terrible comedian. What is it they say?”

“Don’t quit your day job?”

“Yes. That’s it. Don’t quit your day job.”

“Noted.” I adjusted, comfortable with the intrusion, and rose a short way before descending again.

“Oh, damn. *Nngh*… You bastard. I’m losing the plot already.”

“My god, I love your words. What does that even mean?”

We both laughed, but it quickly faded as I found a solid rhythm that drove us beyond conversation.

Mordecai braced his hands on my chest, keeping a distance between us. I guessed from the previous time that it might have something to do with not wanting to bite me too early. I suspected the temptation was overpowering, no matter how many times he complained about not liking it or wanting it.

I rode him, gyrating my hips to properly milk his cock, clasping his forearms for balance. His lashes fluttered. His lips parted, and ripples of pleasure he couldn’t disguise played out expressively over his face. At one point, I spat in my hand and stroked myself, pushing the limit as Mordecai’s burgundy eyes blazed.

From between the scarlet parting of his lips, two gleaming eyeteeth, pointed and prominent, drew my attention. Hypnotized, my blood tingled and raced through my veins. The closer he got to orgasm, the higher his top lip rose over those dangerous fangs, exposing them more.

He twitched and trembled, and I imagined the surge of pleasure became harder to control. When he tucked a hand around the back of my neck and drew me closer, I went willingly, bursting with anticipation.

“I’m nearly beyond the point of control, Ensley. If you don’t want this, you need to get away from me. I won’t be able to stop once I start.”

“I want it.”

Mordecai whimpered, whether from despair at my easy acquiescence or the unquenchable thirst racing through him, I didn’t know. By that point, Mordecai was actively thrusting into me, pounding with a punishing rhythm. The slap of skin as loud as my erratic breathing and thundering heart.

Mordecai found his way to my neck, and I stroked my cock faster in anticipation. His lips lingered around the thumping artery, his tongue pressing against the area as though savoring the feel, but he moved on swiftly and settled in a slightly different location. The same spot as before.

The sudden sting made me gasp and jolt, but Mordecai anticipated my reaction like the previous time and held fast to the other side of my head, keeping me in place.

The initial release was shockingly cold, like being injected with something rather than rapidly losing the one thing keeping me alive. Perhaps I should have been afraid, but I wasn’t. In fact, part of me

wondered what would happen if he took it too far. Drank too much. Would I be angry? Would I embrace the change as he couldn't?

Almost instantly, the jarring cold faded, and a surge of numbness blanketed the prick of pain. Then, a tingling warmth flooded my system, not localized in my neck, but erupting everywhere at once, like my collective cells were gathering a static charge. The culmination of all that uncontrolled energy surged to unthinkable heights. Before I knew it, I was coming with the intensity of a nuclear blast. So strong and unexpected was the orgasm that my vision dimmed.

It went on for ages, and I quivered with the residual quakes and twitches until the last pulse abandoned me.

I was so out of it that I missed Mordecai's release. I registered it must have happened around the same time by the way he mercilessly rammed into my ass and clung with one arm around my waist as the other anchored me against his mouth.

A wild sense of vertigo made my vision swim. As I wondered if maybe Mordecai wasn't going to stop this time and if I'd lost too much blood, as my body grew heavy with an anesthetic surrender, he withdrew.

Clumsy and no longer in full control of my limbs, I swung my far too heavy head around with every intent of looking at him and sharing a smile, but I accidentally knocked his chin as he was pulling away. The *thunk* rattled my brain and made my eyes cross.

Mordecai hissed as his head snapped in the opposite direction.

"Oh god. I'm so sorry." I felt high or drunk. Even my words were partly slurred. "Are you okay?"

He tongued his lip where a dark trickle of blood oozed slowly down his chin.

Why I did it, I had no idea. My brain was woozy and not firing on all cylinders. The action was meant to be playful, a joke, and I honestly thought it was *my* blood running from his mouth.

Extending my tongue, I moved as swiftly as my sluggish body would allow and aimed to lap up that escaped dribble. I didn't fear the coppery tang. Our kisses last time had been laced with that flavor after he'd fed. Who cared?

Little did I know that I came within centimeters of altering the entire course of my life.

Mordecai, refreshed from having eaten and far more astute to my stupidity, reacted by tossing me off his lap. Not a light shove, but a pummeling ejection, like an airbag exploding and punching you in the chest—and I was familiar with that feeling.

I flew backward at such a velocity that I cleared the coffee table and landed in a tangle of limbs on the other side. If I'd ever questioned Mordecai's strength, I had my answer. It didn't help that I was severely weakened by what amounted to an extreme blood donation.

Wide-eyed and confused, I stared at the man I loved as he scaled the couch and landed on the other side. The liquid Bordeaux of his eyes bubbled with fury.

"What were you thinking?"

I wasn't, I wanted to say. *What did I do?* The cylinders weren't firing, and I hadn't sorted out what had made him so angry.

He swiped a hand over his bottom lip, and it came away bloody. A new trickle appeared. Only then did I register the quality wasn't quite right. When I bled—and I'd taken up skateboarding as an adventurous eight-year-old, so I'd bled a lot in my lifetime—it was always vibrantly red and… runnier?

The substance that coursed down Mordecai's chin was so dark it was nearly black, and it oozed with the consistency of molasses.

The pieces connected. It was not my blood. When I'd accidentally head-butted him, he'd sliced his lip open. A conversation came back to me.

If a human ingests the blood of the cursed. Then, at the moment of death, they would rise in their new form.

I blanched like I'd been pummeled in the chest a second time. The breath left my lungs, and I sat back on my ass as a prickle of fear raced up my arms, down my spine, and over my scalp.

"Oh."

We stared at one another as the gravity of my stupidity sank in. Mordecai wiped his mouth again, leaving a dark smear over his chin. The bleeding did not resume.

I had no energy to apologize and defend myself. My head spun like I'd gone too many rounds on the teacups. A profound tiredness made it hard to focus and keep my eyes open.

"I… I think I need to lie down."

Mordecai’s anger dissolved, and he aimed for the kitchen, rummaging in the fridge. When he approached, he brought a tall glass of orange juice. He crouched and held it to my mouth.

“Drink.”

“Am I dying?”

“No. I was careful, but you’re weak.”

I drank the juice, and he helped me to my feet. Mordecai guided me to the bathroom and helped me clean up. Since he’d practically moved in, a towel covered the mirror. I removed it when I showered in the morning but always rehung it out of respect.

Once we were clean, he helped me scale the ladder and get into bed before crawling in beside me.

I shifted to face him, drowsy but not ready to fall asleep. I didn’t know what time it was, but it felt too early.

“Are you angry with me?”

“No.” He tucked a random piece of hair behind my ear. “You frightened me, is all. That would have been catastrophic.”

Maybe, but part of me wondered why. Wouldn’t it be a solution? Was existing as a vampire so terrible? Was it truly akin to a dreadful disease? A curse, as he so often put it. Cristofer’s opinion seemed to contradict Mordecai’s. If I understood correctly, ingesting his blood wouldn’t kill me on the spot. I could live the rest of my life as normal. The virus, or whatever it was called, would only take effect after I died.

Mordecai’s stance was unwavering. Before entering this relationship, he’d made me promise never to ask to be changed, because the answer would always be no.

I studied Mordecai’s mouth but wasn’t sure if it was safe to kiss him. I touched his cheek and tugged gently on his lower lip. “Where’s the cut?”

“It’s healed, love.” He moved my hand, kissed my knuckles, and tucked it between us.

“Already?”

Sorrow pinched the side of his eyes. “Already. Parlor tricks.”

“It’s a cool one.”

“If you say so.”

“Can I ask you something?”

Wariness surfaced, but he nodded.

“You said your uncle showed up at your house one day. He was already changed, but this was years before you joined a campaign and fought beside him, right?”

“Yes.”

“You said your family never suspected.”

“No. He was clever.”

“So, in essence, he merged with humans and lived a humanesque life despite his affliction.”

“With caveats. He rarely came around while the sun was at its apex. Early evenings on occasion. The hours before sunset are when he taught me to shoot. When he cultivated a relationship with me under false pretenses. Otherwise, he arrived after dinner and stayed long into the night, talking with Father.”

I took that in and considered what it meant.

“Is it possible, if your family had still been alive after your transformation, that you could have returned home and lived a relatively normal life without them knowing differently?”

“No.”

“Why not? Didn’t Iulian prove it was possible?”

“My family would have wondered why I didn’t eat. They would have questioned my pallor and summoned a physician. From there, it would only have been a matter of time before someone discovered my heart didn’t beat. In my time, it was widely believed that illness was a result of an imbalance in the four humors. Do you know what they prescribed as a cure?”

“Bleeding.”

“Yes, and you saw the substance that I excrete. It would have raised the alarm.”

“You still could have visited. Told them you lived elsewhere. Stuck to a schedule like your uncle did.”

“It would not have been feasible, Ensley. Besides, why are you asking this? It was never an option. My family was gone by the time I returned. Grampy, Nan, Mother, and Father.”

“But you returned.”

“Years later. To see them, not interact with them. I was lonely and angry and scared. Do you know what I found? Gravestones. A long line of gravestones. More than when I left. I don’t know who placed them. The

plague ripped through the countryside. I assume the neighbor. Mother and Father knew them well.

“It was a shock, but more so was seeing my name carved into the one beside Abeta. Word traveled that I didn’t survive the battle in France, and my parents placed a stone in my honor. Had they lived. Had the plague not come and taken all I had left, I still could never have returned. I was already written out of history, don’t you see? Dead so far as anyone understood.”

“Okay, but if circumstances were different—”

“They weren’t, Ensley. Stop. Where is this coming from? Why are you suddenly—” His eyes widened, and he pushed himself to an elbow. “No! You eject that thought from your mind right now. What did I tell you?”

“I just don’t see how it’s as bad as you say. I get it. You weren’t given a choice, but—”

“This conversation is over.”

Mordecai rolled out of bed and was down the ladder before I could find the words to stop him. In seconds, I heard the door close and knew he was gone. No matter how fast I moved, I would never be able to chase him down.

Parlor tricks my ass.

I never should have danced around the subject. Mordecai was four hundred years smarter than me. I should have known he’d see right through my curiosity.

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28

Mordecai

I SPENT THE NIGHT wandering Greenwood Cemetery under a haunted sky fit for the likes of me. The heavy cloud cover and moonless gloom suited my mood. Some of the memorials dated back as far as the late nineteenth century, their etchings barely visible. *Beloved husband and father. Cherished mother and wife. Precious daughter to so-and-so and so-and-so.* Or simply, *Our angel*, the dash separating a handful of months instead of years. Lives that had ended naturally as God intended.

None of the deceased were as old as me. Greenwood Cemetery didn't exist in my day.

The weight of those foregone years clung to my coattails, leaving me forever ensnared. One foot in the past. One tangled in the present.

It wasn't a life. No matter what Ensley thought. Why couldn't he understand? Why romanticize such an ugly and tarnished curse? Didn't he see what I lived with? The challenges I faced. The restrictions.

The loss, guilt, and shame. The betrayal.

Why would I subject someone to this torment? Especially someone I loved.

I sat on a memorial bench and stared without seeing into the distance, looking into the past, contemplating the future. Ensley wasn't alone in glamorizing something that wasn't glamorous. For hundreds of years, I'd seen my kind prosper. They embraced the change. They adapted and thrived. They brought others into our fold, ones who eagerly accepted and understood what they were up against.

I didn’t know if I was alone in my repulsion. Our numbers had grown out of control in the past few centuries. I suspected that if I wasn’t, only a handful felt as I did. Burdened. Ashamed. Ugly.

This was why I didn’t get close to humans. The risk of attachment was too great. The risk to my heart was unbearable. But the loneliness. The loneliness was so hard to conquer.

I loved Ensley. It was unplanned and unexpected. Because of that love and the knowledge I carried, I would *never* break my will. I would not pass along this curse or doom him to my existence. Not if he begged and pleaded.

Not for anything.



I returned to the flat in the early dawn, finding Ensley awake and seated at the high table, sipping a steaming mug of chamomile tea as he studied the stack of files he’d brought home the previous night.

He glanced up at my entrance, worry creasing his brow, a forlorn look in his eyes. It didn’t take a genius to see the man was utterly miserable. Wounded.

“You were gone all night.”

“You upset me. I needed air.”

He moved his gaze to the mug of tea, his distress cutting lines into his forehead. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have questioned you. You made your stance clear, and I didn’t listen. I just… wanted to understand. I won’t bring it up again.”

“We had a deal, Ensley.”

“I know. To be fair, nowhere in that conversation did I ask you to change me. I only questioned why it was such a bad idea. Can you blame me for wondering? You say you love me. Wouldn’t spending eternity together make up for all the aspects you find so disagreeable?”

“No. It’s like agreeing to a suicide pact. Why can’t you see that?”

“How?”

“Oh, do let’s, love. We can hold hands and jump off the bridge. La-di-da. How fabulous. Never fear. We’ll be together for an eternity. All our woes will disappear.” I scowled, cutting the sarcasm with a snarky, “An eternity in *death*, Ensley. Do you understand that?”

“Okay. You don’t have to be an ass. To be fair, death has a whole new definition when applied to vampirism.”

I deadpanned. “Are you daft?”

Ensley sardonically chuckled as he held up his hands. “Never mind. Case closed. We won’t talk about it. I’ll go to my grave properly when it’s my time, and I’ll never bring it up again.”

“Thank you.” I meant it sincerely, but Ensley’s feelings were bruised. Fumbling for a way to change the mood, I motioned to the counter. “Can I make you breakfast?”

“No. I had toast. I’ve been up for hours waiting for you to get home. I know this may come as a surprise, but I worry about you too. You’re not as immortal as the legends claim. You have a lot of weaknesses that someone knowledgeable can exploit. In fact, you have a gang of hunters after you who know all your flaws. Never mind the dangerous mission you’re reluctant to talk about. The one that I suspect will take place behind my back. I’m waiting for the day you don’t come home. I might never find out what happened, but you know, that’s fair.”

He huffed and returned to his tea and paperwork.

In his ramble, one word stood out from the rest. *Home.* He waited for me to come home. He considered the flat mine as well as his. A shared unit. I hadn’t called any place home in over four hundred years. I’d lived in all sorts of places, but it wasn’t the same. When did an unremarkable loft in Owen Sound become home? When did Ensley and I become so entangled?

When was I going to realize that this man, this flawed human, who had fallen for me as much as I’d fallen for him, was only seeking comfort by exploring options beyond the grim future I’d offered? He wanted an eternity in death, and I was giving him expiration dates.

Was I so wrong? Would I feel different in his shoes?

I didn’t have the answers.



Ensley’s teacher friend, Ziggy, arrived first that evening, lugging full bags of takeaway. He greeted us with a sunny hello, offering a sly grin in my direction that I didn’t quite understand.

“It’s the new beau. I knew it would happen. I saw the hearts in Ensley’s eyes last time we got together. I’d bet you’re the reason this asshole has

been AFK for weeks."

"Leave him alone." Ensley relieved Ziggy of the overfull bags of food. "And I didn't have hearts in my eyes."

"You did."

Since Cristofer had yet to arrive in the city—his trek from the Toronto airport was taking time—I lingered, affecting the role of dutiful boyfriend before I had to escape.

"It's good to see you again." Ziggy offered a hand to shake, and I obliged. The instant we made contact, he swore. "Christ, Ensley. Turn your fucking heat up. It's November, and your boyfriend is freezing." To me he said, "I thought you were from London. Aren't you used to this miserable weather? Rain and cold?"

"Oh, I am thoroughly acquainted with a dreary autumn." I tucked my hands into my trouser pockets. "It's… poor circulation."

Ensley, likely trying to save me from the awkward exchange, asked if I'd take the food to the kitchen. When he went to hand over the bags, the aromatic blend of spices drifted in the air, smacking me in the face. A sudden twist of discomfort made me jolt back as though burned, and the takeaway nearly ended up on the floor.

Ensley, reading the revulsion on my face, quickly deduced its cause. "Never mind. I've got it."

Crushing the bags to his chest, he dodged wide and aimed for the kitchen, calling back to Ziggy, "What's on the menu?"

"Italian. Mars wanted the shrimp alfredo from D'Angelo's, bringing it up in text no less than six times. You'd think it was a pregnancy craving the way he begged and moaned. So, I got a platter to share."

"Yeah, but—"

"Don't worry, I got a platter of red sauce Bolognese as well, so we don't have to suffer with Poet's flatulence all night. Lactose intolerant," he informed me. "I work with twelve-year-olds who stink up my classroom all freaking day. I've had enough of other people's stink."

To Ensley, he added, "There's garlic bread and salad too. Mars is bringing beer. Poet said Kate made apology brownies, so he's bringing them for dessert. I don't know what that means, but I suspect they're fighting again."

Ziggy tugged a receipt from his pocket and stared at it for a long minute as his lips moved in silent calculation. "It's thirty-five a head tonight. Kind of steep. Sorry. Blame Mars. That place is expensive."

Although I wouldn’t touch the food, I covered the tab for both Ensley and me, knowing I had been included in the division.

By the time Poet and Mars arrived and everyone filled their plates, DnD game night was underway. Before I could be included in the new campaign, I explained that I was meeting a friend from back home shortly and would have to duck out. Barring unforeseen plans, I promised to join in the following week.

Of course, that depended on how things went with Iulian.

Cristofer’s text landed with perfect timing. The game was getting rowdy, and I was getting restless. I kissed Ensley’s temple and whispered in his ear that I was leaving. He didn’t believe my claim that Cristofer and I were simply meeting to chat. A viable concern. In truth, I had no idea where the night would go, and it was possible that we would move in on Iulian immediately.

Having fed the previous night, I was fully recovered. If we were going to act, there was no better time than the present. It would be better to get it over with, so Ensley didn’t have a chance to worry or get in the way.

Then, barring complications, we could move forward with this unconventional relationship and learn to blend our lives as a couple.

Of course, if Cristofer and I were unable to manipulate the hunters into removing the wards…

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Mordecai

WE RENDEZVOUSED AT THE mansion. Despite the newly erected wards, getting inside was easy, and it gave us somewhere private to talk. The chances of hunters showing up were slim. Night left them at a disadvantage. Since they tampered with my soil, they likely assumed I wouldn’t return.

I emerged from the forest, slinking on four paws, leaves barely rustling with my advance. A silent hunter in my own right, prepared for unexpected humans should I encounter them. Rounding the corner of the building, I discovered Cristofer sitting on the crumbling edge of the long-dead fountain. He clocked me immediately, his hearing as sharp and his nose as dialed into every odorous molecule as mine.

A smirk curled the corner of his lips as I retook human form, sauntering toward him with a newfound confidence. Having a friend at my side dampened my worries.

“Cristofer.”

“My darling Mordecai. How are you, duck?”

As much as he drove me crazy and often invaded my solitude, he was the closest thing I had to family. We embraced, a rare exchange that felt necessary. When we came apart, he held me at arm’s length, scanning me up and down.

“You have spunk in your step, and I dare say, you look as fresh as a ripe peach. That human of yours must have rich blood.”

“Oh, good. You’re still an irritating bastard. I feared in my absence you might lose your edge.”

“Never. Not going to lie. This is a pleasant surprise.” He cradled my cheek. “I expected you gaunt and wanting. I had threats prepared and everything.”

“Well,” I pushed his hand away, “you needn’t have worried. Shall we go inside?”

“Please. Lead the way.” Cristofer sized up the desecrated mansion with a smirk. “Such a charming place you’ve got here. However did you find such a gem? I’m green with envy.”

“Go ahead. Laugh. You will pay for this. If it takes a hundred years, I’ll get you back.”

“I expected no less.”

We entered via the bedroom window, and Cristofer immediately noticed the rumpled sheets on the bed. “Ah, the scene of the crime.” He inhaled sharply. “I smell him, too. Is he a good lay?”

“I’m not having this conversation.” Taking Cristofer roughly by the arm, I steered him out the door and down the hall to the stairs.

We congregated in the kitchen, where the map remained sprawled on the worktop table. Then, sparing no detail, I described every step I’d taken since my arrival, detailing what I’d discovered and the obstacles I’d encountered. For once, Cristofer curbed his saucy attitude and listened without interrupting.

When I finished, he asked to see the cellar. Standing a distance from what had been my sole resting place, he begrudgingly agreed with my assessment.

“Definitely compromised.”

“Yes.”

“Unsalvageable.”

“Like I said.”

“I asked Seamus to collect more and have it sent. It should arrive by courier tomorrow, alongside my own. He’s given instructions for the crates to be left at the front door. No signature required. Although, I do hope we can finish this quickly so I can return home. I hooked myself a gorgeous Albanian football player last week, and I would hate to lose him. Humans have such short attention spans.”

“Pot meet kettle.” Not interested in his latest conquest, I steered the conversation back on track. “Will it be wise to establish ourselves in the mansion again? I might be able to locate a suitable alternative.”

“I’m undecided. Show me where Iulian is being held. Let’s assess the situation and see if it’s something we can handle on our own. The hour is young. If those rotten hunters prove malleable, we could have Iulian out before dawn.”

“It will never be that easy.”

“No, but we’ll all have a good laugh if it is.”

It was close to ten when we arrived on the eyot. The night was especially dark under the trees, with a heavy autumn sky blocking the moon and stars. Melding into the shadows, we approached the clearing, stopping a dozen yards away from the trapdoor and her team of guards before returning to human form.

“I thought you said there were three.” Cristofer’s voice was low enough to be inaudible to humans at our distance.

Grimacing, I cursed. “They’ve upped their numbers.”

“Aw. Your lovely birds frightened the poor bastards.” Cristofer chuckled. “Well done, duck.”

It alerted them to trouble was what it did. Any hope that the hunters had assumed it was a natural frenzy of crows vanished.

Six guards stood around the entrance to the underground cell, far more alert than the previous times I visited, which might have been partially due to the early hour, although I doubted it. How many protected the stone sarcophagus? The same number? More? Valerius had definitely been informed of my trickery.

The increased security wasn’t the only change. The surface of the trapdoor had vanished under a heaping mound of garlic blossoms. The access I’d had to gaps around its surface was gone.

We moved closer. I pointed out the trip wire, and Cristofer nodded. “Shall we try?”

“I knew you were going to say that.”

“A small test, so we know where we stand. We’ll see if we can get someone to move the damn flowers at least. They reek something fierce, don’t they? If the suggestion doesn’t work, we have our answer. In which case, we proceed with Plan B.”

A ball of dread hardened my belly when I considered Plan B.

“What do you propose?” I reluctantly asked.

“Keep it simple. The handsome fella with the beard is mine. Make the other five docile, in case it works. I’ll present a reason for his actions. Be sure your group accepts it.”

“It won’t work.”

“No. I doubt it. Shall we skip Plan A?”

“No. We’ll try.”

I tapped into the minds of five hunters, draping a blanket of passivity over them, taking their preparedness down several notches. The change was visible. Their rigid stances relaxed, and the concentrated attention they had been paying to their surroundings vanished as they picked their fingernails or teeth and checked their phones.

Cristofer noticed. “Well done. Here goes nothing.”

And nothing was exactly what we got.

No matter the implanted excuse, Cristofer could not convince the bearded man to remove the blossoms from the trapdoor. His effort showed. Our guinea pig glanced twice at the barrier with a deep frown, as though he wanted to do something, but he shook it off and returned to his post.

Unless it was his idea, it would never happen.

After several minutes without success, I told Cristofer to stop. “You don’t want him to suspect you’re inside his head.”

He laughed. “As if. I’m not an amateur.”

I released my hold on the other five, and they shook off their lethargy and continued their duties unaware anything was amiss.

“Valerius has them under his influence.” It was a redundant statement.

Cristofer sighed. “We suspected as much.”

“I don’t want Ensley involved.”

“Then we find another human. It’s the only solution. You and I can’t do it. Nor could an army of vampires.”

Cristofer motioned for us to retreat from our position on the outskirts of the clearing as he continued. “We’ll select a young and capable human, put them under our control, guide the process, and leave them with no memory. If it bothers you, I’ll do it. But you have to be present to wake Iulian. That, mate, is beyond my capabilities.”

“I know. It’s not about Ensley specifically. You’re risking a human life, and the complications of that level of manipulation under these circumstances—”

“Would be extremely risky. I’m aware. Don’t you see? Ensley wouldn’t need to be manipulated.”

“It doesn’t make it safer.”

“No, but he knows who we are, and I suspect he has a fair understanding of this assignment. Am I right?”

I mumbled in agreement.

Cristofer clasped my arm and stopped my advance, spinning me to face him. “Make a choice, Mordecai. Ensley or a human puppet. We have no other options.”

I pressed my lips in a firm line. He was right, but I didn’t like it. Impulsively, I wanted to pick a stranger, sparing my lover’s involvement, but it was the wrong decision. Ensley’s knowledge and understanding of the task would make it far more likely that we would succeed. His reaction time and ability to problem-solve on the spot would be paramount.

Using a stranger, turning him into a puppet, as Cristofer so elegantly put it, was far more complicated. We would only be able to control them from a distance, and they would rely solely on the instructions we implanted. It would widen the margin of error tenfold.

“We can at least see if he’s willing,” Cristofer said.

I almost laughed. We didn’t need to ask. Ensley was more than willing to jump in with both feet. Danger be damned.



Game night was winding down by the time we returned to Ensley’s flat. Since Cristofer had not been invited to enter, and the owner of the premises couldn’t be manipulated or openly asked to extend such an invitation, directly or indirectly, we had to get creative.

Rather, Cristofer got creative.

He collected random stones from the pavement and along the curb until he had a handful, then he launched them one at a time at the upstairs windows.

“You’ll break the glass, and he’ll send you back to Europe.”

“I’ll charm my way out of it.”

I would have argued, but he was right. Even without tampering with minds, Cristofer had a charisma I could never achieve.

The rocks pinged against the glass, but I wasn’t sure it was loud enough to draw anyone’s attention. Tuning my hearing, I listened to the chatter beyond the window. A discussion about… brownies?

When Cristofer ran out of rocks, I helped him collect more, and we went at it together.

It was Mars who finally heard the disturbance.

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Ensley

“WHAT MAKES THEM APOLOGY brownies?” Ziggy plucked another chocolatey treat from the Tupperware before passing the container to me.

Poet, organizing his notes for the final boss room, barely spared him a glance. “She picked a fight again over absolutely nothing and kept me up all night, so I was a zombie at work the following day and got my ass chewed out for minor mistakes I would never have made otherwise.

“Then, when I refused to go to her house after work the following day because I was tired and wanted to sleep, she got angrier and decided to show up at my place so we could continue where we left off. After two hours of arguing—I didn’t even know what we were fighting about at this point—I told her I was done. I couldn’t keep going like this. She wasn’t worth my job or my sanity. I kicked her out and told her not to call me. She showed up at my work today with the brownies. They’re supposed to make me reconsider the whole breakup.”

Ziggy, grinning, licked a smear of chocolate from his fingers. “Is it working?”

Poet scoffed. “A two-dollar box of Betty Crocker isn’t worth throwing away a career.”

“I don’t know. Have you tried them? They’re pretty damn good.”

“No, I haven’t tried them. Want to know why? She made them *extra special*. ‘With milk, baby. They’re richer that way.’” Poet mimicked her tone and scoffed.

I inhaled crumbs and sputtered, “She what? Doesn’t she know you’re lactose intolerant?”

“Oh, I’ve told her many times. It has yet to sink in.” Over his shoulder, Poet yelled, “Mars. What the fuck are you doing in there? It’s getting late, and we have a boss to kill. God help me, I will break up with you too if I don’t get out of here before midnight.”

The toilet flushed, and Mars emerged, spraying an excessive amount of air freshener before closing the door.

I pitched a face. “Dude, seriously? That’s my bathroom.”

“And I would avoid it for a while.”

Ziggy snickered, while I continued to scowl.

Mars aimed for the kitchen and grabbed a fresh beer from the fridge. On his return to the couch, he paused and frowned, glancing at the line of tall windows that overlooked the street. “Did you hear that?”

“What?” I asked.

Poet, Ziggy, and I stopped what we were doing and listened. A *clink* sounded, followed by two successive *pings*.

“Is someone throwing rocks at my window?” I jumped to my feet and met Mars as he drew the curtains aside. I cupped a hand to the pane and peered into the night. “What the hell?”

“Is that your boyfriend?” Mars asked.

“Yes.”

“Who’s the handsome devil beside him?”

I assumed the man was Cristofer, and a twist of jealousy knotted my gut. Handsome devil was an understatement. Christ. Were all vampires unfairly gorgeous? If so, Mordecai had failed to mention that perk.

The two waved, grinning like they were having the time of their lives.

I waved back and motioned for them to come up. Cristofer puckered his lips, kissed a rock he held pinched between his fingers, aimed, and launched it at the window. I flinched when it hit the glass near my head.

Mars chuckled. “Seriously, what are they doing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Here’s a thought. Go drag them up here so we can finish this freaking game.” Poet’s temper rarely frayed. “I swear, if I don’t sleep tonight, I’ll be jobless, and no amount of apology brownies will save any of you.”

“Oh-oh, Poet’s getting feisty.” Mars slapped me on the back. “Run down and drag them up here before he snaps for real.”

Why on earth were they standing outside in the cold throwing rocks anyway? Poet was right. We had a game to finish.

I raced down the stairwell and thrust open the door at the bottom. The November chill hit me in the face and cut through my thin shirt as I peered into the street at a pair of smug vampires.

“You know, for two guys in their hundreds, you’re acting awfully juvenile. Are you quite finished?”

“Ah, Sir Ensley. We meet at last.” Cristofer performed a stately bow that made Mordecai roll his eyes. “You, good sir, have been the topic of many conversations.”

“Yeeeah… okay. Lovely to meet you, too. Now come inside and try not to make a scene. The game is almost finished.”

With what seemed a healthy dose of self-satisfaction, Cristofer elbowed Mordecai. “See? Piece of cake. What did I tell you?”

“Your ingenuity knows no bounds.”

“No need for sarcasm, duckie.”

“Just go, and tone it down. We don’t want everyone figuring us out.” Mordecai shoved Cristofer toward the door while offering me an apologetic smile.

Before heading up, Cristofer paused and studied me. He had the same liquid Bordeaux-colored eyes as Mordecai that sucked you in and held you captive. Although a slight shade darker, they sparkled with mischief under the streetlight. Like my boyfriend, Cristofer had paired elegant black trousers with a fashionable buttoned shirt. The cut suggested wealth, as did his glossy footwear and designer wool coat—also black—that hung to mid-thigh. Fine leather gloves finished the outfit.

Cristofer had similarly pale skin and scarlet lips, but in contrast to Mordecai’s moon-licked blond hair, Cristofer’s was the color of midnight. His groomed and expressive brows spoke of confidence. Of fearless domination.

Of seduction.

Were they all like this? Sharply dressed? Handsome? Alluring? Spellbinding?

“Aren’t you a doll,” Cristofer cooed, licking his lips. “The elusive Ensley. You’re right. He’s awfully pretty. I see the appeal. Don’t be so hard on yourself, Morty Boy. I wouldn’t have been able to walk away either.”

“You’re insufferable,” Mordecai mumbled. “And don’t call me that.”

I offered my hand. “The famous Cristofer. We finally meet.”

“Famous? Is that what he called me?” Cristofer grinned at Mordecai.

“I assure you, I didn’t. Stop flirting with my boyfriend.”

Amused by Mordecai’s irritation and curious about Cristofer in general, I led them upstairs and into the apartment. The guys were gathered around the table, waiting for me so we could play the final boss room.

“About time,” Poet muttered, still scrutinizing his notes.

“Quick introductions first, and we can finish. Everyone, this is Mordecai’s friend Cristofer from… somewhere overseas?” I glanced at Cristofer for clarification.

“Precisely. Not sure I can narrow it down better than that, mate.”

“Okaaay.” I chuckled. “Cristofer, this is Ziggy, short for Siegmund, Mars, short for Marsden, and the grump with his head buried in papers is Poet.”

“Short for nothing, and I wish I could say my parents were dope smoking hippies or radicals, but neither is true. I go by—”

Poet’s words died off at the same time Cristofer exclaimed, “Oh my.”

They stared at one another, Poet’s paperwork and dungeon statistics seemingly forgotten.

A beat of silence filled the room.

Mordecai cleared his throat. “We’ll make ourselves scarce.”

He grabbed Cristofer’s arm and tried to drag him into the kitchen area, but Cristofer planted his feet and didn’t move. His full attention was on Poet, who had stalled at the sight of the newcomer.

Lips parted, eyes wide, and with his glasses hanging precariously off the end of his nose, Poet seemed at a loss for words, which was highly out of character for my logic-arguing friend.

Oddly, Cristofer wore a similar stunned expression.

The moment lasted seconds at most. Long enough for Mars and me to exchange glances and silently question what was happening. Ziggy didn’t seem to notice.

Mordecai jerked Cristofer’s arm more forcefully, making him stumble. “Don’t even think about it.” He dragged him bodily into the kitchen.

Poet snapped out of his daze and looked around. His cheeks took on color, and the instant he registered we were all staring, he scowled. “What? Can we play?”

Mars smothered a grin. “By all means.”

Nothing more was said about the awkward introduction, but for a guy who typically ran his dungeons with precision and rigidity, the final boss room was a sloppy mess. Poet kept losing his place and seemed suddenly shy when it came to performing his Dungeon Master duties. More than once, I caught him glancing in the direction of the table and Cristofer, who stole his own glances at my friend.

I wasn't stupid, but I was also starting to realize that I didn't know Poet as well as I thought. Rather, I'd made assumptions that I had no business making.

Unless I was way off course, but I doubted it.



Things didn't wrap up until close to midnight, but Poet seemed to have forgotten his original concern about sleep and work. All mentions of Kate vanished from conversation. He lingered, packing his game bag much slower than usual. In fact, he was the last one to the door, and I sensed he was purposefully lingering.

"Good luck with Kate." I handed him the Tupperware of leftover apology brownies, a not-so-subtle reminder that he had other issues to occupy his time. "I hope you figure things out."

"There's nothing to figure out. Here," he passed the brownies back, "I can't eat them." He motioned to Mordecai and Cristofer, who had taken over the high-top table. "See if they want some."

Cristofer had registered Poet's departure, and his attention was glued to my friend. I wanted to warn Poet off, but my reasoning was hardly sound. Who was I to dissuade him from seeking affection from a vampire when I was willingly and happily involved with Mordecai? Hell, I would love to have someone to talk to about this unusual circumstance, and Poet would be ideal.

No sooner had I shut the door behind Poet, Cristofer hopped to his feet, announcing, "It's so stuffy in here. I think I'll slip out and get some air."

"Oh no you don't." Mordecai snagged his arm before he could saunter away and shoved him back onto the seat. "Leave the poor man alone."

Cristofer scoffed. "Why on earth would I do that?"

"I'll give you two reasons. One, we have a mission that takes priority over your libido."

“You’re such a hypocrite.” Cristofer caught my eye and winked.

Mordecai ignored him. “Two. Did you already forget about your hunky Albanian football player?”

Cristofer waved a hand in the air with a *pff*. “He’s probably fucking his roommate right now because I vanished without an explanation. You see, duck? I sacrificed my love life for you. I deserve a reward. The least you could do is allow me a bit of fun.”

Approaching the table, I cut in. “Poet has a girlfriend. Sort of. They’re working shit out. Besides, I’m not sure his interests… swing that way.”

Mordecai smirked.

Cristofer snorted. “Oh, you naïve soul. I assure you, they do, and not because I have superior hearing and listened to his racing heart, but I know interest when I see it. He was charmed.” Cristofer licked his lips salaciously.

“You know what? I give up. You’re right. I saw it too. Do what you want. I don’t care. Poet’s a grown adult, and who am I to stand in your way?”

“Exactly.” Cristofer rose to leave, but Mordecai lanced daggers in his direction. With an indignant huff, his ass hit the chair again. “You wound me, brother. All work and no play. You never did know how to have fun.”

“I didn’t ask you here so you could bugger off for a shag. At least wait until this is behind us.” To me, Mordecai said, “Do you need to rest, love? It’s late for you. We have things to discuss, but it can wait until tomorrow.”

“Things to discuss? With me?”

“Yes. Unfortunately.”

I glanced between Mordecai and Cristofer as a tingle raced up my spine. “I’m fine. I don’t have a showing until eleven, and Dany can do without me at the office. What’s up?”

“You should probably sit down.” Mordecai indicated an empty chair.

The three of us took up one end of the high-top table. Mordecai at the head, Cristofer and I caddy corner and across from one another. Cristofer deferred to Mordecai, who stared at his hands for a long time before explaining the situation.

“We can’t get at Iulian. Valerius’s men have erected wards that are impassable for the likes of us. We thought we might be able to manipulate the guards into dismantling them, but it can’t be done.”

He explained the complications of overriding another vampire’s implanted suggestions and how they had suspected Valerius of manipulating

his hunters. After testing their theory, they discovered it was indeed impossible to force their hand.

“The only way for us to free our elder is to secure the assistance of a human,” Cristofer explained. “It’s your lucky day. You’re our human.”

“For the record,” Mordecai interrupted, “I don’t agree with this. It’s dangerous.”

“But necessary,” Cristofer added with finality.

I shifted my gaze between them. “You need me to free Iulian?”

“You can’t free Iulian, love.” Mordecai’s voice was thin and strained. “Only I can do that. What we need is for the wards to be removed so we can access him. As it stands, too many barriers stand in our way.”

“Wards? Like magic?”

I felt stupid asking because believing in vampires with superhuman powers was one thing, but acknowledging the existence of magic was another. The only *wards* I could think of related to gaming, and they were often enchantments or spells used by mages or shamans.

“Not like that.” Mordecai explained about his sneaky excursion into the underground chamber where he’d discovered his uncle and all the barriers in the way. The garlic mist, the blanket of blossoms, the consecrated circle of white powder, the UV lights, and the heavy wooden cross hanging over a stone sarcophagus. “Harmless to a human, but impossible obstacles for the likes of us.”

“You want me to remove them so you can set your uncle free.”

“Yes, but it won’t be a stroll in the park,” Cristofer said. “The chamber is guarded. Six men on the surface tonight. We don’t know how many are underground.”

“It was three last time,” Mordecai said. “It could be six now, or more. It’s hard to say how many guards Valerius can pull at once. We don’t know how big a pool he’s drawing from.”

“Any more than twelve and we’re in trouble,” Cristofer said.

“Why is that?” I asked.

Cristofer explained their limitations when it came to manipulating humans. “No more than six at a time.”

“And six is pushing it,” Mordecai added. “Six often fails.”

“Not if you’re well-fed.”

The pointed remark made Mordecai stiffen.

I considered their proposal but hit my own barrier immediately. “How am I getting past a team of hunters to disrupt the wards?”

Mordecai glanced at Cristofer, who grinned. “With a carefully constructed plan. Buckle up, mate, your life is about to get interesting.”

“You mean more interesting? I’m colluding with vampires, remember. Up until a month ago, you were fictitious.”

“Fair enough.”

Over the next hour, Cristofer tested several ideas, and Mordecai dismantled them, countering with every plausible way they could go wrong. The two argued and bantered. In the end, we sketched a rough outline of how I might go about infiltrating an underground chamber that had been specifically designed to keep vampires out. Considering a handful of hunters had possibly seen my face at the mansion, it added another layer of concern.

Cristofer wasn’t bothered by the obstacle. Mordecai remained perpetually annoyed.

I wasn’t sure what to think.

If I was Poet, with a head for mathematics and an inclination toward statistics, I would have ventured a guess that the odds of success were not in my favor.

My boyfriend hated it.

Cristofer deemed it a necessary risk.

Did it dissuade me? No. In fact, I was eager to participate in what amounted to a real-life quest to free a real-life boss. A king in his own right. King of the Underworld? In theory, was he a bad guy? Were vampires the enemy? Should I be siding with the humans?

My gut told me the lines were far more complex, the sides not evenly drawn.

My loyalty was with Mordecai. I would do anything to help him succeed.

Cristofer seemed impressed with my willing and eager attitude.

Mordecai couldn’t have looked paler if he tried. I read the distress in his burgundy eyes clear as day. He didn’t like the plan. Not one bit.

Maybe I should have worried about my safety, but for once, my life had purpose beyond a dead-end job and a social life more fit for a teenager. For once, I could actively do something worth doing, help people in need, and not sit behind a screen, living inside a digitized world that didn’t exist.

For once, I might be able to save someone who was in peril.

With luck, they wouldn’t die this time.

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Mordecai

ENSLEY WENT TO BED a couple of hours before dawn. His eagerness to assist twisted my belly in a knot. We decided to implement our plan on Saturday night. It ensured Ensley had uninterrupted daytime hours to sleep, so he would be sharp after the sun went down.

It also gave Cristofer and me time to observe a few shift changes and smooth out any concerning snags that might creep up and cause issues.

When Ensley retired, although I desperately wanted to join him and take comfort in his warm naked body, Cristofer and I returned to the eyot. Duty called.

We lingered on the outskirts of the clearing, engulfed in shadow, far enough away that our conversation wouldn't travel, yet close enough to listen and observe.

"What can you tell me about Poe-Poe?" Cristofer asked after we got settled.

"I can tell you he's Ensley's friend, and you're to leave him alone. We have enough problems without you spreading corruption."

Cristofer laughed. "Corruption?"

"I know you. If things go smoothly on Saturday, you can head home and hunt for a new lover in familiar territory, far, far from here."

"I'll need to feed before Saturday. Some of us enjoy it."

"Find someone else, and don't leave a mark or memory. We don't want rumors to spread. It would put the hunters on alert."

“Relax. I’m quite practiced, duck. Been at it for a while. Why all the fuss?”

“Please listen to me for once.”

“Fine. You’ll feed before Saturday as well, in case you thought to tackle this adventure even slightly depleted, and that’s not a suggestion.”

I mumbled something resembling agreement. Although, for the first time in history, the thought of Ensley’s warm and intoxicating energy filling my insides invigorated me. The memory of his taste stirred my loins and made my teeth ache. I had to be careful I didn’t leave him too weak, or our mission might suffer.

Two days of observing shift changes on the island confirmed that we were dealing with nine hunters in total. Six were stationed above ground, and three below. Nine was manageable and offered a sense of relief. We might make a smooth rescue yet.

The crates of soil arrived as anticipated on Thursday. Despite the daylight hours, we met the delivery truck and discussed placement options. The mansion was too risky. I presented Cristofer with a few alternatives, but it was a no-brainer.

After dark, we transported the crates to Greenwood Cemetery and opened an overgrown mausoleum belonging to a family that had been buried over ninety years ago. Chances were, no living relatives accessed the grave any longer, and it would be the perfect spot for us to temporarily rest.

Saturday arrived too soon, and my anxiety peaked. Ensley, for all his talk, seemed nervous. He tried to hide it, forgetting that my enhanced senses picked up everything, including his elevated heartbeat and the fear pheromones released in his sweat.

Cristofer was at the crypt, resting before evening, while I paced, and Ensley dressed for our excursion. I’d fed on him the previous night, fearing he would be too weak for our mission if I left it any longer.

In the bathroom, dressed in similar gear as the hunters—combat boots, black cargo pants, a fitted tee, and a heavy canvas jacket—Ensley dabbed foundation on his neck to ensure the marks I’d left were no longer visible. If anyone was going to notice them, it would be hunters. Although it would be dark, we didn’t want to take chances.

He exited the bathroom and tipped his head to the side. “Can you see them?”

“No. Are you still woozy?” I’d made him a hearty breakfast and lunch, forcing him to eat everything.

“Not at all. When’s Cristofer coming over?”

“After dark.”

Although the heavy lifting was Ensley’s responsibility, Cristofer and I would provide as much support as possible. His story would only hold so long as we opened the hunters’ minds to suggestion. The margin for error was wide, and thinking of all the ways it could go wrong only made me want to abort.

“You’re fretting.” Ensley took my hand and drew me into his arms.

“I didn’t want you involved.”

“I know.”

“The risks are too great.”

“You need me. It’ll work. I’ll be careful.”

I rested my head against him and closed my eyes, trying to picture a time after it was all said and done. Iulian would return home and cast Valerius from the usurped throne. How the corrupt vampire would be punished was not up to me. With Iulian’s place restored, I would fade into the background again—with Ensley, content to enjoy the short time we had left together.

When you lived for centuries, a handful of decades passed in the blink of an eye. I would treasure every moment and try not to regret my choices. Loving him had never been part of the plan. Our eventual separation would devastate me, but I’d made peace with it. I would absorb every moment until there were no more.

“Mordecai?”

“I’m scared for you.” My voice hitched. Involving him risked shortening our time together. It risked our happiness.

Ensley cradled my face and peered deep into my eyes. If tears were still something I could produce, I might have cried.

“No matter what happens,” he said. “Remember I love you.”

“Don’t talk like that. It sounds like goodbye, and I refuse to explore that possibility. Not yet. Not now.”

“It’s you I’m worried about. Once the hunters realize they’re under attack, they’ll retaliate. They could kill you. They have the means and knowledge.”

“They won’t.”

Perhaps my assuredness was arrogant. Considering the threat to our species, my survival was paramount, at least until I'd successfully freed my uncle. Cristofer would do everything in his power to protect Ensley and me, but once Iulian was awake, that priority shifted. Cristofer would sacrifice himself to save our king.

Death did not scare me. Besides, Cristofer and I could heal from most fatal injuries. Ensley could not, and we were putting him in a dangerous situation.

I kissed him, drawing strength from his unwavering confidence and bravery.

Before leaving Europe, I was prepared to sacrifice my life for Iulian—*wanted* to sacrifice my life. I could admit it was part of my personal plan. I'd longed for the final death for centuries. My existence was a stain on my conscience.

Now everything had changed. For the first time in hundreds of years, I wanted to remain. I wanted to explore something that mimicked normality. Even if that something was bound by the regular span of a human life, I wanted a taste of freedom. Of peace.

Didn't I deserve as much? Hadn't I suffered enough?

I broke from Ensley's mouth, my unbeating heart aching. "Ensley, love. Listen carefully."

We'd already talked about this, but it needed to be emphasized. "Once you've dismantled the barriers, it's *imperative* that you leave quickly. Listen to Cristofer. Ascend the ladder and shut the trapdoor. Replace the blossoms and under no circumstance should you remove them unless I tell you it's safe to do so."

"I know."

"No matter what you hear or how frightened you are, they must remain in place, and you must be above ground."

"Okay."

"Promise me, Ensley." I peered deep into his troubled eyes. "Please."

"I promise. How long will it take to revive him?"

"It's hard to say. He's been locked in a state of torpor for a long time. It could happen quickly, or it might take effort to draw him to the surface."

I only hoped I could control Iulian once he awoke, but I didn't express my concerns, lest I frightened Ensley more.

“What if the hunters don’t believe I am who I say I am? Once you turn your focus to Iulian, you said you’d lose control of your group, and Cristofer can’t control nine men. What if they turn on me?”

“They won’t. By that point, they’ll have bigger issues to contend with. Do what you can to keep them on the surface. It’s vitally important they don’t descend. If you can’t… If they try to come down…”

“Get off the island.”

“*Immediately*, even if you have to swim.”

Ensley shivered. “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. That water will be fucking cold.”

Cristofer arrived as the sky faded to a rich indigo and the first stars broke through the thin veil of wispy clouds. The night felt ominous and threatening. The air was still like the earth was holding its breath.

Cristofer studied Ensley’s wardrobe and nodded approval. “Is he armed?”

“Yes.” I indicated the items we’d collected.

“Good.” To Ensley, he asked, “Any questions before we head out?”

Ensley shook his head and eyed me. “We’ve gone over everything several times. My backstory is memorized, and I’ve been roleplaying for years, so whatever we haven’t thought of, I can fudge.”

The plan was for Ensley to meet the hunters during the evening shift change, announcing himself as a transfer from another city. Ordinarily, it might not work. We didn’t know their recruitment rules or who among the hunters was in charge of those things, but Cristofer and I planned to make the crew receptive to the suggestion.

Presenting Ensley as a transfer, effectively a new recruit, gave him the excuse to move between the upper and lower areas to get familiar with his surroundings. It also warranted his asking unending questions. To facilitate the ruse, we’d outfitted him with similar weapons, including a stake and a stuffed pouch like the ones we’d seen the other hunters wear. A transfer would have gear and understand how to use it.

In the few days we’d had to prepare, Ensley had collected his own vial of holy water from a local Catholic church, along with a proper silver chain necklace with a crucifix, which he had the father bless. The pendant his mother gave him wouldn’t deter Iulian the same, especially when he woke in a state of frenzy, and Ensley’s safety was my greatest concern.

The hunters weren’t likely to kill Ensley, even if they discovered the ruse. Iulian might, not through any fault of his own, but because he would wake

in a state of severe hunger and attack the first living thing he saw. Hence my insistence that he leave the instant the barriers were down.

We piled in the Jeep, and Ensley drove us to one of the side streets where the hunters usually parked their vehicles. At the trailhead, Cristofer vanished into the dense trees, giving us a private moment to part ways.

“Don’t be long,” he said as he slinked into shadow. “You’ll be together again soon enough.”

The moment he was gone, I huffed. “I wish he wouldn’t tempt fate.”

Ensley smiled and brushed a thumb over my creased brow. “That was meant to reassure you. He sees how worried you are.”

“Rightfully. This isn’t a walk in the park.”

“It’ll be fine. We’ve thought of everything.” With that confidence, Ensley kissed me a final time, his lips soft and welcoming.

Except, it wasn’t possible to *think of everything*, and the one scenario we didn’t consider was exactly where it all went wrong.

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Ensley

MORDECAI GLANCED OVER HIS shoulder. Our gazes met one final time before he vanished into the dense trees beyond the path. Although late fall had stripped the branches bare, the skeletal canopy provided enough cover to dampen the effect of the moon. The depthless forest and her inky shadows left me vulnerable and alone.

With the air still, the quiet noises of nature reached my ears. The rustle and scritch of dried leaves on the forest floor. Crickets. The odd ping of a frog, like an elastic band. The gentle slosh of the Sydenham lapping at the shore.

I had put on a brave face for Mordecai, but underneath, I was nervous. After hours of planning and endless discussions, it wasn't the plan itself that bothered me so much as the waking of the elder. Until Mordecai had described the process, I'd had no idea how dangerous the task was.

At first, I thought he was exaggerating the risks to frighten me, but when Cristofer, whom I'd pegged as less-than-serious most days and honest to a fault, grew somber, my concern escalated.

No human wanted to be near a vampire when he was awoken from a forced state of torpor. Since I wasn't keen on being eviscerated, I planned to hit the ground running the second I'd dismantled the wards.

I checked the time on my phone when a rumble of distant engines sounded from the road nearby. Right on time. I moved farther down the path toward the boat launch. Mordecai and I had visited the area the

previous day, so I knew where I was going, but I aimed to look purposefully lost.

The idea was to intercept the crew and introduce myself as a new transfer. By name-dropping Valerius, I hoped to establish a mountain of credibility. How else would a human know the name of the man at the top?

Mordecai and Cristofer would ensure my story held by tampering with their minds and making them agreeable to whatever I said. Anyone who thought they recognized me from the mansion would, ideally, brush it off as a misremembered face.

The complicated part would be the shift change itself since Mordecai and Cristofer couldn't manipulate eighteen men at a time. The hope was to make the initial group believe my story, so they would communicate the narrative to the others. Less chance of a dispute. Ideally, we wouldn't have to deal with everyone at once.

Shortly after the engines cut out, men's voices arose above the snap and crunch of boots marching along the cedar-lined trail. Before long, a group of nine hunters rounded the bend, materializing from the darkness.

I had imagined they would be rough-looking men of great height, large muscles, and fierce expressions. I feared my mismatched stature would give me away. In reality, the group was a mixed bag. Their ages ranged from midtwenties to early forties. Some were tall and slender. Others were built like tanks. Two were Black, one was Asian, and the rest were white. No women. I wondered who decided on that exclusion?

The instant the men saw me on the trail, they stalled. I expected a flare of anger but was met with confusion and spiked nerves, if the way a few of them glanced around and backed up said anything.

"Who are you?" one of the burlier guys asked. He clutched a wooden spike similar to the one I held in a sweaty palm.

"Name's Elowen. Are you Lou? I was told to find Lou." Mordecai had given me a name to drop. He'd overheard it during one of his reconnaissance missions. Pretending I'd been told to meet someone, especially a known hunter, lent credibility to my story.

A different guy stepped forward. Hard eyes, tattoos covering his neck, sausage-thick fingers wrapped around his own wooden spike. "I'm Lou."

I offered a friendly nod, hoping like hell Mordecai and Cristofer had softened their defenses. "I was told to meet you here. Sorry I'm late. I was supposed to come last night but got held up. Valerius reassigned me. I've

been working with a group out of Scarborough for the past few years. He said you had trouble brewing and needed extra hands. Guess I'm your new recruit."

I cursed my runaway mouth. Babbling the entire phony backstory was not the plan. I was supposed to spoon-feed them a few morsels at a time.

The man who called himself Lou looked a question at one of his companions, who shrugged. "No one told me, but Davey said he's been begging for more numbers."

"Don't look a gift horse in the mouth," another guy said. "Y'all didn't see the birds. It was him. I know it. That vamp is skulking around."

I glanced between them, as others expressed bland opinions, not seeming bothered by my presence one way or the other. I silently thanked my hidden companions for flattening their hostility and dampening their minds.

"Scarborough, huh?" Lou narrowed his eyes, scanning me from head to toe. He appeared less convinced than the rest but had yet to call me a liar. By the look in his eyes, I feared he was one of the men from the mansion and fighting to place my face.

"Yeah. For the past five years. Do you know Anthony?"

"No." Lou scrutinized my face, and I tried hard not to squirm.

"How about Toby?" I plucked another random name from the sky.

Lou shook his head.

"Well, I worked under them mostly. Valerius contacted Toby after your bird incident. Crows, right?" I aimed the question at the man who'd brought it up, hoping my knowledge helped seal the deal.

"Freaky shit. You should see my arm." He wore a jacket but displayed the appendage as though I could see his injury. "It's cut to ribbons from their claws. Jerry nearly lost an eye. Fuckers pecked his face. It was some fucked up Edgar Allan Poe bullshit, let me tell you."

I nodded, commiserating.

When Lou continued to seem undecided, I cursed Mordecai and Cristofer. It wasn't working. He knew me. At any moment, the pieces would click, and we'd be fucked. Correction, *I'd* be finished.

I stuffed a hand in my pocket and withdrew my phone. "Do you want me to get someone on the line who can vouch for me?"

My heart jackrabbited with the bluff. I had no clue what I would do if Lou said yes, and beads of perspiration peppered my forehead. Great, if

they saw me sweating when the temperature was barely five degrees, and my breath plumbed with every exhale, the jig would be up.

But Lou shook his head, and the tension bled from his shoulders. “Nah, we’re good. Welcome aboard.”

“Wonder why Lenny didn’t give us a heads-up?” another man inquired.

“Who cares? Let’s go,” said a guy who looked ten kinds of bored.

I followed the men to the boat launch and went across with the first group. Five hunters and me. We left the other four on the mainland for when the boat came back.

Halfway across the Sydenham, movement in the sky caught my attention, and I peered up as a pair of dark blots crossed the partly veiled moon.

Goose bumps raised the hair on my arms.

I flicked my attention to my companions, but no one else seemed to notice the inky flecks in the sky. Mordecai and I had never properly discussed his abilities. Listening to him recount his reconnaissance mission, I surmised that he could meld into shadow, which I assumed meant he could move without being seen, but it didn’t explain how he’d gotten through a trapdoor without the hunters noticing.

Subconsciously, I understood his powers were complex. I’d seen the mist at the dam. I’d seen him summon a pack of coyotes at the mansion. I’d read stories and watched films about vampires, but knowing something and seeing it with your own eyes was entirely different. I didn’t question how Mordecai and Cristofer would get to the island, even when I knew they weren’t planning to use the rowboat or swim.

I also knew birds didn’t typically fly at night.

But bats did.

I made a mental note to discuss my boyfriend’s shape-shifting abilities when this was said and done. How dare he hold stuff back.

We reached dry land and got out. Two men secured the boat before we headed into the trees. This was the part that worried me. I kept my head down, aiming to blend with the group.

Emerging into a clearing—Lou warned me not to trip on a barely visible wire surrounding the camp—we rendezvoused with six other hunters. The other three on this rotation must have still been underground. I scanned for the trapdoor and spotted a mound of dainty white flowers on fine stalks. Wild garlic blossoms, Mordecai had said. Until today, I’d never seen garlic blossoms.

Lou introduced me as a recent transfer, and I shook a few hands. No one flinched. The ruse seemed too easy. The men reported a quiet day and left. By the time the second half of our crew arrived, the last of the day shift emerged from underground, barely sparing me a glance. They knocked fists with a few guys and headed to where the boat was docked.

“Too fucking easy,” I mumbled under my breath.

The trapdoor sat wide open. No one seemed alarmed or concerned. I wanted to peer into the hole, but Mordecai had warned me not to rush or look too eager.

The underground guard rotation was decided with a coin toss. The men selected groaned, clearly unhappy. After a short chat, they descended, and Lou and another guy replaced the garlic over top of the door, spreading it so not an inch of the steel surface remained visible.

A younger hunter, lanky, midtwenties, nudged my arm as I watched them work. “Gotta cover the cracks. They can slip through otherwise. Turn into oil or something. At least that’s what I heard. Not sure I believe it. You ever seen one?”

“Yeah. A couple.”

“No shit.” The kid’s eyes sparkled. “Ever kill one?”

“No.”

The kid’s shoulders fell on a sigh. His fellow war hero had proved inadequate. My stomach churned, realizing he would have much rather heard a story about a gruesome vampire slaying. What a sickening thought. It was what these guys did. Hunted and killed vampires. Vampires like Mordecai and Cristofer and hundreds more exactly like them. Vampires who had once been living, breathing people with histories and families and stories that went back decades or centuries.

Were they a threat? Some, maybe. Valerius sounded evil to his rotten core. But Mordecai hadn’t asked for this life. He was a victim.

“So, what’s the deal?” I asked Lou once the men took their positions around the clearing.

“Suppose you’re used to patrolling a city, huh?”

“Mostly. We pursue leads, listen for rumors, bleed them out.”

“It’s not like that here. Not anymore. You know what we’ve got in there?” He motioned to the trapdoor.

“An elder, or so I’m told. Someone of importance.”

“You got that right.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“Don’t you worry. The subject is nothing more than a canned corpse. Can’t hurt you. It’s other vamps we need to watch out for. One in particular. He’s been skulking around, testing our boundaries. It’s why we’ve upped our guard.”

“That’s what I hear. Aren’t you worried he’ll bring reinforcements?”

“Won’t do him any good. Even if he manages to get past us, there’s no way he’ll get close to the subject. Not alone, and not with an army of backup, either.”

“Oh?” I feigned curiosity.

Lou went on to explain the wards in the same detail Mordecai had done the other day. I listened carefully in case anything had been missed or added. The list was the same.

“Do you mind if I hang back and get a feel for the new position tonight? I’d like to walk the perimeter of the island and familiarize myself with the forest, maybe see below at some point. A prepared soldier is an effective soldier.” I laughed self-consciously. “Know what I’m saying? Wouldn’t want to be caught with my pants down.”

To my shock, Lou chuckled. “True that. I say go for it. You’ll make everyone jealous. Since the bird incident, we’ve been warned to stay alert and not get distracted. Less chitchat and more focus on the possible intrusions. Makes for some boring shifts.”

“I bet.”

So that was what I did. I wandered the island, eyes peeled for any sign of Mordecai and Cristofer, but I didn’t see them. My palms were slick from stress as I worked up the nerve to put our plan into action.

I gave myself an hour to explore and chat with the random men above ground, who seemed more than happy to break the monotony of their evening. I learned their names and got a feel for their personalities. What I wanted to know was how they ended up tangled in vampire hunting. Who recruited them? How much did they really understand?

Time stretched. The pale moon inched higher, vanishing behind clouds at times and blanketing the eyot in a veil of gloom. Fear of the unknown ate at me. Giving myself a false sense of control, I pretended I was on a mission with Mars, Ziggy, and Poet. A quest with a fanciful objective that required precision and teamwork.

Clear the underground lair of traps. Release the elder vampire from a forced stasis. Don't get killed by hunters.

Except this wasn't an RPG, and I couldn't swig a healing potion and pop a shield to keep myself alive. I had to use wit and ingenuity to fulfill my part of the mission and run like my ass was on fire the second Mordecai and Cristofer took over.

It was go-time. I couldn't put it off any longer. My adrenaline spiked as I circled the trapdoor and announced I wanted to see below. A few of the men weren't pleased with the idea, but Lou told them to relax.

Surprisingly, they did.

Their easy acquiescence and laid-back attitudes was so unfitting, I almost laughed.

I helped Lou remove the garlic flowers. When the heavy trapdoor underneath came into view, I stalled, my attention drawn to the horseshoe-sized iron loops welded to concrete slabs embedded into the ground on either side of the door. Mordecai hadn't mentioned them. Maybe he hadn't noticed.

"What are those for?" The question was out before I could stop it, but a quiver of apprehension stirred my belly.

"Precaution."

"I don't understand."

"We don't keep the door locked. No reason, really. Not with the wards. You'll see. But, in the event of an unforeseen emergency—let's say our corpse got free—we can seal the tunnel."

Lou motioned a short distance away. Hidden in shadow at the base of a tree was a steel beam shaped to fit through the two horseshoes and easily eight feet long. When slid through the loops, it would lie over the entire entrance, preventing it from being opened.

"Steel door. Steel lock. Valerius said it was strong enough." Lou shrugged. "We can only hope." From inside his pouch, he withdrew an unmarked toothpaste-sized tube. "Once it's in place, we use this to seal the cracks around the circumference. It's a sealant made specially for this purpose. Water-based but dries like glue. We use holy water for its production. No chance of a vamp slipping out."

"Wow." My shock was genuine. I didn't know what to say.

"I'll be sure you get some. We all carry it, just in case. We can use it on doors or windows. The vamp they sent to fuck with us? We found his lair

and sealed it. Decrepit mansion outside of town. Real shit hole. Freaky as fuck."

"But…" I glanced at the trapdoor. "What about the guys down there? You wouldn't seal them in, would you?"

"The priority is not letting the elder escape." Lou replaced the tube in his pouch.

It was what he didn't say that bothered me. No wonder they relied on a coin toss to decide who went down. No wonder those men had appeared less than pleased to be chosen.

Mordecai had told me to stall once the trapdoor was clear of garlic blossoms. He and Cristofer planned to slip down unseen. How? I could only guess. I had no idea if they had made their move, but my discovery of the loops bracketing the door and the subsequent discussion had killed enough minutes that I had to assume they were below.

Lou heaved the steel contraption, holding it ajar so I could enter. The base of the ladder ended a dozen or so feet underground, barely visible from my vantage but for a dim light coming from somewhere I couldn't see.

"Go on. I have to close it behind you. Just put your shoulder into it when you're done. It opens easily enough. I'm not locking you in."

"I know." Yet a quiver of uncertainty tainted my words.

"You look like you're going to throw up."

"I'm fine." I wiped my sweaty palms along my pants. "Where's the chamber?"

Lou huffed, and I sensed his opinion of me plummeting. "You won't miss it. The tunnel goes one way. Follow the light. Twenty yards at most."

"Right."

I descended the ladder. Lou had the decency to wait until I reached stable ground before he swung the door shut with a *crash*.

I peered up, instantly unnerved. I couldn't see the exit any longer. With no light penetrating around the edges of the doorway, the space above was an impenetrable black hole.

I blew out my cheeks. *Clear the underground lair of traps. Release the elder vampire from a forced stasis. Don't get killed by hunters.*

Correction.

Clear the underground lair of traps. Get the fuck out. Don't get killed by a cranky elder vampire who hasn't eaten in over a year.

"Great. Easy-peasy."

My heart pounded in my throat as I peered along the tunnel, psyching myself up for what I had to do. Mordecai had claimed it was relatively soundproof underground. If he was wrong, this would all go to shit.

“Fuck my life. Here goes nothing.”

I filled my lungs, closed my eyes, and exhaled. Then I ran toward the lit chamber, sounding the alarm.

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33

Mordecai

I SMELLED ENSLEY'S FEAR the instant he was below ground. It seeped from his pores and radiated along the tunnel where Cristofer and I waited in shadow. For a moment, he stalled and mumbled curses.

Dammit. He wasn't able to go through with it. We'd asked too much.

As I turned to confer with Cristofer, Ensley ran. A warrior charging into a den of enemies. Fearless and resolute. The panic in his voice was believable, and I suspected it was genuine.

I had the sudden urge to intercept, call the whole thing off, but this was our chance to end things. Right the wrong that had plagued my people for over a year.

Ensley hollered at the men in the chamber, his voice cracking. "He's here! He's here! Fuck. Help. Go, go, go. We need backup."

The men, who Cristofer had already made submissive and pliable, jerked to attention as Ensley burst from the tunnel in a flurry. They didn't question why the new transfer was the one delivering the message. They didn't debate his claim or mistrust his story. They reacted with the perfect amount of panic and agility, exactly as we hoped. The choreography was spot on.

"Nicely done," I said to Cristofer.

"Not my first time."

Ensley motioned to the surface. "He tripped the lights again."

As if I'd do that twice.

"Lou's hurt. He lashed out. They have him surrounded, but he's enraged and attacking. We can't let him get away this time. Hurry."

Ensley’s believability and performance were impressive. It triggered the right amount of fear response from the hunters, who raced toward the tunnel without a backward glance, flying past Ensley and oblivious to the shadowed forms hiding in the corner.

Cristofer moved to intercept, his speed far greater than any human’s.

The hunters wouldn’t ascend the ladder. Not yet. Entrenched in darkness at the far end of the tunnel, Cristofer waited until they were nearly upon him before stepping from the shadow. With nothing more than a sharp-toothed smirk that would have made the bravest soldier think twice, he cut a daunting presence.

The men balked and tripped over their feet. They didn’t scream, and they didn’t flee. Cristofer clung to their minds, emptying them of free will until they were puppets on strings, incapable of forming a simple thought on their own.

Exerting this kind of power was cruel and something I never did to humans, but it was necessary under the circumstances. Confident that Cristofer was in control, I turned to Ensley.

My love and the key to our success had stalled. Mouth gaping and eyes blown wide, he gawked at the enormous stone sarcophagus in the center of the room.

I stepped into the light, instantly drained of power under the UV assault.

Ensley registered my approach from the corner of his eye and jumped, clutching his chest as he whipped around. “Oh, fuck. Don’t do that. You scared the shit out of me.”

“Sorry, love.”

He glanced at the massive slab of concrete on the raised platform. “Is he really in there?”

“Yes, but I can’t free him until you remove the wards. You need to hurry before things get out of hand.”

“Right.” He vigorously nodded as he scanned the chamber, taking in all the obstacles I’d described.

Sweat glistened on his upper lip, and his hands shook. I wanted to take him in my arms and tell him everything would be okay, but I didn’t know that it would. I wanted to turn back time and put my foot down, discourage this nonsense, and tell Cristofer to find another human to manipulate into helping us. But we were well beyond that point.

As though coming to a decision, Ensley lurched into action.

He attacked the powdered circle on the ground first, breaking it apart with the edge of his boot, scattering the granules in an arc so wide, I was forced to retreat. My skin tingled with trepidation. My atrophied organs physically hurt. Ensley left a wide enough gap I could safely and easily slip through.

He glanced in my direction for confirmation that it was enough, and I nodded.

Within the broken circle, Ensley was instantly assaulted by clouds of garlic mist. Fine droplets rained over his jacket and head, coating his face, hands, and body. He squinted and coughed, turning away as he held a protective hand in front of him so he could get closer. He knocked the contraptions from their mounts one at a time and smashed them under his boot.

The first one exploded on impact, its contents splashing in a five-foot radius. I instinctively flinched.

“Careful. If it spreads over too much of the floor, I won’t be able to approach.”

“Shit. Sorry.”

Not that it mattered. The concrete under his feet showed a dark stain, sodden from mist. It surrounded the platform. My access was already compromised. Worry tugged at my gut, but I pushed it away. One thing at a time.

Ensley took greater care with the final two sprayers, launching them against the far wall instead. The cheap plastic shattered.

He glanced worriedly toward the tunnel. I couldn’t help picking out the tripping rhythm of his heart.

“You’re good, love. Cristofer has them under control. Keep going.”

Ensley climbed onto the platform and swiped the mountainous stack of blossoms from the top of the sarcophagus, pushing them over the edge, so they fell behind it. He scanned the ground for strays and moved them out of the way, so my path was clear.

The ground remained persistently wet, and my worry deepened as I brainstormed a way to fix the problem.

For a long time, Ensley peered at the hanging cross. Ten feet tall and six feet wide, constructed of solid lumber beams. A monstrosity that probably weighed more than Ensley. Climbing onto the stone coffin, he reached for the crossbeam and clung, hanging with his full weight, but the industrial hook in the ceiling didn’t budge. He tried swinging it back and forth, left

and right, but it continuously returned to centerline, immediately over the coffin. He jerked and tugged.

Nothing.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with this thing? It’s too big and weighs a ton. I can’t move it, and I don’t see how I can take it down.”

I hadn’t considered this obstacle, but he was right, and no matter what my typical strength, I couldn’t touch the cross without suffering crippling burns and supreme agony. Potential death if it went on too long.

Hence, I couldn’t help.

“What if I hold it out of the way?” he suggested.

“Impossible. You can’t be down here when I wake him.”

“Well, what do I do?”

As I scanned the underground chamber, mind racing and grappling for a solution, my gaze fell on a coil of electrical cords running from the mounted UV lights to their power supply. An idea took root. I panned the walls, looking for a potential anchor.

The chamber was constructed to contain the elder; that much seemed clear. Out of the way on an eyot thought to be uninhabited. Poured concrete floor and walls. A project that must have taken a long time. Funded by Valerius, no doubt, while the citizens of Owen Sound remained oblivious.

Although intended as a prison, an element of care had been taken to provide for the hunters who would spend many hours guarding the sarcophagus. A nook on the far side of the room attracted my attention. A social area. Coat hooks lined the wall, drilled into the cement. A storage shelf for personal belongings hung above it. A beer fridge, a microwave, and a functional bit of counter space made it possible for them to prepare food or make coffee. A four-person table.

The hooks were my only option. Their height wasn’t ideal, but they might do the trick.

I collected one of the longer lengths of coiled electrical cord and followed the tangle to the end to see which lights would be extinguished if I disconnected it. Ensley wouldn’t be able to complete the task in total darkness, and although he had a flashlight, it wouldn’t be ideal. Plus, we didn’t want to cue Cristofer too soon. That would be disastrous.

Confirming the cord supplied power to only a section of the lights, I unplugged it, dimming the room by half.

Ensley, who had been rotating the cross in circles while glowering at the ceiling, likely trying to loosen the hook or snap it free, whipped his head in my direction.

I held up the coiled cord. “Use it to tie the cross back. Secure it to the hooks over there if you can.”

Ensley didn’t hesitate. He jumped from the platform and approached. He reeked of garlic, and I balked, stepping back with a sour expression I failed to hide.

Hurt crossed his face until he realized why. “Oh shit. It’s all over me.”

“It’s all right. Keep going.”

He took the tangled mess carefully, so we didn’t touch, and did as I instructed. It wasn’t without challenges. The hooks were about level with the base of the cross, so they didn’t provide a steep enough angle to keep tension. Each time he heaved the cord taut, drawing the cross out of the way of the sarcophagus, the loop he tied around its base slid off, sending the massive beam swinging like a pendulum.

It was Ensley who came up with a modification. After several failed attempts, he passed the cord over one of the extinguished UV lights that was mounted high on the wall next to the nook. He’d created a pulley that would give him the angle required so the cord didn’t slip free. Once in place, he heaved, putting his full weight behind it, and the cross cleared the sarcophagus. The cord held.

“Fucking right.” He tied it securely to the hook.

“Will it hold?” I asked.

Ensley plucked the cord in a few places to see what would happen. “It seems secure.”

“Okay.” I scanned the ground, my concern over the wet patch escalating.

The entire room reeked of garlic. It was enough to set my nerves on edge, but the smell alone wasn’t debilitating. Contact was the problem.

As I approached, I immediately felt its repulsive energy pushing me away. I could endure some pain, but standing on it for any length of time would be impossible. It would cripple me. I wouldn’t be able to finish the task.

“I can’t cross. The mist soaked into the concrete. The ground is tainted. I need…” A bridge. A plank of wood. “A barrier of some kind.”

“Will this work? Can I wash it away? Dilute it?” Ensley drew two gallon-size jugs of water from the beer fridge and held them up.

“It might.” His discovery ignited a spark of hope.

Ensley brought them over and uncapped the first, dumping it in a path along the concrete so it washed the floor clean of residue. Would it be enough? He used the second jug to go over the same patch a second time.

When he stepped back, I tested the area and was pleased to discover it worked. “You’re a genius.”

“You can thank my gaming brain. It’s been forced to problem solve for years.”

“I’ll never mock it again.” I returned to the coils of cords on the ground. The ones still connected to their power source. “I can unplug the rest of the lights on my own. Make your way out now. Be safe, love.”

The instant the lights were out, Cristofer would move to stage two of the plan. In the dark, with my powers restored and Ensley gone, I would remove the lid on the sarcophagus and get to work as quickly as I could.

“Wait,” Ensley said before I could act.

He approached the platform and studied the sarcophagus, running a finger around the lip.

“What are you doing? We can’t delay.”

“Lou showed me this filler they use to seal doors and windows. It’s the same stuff they used at the mansion. It’s like caulking but made with holy water. Dries like glue, he said.”

Ensley squatted to examine the seam where the lid connected to the body of the sarcophagus. “You won’t be able to open this. Look. It’s sealed.”

“What?”

I joined him and stupidly pressed my hand to the lid to test his theory. The pain was instant, and I recoiled with a shout, jerking it back. A fiery red mark bloomed across my palm.

“Damnation, that hurt.”

“Why would you do that? And who says damnation?”

“You want to mock me now?”

“Well, don’t be stupid. I just said it was sealed. Look with your eyes, not your hands. Can’t you see the filler?”

Chastised, I looked. I saw. I sulked and rubbed my injured hand.

Ensley withdrew a pocketknife and wedged it under the lid, scraping at the sealant as best he could. It came out easily enough but not as thoroughly as we hoped. By the time he’d gone around the entire circumference, residue remained, making the lid untouchable.

“You have to slide it off for me.”

Ensley looked at me like I’d lost my marbles.

“What? I’m serious.” I displayed my burned hand for emphasis. The mark wouldn’t heal until I’d regained my powers.

What I forgot was that my boyfriend was not a vampire with superhuman strength.

The pitiful amount of muscle he did have was not honed from spending all his spare time lifting weights in the gym. He hurled spells and incantations from behind a screen, battling virtual enemies who didn’t require him to have proper strength or stamina. He had a beautifully creative mind, but creativity was not going to help him lift a massive concrete slab that easily weighed over two thousand pounds.

But by golly, he tried, and I loved him for his unflinching determination.

Ensley attempted to slide the lid to no avail. “There seems to be an internal lip locking it in place.”

I had no doubt, but that was hardly the issue. He tugged and pulled and heaved and grunted. At one point, he slipped and scraped his knuckles along the rough cement edge.

“Mother—” He flicked his fingers before whimpering and sticking two of them in his mouth.

A distinct trace of copper drifted to my nose, and my nostrils flared.

“You’re bleeding.”

“I’m fine. It’s a scratch.” Hissing, he studied his scored knuckles.

That wasn’t the point. I fisted my hands to maintain control of my innate urges. It didn’t matter that I’d recently fed. Blood was an aphrodisiac. It threatened the will of even the strongest vampire.

Ensley went at the sarcophagus again, but his effort was useless. We were wasting time.

I scanned the room, seeking a lever but found nothing of value.

Ensley crouched, braced the lid across his shoulders, and used the power of his legs to heave upward, growling and spitting obscenities.

“Would you stop before you hurt yourself again.”

He paced away from the sarcophagus, cursing and threading fingers through his hair. When he nearly tripped on a broken piece from one of the garlic mist contraptions, he kicked it, and it crashed into the wall with a clatter.

“Fucking fuck,” he yelled.

“Are you two done dillydallying?” Cristofer called from the far end of the tunnel. “You’re making enough racket to wake the dead.”

“Isn’t that the point?” Ensley spat.

“I should rather hope not, mate. You’ve cut yourself. My loins are stirring all the way over here.”

I shot a dirty look in Cristofer’s direction even though he couldn’t see me. “Get your knife out and scrape as much of the stuff off one corner as you can.”

“What good is that going to do? It weighs a fuckton. There’s no way we can lift this.”

“You can’t. I can. Please don’t argue.”

Ensley did as I asked, wedging his knife as far into the crevice as possible, getting as much sealant out as he could, so I had a spot to grab. Once he’d cleared a corner, I asked him to step back. With an upturned palm, I crouched, securing a hold with my unburned hand, and pushed.

To my shame and utter embarrassment, nothing happened.

“See?” Ensley crossed his arms.

Frowning, I realized my error. “The lights. Of course. I have no strength, but it didn’t burn me, so we’re on track. You need to extinguish the lights and get out now. I can do the rest.”

“You can’t lift that.”

“Ensley, I can. It’s time, love. You must go. Remember what I said.”

He stalled. Our gazes locked. I wanted to kiss him, hold him in my arms and never let go. He must have been thinking the same thing. We stepped toward one another, and my nose instantly wrinkled.

“I’m sorry.” He stepped back, a distraught crease forming beside his eyes.

“Come here, love. I’ll suffer the discomfort for a taste of your lips.”

But as I moved to kiss him, a more powerful repulsion halted my movement, and I hissed. The necklace. The cross. Ensley touched the chain, realizing at the same time.

“Go,” I said. “It will be over soon, and we’ll have all the time in the world to share affection.”

“Okay. Good luck.”

Ensley hopped from the platform and aimed for the car batteries that powered the remaining lights. He grabbed the cords that were still attached and yanked them free.

The chamber plunged into darkness, which was fine for me, but not for Ensley. He knew what he was meant to do. We'd gone over it several times. A second later, his flashlight came on. From the corner of my eye, I saw him sweep the beam toward the tunnel, and I thought he was leaving.

My instructions couldn't have been clearer.

Only he didn't leave. He didn't run toward Cristofer and safety.

Caught up in my task, by the time I realized he hadn't left it was too late.

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Mordecai

I SECURED MY PALM under the lip of the lid and heaved it up and off without a hitch. The stone slab fell with a thunderous crash, vibrating my insides and cracking in half when it hit the floor.

I laid eyes on my uncle's desiccated body for the first time in over a year. He was drained, depleted to the point of mummification. His skin, shriveled and dry, had grown discolored and tough as leather. It clung to his bones, making their sharp angles stand out. I did not expect his eyes to be open, but they were. Their flaming black pits boiled with anger and burned with revenge. Apart from those bleak and unnerving windows, he looked dead.

But he was not dead. Rather, he had not succumbed to the final death. He was in stasis. A torpor that required the blood of kin or that of a superior elder to properly revive him. I was not superior, but I was kin. A lesser source would cause an unstoppable frenzy.

Removing the wards must have started the process or stirred something deep within the old vampire for he seemed semi-aware, if not fully awake.

Concentrating on the task at hand, distracted by what I must do, I failed to register Ensley's presence. It was my fault. I'd acted immediately, eager to be finished. I hadn't given him time to escape. Of course he was curious. Of course he glanced back in his retreat.

Human curiosity was a powerful thing, and my boyfriend, who had spent a lifetime engaged in fantasy gaming, couldn't fight the pull to steal one simple look.

Only when the beam of his flashlight shone upon Iulian’s face did I realize he was still in the room.

“Holy fuck. Is he dead?”

I jolted, alarmed not only at Ensley’s presence but at his proximity at my elbow. Before I could shout for him to fall back, to get out like I told him, the mummified corpse of my uncle stirred.

First his nostrils twitched, then his eyes, no longer fixed on the middle distance, shifted to the man I’d fallen hopelessly in love with.

That was all the warning I got.

Our plan was supposed to be as follows: the lights were meant to be Ensley’s final task. Upon extinguishing them, he *should have* run into the tunnel and rendezvoused with Cristofer. Cristofer, upon seeing the extinguished lights, was meant to send the hunters he was controlling to the surface. Ensley *should have* been on their tail. He *should have* been the final person up the ladder. He *should have* closed the trapdoor and covered it with garlic blossoms.

He should have been far, far away.

All the humans on the eyot *should have* been protected from Iulian’s influence.

Cristofer was not in danger. His blood was of low quality. Mine was essential for the elder’s sanity to be restored. Without it, he would frenzy and seek the closest source of fresh blood.

Over a year without feeding had made him ravenous. Under ordinary circumstances—not that anything about this was ordinary—*I* should have been the one to wake him with an offering of blood directly from my body.

The dominoes did not fall as they should have.

Ensley did not run when the lights were extinguished.

He was not in the tunnel to ascend with the others as planned.

He had cut his knuckles trying to remove the sarcophagus lid and was actively bleeding.

Iulian’s severely depraved body scented the fresh blood, and it roused him from slumber. I did not have time to gain the upper hand. A piercing, inhuman shriek filled the air. A wail so shrill and ugly it vibrated in my teeth and echoed in my bones. It traveled far and wide, toppling anything not bolted down. The earth quaked. The water in the Sydenham rippled with the effect. The cross, precariously tied off, creaked and swayed.

The concrete beneath my feet cracked.

No one on the island escaped its reach. I heard panic from the men above ground.

As the residual scream reverberated off the walls, I threw myself on top of the elder, shouting, “Run, Ensley. Cristofer! Get him out. Help him.”

Iulian might have been drained to the point of mummification, his bones might have been brittle, and his leathery skin might have lacked flexibility, but none of it stopped him. His strength came from the utmost level of starvation. His power was ingrained for survival. His instincts were pure and predatory. The scent of Ensley’s blood had triggered a state of hysteria, and Iulian would tear apart the world to get at him.

He was my elder. Superior in every way, and I didn’t stand a chance at restraining him.

He tossed me aside like a sack of potatoes and lurched after Ensley at daunting speed. I hit the wall hard enough to crack bones, but I drew myself upright and made chase as those broken bones knit themselves back together. The pain was real, but my fear erased it all.

I had no hope of catching up.

Cristofer had snagged Ensley, and they had made it to the end of the tunnel, but the men above had barred the door. Ensley’s screams for help went unheard in the soundproof underground. For all Cristofer’s strength, he couldn’t break the lock on his own.

Iulian was on Ensley in a flash, knocking Cristofer off his feet when he tried to intervene. He snagged Ensley’s ankle—he was partway up the ladder—and flung him to the ground.

Ensley landed in a heap and rolled, scrambling to his feet in a desperate attempt to run back toward the chamber, but he wasn’t fast enough. Iulian grabbed him and pinned him down. The misty coating of garlic on Ensley’s clothes didn’t seem to affect the old vampire, and I suspected the pain of a burn was nothing compared to the voracious hunger eating him from the inside out.

As Cristofer stumbled to his feet farther down the tunnel, I tried to hold Iulian back, but he lashed out, sending me crashing to the ground once again.

Then it happened.

I saw the moment in slow motion, helpless and heartsick.

Knotting his fingers into Ensley’s hair, Iulian wrenched his head back and moved to plunge his sharp fangs into his vulnerable carotid artery. Iulian

would bleed him dry in seconds if I didn’t stop him.

But before Iulian connected, before his teeth broke skin, he shrieked with another piercing wail and shriveled away as though stung.

The shimmering silver chain around Ensley’s neck caught my eye. The necklace he’d had blessed by a priest. The religious symbol that had prevented me from taking that final kiss only moments ago.

Iulian tried again but was repulsed by its energy. Another deafening cry filled the chamber.

He would soon find another access point.

I launched at him, and Cristofer joined me. We grabbed him, but the old vampire fought, twisting, turning, and battling us both as Ensley tried to crawl away. We lost control, no match for a starved elder, and Iulian lunged.

It happened in seconds. Instead of biting, he slashed Ensley’s legs with fingernails that had grown to razors during his slumber. Ensley screamed and toppled to his stomach. Iulian slashed at him a second time, scoring his back and shredding his clothes. When Ensley rolled, Iulian got him a third time and a fourth. Once across the face and the final time across the throat.

As he attacked my lover, Cristofer screamed for me to open a vein. “You have to stop the frenzy. He’ll kill him.”

I used my teeth to break the skin on my wrist and lunged for my uncle, wrapping my bleeding arm around Iulian’s head. Iulian thrashed, trying to throw me off.

“Help me hold him,” I shouted at Cristofer. “Don’t let go.”

I positioned the wound over my uncle’s mouth, forcing him to accept the offering. The instant he ingested the sluggish black fluid that inhabited me, his rage calmed. The elder seemed to collapse under its influence, the fight gone out of him. Cristofer and I supported him as he drank enough to calm his brain and revive his senses.

It took several minutes.

In that time, Ensley grew quiet.

I kept my wrist in place only long enough to ensure the elder wasn’t going to continue his rage, then I tore free and ran to my lover.

“Ensley.” My voice cracked as I fell to my knees. He lay in a pool of blood that flowed ceaselessly from his neck and several abrasions on his face.

He scrabbled at the religious chain and tugged it off, throwing it aside as he mouthed words I didn’t comprehend.

With the necklace gone, I used my hand to staunch the flow, but it was useless. Iulian had hit his mark.

The light in Ensley's eyes grew dim as he searched my face.

"No. No, my love. You can't leave me. Not yet. It's too soon. We'll get you help. Cristofer, get help. Now!"

"They won't open the door."

"Make them," I bellowed.

Ensley tried to speak again, but the words didn't come. His lips, an ugly shade of blue, were coated with blood. I cradled his head and spoke softly in his ear. "Stay with me. Please, Ensley. Don't go. I love you. It wasn't supposed to end like this."

But not all stories end the way they are meant to.

Some have endings we despise.

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35

Mordecai

DAYLIGHT HOURS HAD COME and gone. I hadn't left his side. Couldn't. Not after what I'd done. After what I'd let happen. Regret, guilt, and sorrow ate me alive. My dead heart ached for a life taken too soon.

I thought of his mother and the new man in her life who made Ensley squirm with jealousy. I thought of the father he'd said goodbye to many years ago, whose death he felt responsible for. I thought of his friends, Ziggy, Mars, and Poet, and their enthusiasm for role-playing games. I thought of the job he barely liked, and the boss who treated him poorly.

"I'm so sorry." If I could have cried, I would have.

"What choice did we have?" Cristofer stood in the doorway, hovering, knowing I was upset. "He knew what he was getting into. It was a risk."

"He didn't know."

"You act like it was you who killed him."

"Go away, Cristofer. Leave me with my grief."

I heard his sigh and sensed his reluctance to leave, but the door snicked closed, and I was on my own.

With my uncle's sanity restored, the three of us had managed to break the steel bar keeping the trapdoor closed. It was a feat, but we tore the concrete plates holding the hooks right out of the ground. Lou's fancy sealing agent didn't matter when the whole framework peeled away.

By then, the hunters were gone. Fearing they might return with an army, we left quickly. When Valerius heard the news, he would warn them off. We had the elder, and Valerius's reign had come to an end.

If he was smart, he would go into hiding and pray we never found him.

I'd transferred Ensley's inert body to the mansion. I laid him on the bed we'd shared a few times before he learned about my tainted existence as a heartless vampire. A demon. A cursed one. Before I'd fallen in love and questioned everything I stood for.

Ensley had never flinched at hearing the truth. He'd embraced our differences and loved me back. If only I'd not been so stubborn. If only I'd allowed a conversation.

It was too late for that.

I rested my hand over Ensley's unbeating heart, his skin cold and colorless. Earlier, I'd stripped him of his bloody clothes and washed his lifeless body, so he was clean.

An icy breeze blew through the open window, billowing the curtains I'd drawn aside when the sun went down. The smell of a winter storm tickled my nose. The brisk November air would no longer bother him. Those days were gone.

I paced the room for a time to distract myself but eventually returned to the chair I'd drawn beside the bed. I sat and took in every aspect of his beautiful face, admiring the way his hair fanned the pillow.

The door creaked as someone opened it. I figured Cristofer had returned. The man was irritatingly concerned over my wellbeing. Glancing over my shoulder, ready to tell him to bugger off, I discovered my uncle. Tall and robust, sharply dressed and with a presence that commanded authority.

A wave of anger roiled in the pit of my stomach.

Since waking him, we'd barely spoken ten words to each other. He'd since fed properly and had regained his formidable good looks. In a few days, he would return to Romania and dispose of the usurper, if he still dared walk the halls of the ancient castle.

I didn't know what would happen to Valerius, but I didn't care. Iulian would reclaim the throne. Power would be restored. The human hunters would retreat in droves with their newfound knowledge, only to wreak havoc on our kind another day. The war would never end. I didn't know what that meant for our future. Time would tell.

The only thing I cared about was Ensley and the life he never got to live thanks to me.

"Stop sulking, child." The snap in Iulian's tone was familiar. "You act as though humanity is worth cherishing. It's a pitiful existence, and you know

it. He’s better off.”

We’d never agreed on that point, but I remained silent. Everything I stood for had crumbled to dust. Iulian and I had been fighting semantics for four centuries. I’d never forgiven him for changing me, but now…

“I should be damned to hell if such a place exists.”

“You can no longer accuse me of doing wrong, Mordecai. From this day forth, your sins are as great as mine. Remember that.”

His words stung.

The door clicked, and I was alone again, despair and remorse my constant companions.

Based on the pull of the moon, I figured it was shortly past eleven, roughly twenty-four hours since Ensley had fallen.

I studied his flawless, pale skin and traced my thumb over his slightly parted lips—not blue but a vibrant scarlet that contrasted his complexion.

“Come on, love. Your injuries are healed, and it’s time to wake up.”

Somewhere in the house, the grandfather clock rang the hour. Midnight. The time when evil reigned, when the cursed ones walked the earth and the moon’s pull was most profound.

Ensley stirred. His lashes fluttered as he peeled his eyes open one at a time and scanned the dark room.

When his gaze landed on me, he blinked a few times before rasping, “Where am I?”

“The mansion.”

“The mansion.” He frowned and wet his lips as though parched. “How… How did I…” He groaned. “I feel strange.”

“I imagine so. You’ll adjust.”

“Adjust? To what?”

I didn’t answer. Couldn’t.

The confusion was normal and tended to last several hours upon waking after the change had taken effect. Some called it the Adaptation Phase. Then, hunger would kick in. He would be ravenous, delirious with need. It would take over his senses until he learned to control it.

I wasn’t ready for that obstacle. My disinclination to feed regularly would be of no help to Ensley. It meant changing my ways until he learned discipline.

One step at a time.

He sat up slowly, groggy and stiff no doubt, and steadied himself by leaning on an arm as he swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Our gazes met. “Why do you look so sad?” he asked.

I tucked a stray chunk of hair behind his ear and brushed my fingers over his cheek. “What do you remember of last night, love?”

“Remember? Um…” Confusion creased his brow as his gaze turned inward. A moment later, his eyes, deep burgundy like my own—like Cristofer’s and Iulian’s, and all the other cursed souls that roamed the earth—widened.

“We woke the elder,” he whispered as his gaze flicked side to side. “He… Oh. I didn’t leave fast enough. He came after me. I was bleeding.”

Expression stricken, he searched my face for answers. “What happened?”

A lump stuck in my throat, but I forced myself to explain. “He mortally wounded you.”

I couldn’t look at him, too full of guilt and shame. “You were dying, and…” I pinched my eyes closed against the memory. “Oh, Ensley. I wasn’t ready to let you go. I couldn’t bear it. I’ve spent four centuries with a vacancy in my chest, so utterly alone in this wretched world. Then you came along and revived my long-dead heart. You breathed life into my poisoned lungs. You gave me hope and peace. Oh, my sweet love, forgive me. I’ve done a terrible thing.”

Tortured by his silence, I glanced up and saw the moment he understood the truth.

Ensley touched his face and neck where Iulian had fatally cut him. The wounds were gone. Healed.

“Oh… Oh god.” He peered around the room, lips parted in awe, and I suspected he recognized his enhanced senses. Did he hear Cristofer moving about downstairs? Did he smell the approaching storm?

He prodded his changed teeth, then desperately clutched his chest. “My heart… It’s… I can’t feel it beating. Mordecai? Am I… Did I die?”

“Yes, love.” The next words hurt to voice, but I persevered, knowing I owed him the truth. “But not before I fed you my poisoned essence.”

“What?”

“My blood, Ensley. I forced you to drink my blood.”

The cut I’d sliced in my wrist for Iulian had still been open, so as Ensley had lain gasping for air that would not fill his lungs, as his life rapidly drained from his body, as my unbeating heart broke at what was to come, I

had pressed the still seeping wound to his lips and squeezed all I could into his mouth, forcing him to drink from me.

“Forgive me,” I whispered. If he hated me forever, I would understand.

“Forgive you?”

“Oh, Ensley.” I went to move away, but he snagged my hand and kept me in place.

“You saved my life.”

“No, you naïve fool. I didn’t save your life. I’ve cursed you for an eternity. I forced the change because I’m a selfish bastard, no better than my uncle. I swore I would never do this to anyone.”

I tugged free from his hold and bolted for the door, but Ensley caught my arm.

“Stop. Please. Mordecai, I’m not mad. This isn’t a curse. You aren’t evil. Don’t you see what you’ve done?”

Oh, I saw, and in ten thousand years I would still hate myself for it.

Ensley turned me to face him. He cradled my jaw and rested his forehead against mine. “You’ve given us time, Mordecai. Time we wouldn’t have otherwise had. Don’t you see?”

“You’re glamorizing it.”

He chuckled. “How can I not? You’ve practically proposed. Two days ago, you were so focused on the limitations of our relationship. We don’t have any now.”

Ensley smiled, and my stomach curdled at the sight of his sharpened eyeteeth.

“Stop beating yourself up. How can I possibly be angry?”

“I told you he wouldn’t be mad,” Cristofer shouted from the lower level. “Didn’t I tell you?”

“Stop eavesdropping.”

“I love you, Mordecai. You’ve given me a gift. I will cherish it forever. I will cherish *you* forever.”

Cruel hope threatened to erase my sorrow. How could he not see the challenges he faced? How could he so readily accept what I’d done?

“I didn’t want to be here without you. I’m so tired of being alone in this terrible world.”

“You’re not alone anymore.”

“You’re not angry?”

“No. I’m grateful beyond words.”

“How? Why?”

He kissed me instead of answering, and I crumbled in his arms. Four centuries of grief and misery fell away. Was it possible that I was meant to find him, that we were meant to be together? Was this fate? Destiny?

I broke free from his mouth and peered into his eyes. “I promise I will love you until the world is no more.”

“You’re such a charmer.”

“You have my eternal devotion, Ensley.”

“And you have mine.”

Another kiss, and he guided me to the bed. As we tumbled onto the mattress, tangled in each other’s arms, Ensley broke from my mouth with a ponderous expression.

“What is it?” I asked.

He wet his lips. “I’m really hungry.”

I groaned.

Somewhere below, Cristofer laughed.

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Ensley

Epilogue - Six Months Later

DEAREST MOTHER,

Hello from Zermatt! We made it. My god, you would love it here. The village, the atmosphere. The snowcapped Matterhorn is simply breathtaking. The air is cool and crisp. It's been raining a lot, but that's typical for May, I'm told. It certainly doesn't ruin the experience. Is it warm back home yet? Did you plant your garden? How is James? I hope he's taking good care of my Jeep. I might want it back someday. Is he still teaching tae kwon do? Have you been out on the boat yet this year?

Anyhow, we'll be in Switzerland for another week or so before moving on to Austria, then off to Hungary, before finally landing in Romania, where we'll spend a month or so visiting Mordecai's family. We hope to be back in London for fall.

Don't worry about my job prospects. Mordecai claims he has a lot of connections, and I'm sure I'll find something. I'm attaching a few pictures of our travels. Mostly scenic. You know I hate having my picture taken. Mordecai is the same.

Anyhow, I have to cut this short. Dinner plans with a friend.

Phone date on Sunday?

PS: We'll try to come home for Thanksgiving. If that doesn't work out, Christmas for sure.

I love you, Ensley.

Begrudgingly, I uploaded a handful of doctored photographs so my mother would believe the narrative I spewed every time I wrote. A friend of Cristofer's, who had no morals or ethics to speak of, and I'd told him as much, had created very realistic AI images of both Mordecai and me and transposed them onto the landscape pictures we'd taken during our travels.

I would have argued, but convincing my mother I was alive and well was imperative. She didn't know her only son had died in an underground lair trying to rescue an elder vampire. She didn't know I would never age and would go on living for who knew how long. She couldn't know. It would devastate her. It would renew her grief, and that wasn't fair. My mother had finally found peace and moved on from my father's death.

I no longer hated James. In fact, I relied on the man to take care of my mother in my long absences.

Six months ago, after finding stability in my new existence, I'd told my mother that Mordecai and I were moving to London. She was heartbroken but also excited by the new adventures ahead of me. I'd never traveled. I'd never been in love.

She was ready to let me go.

I wrote daily and texted often. We spoke on the phone three days a week. Visits home would be infrequent and would require plenty of stage makeup and evasiveness over the years if we were to have any chance of making the story believable, but we would tackle that obstacle when the time came.

As for Ziggy, Mars, and Poet? We kept in touch. We still gamed online, much to Mordecai's annoyance. He couldn't understand the obsession. We chatted often through text but rarely called one another. Whether I would see them again in person was another matter.

I checked the time after hitting send on the email. It was near midnight. It would be the dinner hour in Owen Sound. I had time to slip out and feed before our dungeon run. The hunger was insatiable. At times, I thought it might never go away.

I shot a quick text to Mars, making sure we were still on for that night's dungeon run, as I called over my shoulder, "Cris, are you ready?"

"I've been ready for an hour, mate. Your better half isn't coming. Shocking, I know. I can't convince him."

That was no surprise. Mordecai possessed some sort of unnatural ability to go weeks without feeding. I could barely get from one night to the next, which was how Cristofer and I had become such good friends. He'd taken

my poor, starving fledgling ass off my boyfriend's shoulders, much to Mordecai's relief.

Cristofer snagged the phone from my hand. "Are you talking to Poe-Poe?"

"Do you mind?" I stole it back. "I'm talking to Mars."

"Have you talked to the sexy Dungeon Master recently?"

"In game."

"How is he?"

"I don't know. Fine, I guess."

Cristofer huffed irritably.

I dashed a glance over my shoulder. "What?"

"Could you be more vague?"

"We don't carry on lengthy conversations when we play. If we do, it's about the task at hand."

A lie, but Cristofer had been annoyingly invasive when it came to Poet ever since we arrived in Europe. He'd become our reluctant traveling companion—read, third wheel—because, well, fledgling.

"Does he ever ask about me?"

He did. Often. But I wasn't about to tell Cristofer that. "He met you one time. I doubt he remembers you."

"Oh, duckie. One time is all it takes for some."

Didn't I know it. I would never forget the night I'd stood outside Owen Sound's purportedly haunted mansion waiting for its new owner to arrive. The first time I laid eyes on Mordecai Ashenvale, I knew with absolute certainty that nothing would ever be the same.



I realized when I came to the end of this book that Cristofer would not let me off without giving him a story. Stay tuned for details. Anticipated release will be Fall 2027. Sign up for my newsletter to be the first to hear about new releases and special promotions.

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