

VAMPIRONY

(a fictional account of the
vampire psychologist.)

by Stacie Benton

clueless to a gun fight how to remember



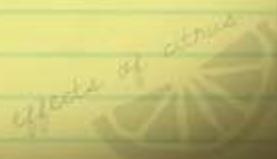
protection methods



vampire 101: trust

exit strategy

or a whale always have one



vampire practicum

joining a bad投行

escape from the penthouse

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Prologue

February 1886, London

She stumbled along the cobblestone rise, the hem of her borrowed dress catching under her bare feet. The pale flesh along her palm tore as she put her hand out to right herself, taking no time to slow down as she hurried. The pain barely registered. She panted; apprehension threatened to crush her heart even as somewhere she knew her heart failed to beat to that end anymore.

As the ancient hallway descended, spiraling down from the warehouse building to the topmost level of the underground tunnels, she began to hear voices, one very distinctive, female, peaked, tremulous and angry. Her brow furrowed. It was unexpected. When she'd found the bottle of tonic on Miss Sherbourne's desk empty, she assumed the best. That all her patient work to bring her into the fold had come to fruition, that Miss Sherbourne had developed a taste and had wanted more.

But the keening wail and subsequent crash of glass brought all her assumptions to doubts. She was almost to the door of the crypt, the large central room of the underground complex where her father spent most of his time when not above ground with Miss Sherbourne. The door was open but as she rounded the last bend, slowing to approach cautiously, the door slammed shut and she heard her father's most authoritative voice.

"I've warned you never to come below ground at night! It's not safe."

She started. There was something in his reproach that frightened her even now, when it wasn't even aimed at her. She crept low along the floor, rising herself up slowly to look through the keyhole until it was only one bright green eye peering in.

The fire was blazing in the fireplace of the mostly barren stone room. Darcie, Miss Sherbourne, was there, in the middle of the room, in her dressing gown, her long dark brown hair entirely askew, as if she'd just awoke without a bonnet. As the green eye moved around the room, she had to shush a gasp. Her father stood close to the door, after just having shut it, his arm still raised.

Darcie straightened herself, turned her head to him. Her face looked feverish, and yet paler than normal. Her brow was damp with perspiration and yet she looked radiant. And deviant.

"I will not let you lecture me about safety, Val. You have kept me from this part of your world long enough. They are your own secrets you wish to keep safe not me."

As he crossed the room to her, she sidestepped, avoiding his arm. He paused where he stood, head cocked to one side, appraising. "You look unwell. You should---."

"Don't..." she raised an accusing finger at him, "you use your Vox on me to get me to behave. I'm not one of your children."

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"No, of course not, love, I only meant---"

"And don't patronize me with what you think I want to hear." Her voice was so strong and yet, her hands moved ceaselessly, grazing up and down her arms. Then, suddenly near tears, she cried, "You never let me in. Why won't you let me be with you?"

Val held out his hands. "Love, why do you talk this way? What is a-matter? What has troubled you so?"

Darcie brought her shaking hands to her face, then began shaking her head side to side, moaning, before grasping at her head, "You're always so near and yet so far. And yet I can feel you. I can feel you inside my head."

Then Darcie gave her hair a painful tug, yelping as she did. Then her whole torso went limp but her hands kept dancing in the air. He took a step and grabbed her arms, shoving up the sleeves of her dressing gown. The green eye could even see the long scratches, like nail marks all up and down the pale arms.

His dark tall frame towered above her, deathly still. The expression in his face was one the green eye had never seen before.

"You see it," Darcie spoke, her voice suddenly dark and beseeching. "You must make me."

His chest heaved as he dropped her arms and stepped away. He shook his head, his face screwing up in to the most unpleasant visage. "You don't know what you're saying. How....How did this happen?"

Darcie smiled in a pained way. "I don't know. I hear you in my head. I feel you in my blood. You must make me." Her head lolled to the side. Her hands moved to her head as if separate from her own volition but they merely hovered at her temples, trembling.

"I'll call for Aubrey. We'll make this right."

She screamed in anger and pain. "I don't want your fucking lackey! I want you to make me!" Then, her disposition changed to a pleasant if somewhat cloying smile. "It's ok. We can be together. Together forever. It's ok."

"It wasn't supposed to be this way. We didn't want it to be this way."

"Shhh," she stepped to him. She reached up, her hands cupping his face. "It's ok. It's ok."

"How? How did this happen? Were you testing? Were you attacked? What..."

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"Shhh," she put a finger over his lips. "I can feel the darkness rising. And it is your blood." He bent over her, his body shaking. Where those tears? Was that possible for her father, her proud, powerful father crying? "Just make me."

He lifted his head. "I made a promise. You made me promise."

She nodded. "I absolve you." She kissed him then whispered "Make me."

He gripped her face between his large hands. He lowered his tortured face to hers, his brow against hers and she began to move her body back and forth, like some willowy dance, her eyes closed, her smile fading to an open gaping mouth. "Please. My love. Please."

"No."

She suddenly grabbed at his wrists, sharpened nails digging into his flesh. "You have no choice. Please. Before I beg you. Remember your promise." There was a look that passed between them and for a moment, it was Miss Sherbourne again, Darcie of old. But he blinked and her head lolled to the side.

Then the willowy dance began again and her hands caressed his arms. He pushed her away. "Please, Val. Make me. I'll be all better then. Please. Please." With every successive please, her voice became more shrill, more disturbing until she was wailing.

The sudden blow shocked and did its worst, severed head from neck, not by any slicing of flesh but by sheer inhuman force knocking the skull from the spine, detaching all with practiced and precise savagery. In the blink of a green eye, the head flew, smacking into the far wall before bouncing off and landing some feet from the fire.

The body remained suspended for a moment and just as if the soul had suddenly been expelled, began to collapse. He caught her, clamping those same strong limbs that had just separated head from neck in one blow gently around her, encasing her as he fell to his knees with her so encased.

He lowered his head over her breast, his shoulders vibrating in sobs. All the green eye could do was blink in shock until the tears welled and she sank back away from the door, hand clutched to her mouth. He'd killed her. He'd killed her.

"What are you doing here?"

She looked up to find Emmerick towering above her, his dark brooding powerful form as menacing as anything with her so far outside of her bounds. Then a cry, short, breathless, tortured sounded from inside and Emmerick stepped past her and opened the door.

She saw between Emmerick's legs her father, kneeling on the floor cradling Darcie's headless form, his head tilted back in despair. "I kept my promise."

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Emmerick stepped into the room and shouted, "What have you done?"

"I kept my promise."

Then the sound, eerie and unnatural, a strange squishy sound startled them all and Emmerick exclaimed, "What in the Hell?"

She crawled to the doorway, grabbing the frame, and looking into the room but would wish on her forever damned soul she had not. The head that had bounced on the floor was moving by some unnatural force, as if wishing to reconnect to the body that was its. And when the eyes opened and stared straight at her as if to accuse her of causing this calamity, she screamed.

"Get her out of here, Emmerick." Her father laid the body gently down and then stepped to Emmerick, who had backed away from the abomination of the head. Her father drew the kukri from Emmerick's sheath and proceeded to hack the body into ever smaller pieces, ignoring a stunned Emmerick and his screaming daughter.

When Emmerick finally got enough reason, he turned quickly away and grabbed her dress hauling her up into his arms. He turned once at the doorway to look back.

Her father was throwing body parts into the fire which began to roar with each subsequent piece. "Burn, love! Burn it all down. Burn!" The fire licked at the wooden ceiling, burning the wood until it turned orange with heat. Emmerick took off running up the hall towards the warehouse, but the sound she heard as they fled was that of her father screaming, "Burn!" but the memory was already seared into her mind, the image from her green eye seeing the dismembered head of her friend, her teacher, her surrogate mother accusing her, all-knowing of her adolescent treachery.

No, no, it wasn't her. She hadn't meant it like this. No never like this. They had misunderstood her. They had denied their own happiness and in doing so, thwarted hers. She could still hear the anguished screams of her father in her head. Her body shook with his anger and torment, until the guilt turned into fear of discovery.

No, not her fault. All the death and turmoil that followed, the dark empire fallen. But someone was to blame. And someone would pay for the loss of all her happy dreams and her happy home. And then their world would burn. Burn in blood.

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A New Case: Go West, Young Woman

When the plane had lifted out of LAX, I had felt a huge sense of relief. Not only was I gainfully employed again but my new case was in the Pacific Northwest, first time out that far West. Granted, anything to get me out of LA, which had been a complete shock to my Midwest sensibilities. While I wound up really liking my last client Lauren, nothing's worse than a vampire worried about gaining ten pounds on screen. Well, except one worried about her complexion. There's just no easy way to work through bad self-image with a vampire. Umm, look in the mirror? But four tough months later, I think the new ingénue starlet on a not-to-be named Fox dramedy would easily be able to play the sixteen year old for a long long time, not even needing syndication to keep her looking so young.

And in Hollywood, it all made sense. She could go years looking so young, then start applying makeup to age her a little bit, then disappear for a few years only to come back looking amazing, waving her hand away to any rumors that she's had major work done. In fact, I gave her probably twenty years in the industry, depending on how successful she could work the mechanics of the entertainment machine, before she would have to go dark and plan her next lifetime. There really wasn't anything stopping her from having a fabulous Hollywood career. Except for maybe that teensy fear of mirrors.

Admittedly with this move, I felt both excitement and a certain amount of unease. But when I saw all those tall majestic evergreen trees as we came down through the clouds and circled the Space Needle, I could pour most of that excitement into a box of "Here's something new." But not all of it. I'd need to sift through the remnants to understand that. The unease? Where was that coming from? I was completely clueless on that.

It's not like this life of being without a home, playing the psychologist to vampires was at all jarring or dangerous. Sheesh! Only three clients in and already logged over a thousand miles on my frequent flier card. As I thought for a split second of all I'd left behind in this lifetime coming to terms with what seemed to be my calling from all those lifetimes before, it might as well be a million miles away. Was it so awful that with one beautiful, perfect little exception, I didn't miss that old Midwest life that never fit at all?

I'd have to set that aside for the moment and focus on my next client.

Skovajsa...what kind of name was that? I suspected he'd introduce himself with a flourish of his arm and a declaration of himself as One Named Deity, like Cher or Madonna. Vampires...they really were, most of them, such drama queens. If I had to hear "I am Vampire" as if it explains every weird quark and bad behavior one more time, I might prescribe myself some anti-psychotics, that is if I could prescribe meds. Boy, that'd be useful. Not for vamps, of course, or me...but for cohorts and companions. Those were the ones to look out for. They were typically wound tighter than their immortal masters. If this guy had one, I had no clue.

He was so vague and generic on the phone...I might as well be on an eHarmony date.

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Hi, I'm Skovajsa. I am Vampire. I drink blood and am allergic to garlic. I'm more of a night person and dig hanging out outside clubs to hit on unsuspecting drunk chicks. I don't smoke and prefer non-religious types (unless I'm wanting to be naughty and stick it to the Man). Prefer no pets, especially no dogs. I'm looking for a mate who has a certain moral flexibility and believes in forever.

Yeah, that sounded like the kind of guy I'd go for. I sighed. I couldn't help letting myself have a moment of romantic indulgence. Please, just not another vamp who **would** stare at himself all day if he could. Or night, as it were. After Lauren, who's ego was large but who's emotions still smacked of a stage persona, I found myself wishing, please, couldn't this time, I just found one who's a bit more real, more...alive?

Walking through the terminal, my phone chirped with a new message. It was from Lauren.

INBOX: Re: The Gift
From: Lauren Lyles (lysistrata@webvampyr)
Date: Mon, 13 Jul 2009
To: vampironyis@live.com

So excited to share, Psych! After a few futile attempts, I finally got up the cajones to unwrap your gift and sure enough, I could see myself! I have to report, tho, that it took me awhile to decide it was me. Reminds me of how Muffin reacts to looking at herself in those things. She barks, most times. Yeah, I did it, I fanged out.

But here's the whack thing: it wasn't me. I mean, a few rounds of pantomime with it proved it was but...I look nothing like myself that I remember. I still have a photograph somewhere of my mortal self...I'll have to send when I find it.

I didn't last long; I'm working up to staring a minute so I can see what's different. Gotta find that pic.

Thanks so much! Am thinking, once I build up some tolerance, I can practice my lines in front of it, work on making my lips move more...er..naturally...:)

Yours,

lyle

I was surprised. That had been quick. I had left her the gift thinking it would take her awhile to get around to using it. In the note I'd emailed her, I let her know there was no silver to worry about with the mirror as most modern vamps still have that raging allergy. I'd also made a crack about the tiny mirror in her hugely oversized but trendy bag. It was the most teasing I figured I could manage considering her kindness and the fact she'd given me the referral.

Sure, it was a friend of a friend who knew this guy...but it was still keeping me going. I'd promised to share details with her as she'd been promised this guy was quite the looker. Still, she seemed one

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very happy customer. I needed to remind her to write me a nice referral. But hopefully no more actor types. I didn't need the drama.

I quickly jotted down a few items for my task list while waiting for a taxi. I had commissioned new business cards from a local marketing firm so I needed to pick those up at the hotel when I arrived. I also needed to request some local real estate listings to look for a potential temporary office site as well as put an ad out for an office assistant. I had no idea how long I'd be in town but if Lauren was any indication, it had taken a few months to really get rolling so I wanted to hit the ground running.

My vampire test kit needed some fresh provisions. In addition to the Velcro strips and straight pins, I needed a big jar of pickles, sunflower seeds, and a bag of fresh lemons, preferably Meyer. I was hoping I could give the order to the concierge and let them handle it while I settled in. And above all, I needed to remember Jasmine's birthday. The present was already in the mail but I needed to call. Such was the busy life of the vampire psychologist.

DJB: Memoirs, Volume 3

I found the Frost poem I wanted.

Fire and Ice

*Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.*

I've had the dream again. It is unsettling after so many dreamless nights to suddenly have images so startlingly and real awakening me. It's the sun, peeking through a bank of clouds, setting far away. I haven't seen a sunset in a long time. It beckons me but it is safely far away. I twitch, my eyes glow.

The Sun, it's suddenly upon me, huge, foreboding, hanging as if ready to tumble on top of me, yellow turning orange and then deeper orange, almost red. Burning, I can feel the heat and the light as if it's leaking out from inside me. And then I'm there, with it, inside it, and it consumes me and I do the only thing I can think of. I scream.

Wake up, my throat hoarse, sweating...sweating.

Vampires do not sweat.

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What Passes for Favors

The digital display on the cell phone read 9:38 PM. But by the patronage at The Mystic, a cozy pub in Seattle's historic Ballard neighborhood, you might have guessed that school had just let out. At least, to the eyes of the pub's proprietress, it seemed that way. A group of young Goths were horsing around at one of the round booths making a mess. The table at that particular booth had an old nautical map of the East Indies from the 1800's, back when it was still in fashion to draw sea monsters at the edge and declare that "Here Be Monsters."

Indeed, thought Morena Fourtenay, although things were never what you would expect, were they? This particular breed of little monsters were giggling, slapping each other on the arms, and downing the new hipster beer. How PBR had become vogue, Morena couldn't guess. But what was old is new again. That was fashion.

Not that Morena knew much about that. Her everyday wear consisted of something black, something form-fitting over her long limbs with enough give so should she need to tussle with an unruly irregular, she wouldn't pop a seam. And when out and about, a jacket to cover the bulk of her entirely legal Glock in case she needed to aggressively dissuade, as appropriate. The streets, sometimes, were dangerous. And Morena was nothing if not diligently prepared.

At the thought, Morena's eyes traveled back to the goth gang. Camille was with them, looking as carefree as the rest of these barely graduated nuisances. Scratch that, Camille didn't look like she was enjoying it much. Too much force in her smile. And when she looked up and caught Morena staring, it was as if they both knew they were both thinking about a very different monster than either had expected to meet on the streets of Ballard that night several months before.

Anyone that set foot in the Mystic would be caught between the devil and the deep blue sea, the décor gleaned from Morena's seafaring family lineage and the previous co-owner's fascination with the occult. What Morena had been left with after her uncle's divorce and the will was a hodgepodge of Ouija boards, rowboat oars, maps, sextants, crystals, and chandeliers hanging over little circle bar tables made from barrels. All Morena needed was a peg leg and a cutlass strapped around her hips and she'd be the saucy pirate wench. Sadly, Morena's simple tank top, black jeans, and combat boots didn't fit the bill, even if her Latina looks with long, flowing dark hair would hold up any such fantasy.

She sighed, leaning over the massive oak bar and flipping her phone open again for the third time this hour. No, no message yet. Thinking of fantasies, her mind was starting to run circles around her. She couldn't wait any longer. The sun was down. He should be up. The resident monster.

She straightened up, preparing to dial when the phone buzzed.

"Did you have the dream again?" she asked, not bothering with needless pleasantries.

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As she paused to listen, she noticed Camille perk up, as if the girl knew that her savior from months ago was on the phone. Morena dropped her eyes, trying to shake away the thought. That couldn't be true. Her hand gripped the edge of the bar. Or could it?

"Hey, you hungry?" After his noncommittal utterance, she added, "Come by the bar." When he didn't respond at all, she continued, "Please. I've a couple of candidates. They're checked out...safe...legal."

She looked up to the commotion as Camille tried to get out of the booth, the other Goths heckling and pestering her. The girl smacked a hand or two away before getting free. It was uncanny how as Morena was offering up some candidates, Camille, who's single-minded interest of late was getting to know her savior better, would be making her way across the bar.

Morena bit her lip, her brows lowering.

"No, I need to hunt," came the response. Then the phone went click.

Not knowing exactly what that meant, she flipped the phone shut just as Camille reached the bar. Miffed, concerned, suspicious, Morena realized there was nothing worse for her than being jealous on top of all those things. She shooed the thought away.

Camille, twenty-one, fresh faced, willowy with her hemp bag, tie-dyed peasant skirt and Tarot cards, smiled a perfectly innocent and perfectly hopeful smile.

Morena punched that green-eyed monster right in the maw and drop-kicked it back into the depths of her subconscious.

"Hey, Morena."

Morena forced a friendly smile, the kind she used when on duty at an embassy in a country that would just as soon kick her American ass into a dungeon as have her protecting her capitalistic embassy staff.

"Hey, Camille." But protection won out. "Those guys giving you any trouble."

Camille scrunched up her brows before noticing the path of Morena's glare. "Oh, those guys. No way. They're just messing around. Besides, they all want readings during the next full moon. They live for the Freak show!"

Morena had to find something to do with her hands so she grabbed a bar rag and began to buff the polish off the bar. "Seems like you could find better friends than that."

Camille flashed her smile again. "Yeah, kinda what I wanted to talk to you about. Soooo...?"

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Morena was beginning to regret she'd ever let her guard down and confided in Camille. But after what they had been through together and what they both had seen that night in the dark alley, she couldn't fathom carrying that burden all alone. The man that had appeared out of the darkness and assisted Morena in beating back a couple of drugged up dealers that had pounced upon Camille one night leaving from a Tarot reading had proven himself to be a very different kind of monster. And Morena knew she had no weapons against what he was doing to her head not to mention to her in his bed.

She sighed again, stopping her needless busywork. "So tell me again how you know about this supposed Vampire Psychologist?"

Camille smiled broadly and told her the tale of the business card again.

If she couldn't fight him, maybe she could fight for him.

Business Cards and Other Sundry

I found my room at the Bellevue Hyatt, in a word, refined which was in complete contrast with the view afforded by the 21st floor. Outside, it appeared the entire heart of the city was set upon by metal cranes of orange and blue, construction underway at various sites, all climbing into the sky. But from here, with a clear sky, I could look west and make out Downtown Seattle, as if it was what Bellevue Washington aspired to be.

My initial meeting with new client, Skovajsa, was set up for the following night but not without revealing a slight oversight. Apparently, our vampire friend preferred to meet in Downtown Seattle, not an address in keeping with my original referral. Somehow, though, I suspect the mix-up would prove auspicious.

I managed to get another referral, from someone who seemingly snagged one of my new business cards from the production floor of the printer. This one was fascinating: a vampire that dreams. This must be the first time in all my lifetimes I'd heard of that. And then another strange twist...it was his lady friend that contacted me. She didn't want to tell me any more details than that but she seemed quite keen to meet up ASAP. Well, when in Rome. I set up a coffee talk to meet, just in case the night meeting with Skovajsa ran late. Meeting in the daylight for a consult. Yeah, first time for everything.

Just to be safe, I would get my Belgian contact to run a background check. I liked to call him Hercule, so good was he at getting blood from a stone even with the older more obscure requests. Bruno wouldn't mind, considering his forte was looking through decades of artifacts, old birth registers, civil filings, death certificates, and the like. I fired off a quick email to get the ball rolling since he was nine hours ahead.

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After that, I checked through the local papers online, looking and finding some potential vamp signs, but only within the last few months. My guess was a new vamp influence in the area. Maybe one of these two clients was responsible for it. Once I sized them up and categorized them, I'd have a lot of answers. I'd never handled two vampire consultations before but I reminded myself...things happen in due time.

Holding up one of the new business cards from the box of one hundred, I smiled in approval. The logo was elegant, simple, and hidden. The word *Vampire* had been printed using a special ink that only showed in black light. It was a spectrum that vampires could see without the special effects. I needed to update my Facebook page with the basic logo, realizing that there was really no way to duplicate the effect on the web. I also need to add Lyle's last recommendation. I was considering a Twitter account as well, however dreading it. Even though I was getting more interest through the Facebook site and the blog, this new technology confounded me. To a certain extent, I didn't like it. I preferred the feel of paper and vellum under the curve of my hand, old fashioned fountain pen to tablet PC.

My eyes fell upon my old fashioned trunk where I kept such precious and ancient things.

No, I needed to be effective in this modern world. I needed to find an assistant, someone who got this techie stuff so I could have the Internet without wasting my time on it. It was about history for me, not technology.

Vampire Factbook excerpt: Six Degrees of Influence

While variations have been recorded within the types (see Chapter 1: I am Vampire), there are standard ways vampires effect a human's behavior. The ability to influence humans toward the vampire's wishes can often mark the difference between a long preternatural life and a quick death by stake or burning. Considering the complex world in which vampire- human relationships exist (prey, partner or predator), vampires often use whatever influence abilities they possess without conscious thought or practice. Although these abilities can be honed and skillfully applied, vampires lack the tutelage in most respects to excel past the limitations of their own necessitated experiences.

Overall, influence can be measured by the degree of control over the human and the effort involved which can work to either attract or repel depending on the aims of the vampire.

Cloud - Clouding is the simplest and weakest of influences, allowing the vampire to mask his presence and guide the human toward or away from the vampire without the human's awareness. Vampires have an inherent polarity that as they mature, they need

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to gain more control over to meet their needs. Negative vampires tend to cause general discomfort in surrounding humans, a feeling of ill ease that most humans will move away from. This serves as a defensive mechanism, especially for younger vampires who are still learning to control their needs and abilities. Positive vampires tend to attract human attention wherever they go. Fewer positive vampires survive to maturity because of this but have been observed to develop stronger powers of influencing humans because of this underlying attraction.

Charm - Charm, while mostly associated with attracting humans, can be used either way, however the influence is actively asserted. Charm can be used to change the attitudes of a human to be more amenable to the vampire. #Charm includes very simple enforcement of the vampire's will upon the human and, in measured doses, has no lasting effect on the individual human. It is often used in conjunction with Clouding to influence a human to forget the encounter in which the charm occurred. For example, a vampire might charm prey to leave a public place to walk home alone and cloud them to not remember the conversation at all. Charm almost always involves vocal engagement to activate, unlike Clouding which is an inherent state of the vampire's being.

Persuasion - Persuasion, while more active than charm, greatly depends on the human's pliability to the request or suggestion. It often involves influencing the human to some action that might at first seem unpleasant but upon further consideration, seems agreeable as it might make some favorable end. It's analogous to changing a person's opinion on a subject by convincing them they'd always thought that way or that it was their idea. #Because persuasion involves knowledge of the human's attitudes, it typically involves more of the vampire's sensory abilities (see Chapter 2: Nature of the Beast) however still leaves no lasting mark beyond the encounter.

Entrance - Entrancing begins a quickly accelerating process of binding a human to a particular vampire. Entrancing first involves creating a state of deep connection whether mental, emotional, or physical with the human in order to elicit their behavior in exchange for pleasing the vampire. In other words, the vampire enraptures (syn) the human by making them a willing servant and then giving them some task to do for reinforcement, usually in the form of physical or emotional closeness with the vampire if positive and escape from bodily harm or mental torture if negative. This two step process is exactly the same as with Spellbinding however, in this case, leaves a

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transient tie in the human. Depending on the pliability of the human and the strength at which they have been entranced, this state can last for weeks or months but usually no more than a season.

Spellbind - Unlike Entrancing, the effects of Spellbinding a human are permanent unless released by the vampire* but unlike first thought, spellbinding does not produce a completely compliant human. The increased awareness of most humans under spellbinding can lead to erratic behaviors and agitation as the human tries to show the vampire their devotion. Vampires have often had human cohorts (see Chapter 3: Favor of the Beast) slain by spellbound followers in fits of jealous rage. Spellbinding requires vigilance on the part of the vampire to protect both vampire and human from the worst possible fallout of spellbinding, wrecking. However, a properly managed spellbound companion can prove a highly effective daytime steward for the vampire. Most adult vampires have a single spellbound companion (aka devotee) while elder vampires and ancients, because of their abilities, can easily manage many devotees.

Wreck - Wrecking involves the vampire exerting so much force of will on the human that the human either emotionally or mentally breaks. This can also happen from circumstances on a devotee when the stress of trying to please escalates into overwhelming need and jealousy. Wrecked individuals can very rarely be rehabilitated as the tie to the vampire remains intact while their will and/or mind, both necessary for any release, has been broken. Contrary to popular myth, wrecking humans happens more out of inexperience than intention but some vampires have been observed to prefer this method of trapping humans before feeding, gaining satisfaction from the process. Whether learned or inherited, it is preferred by the most dangerous vampires, the Carpathians, but occasionally practiced by other types. Jiang Shi have also been known to prefer wrecking when the life essence of a human prey could not be successfully absorbed.

It is not quite understood whether or not vampires can also be affected by these influences. Vampires are often born with an existing tie to another vampire, their maker. Further, the blood tie may in fact usurp any other influence as it shares the vampire's powers with its offspring. This may offer continual protection against any other influence being exerted on them by other vampires. Because vampires tend to live isolated with no organization (unlike werewolves), studying vampire interactions becomes difficult. It is hard to know how much of the interplay between random

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vampire encounters evolves from vampire-human influencing versus their own complicated human-into-vampire emotional journeys.

*note: One alleged case of vampire “exorcism” is known but the details are as of yet undocumented as the human died shortly afterwards in childbirth.

Case Notes #13 – Skovajsa: First Interview

Sitting at the bar waiting: Weds night, Ladies Ladies Night at the EO Bar, DJ stage somewhat out of space and time for the “library chic” of the rest of the hotel lobby. Strange crowd includes our lesbian friends here supporting their girl, suits sizing up their newly introduced female companions in overly short, overly tight attire, the odd couple enjoying a chat over cocktails in window booths overlooking the balmy night.

Enter Vampire Skovajsa. Overlarge black leather jacket, black slacks, dark leather shoes. Dark hair, dark eyes, first guess Greek or Slavic. He senses for a moment, not sure if it's for prey or me. (Maybe me in both cases?) Warm night for that jacket, must not have fed recently. Somewhat dated look completely overwhelmed by lack of movement. Tightly controlled but still unable (unwilling?) to keep his negative energies from causing the bartender to flinch when he leans across the bar. Handles that effortlessly as he charms the bartender over to ask for me.

Moment of decision: my sense for vampires not liking this so far, his pick of locale, his utter discord with it. Something tells me this guy is trying to impress with his first date selection. But I should ride it out. He seems harmless enough. For now.

I slide my card to him at the bar, smile to myself. Am I just another female companion being paid for my services here tonight? Hand in my jacket taps the ‘record’ button.

He ignores normal introductions: “Aren’t you going to suggest we retire to a more, um, private locale?” voice thick with accent. He’s learned English very recently or acting it up that way. “That depends, Mr. Sko...” “Just Skovajsa.” “Yes, well, Skovajsa, that depends on what you expect me to do for you.” Carefully regards me. “You are the, um, psychologist. You tell me.” “That’s not how this works. You have to want my help. If you don’t have a specific reason you called, then I think we’re done here.” I give him a moment. He’s doing what I call Computing. Some vamps lose a lot of their emotional base when they are turned; they can have trouble reading humans because of it. They try to mimic what they think the human reaction should be.

I ease off the bar stool, start to move past him. He takes my arm, not with force I note, “Wait. Please. Sit.” I resume my seat, thankful. At least seated, I don’t have to crane my neck to keep eye contact. “So?” He turns his head full towards me and I know it’s coming before he even speaks. Eyes widen, voice guttural with what can best be described as a reverb effect to it:

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"Don't you want to be alone with me?"

Ah, vampires. Sometimes you can set your watch by their moves. Especially an uncomfortable one. This wasn't to the level of entrancing but a strong attempt at persuasion for sure. And using Vox Compulsum, "the Compelling Voice." That's not nice. *"I think you want to go with me."* "I bet that works on lots of the ladies." He blinks, surprised. Yeah, I can't help it if I always enjoy this moment. It reaffirms everything I've been through and maybe forgives some of what I've done. Being immune to most vampire powers means being in a position to cut to the chase. "You're not afraid of me...Why then did you sit back down? "I like to wait for the punch line." I tap my card on the bar. "Keep the card. When you think of a reason to talk, we can try again." I leave him standing there, nonplussed. Catch a cab immediately and leave the area, heading back over the 520 bridge. I've got the recording, bartender should call me for the end credits, then I'll record my observations. For now, I just want to absorb.

****Excerpt from "Local Live" filming on location, EO bar**

timestamp 07/15/09 22:32:09

Tall man, black jacket, talking to middle-aged woman at end of the bar. She slips him a card, leaves. Bartender approaches end of bar, gets waved away, keeps eye on Black Jacket.

Black Jacket, turns suddenly to leave, bumps into young, tight-fitted, leggy blonde. She angrily spats at him. He continues to block her path. She says something else, still angry. He leans over her. She visible quakes, fear first then seems to relax as he speaks. She slowly raises her head to look up at him directly. He speaks again, taking her arm. Her face shows rapt interest and she nods.

He looks up past her. Three other similarly clad young women are just coming in.

He says something else to her. She turns and waves her friends over, excited. At first, they approach cautiously but within a few moments, he has his arms around the group of women who are embracing him back. They leave frame, heading towards hotel elevators.

Case #13 – Skovajsa: First Impressions

Reason one out of, oh, I don't know, about one hundred, why I always conduct my first meeting with a client in a very public place: You just never know what you're getting into. Skovajsa. One name, like Cher or Sting. The Carpathian vampires are still the most dangerous. Full of power, hunted for centuries almost to extinction. Terrified of the world and ready at any moment to try and conquer it. Not the sort of vampire I would ever expect to call for my services.

He's a tricky read: emotionally disheveled, almost childlike in his discomfiture, like an adolescent trying to fill adult shoes. Like Bela Lugosi's shoes. It's almost sweet. But then, all that economy of

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emotion and movement often covers ill intentions. It is like a first date; you get to see the persona and if it does its job, if it's intriguing enough, you might want to see more, to try to tell what's fact versus façade. I admit I'm intrigued. 1100 miles is a long way to go for a five minute talk. He'll call. He hasn't figured me out yet. And he wants something. That much is clear.

Of course, it coulda been worse. He could actually have been charming or cute.

Get back to the hotel# and up to my room, my groceries have been delivered. Empty out the bag just to check. A lemon rolls out of its mesh bag.

sigh No lemons for you, Mr. One Named Wonder. Bartender hasn't called me back. Will try him tomorrow. He might've gotten busy. Would've thought that \$100 would have kept me on his to-do list.

Now here comes the strange part. I'm looking out the window, there's a moon, and honestly, I'm missing simpler times. Missing someone to get to know me. Missing an adult conversation. Missing...flirting... So stupid. If it isn't in my cards, it just isn't and nothing on Earth can change that.

THUMP! Goes my trunk. Archaic, I know, to travel with one but I need my references. I open it up, take out the Book. Give it a rub. Ok yeah I talk to it when I'm morosely lonely.

"Getting a little restless, eh? Been a long time since you've stirred. You seem to like Seattle?"

It doesn't actually talk back. Ever.

I set it on the desk, move to the bed to unpack some things. Have a sudden feeling that somebody just walked over my grave.

The book's cover knocks over and the pages start to flip on their own. Ok, when I moved the book from my carry-on upon landing in Seattle, it moved on me. This? This hasn't happened in my recollection in over a century.

The book falls over onto the floor with a thud. I go pick it up, careful to note the page. It's one of the blank pages towards the back of the book, the edges well worn. I flip back a page and land on the Burim twins.

"Lucienne and Maurice Burim – My brave charges, how can I write of you and your bravery, so young when turned, without cursing the heavens for damning your souls to this world of pain and suffering forever."

Heartbreaking but no, not them. This page. I've touched this page many times before but it won't give up its secrets so easily. Sometimes I forget that the magic of this book is all its own. I can't quite remember who gave it to me, which lifetime, only that I have ever since used it to record the people I have met in my lives. And every new life, with every new awakening, I find the book again and it

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shares with me those that I have met before. Only this lifetime, ever since stumbling upon it 3 years ago, it has been mostly silent.

Until now. And yet, it's not ready to tell me what it wants me to know. Crazy.

Hope to hear back soon from Bruno. Already, Seattle is becoming more than I bargained for. Better get some shut eye. I have a real meetup with a real adult (vampire cohort but still adult human) early morning. Something about vampire dreams.

DJB: Memoirs, Volume 3: The Thief

Another night, more unease. I'm not even sure that's the right word for it. I'm sure the dreams are mostly to blame. I called Morena when I woke; she had willing victims for me. But I wanted to hunt. I needed to. Been awhile. And I've been avoiding her. She's been sensing my unease and I can't have that. She's too new at this.

So I went out into the night. Bellevue. Still wondering what keeps me here. Ballard made more sense. This place is half ghost town, half development project. Cranes litter the skyline. They make good vantage points for the flight enabled. But this night, I want to walk. It's balmy but cooled quickly. I pass by the watering holes for locals escaping miserable jobs, travelers looking for companionship or entertainment (hopefully in a soft, willing package), and strangely, the shopping throngs. The mall is close to my condo. I always felt it gave me some options.

I used to frequent the bars most nights before I'd met Morena. The bartenders liked how I attracted good tips for them and the waitress, well, they liked to tease. They perceived me as no threat. I'm naturally shy, quiet, but observant. They see me watching; they want to know more. Many a feeding started that way. But the scene became the same and the cranes started giving me headaches and I went back to Ballard for a spell. And that's where I met Morena. We saved a girl together. Well, I thought it only gentlemanly of me to let her think she'd helped. It was a mistake and I know it, bringing her into this world of mine. But she showed no fear, seemed to absorb the thought of me being a vampire like she'd known it right away. She just got what I was. It was refreshing. It was addicting. And now I feel guilty about it. She's beautiful, vibrant, vastly intelligent, and could wind up a serious threat. She's the first human in a long time that I've actually thought could end me. And I've brought her into this world.

I stopped at the alleyway behind the hotel. There's a man riffling through the garbage. I took in a breath, feel the unspeakable odors of the human refuse enter into me, but underneath it, clean washed skin. The slightest hint of generic brand soap. Dandruff shampoo. Underarm deodorant. I headed down the alleyway in a flash, standing just behind the man before he knows. He couldn't hear me or see me yet. He climbed down from the waste container, hand full of soiled receipts, tossed bills. He was a credit card thief. Maybe identity theft. There's a special hell in the vampire world for humans who steal identities.

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I grabbed him, relishing in that moment the release of the pent up energy. I accidentally broke his arm when bending his arms back after he tried to hit me. I took no effort to mask my intentions; my intention was to terrorize him, to feel like Vampire. I drained him enough so he'd pass out. But just before, I held him up, extended my fangs completely, darkened my face. Then I threw him against the waste container. Kicked him where he fell.

Then I grabbed his attention and wouldn't let him look away.

"You'll live to forget."

They come mostly at night...mostly

Checked mail, no answer from Bruno, tried calling bartender with no answer so left vague voice mail. Seem to recall a video tapping at the club, resolve to look that up. Spend an hour updating FB with some excerpts from the Factbook on influencing since it's in my mind. It's not that I'm avoiding sleep...it's just not coming.

After a few years of seeing clients at all hours of the night, sleeping at night feels like a wasted opportunity. But meeting early tomorrow, 9AM, to see to this other lead. But now, it's probably too late to take a sleeping pill. And my head is reeling with memories.

Part of the trouble with remembering past lives is that they creep in when you're most vulnerable. For me, that's the night mostly. Which is why I don't mind working in the evenings. I actually prefer it. By day, I'm so tired that I crash and when I awaken, there's light and movement and all the sights and sounds of a life in full view that distracts me beautifully. I've been on this quest, perhaps quixotic, so many lifetimes that my nights are filled with memories of vampires. Ones I couldn't help, ones that hunted me, ones that even killed me...I've had so few successes. But my failures, they are grand indeed.

But then, there are moments. Like the Burim twins. I protected them for a spell. Made vampires by mistake at 13. Hired as a governess, I was Auntie to them. When I had finally revealed that I knew their horrible secret, I had been able to help them find a way to not take up the vampire life, to avoid it and yet survive. They never drank human blood. That seemed key to keep them from growing too strong, for keeping their powers undercover. And using the techniques I had through lifetimes to record my work, save it away, entrusted to a guardian who would continue the line until I surfaced again, we were able to set up familial guardians for the twins. So they might never be alone, unprotected.

In honesty, I'd lost track of them after that one lifetime. I have tried off and on to find out what happened to them, so many things could have. But this lifetime is too new and the memories sometimes fade into fog if I try too hard to remember. It's better to let them coalesce on their own.

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I get up to go call in my last stand: melatonin. It usually eases me to sleep. And sometimes, the best remedy for the night is to pass through it unknowingly.

The Only Good News is No News

From: bruno bonne (brunbon@unilu.ch)
Date: Tues, 14 Jul 2009
To: vampironyis@live.com

Good news and bad news. Bad first, I haven't been able to find anything on your 'skovajsa' except the translation: Hide Yourself. Not getting a good feeling about that. Made my beard stand straight up. Please take precautions if this is another fanger.

Good news: The Memento is meant to stir if you cross paths with someone you've recorded before. If I'm understanding the guardian notes I've collected so far, it activated the moment you came back in touch with it in this lifetime. Heh, should be interesting to see what souls from former lives you run into. Isn't it often said you keep running into the same people over and over again? Heh, i get that feeling from my landlady...think she might have been a guard when I was wrongfully imprisoned. ha! she tortures me the first of every month!

Seriously, the book moving on its own? I only have the one life and I don't recall it doing that so it must be working out an old soul of your acquaintance. Hopefully friendly. What was the name of that last fanger you dealt with? Valkyrie or something? Yeah hoping not him. Your drawing on his page in the book scares me.

I'll see if there's anything else on the guardian tablet. After I take my antihistamine. It's awfully drafty and dusty up there in the belfry. why in god's name did your last self decide to leave the tablet there? I can't figure out a way to get it out to protect it! Or read it even. Damn nuisance!

-bb

Bruno Bonne Kasernenplatz 6 Postfach 74553 6999 Luzern 9 Universitat
Luzern

Date: Thurs, 2 Jul 2009
From: vampironyis@live.com
Subject: name check
To: brunbon@unilu.ch

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Bruno – another name to check: Skovajsa. I know, not much to go on but you've had worse.

Also, the book stirred. Flipped open on the desk to a blank page towards the back of the book. Any ideas?

sophie

Case #13 – 5: Coffee talk

Rough night but finally got a few hours sleep. I thought Seattle was supposed to be temperate, cool, rainy, wet. Not ungodly hot. At least the room has air conditioning but it's a shock to walk outside at 8am and have it be 80 degrees in the Pacific Northwest.

I arrive at the Starbucks across from my hotel for my meeting early. Again, part of sizing someone up is how they enter. In this case, I choose the spot out of convenience to me. Meeting a vampire's human followers is always a tricky business. Normally, I treat them exactly like the vampire, many of the master's traits rub off on them. And personalities need to mesh. You can tell a lot by the company someone keeps, especially when that someone can cause you harm if they slip up.

I sit down with a local paper. Dead girl found in a dumpster. Small print today, will be no print by tomorrow. Meet is at 9am. Should be able to get to the Sports page.

At 8:43AM, a striking tall Latina with long raven hair, perfectly fitting t-shirt, jacket, and jeans, and no nonsense eyes that physically move two businessmen out of her way strides in. I think my jaw drops open. Morena Fourtenay doesn't just enter the room. She owns it. Hercule's dossier spoke a lot about her abilities with weapons and combat, her shining career, fast tracked then stonewalled, then reassignment and quitting. But this woman here looks anything like a quitter. And the dossier has no ranks for kick-ass-edness.

I toss a look around the room. Even the picture didn't do her justice. Must have been an official one from her embassy days, all prim and proper. Every able male in the room (and some of the women) are currently fighting a whole different morning woody. She cases the room while ordering her drink. But she's distracted, sloppy. I'm not trying to avoid her eye contact but her eyes brush by me.

Makes it easy as I wait for her to choose a spot then very casually move to exchange my paper on another open table, peruse it, then sit down right behind her. That's when I notice the fidgeting, her fingers drumming against table as she drains her venti in under five. I let her sweat it out for a few minutes. The drumming doesn't let up. And they say vampires are OCD. Just as I'm about to say something, I hear her sigh.

"This is a total waste of time."

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I lean back in my chair. "Coming from an ex-Secret Service agent, that's saying something."

She startles, grabs for the back of her jeans, under her jacket.

She's packing. In a coffee shop. Great. Great start.

"I take it that's not decaf you're drinking."

Morena Fourtenay pauses, hand to her back gripping that yet unseen gun, eyes narrowing. Well I thought it was funny.

"Who are you?" she asks.

I smile. She has set my business card in front of her on the table. I point.

"Ok, dumb question." She eases her hand off the gun, back to the table. "Just how long have you been here?"

"The more interesting question is why are you here." And why bring a gun to a coffee shop on a hot day?

She assesses me. I stand up and move over to her table. Put out my hand.

"Sophie Quinn."

She takes a moment. I can see the wheels turning in her head. This is a mistake, she thinks. He's going to kill her for this. Maybe literally kill her for this. What business is it of hers what he does?

She shakes my hand finally. As she starts to introduce herself, I put up a hand.

"Please. I always check my referrals. May I sit down?"

"Sure."

I sit. I wait. Not much of a talker, this girl.

"Well, the coffee is good here but I imagine you had something on your mind when you contacted me."

She starts to tell me about the dreams, no "I met Vampire X when..." which is patently interesting. Just He. Yeah, you heard that. In CAPS.

"Ever since the dreams started, he's been different. Almost as if..as if he's afraid."

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“How long has this been?”

“About a week or so.”

“Hmm. Vamps and sunshine don’t mix that well, at least not directly. I’ve never heard of a dreaming vampire either.”

“But what does it mean?”

“Do you know how old He is?” I suppose if it isn’t important for me to have his name yet, so be it.

Morena sits back, folds her arms.

“We, uh, haven’t talked about that really.”

“Hm.”

“What does that Hm mean?”

“You’ve only been with him a few months, eh?”

“How did-?”

“Vamps are notoriously long-winded once they break the four month window. Well, allowing for variation. After that, you’ll be begging him to shut up.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You know how your great uncle Charlie used to trap you and tell you “Well, in my day” stories?”

“Yeah?”

“Imagine hundreds of years’ worth of those stories.”

“Oh.”

“Unfortunately, that makes this whole thing difficult.”

“How do you mean?”

“Vamps don’t trust easily. And because they’re so long lived, a few months is just a blink of the eye to them. No matter how good you think your relationship is, telling his secret to another human is tantamount to betrayal.”

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“But I’m trying to help him.”

“You really are new to this, aren’t you?” It’s not her fault, really. I’ve had lifetimes with these creatures to know about them. She probably has gotten swept up in the danger and romance of it. Look at the TV, the bookstore, even our teenagers are being led to believe that vampires are these romantic, even glowing beings that when they meet just the right woman...ur...human, they can be tamed. They’re just misunderstood. Well, they are. More so now than ever.

“A few words of advice, Morena. He’s a big vampire, he can take care of himself.”

She’s not convinced. Well now this must be a first. A human woman thinking she knows better than a hundreds of years old vampire. I thought I’d cornered the market on that. Which is why I feel sorry for her. She’s treating him like just some guy. She needs to know a lot more things before she could think like that safely. Most vampires, by virtue of their sheer existence, can take care of themselves. But there’s always something.

“How do you know that? Maybe he’s young and foolish.”

I laugh. Can’t help myself. She really wants to control this.

“What?”

“Vamps may be paranoid even in the best of times but they are insanely good judges of character. And there’s no way a vamp younger than 300 would attract a....friend such as yourself.”

“Why? What’s wrong with me?”

Oh brother. “Look. You are well-trained, ex-military, ex-diplomatic service, card carrying member of the Kick-Ass-Cult. Of the Three, you’re either perfect predator or partner.”

“What does that mean?”

If I’d known I was going to be giving lessons, I would have brought my Factbook. Oh well. Better now, give her a chance to get away, then wait until she’s too far in it.

“I theorize that for every vampire, there are three perfect matches that they are karmically bound to. Prey, the one they hunt. Predator, the one that hunts them. And Partner. That one’s kinda obvious. If you were Prey, you wouldn’t be walking around.”

This doesn’t help her and after thinking about the fact I just suggested she’s karmically bound to this HE, I realize my mistake. Time to take it back a notch.

“Look, you might not be any of those things to..him. I guess what I’m saying is that vampires don’t leave threats around. You’re a powerful woman and there’s obviously some...uh, attraction there.”

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Yeah, that clears it all up. Is this when I make it worse and tell her that a lot of vamps just attract lookers so they can feast on pretty meat? She's walking around so blind I'm beginning to think this *he is* the wrong sort, that he's messing with her and, when she figures that out and tries to kill him, he'll enjoy it and then end her.

"You saying he's going to turn me?"

"Contrary to movie and novel folklore, vampires tend to turn humans out of accident more than intent. They turn a human that they are compatible with and they ruin a safe and reliable food source. They also threaten their hunting grounds with yet another mouth to feed." Not to mention increase the UVA in the area. Police blotter around here already high on that scale.

"Ok you've made your point. You sound like an expert. But how do I know for sure?"

"Well, vamps hate references so unfortunately, you're going to have to let your night friend decide. That is, if you're still interested."

"No references? What kind of psychologist does that make you?"

"The reliable kind. The trustworthy kind. Look I'm in town because another powerful vampire wanted to see me. Beyond telling you that, you're just going to have to decide who you trust the most: me, yourself, or your Nightwalker. But do me a favor, if you want us to meet, please come up with a reasonable cover so that he won't kill me on sight."

"He's not like that."

"Says you and every other dog owner. *My dog won't bite.* I may know I'm destined to be back in this world again but I kinda like my here and now."

We discuss meet-ups. I have to get back to her because I'm still waiting for Skovajsa to rear his head again. I mumble something about never handling two cases together.

"Then why did you agree to meet me?" she asks testily.

Because I get sick of talking to the undead. Because I need to keep busy, the memories have been bad lately. Growing restless in my head for a week or so.

"Honestly, I don't know. It sounded urgent. But my other case is difficult, a Carpathian."

She raises a perfectly arched eyebrow. "I have no idea what that means."

"Cripes, you really are a rookie! We need to learn you up if you're going hang with the fang. By the way, don't mention anything to your vampy friend about the Carpathian. Some vamps get pissy about...other vamps. And work on your plan, we need to keep it honest and real."

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I leave her with that, suddenly need to get out of there. I stumble into oppressive morning heat and grab for my amulet. She's so green, I shouldn't let her plan anything. But for now, I head back to my room. I'm going to need an office stat, especially if I intend to try and manage two vampires at once.

No point in reminding myself that in 13 lifetimes, I'd never even thought to do that outside of a familial group of vamps (aka horror). And as I check my mail and see a note from Skovajsa asking to meet Friday night, there really is no point at all reminding myself how that horror session ended.

Vampire Factbook: Glossary excerpt

Jugular Response: Like the patellar reflex in humans. Vampires are particularly vulnerable at the neck and usually respond in either avoidance or aggression with attempts to touch them there. A rough scale of 0 - 5 may indicate overall inherent aggression, with 0 being no reaction at all and 5 being a kill response. Test still in research stages due to seriousness of level 5 response.

.....

Perfects: Three potential types that throughout the vampire's lifetime are perfectly fitted and karmically bound to fulfill a certain role.

Prey - A human that the vampire will risk anything, including death, to kill. This could be to settle an old score from their human lifetime. This is unusually characterized by the vampires complete refusal to feed from that human, even if injured, much like lions choosing to kill but not eat hyenas.

Predator - A human who will stop at nothing to destroy the vampire, so much so that the vampire may actually fear them on a subsequent reintroduction. Humans that are successful at vanquishing the vampire oftentimes become professional vampire hunters. (See Emmerick)

Partner - A human that develops a permanent attachment to the vampire. Oftentimes romantic but not necessarily so. This bond does not last if the human is turned into a vampire.

.....

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UVA: Unidentified Vampire Activity, this is the score of an area's exposure to unexplained phenomenon caused by vampire activity. A high score indicates either an area rife with vampires or an area frequented by a young, inexperienced, crazed, or insane vampire. Current formula measures number of suspected activities per year with 0-4 being benign, 5-10 being of interest, 10 - 25 being suspect, and 25+ being overload.

My Inbox (or Lesser Forms of Evil)

Inbox: (preview pane)

From: skovajsa (skodark123@gmail.com)

Date: Wed 15 Jul 2009

To: vampironyis@live.com

Dinner. Friday. Met Grill, Downtown. 10PM. We can talk then.

-s

.....

From: bruno bonne(brunbon@unilu.ch)

Date: Wed, 15 Jul 2009

To: vampironyis@live.com

Is this thing on? Look, like I said couldn't find anything specific except that the book's enchantment is meant to manage memory. (guess that's why it's called The Memento, eh?)

Been thinking about that. Maybe when you cross paths with someone you've met before it stirs. Or maybe it's someone recorded in the book? Have you done that yet in this lifetime?

The guardian text specifically mentions that contacts need to be "faithfully scribed." I guess that means you should get writing.

let me know what's going on with Skovajsa. Kinda hoping nothing...nothing at all.

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-bb

.....

From: DWilson (dwils90@aol.com)

Date: Weds, 15 Jul 2009

To: vampironyis@live.com

Soph,

Thanks for the present, Jasmine loved the dress. She looks like a little princess in it. Can't get her to take it off; she's already gotten toothpaste on the ruffles.

She'd sure love to hear from you, even though she doesn't ask. Would be nice to hear from you once and awhile.

Sorry, she just misses you. A lot.

give us a call when you can.

-d

Into the Memento: Nick Fujiyami

I'm new at this writing thing. At least in the Memento. But a Skype to Bruno did two things: settled his worries, at least, for the moment and gave me a methodology that the guardian text describes to unlock the powers of the book. I laughed. Apparently I *AM* supposed to talk to it. Writing is encouraged, so I scribble a few details. But I'm supposed to tell the book a story.

I sit at the writing desk, make myself comfortable, take a breath to relax, remove all distractions, and focus. So here it goes:

I arrive at the Russian Deli about half past 12. I'm hard pressed to believe this building exists just a short 10 minute walk from my ritzy hotel. The lot beside it is an abandoned KFC surrounded by fencing. The cranes that dominate the Bellevue skyline must be looking to gobble this place up. Inside, only a few elderly customers shuffle about. An ancient Russian woman stands like the Iron Curtain behind the counter, arms folded, daring me to approach. I decide to take a seat just as the door opens and Nick Fujiyami bustles in. 5'11" maybe, thin, maybe 24 if a day, rumpled ill-fitting suit, spiky hair (seemingly not by choice). He's riffling through papers in a beat-up messenger bag, not paying attention as he knocks into a table, barely phased, then looks up distracted, seeing me.

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"Uh, you here to see the rental?"

I see the Buddhist talisman around his neck, wonder which parent gave him that. Look him in the face again. Or girlfriend.

I stand, put out my hand. "Sophie Quinn."

He rallies, firm hand shake. "Nick Fujiyami. Sorry I'm late."

"Better late than never."

"Uh, yeah, right. The entrance is through the back here." He walks past the deli counter ignoring The Curtain as he digs in his bag. I watch him disappear and return in a moment. "Um, that's not right." He keeps searching in the bag then finally grabs the lot, slaps it down on the nearest table and flips through until he picks one. "The space is upstairs. Five rooms. I coulda sworn the stairs up were in the back of the deli." His face screws up as he reads the paper. Upside down.

"A new property for you?"

"This isn't it. Crap! Excuse me." He approaches the counter and I take a breath as the Iron Curtain prepares to fall. But just as he starts to ask, she turns and disappears through a doorway. "What the?"

We can hear the staccato of rapid fire Russian as Iron Curtain returns with a teenager smacking her gum and looking utterly bored in a black hoodie. In August. "What do you want?" Her accent is barely there.

"Hi. I'm supposed to be showing the upstairs space. Can you help me out?"

"We're very busy today."

He tosses a look around. "Yeah I can see that. Look, I just need to find the door. I've got a key."

It's like watching chess. "I can't leave my grandmother alone. She's fragile."

I bite my lip so as not to laugh as Nick takes a long measured look at the Iron Curtain who suddenly gives him a gap-toothed smile.

"Fragile. Right. No worries, if you can point me in the right direction, I won't take any more of your time. I can see you're in your lunch hour rush ."

Indignantly: "We run a succesful business here."

"And I'm just trying to do some business for your landlord."

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It hits a nerve but unlike anything I think he intended. She visible cowers. "We've done nothing wrong. We've paid up." Even Grandma Iron notices the change and a quick exchange in Russian happens. My Russian is rusty so I miss it all.

"I'm sure you have, kid. Look, if you just point me toward the door, it saves me having to call the landlord and explaining how I lost a potential renter because you folks were too overwhelmed with patrons to help."

The teenager and the grandmother exchange glances and the girl nods. "I will show you." She comes around the counter and begins to walk toward the front door. Nick follows but stops next to me.

"Now, Ms. Quinn, if you'd follow me and my young associate here. Let's take a look, shall we?"

Time behind the Iron Curtain

It is observed several moments after the Russian teenager leads the young Asian man and the dark curly haired woman out of the deli that the old lady's other granddaughter comes in, wearing the same gold lame halter top and black sequined miniskirt from the night before. She is carrying her four inch gold heels and her black hose has gone missing somewhere. Her face is stained with day old mascara and fire engine red lipstick.

But she seems blissfully happy and carefree. It even takes her several minutes of her grandmother's rapid tirade to goad her into a rebuttal, her accent thicker than her younger sister's.

"You stupid stubborn old hag! We are in America now. And I'm 18. I can do whatever I want."

She strides past her angry grandmother to the back room, ignoring the bit about living under her roof, on and on. Usually that is enough for her grandmother to get it out of her system. But she pursues. But before her grandmother can reload, she brushes her long dirty blond locks aside and gently caresses the two puncture wounds at side of her neck.

"Oksana! You have been with him."

The defiant girl looks up as her grandmother stares in fear and starts to make the sign of the cross. She continues to make the sign, backing out of the room, shaking her head.

"Superstitious old bag." She looks at herself in the mirror, inspecting the wounds with red lacquered nails bitten to the quick. They are angry red, probably from a second helping. Maybe a third. She can't quite remember. Maybe the vodka. At least, she thinks she had had a drink.

But what does it matter? She's met her Prince Charming. And he drives a big shiny expensive car.

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She snickers. "What a good night." She starts to hum a tune as she sways in front of the mirror, admiring her neck. Soon it turns to laughter, even as she begins to scratch at her arms, suddenly itchy all over.

Into the Memento: Nick Part 2

So around the back of the building we went to find a steep rickety flight of stairs.

The girl points. "Up there. No one's there for months so don't blame us for the mess."

"Thanks, kid," Nick says.

She walks off, mumbling something that sounds a lot like "Jerk-off" in Russian. Why I remember that from my community college class, I'm not sure.

Clearing his throat, Nick draws my attention as he begins to read in a very pseudo-professional voice, "Ms. Quinn, this property is a pristine rental office, once home to Bellevue's first Hispanic dentist."

I can't help but smile. He's sure making a go of it. "Well, then, let's take a look."

Nick reads as he heads up, me following: "This property, a former dentist's office, offers 850 square feet of space. It opens with a spacious reception area, has 3 additional offices or patient rooms, a small break room, 3/4 bath, and storage/utility room. Lots of windows lend it a bright airy feeling. Recently updated HVAC."

We don't get far. At the landing, Nick struggles with a keyring full of keys, none of which seem to work. "Huh. I coulda sworn."

I fold my arms patiently.

Nick sighs. "Oh Hell."

He jimmies the door open with practiced skill then blithely ignored my raised eyebrow.

"Ah, well, obviously we'll need to get that lock fixed."

And in following with the rest of this appointment, the spacious office is revealed to be an utter dump, cluttered and dusty from disuse. The drop ceiling is missing tiles, the floor is strewn with abandoned boxes of assorted medical nonsense. A stack of unopened boxes of latex gloves sits in the middle of reception. Whatever windows there were are either boarded or dry-walled over. Convenient for me.

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"Ah, charming."

Nick checks the paper again. "I don't understand. It says the last occupant was six months ago. This place could be hiding Osama."

"Or Jimmy Hoffa."

"Who's that?"

I shake my head.

"I'm really sorry. If I'd known, I would have maybe had my brother come by and clean up. He owns a cleaning service. They do a really great job. The specialize in medical facilities and labs."

Despite the disarray, the place isn't that bad. The windows are mostly covered, the offices are of good size, and with this and the deli being the only occupants for the small building, no one to hear anything strange. I'm taking stock of any other updates when I hear Nick sigh.

"I've really screwed this up, haven't I?"

"How long have you been in training?"

"About 3 weeks. This is only my second showing."

"And the first?"

"Was much nicer than this. It was a slam dunk."

I smile.

"You don't believe me. How could you? I'm wearing this stupid suit because the cleaners screwed up my order, my boss's jackhole manager hands me a stack of day-old printouts and tells me to go run up some business while my boss is out sick. I must look and sound pretty pathetic."

I decide to let him roll on in his pity party.

"Here's the deal. There's, like, a million years of cobwebs in here and I wouldn't doubt Aragog is lurking somewhere in the back. With the deli downstairs, I guarantee it'll smell like borscht at all hours and from the look of it, they cater down to the locals. I swear I thought to check for missing cat signs when I parked. But I can get my brother to come in and get this place so clean you could make microchips off the floor. All for a low price. And the windows, well, I'll figure something out."

"Sounds like a lot of effort for you personally."

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"I really need a break."

"Tell you what. How much do you make at this job?"

"Not nearly enough."

"Saving up for something special?"

I get the wary look from him. "Yeah, art school."

"Hmm, you get me this property for four months no strings and all the other things you already said, ready by end of day Monday, and I'll pay you 800 a week to manage the office for me while I'm in town. I'll pay you a flat two grand on signing as an advance."

"Are you serious?"

"Sorry it's not a longer arrangement but I tend to move a lot. I think that should go quite a ways toward...uh, art school, was it?"

"Culinary school, really."

"Ah."

"What are you, the mafia? Drug dealer?"

"Yeah, me and Jimmy Hoffa."

"Huh?"

"No. I offer specialized counseling to folks kinda on the fringe. And for now, until we have a deal, that's all I'll say."

Then his look turns suspicious. "Why me?"

"Because you're a solver. You know how to best maneuver in uncomfortable situations to get a favorable outcome using more finesse than force."

"We speaking strictly about the door? Cause I'm not a thief or anything."

I laugh. "No. And I like you. I just get this really strong sense we're meant to be friends."

"Uh, yeah, ok. Um. I really don't think I'm exactly what you're looking for, Ms. Quinn."

"Nick, wasn't it?"

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“Yeah.”

“I’m not hitting on you.”

“Uh, ok. Sorry. Not sure why I thought that. I mean, of course you’re not, I mean. You don’t exactly scream ‘cougar.’ Trust me, I’ve seen my share over at Jerry’s some nights.”

“Waiter by night?”

“Bartender.”

“Well, you’re full of useful talents.”

“Um, ok.”

“Besides, those of us of the faith have to keep an eye out for opportunities to put others on the path.”

I point to his talisman. Someone has chosen Dharma for him.

“Huh? Oh this. I’m not sure how much I still believe. Nirvana seems such a long way away from Seattle.”

I smirk.

“Ok, that sounded really stupid. I meant about believing.”

“Well, Nick Fujiyami, you see there, I might be able to help you out.”

The First Mark

I open my eyes and somehow, I have rendered a perfect replica on the page of Nick’s talisman. Surprising as I don’t remember being able to draw even stick figures well. I finger my own amulet, the infinity symbol held tightly in place over my throat by old worked leather straps. Given to me as a ward against vamps, it has no special abilities. Other than granting me the occasional solace.

The exercise of entering Nick into the book has sapped me and I feel completely drained. The feeling is welcome. Along with excess energy is gone the worry, the doubt, the fear, the regret, and the guilt. Not even the shred of karmic resistance remains. I push the book away. It is a vampire of sorts. It’s stealing my memories. Or making copies, rather, so that I might connect back lifetime over lifetime to what I had been before.

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I check the time. 10:11 PM. After meeting with Morena, then finding the office space and meeting with Nick, running errands, checking out that dumpster for any more UVA, and doing a haul through the library for any further vamp sign, I have no further work. I contemplate a quick email to my professor and guru Dr. Kaga. Something is working its way out. But the fatigue wins out and I make my way to the bed. Nothing to do this night but sleep.

I pass the window, see the new construction across the street, its cranes lit up in the darkness. Throughout my traveling, I've never seen a place in such a hurried state of decay and rebirth, struggling to craft steel and shine while older times crumble slowly beneath it. It feels all apropos, like the book coming awake after so many years.

Dinner tomorrow night with Skovajsa. Well, meeting anyways. What does a vampire do in a steakhouse?

And the next night, the mysterious vampire dreamer. I do indeed wonder, my Shakespeare ringing in my muted head: *What dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil must give us pause?*

[fbook.com/vamppsycho](https://www.facebook.com/vamppsycho)

Search: vampire age

Results: [...] } *vampire age* but a vampire's abilities are more a product of his maker rather than age. However, age does speak to the maturity of the vampire, the refinement in use of his abilities, and control over the impulses to feed. Vampires begin to mature once they are made but at a much slower rate than humans. Vampires newly made up to approximately one hundred years old are considered *youths, adolescence* being between 80 and 100 years old.

Adult vampires are classified between one hundred and one thousand years old. Vampires that have survived to be around 800 yrs old are considered *elders* until they reach the next phase of maturity. Vampires older than one thousand years old are referred to as *ancient* and are extremely rare.

While a vampire's body ages so slowly as to be preserved, his mind is subject to the ravages of time. Few vampires survive long enough to be considered ancient and often

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become dangerous and unpredictable as their minds struggle to control the derth of memories that no longer have clear connection to their current reality.[...]

Search: ancient vampires

Results: [...] {The mind of the vampire is subject to all the extraordinary senses the vampire possesses. Because of this increased awareness and capacities of their minds, vampires often quickly become savants, masters of any talent they lend their time to. But as they age, the minute details of hundreds of years of memories begin to erode their sense of currency, in some cases causing the vampires to become withdrawn into a mental world hard to penetrate. Comatose ancients often perish from starvation.

In other cases, the vampires act out their frustration of not being able to tell the current time from the myriad of lives they have lived in the past. As vampires best mechanism of folding through centuries is to steal identities, as *ancients*, the identities become confused and hard to separate, resulting in schizophrenia and sometimes psychosis. These vampires usually begin to threaten the societies in which they have hidden, forcing humans or other supernatural creatures to attack and kill them.

In the few documented cases of this, werewolves have often surfaced as leading excursions to eradicate the errant vampire, further perpetuating the hostilities between these two.[...]

Search: vampire sun

Results: [...] { not all vampires are immediately endangered by the *sun*. Of the types of vampires, blood vampires all have a high sensitivity to solar light in common, regardless of their area of origin. Most blood vampires will burst into flames with any exposure, ultimately turning to ash from prolonged exposure. How much sun scorching can be repaired by the vampire depends on the horror strain to which they belong. [...]

Search: horror

Results: [...] { A *horror* is a familial group of vampires, usually made up of a maker and his direct progeny, sometimes including extended progeny. The term is also used to describe a familial line of vampires. As vampire powers are strictly determined from

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a maker's abilities, identifying the familial line or horror strain can determine what abilities the vampire has. While it has been noted that a vampire's abilities can grow in strength from consuming large quantities, usually a heart cycle, of a fellow vampire's blood, it has not been observed that powers transfer from vampire to vampire.[...]

Case #13 – Skovajsa: Dinner

I have a new general rule: Never trust a vampire to set up dinner. I think this as I arrive at the Cosmopolitan Grill and Steakhouse downtown. Skovajsa said 10PM. The fancy calligraphy on the door says they close at 10PM. I check around me wary. It's been dark for more than an hour. The most dangerous time of the evening. But after a moment, the front door opens and I'm ushered in like some sort of royalty.

Escorted by a very happy, young, and overly exuberant waiter to the back room, I see Skovajsa stand from his seat as I arrive.

"You are here."

"Yes." I stand at my seat staring at him. I have to say, even more so than the first time, he's making an effort to impress. His suit is elegantly tailored in black and maroon. His dark looks are not unattractive but something in his demeanor reminds me again of my first impressions. This time I remember the condition I was thinking of. Aspergers. I'd have to look it up later.

"Miss?" the waiter asks, impatiently. Apparently, he's been holding my chair back waiting for me. I'm embarrassed and sit down as he pushes my chair in. Then, he tries to put my napkin in my lap I grab it from him and thank him. He turns on his heel, mumbling about bread. 'Scuse me for not liking strange man's hands in my lap.

Skovajsa remains standing, looking down at me almost as if I'm the main course. "Please, there is wine."

Both wine and water glasses are full in front of me. In fact, it's a full spread, menu sitting, all glasses and forks and spoons. I opt for the water, nearly choke as it's mineral water. He's waiting for a response. I nod, hiding a cough. "Good. Thank you."

He smiles widely. Then he sits, with a slight blur. Hard to notice if you weren't paying perfect attention. He either is unaware of his overt vampire tells or doesn't care.

"Thank you for meeting with me again. Please, order whatever you would like."

I must have a really twisted sense of humor to agree to meet a vampire, especially a Carpathian, in a steak house. Either that or a morbid sense of foreboding. I decide not to shine his apple too much

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about the setup. I notice Skovajsa staring at me. He hasn't moved his facial expression one bit. I wonder if he is trying to influence me but I don't feel any unease I usually get.

"Thank you. Sounds like you've had some time to think about what it is I can help you with." I open the menu, but keep my peripheral vision on him.

He shifts in his chair. "Yes. I have given it due thought."

The overly exuberant waiter returns, seems to have found his dramatic thunder. "Alrighty then. There is your wine, it's an Opus One 2004 from Napa Valley. An excellent choice. We have some great and not so great specials on the menu tonight. There's a Dungeness Crab crusted halibut that I'm going to steer you clear of and a Duck prosciutto tomato salad that is just as effete as it sounds. Now pound for pound, the Rib Eye is still the best-."

Before he winds himself up too much more, I simply ask: "Can I just get a steak salad?"

He looks aghast like I just licked my plate. "The steak salad?"

"Yes, please."

"Um, ok. Very good."

I've burst the waiter's bubble again and he's off to go patch and re-inflate.

"I'm sorry. You were saying."

"Yes, I have given it due thought."

Ok, I remember Carpathian's being a bit slow but autistic? I move my glasses, a salt cellar around out of scientific curiosity. "Ok, what have you come up with?"

He ignores the movement, puts his elbows on the table, clasps his hands together. "I want to know more about me." Oh brother. He's rehearsed this. Maybe in a mirror. "I want to know more about others..ur..of my kind. To better know myself."

Yup, he's been watching Oprah. Didn't she just do a piece on energy vampires?

I speak carefully, "Ok. And what do you hope to accomplish from knowing yourself better?"

I've stumped him for a moment. Then: "To become a better...to become better."

"Well, then, it probably makes sense to set up a session, have you tell me about yourself. See what we can uncover together. How does that sound? But a few ground rules. I don't talk about other clients, not in specifics. So don't bother to ask. And no following or we're done. Understood?"

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He suddenly looks ecstatic, like he's picked the lotto numbers. Or won an Oscar. "Yes, I understand. Yes. This is good, right?" He laughs.

I sigh internally as the overly exuberant waiter returns with some sort of starter I didn't order, ready to again win praise for exemplary service. Hopefully all my meetings will be this easy.

DJB: Memoirs Volume 3: After Conclave

After a rather mundane meeting of the Conclave in which we reviewed current known population counts and several requests for migrations, I asked for a few moments with Valerian. I didn't expect to get them knowing he'd just recently returned from a cleansing in the Congo and had historically sought isolation after such travels. But instead, my web call was answered and I saw Valerian wrapped up in his darkest, thickest cloak resting on his chaise.

"Good even-tide," he spoke softly, deliberately. A servant came into view, refilling his cup with a steaming, nearly clear liquid out of a tea kettle. I thought I spied pine needles.

"Evening, Valerian. How do you fair after your long journey?"

He gave me a look that reminded me who he was. "I fair well enough. The journey was elementary. I'll say this for the mutts, they have advanced the comfort of our traveling arrangements immeasurably." He paused for a drink, which made him vibrate slightly, before he continued. "Seems negotiations were well-spent after all."

"I'll take the compliment anyway I can get it."

He sighed, leaning back, his face somewhat flushed, fevered. "Your contributions to the Conclave sometimes go unnoticed. Where would we be without the secret language you helped develop which protects our communications and our council from prying, juvenile eyes?"

"It's nice to be remembered for one's work."

"Consider this your favor, I don't like showing myself at times like these. But I trust you. As much as I know that emotion." He was right, he did look ill indeed. As soon as he finished what I now suspected was Pine Needle tea, his glass seemed magically refilled by an unseen servant.

"I'll come to the point then. My companion has made contact with the Vampire Psychologist as we had spoken before."

He sipped. "Indeed? And your research?"

"She calls herself Sophie Quinn. From what I can find, she lived in a small community in Ohio all her life until a few years ago when she left and started ministering to vampires." He said nothing, just

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sipped. So I continued, "She claims to have done this for lifetimes. That it's her calling to *seek balance within the vampire being.*"

He stopped sipping. He lowered his cup slowly. Then, his fangs descended and he laughed heartily. "Does she really say that still?"

"Still?" I was confused.

In less than a blink, the laugh was gone, he had retracted his fangs. He took a long sip as I could see his mind calculating. "Make contact as we discussed. Learn what you can. Report back to the Conclave at next tide."

"That's it?"

He looked up at me. "You were expecting something more drastic, I gather. I'm learning the art of negotiations, my old friend. And at my age, I'm learning what is important and what is...noise."

"I understand." I didn't. Not really. Valerian and I were about the same age of ancient lines that may have one time been united. But our polarities, our mentalities, our very natures couldn't have been more different. Valerian volunteered for blood cleansings not out of some greater good for the human race, protecting them from the very plagues that had once ravaged through past populations. The effect on a healthy vampire of consuming that much tainted blood was to weaken them, force them into seclusion while their bodies metabolized the viruses or toxins and made them inert. Shadria, who ran that particular program within the Conclave, picked only the strongest and most capable vampires to do the work. It was messy and required restraint.

No, Valerian volunteered because he was a killer. He enjoyed it. He missed the eras when he could go on sprees and gorge himself on so much blood his eyes would turn red from it. But that Valerian seemed a much different one than the one across the webcam from me, drinking his tea.

He shuddered and sighed. "No, you don't. You don't understand. Not yet anyways."

I smiled as response. I was about to say my farewells when he abruptly ended the call. After every interaction with Valerian, I felt guilty for thinking the worst of him and then gullible for forgetting what he was capable of. And ultimately, confused as to why he considered me worthy of continuing in the Conclave representation at all. I had no horror. I had no idea of my maker or his strain. And therefore, no designs on bearing kindred for fear of what problems might arise.

And maybe that was where my answer lay. Valerian had a sizable horror, somewhere on the order of 50 now accounted for. And all of them were welcome in his circle, his seat. Maybe what I didn't want to admit was that Valerian was capable of change to protect his own. Somehow, the thought chilled me more than anything else. I finished scripting the protocols from the Conclave and went back to the fbook site of this Vampire Psychologist. The meeting was set for tomorrow night. If it

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weren't for the preternatural state of comatose that vampires fall into during the day, there would be no way I could sleep. No way at all.

INBOX: This is the picture

From: Lauren Lyles (lysistrata@webvampyr)

Date: Sat, 18 July 2009

To: vampironyis@live.com

So after looking everywhere, I finally found the picture I was thinking of. However, it's not of when I was mortal. I'd forgotten this was taken when I was dancing the variety revue in Greenwich. "Dance of the Seven Sins," I think. Maybe even a little sword dance here or there. Back then, I traveled between New York and Chicago, doing revues quite a bit. It was right before WWII, dinner theatre and dance halls, ballrooms were everywhere. You could have dinner for \$2.50. Imagine! I remember seeing *Gone with the Wind* for the first time like it was yesterday. It was Dec 19th, 1939. The Astor Theatre. I was in love with Clark Gable. Still am, in some ways.

I was lucky I was vampire born at 22. I still had youth on my side and in my blood, body. In 1939, I had just turned 100 years old, 78 of which were vampire years. I guess we're not supposed to count pre-vamp years as we get older. I was still an adolescent, still learning to control my feedings. But I was lucky, my maker stayed with me. He was patient and kind. I honestly think he wanted a companion forever. He liked that I had been a country mouse when he'd stumbled upon me ministering to war wounded, fending off brigands, deserters, and other men of low moral standing in the backwoods of North Carolina. I was nothing to look at then. I swear I still have a picture from back then. I will find it with time. After all, the smell for decaying news clippings from my burlesque show days drew me to this picture and with good reason.

Look at this photo and tell me that I have not changed in appearance...completely. I'm up to five full minutes with my mirror. This is no longer the face I have. Check any Teen Beat magazine, you'll see.

Along with those smells come a torrent of memories. I locked myself in a room for days, overcome with lifetimes. I was confused and disoriented. It was only my stylist that was able to pull some sense from me. She asked me about your mirror. I'd been clutching it and rocking back and forth. I've never done that before. I hate to ask for your advice so soon again but...have you heard of this? What should I do? I'm afraid now to look for the original picture. I'm afraid I don't recognize me anymore, inside or out.

There's something else I ought to tell you but can't. Just please, be careful. I'm not hearing good things about Seattle right now. Please don't ask me why. It's just, the things you do, they're bound to be noticed. I cannot say more.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

My name back then in 1939 was Renee Montes. And I was a vampiress.

Preparations

Sophie's List:

1 Lemon 1 Orange Large Orange juice Lucid Dreaming by Stephen La Berge First Aid kit (fang plugs, gauze, styptic powder)

Remember: No perfume, use all fragrance free products tonight

Morena's List:

ASP tactical baton, jacket pocket or holster? HK USP 40 Pistol, holstered Benchmade knife, pocket? Manicure, Loreal, Fleeting Samsara, **Notes:** Jasmine, Sandalwood, Rose, Narcissus, Vanilla.

Case #13 – 5: Jesper, the Dreaming Vampire

The introduction is not going well. No matter my pep talk, Morena is anxious and packing heat. She's shifting her weight, hands in her pockets, fidgeting. In essence, she's a terrible liar. And it's making her vamp uncomfortable. And then there's her vamp...who's nothing like what I expected.

I expected, I don't know what. Taller? Broader? Brut-er? I'm not sure. But the vamp holding my wrist, fanging out, and threatening to bite the inside of my arm at the brachial artery or tear my arm out of my socket, whichever came first, didn't seem threatening at all. Barely 5'10", dark chin length auburn hair, blue-grey eyes, he looks more a poet than a vampire. At first, I waited for someone else to come in as we three stood there: "This is Jesper."

He just stared. I waved. "Hi." And then I waited. I think I offended him.

Finally, he spoke. "And your name is?" He was actively assessing me. That clued me in. Something told me, though, he intended as much.

I had put out my hand. "I'm Sophie. Sophie Quinn."

He ignored my hand, stayed on his side of the room. The meeting place is another room in my hotel, a suite. A little close for comfort but considering, I had to go with it. At least there are two rooms, so if I get through this alive, I can have some privacy with this vamp. At this point, I'm thinking of all the things that have gone wrong in the course of 4 minutes. All at once. Time's sorta frozen.

I had put my hand back down.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"And you've come to offer yourself?"

He had his approach down. He's rubbing his chin, a day or two of stubble eternally frozen there, never to be cleaned up. I lost focus. I admit it. He has one of those builds that is just, hmm, nice? Sturdy without being intimidating? You know what I mean? Nice chin, really.

Damn it. I hate to disappoint but I'm not here as food. But I am here to offer my services." Yeah, great. My first meeting with Skovajsa comes to mind.

Morena takes an ill-conceived step forward. "She's here to help...with the dreams." Strike 2: telling his closely guarded secrets. "She checks out." Strike 3: presuming to know better than him.

Yeah, I probably would have attacked me too. His movement had been so quick while I was eye rolling, that he was just there, grabbing me, before I got a full 360 degrees in my sockets. Yup, you can set your watch by vamps. Clockwork.

"Jesper!"

Now, I've had 13 lifetimes flash before my eyes and focused on the last four minutes and realize something important. He can kill me at whim now. He's pausing for something. He slowly looks up the length of my arm at me and meets my gaze. And this feeling washes through me and I know, he won't hurt me. In fact, the moment it comes to me, I know without a doubt that he will never hurt me. Ever. That's when I start to realize something's so incredibly off, that I have no words for it. And I can see it in his face: he feels it too. Whether the softening of my muscles as I relax does it or the receding of any fear that had been in my eyes, I'm not sure. But he knows I am no longer afraid of him.

"Kill me now or kill me later. Does it make a difference?" I start having a completely different conversation with him, one out loud, one with my gaze and my body language. His eyes narrow. "You're not afraid to die?"

"Now where have I heard that before?" Uh, yeah, didn't realize that was out loud. That is, until he tugs me all the way into his arms, putting the other around my waist. *Now you're goading him? No offense, dumbass, but your instincts have been wrong before! Ok, now's not the time to lose focus.*

"This is just one more lifetime out of many. You kill me now, I'll come back in 50 years and stick you with a bill for past services...with due interest."

His eyes are brightening to a fluorescent blue that I've never seen before. Or maybe so? His growl distracts me. It tries to occur to me that I'm wrong, that he will indeed hurt me to gain the edge of Vampire of this situation. But his eyes fall to my neck and focus on my amulet. His grip eases a bit as he seems entranced. *Ok, that's weird.*

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"If you give me a moment to show you..." It's time to test this feeling, this feeling of utter safety underneath all the apparent danger and newness. I reach into my pocket with my free hand, ignoring his tightening grip and Morena reaching for her weapon.

"Show me what?" he mouths around uniquely narrow fangs that I can't wait to examine.

I present the fruit, hold it out from me, not too close to him. Meyer, to be sure. Ripe and fragrant. He turns his head from me to look, puzzled. The feeling of security begins to grow.

"What the—?" says Morena.

"—Is that?" he finishes.

I allow myself only a smile on the inside.

"It's a lemon."

Case #13 – Jesper: Life Hands You Lemons...

Finding a sense of humor when you're in the thick of things either denotes ultimate faith that things will turn out or a complete loss of reality. I am hoping for the former. Jesper, the Vampire, is distracted by the lemon, but he still holds me at his whim and Morena, well, she turns out to be very touchy in a crisis. Of course, maybe this wasn't a crisis yet.

Jesper speaks, "I know what a lemon is."

"Well, you asked."

He growls at me but it's half-hearted. He begins to straighten, lets go of my waist but not my arm, his eyes fixated on the lemon in my other hand. Fascinated by it, he asks, "What is it for?"

"Treatment." I straighten so now he is just holding my forearm.

"You can hardly be serious," he replies.

The fluorescent blue of his eyes starts to fade, his narrow fangs begin to retract. I've never seen a vampire like him. The fangs in themselves are a first for me, narrow like reeds but long. They seem to disappear back into his gums above his canines, not as part of them. Then just those blue-grey eyes, contemplating the fruit in my hand. The fact that he can't tear his eyes away from it says it all. He's even ignoring the small scrap of blood he left on my forearm.

"You're sun-starved. Your..um...friend came to me for help. It's a common affliction in older vampires. The dreams are a symptom, like a bad cough."

VAMPIRONY



Book One

His hand releases the grip on my forearm and slides down to my wrist, now barely holding it. It makes me shiver. He glances at me, quizzically. He sends a very disapproving look at Morena who trembles for a second under it and then he looks back at me. And I know what he's about to say from the way he rolls his shoulders back, tilts his head up a an inch.

"I am Vampire."

There's this moment, this strange moment, when my gut tells me: Bullshit! But I've seen the fangs, the eyes, the super speed. I don't trust my gut with this vamp. I can already tell I need a better wall up for any next meeting. Time to bore him with the details that most vampires hate to hear.

"Life seeks balance in all things, even vampires. The Classical elements, whether you go Buddhist, Greek, or Chinese, all have the basic four: Air, Earth, Water, Fire. Air, you breath, not like mortals but you do breath. Earth, blood is loaded with earth elements like Carbon and it is, after all, what you're made of. Water, you either drink outright or get from the blood you consume. But Fire, on the other hand. Well, vampires are extremely sensitive to fire, like the sun."

"Sensitive?" Jesper the Vampire raises an eyebrow at me and then looks back at the lemon. "And that helps how?"

I hold it up for him, watch the minuscule flinch it causes him. "Think of this as the sun in liquid form."

"And what do you propose I do with it?"

"Suck on it."

Jesper the Vampire shakes himself, as if repulsed by the very idea. But he is staring again.

"You want me to suck...a lemon?"

I push a dirty thought aside. Damn positive vampire...and he's not actively controlling it either. "Yes," I say a little forced before I reign it in. "I used to use oranges but they're more subtle and my early patients were able to deny the effects. Lemons are unmistakable and pack a sufficient punch."

He drops my wrist and I grab it back, holding it against my chest for a strange sense of comfort. His eyes fixate on the lemon, widening even. I can see him thinking.

"This will cure me?" he asks softly.

"Cure is probably not the right word. Likely not in one shot."

He tosses me a look.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"If I'd been given a chance to examine you, I might know for sure. But it will definitely help."

Morena, who has seemingly faded from the room with all Jesper's positive juju floating around me, speaks up, "It won't harm him?"

I turn toward her, glad for the reprieve. "Not at all." I give myself a breath, try to be subtle about it. But as I turn around, I needn't have bothered. He doesn't even see me anymore. All his focus is on the lemon, as if his gaze could peel it open and unveil its secrets. I slowly set it down on the coffee table.

"Why don't I leave this with you? You can take your time assessing...it, decide what you want to do, whether you'll let me help you." I take a step back. I reach into my pocket and draw out my backup plan. "Here's my card and —."

His eyes change to bright blue for an instant and then, whoosh, he grabs the lemon, and his fangs descend into it, some juice spurting out, as he swallows the rest. His eyes flash open, glowing gold now, before he shudders and clenches them shut. He begins to fall, like the fall of a feather, unconscious. I react immediately, run over, catch him before he hits the floor. Or rather, he falls on me, as I slide between him and the floor, his head landing in my lap.

I hear the click of Morena's gun as she readies it, pointing it at me.

"What did you do to him?" she barks. I might ask myself the same question.

Vision of Lemon

A looming bright yellow sun fills my view, the flames crackling noisily, with a burning roar. The yellow brightens and deepens to gold and rays shoot out of me, consuming me, using me as fuel. The sensation billows through every vein, every muscle, all my sinews and bones until all I am is pure nuclear combustion. Then, I explode. And I am nothing but ash and cinders...and a single spark.

Case #13 – Jesper: You Make Limoncello...

Ok, stay calm. Vampires don't faint from lemons. I wave her away, look down at Jesper the Vampire...who's face is frozen in awe, eyes now closed lightly, mouth gaping, fangs still partly retracted. He takes a shaky breath.

"He's coming around. Ease up there, killer, he's going to be fine. Just give him some room." Lucky accident that I'm blocking her view and she can't get around us. It gives me time to think. But as I'm drawing a blank, his eyes open to slits, golden light leaking out. Ohhhhhhhh, not expected.

VAMPIRONY

Book One



"Was that expected?" Morena demands, gun still pointed.

I lie. "A little more intense but yeah."

Intense my....I have to figure out what to do to keep her from seeing his eyes. It's flipping me out so no telling how many times she'll shoot me for it. This is soooooo not normal.

Jesper the Vampire, laid low by a lemon, suddenly smiles. "That's quite a punch."

My exhale is half-laugh and all relief. "Don't say I didn't warn you. Those things should only be taken under care of a, um, vampire psychologist."

He laughs, grinning deeply, his fangs over his lips, pinching him just there. Even partially retracted, they're the longest fangs I've ever seen. Damn, that sounds dirty.

"How do you feel?" I ask, probably with little of the scientific decorum I'd like to think I still have.

His head shakes slowly from side to side. "No words."

Ok, so maybe it's all over and fine now.

I can't help myself as I peel open one of his eyelids. His entire eyeball is radiating, like the light was coming from inside his skull. I let his eyelid slide back and brush an errant lock of hair off his face. His pallor seems almost human. Was his hair always so...golden? Maybe I'd thought it auburn in darker light?

"Have you already fed tonight?"

Jesper's fangs retract and he licks his lips, seemingly savoring the odd sensation of light. He made no move to move at all, was just stillness. "Hmm, yes."

"Good. Your feeding will be a bit more intense for a few days, your fangs will be extra sensitive. Like you've gone to the dentist."

He laughs, open mouthed.

"Jesper?" Morena. She sounds scared and yet calmer. Probably from hearing him laugh...well, most of the time, hearing a vampire laugh is more frightening than their growls. It means they are totally at ease. And as a human, you never really want that. But I remind myself she's a rookie and doesn't know enough to know to be afraid of it yet.

I take his wrist, feel a pulse, which isn't entirely uncommon for recently fed vamps. I notice a signet ring on one finger and a silver ring on another. The silver ring has a raised circle with a dot in the middle. It makes me feel...uneasy.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"Yes, Morena. I am....unharmed." He opens his eyes and for a moment, I get caught full faced with glowing amber orbs. Then he blinks and blue-grey eyes are appraising me. "Am I not?"

Uhhhh.....

"Morena, if you're not going to shoot anyone, can you put that thing away and help me get him to the couch?"

She safeties her weapon and puts it back in its place. Then she helps me move Jesper over to sit on the couch. He's lighter than he should be for his height and weight. He slumps there, head resting on the back of the couch. As Morena begins to lean over to him, I butt in her way and sit next to him on the couch, arm resting beside his head. The next part is tricky. A large part of me, probably the more rational part, wants to call this a night. But I've not yet shied away from a client in need and regardless of my reaction to him, he has no one else to work him through this....whatever this is. And my curiosity..well, yeah, cats and all.

He moves his head to look at me, smiling still, like he's going to ask me for a cigarette.

I forestall that. "I need to ask you some questions."

"As I do you."

"Uh-uh, not how this works. You're the patient, remember?"

"You already have my utmost attention."

"Good." I think. Of course, vampire senses being what they are, he can probably sense...ok, let's not go there. I turn to Morena. This is going to sting. "He's fine. You can leave now."

"What?"

"Patient privilege. Can't have you standing here while I consult."

She looks ready to get her gun back out. "You listen here you little—."

"Morena," Jesper says softly and I can feel what's coming. And so can she.

"Don't," she asks of him.

In Vox Compulsum, he simple says, "*Leave us.*" I'm immune to the voice but even I can hear the ripples of suggestion guided by champagne bubbles and jasmine in his voice. I watch Morena. She's strong, very strong. She begins to step backwards, toward the door without a word but her face shows every ounce of anger she possesses at this moment.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

“Bastard.” There’s no passion there in her voice; it’s all in her face. But she backs all the way to the door, then gives up fighting it and hastily leaves, slamming the door.

I notice the complete quiet and still in the room, his influence gone as easily as waves brushing away writing in the sand. He’s very powerful and very old to use his abilities with such grace and ease.

“She’s angry,” he says.

“She’s upset. There’s a difference.” I turn back to him, see him sitting upright now, all visible effects of the lemon gone.

“You’re a psychologist to human servants too?”

“You’ve heard of me?”

“I suspected she might contact you.”

“First off, she’s a companion, cohort at the worst, not a servant and I expect I’ll never have to explain the difference to you. Second, it doesn’t take a psychologist to see how worried she was that I’d harmed you.”

Oh, and the sheer jealousy on her face as she left? We gonna leave that out of the discussion I hope.

“My relationship with Morena is definitely...progressive.”

“We’ll get to that all in good time. But first, I have more questions for you. About these dreams.”

He settled into the couch, making himself more comfortable, his arm going up on the back as I moved mine down. His mouth curved in a half-smile, possibly from the movement.

“Then ask away.”

Case #13 – Jesper: Happy Vampires

Strange the difference a few hours makes. Just a few short hours ago, Jesper the Vampire had assaulted me and was threatening to sink his elegant fangs into my brachial artery. Now, we are laughing together on the couch as he admits to me what a quick search on the Internet had served up from my business card.

“So wait, you knew exactly who I was when I walked in?”

“Indeed. I found your web site.”

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"And you just happened to find out about my being in town how?"

There it is again. That smug look that he can somehow carry on his face without seeming so...smug. Maybe that's just how he smiles. I should know better than to trust a smiling vampire. But then again, isn't that what I'm ultimately after?

"There is little Morena does that does not make it back to my ears." I'm astonished he's being so open with me, especially in regards to her. It seems almost like unfaithfulness. He's not talking ill of her. She's just inexperienced and I remember my earlier concern about her. Yeah, it'd be best to find ways to warn her, without undercutting whatever this "progressive" relationship he mentioned before is.

"Ah, a vampire stalker? Nice way to play against type." I find myself unable to filter sitting with him, chatting. This is not my normal interview. I don't normally chat with vampires.

"Only protecting my interests. And hers. Her friend Camille was concerned she wouldn't be able to resist seeking you out."

"And that you'd object to it. Which you did, of course."

"I suspect if you've had as much dealings with vampires as you've suggested, I don't have to explain the sanctity of our arrangements with mortals. But I thought it a good opportunity to test her mettle. I need to know who I can trust. And I wanted to test you too. If you were true to your advertising, you not would be easily intimidated by me."

Intimidated, no. Attracted, yes. Damn, the fact I'm thinking this right now is bad bad bad. "So I passed your test. Did she?"

He didn't even blink when he changed the subject. Just lazily rubbed his fingers along the top of the couch very near my shoulder. "Why isn't it that you haven't asked me my age? Mortals seem so fascinated by that."

"Nice deflection. Please. I wouldn't be very good at this if I wasn't a decent guess of these things." I can deflect too. I couldn't help tossing a look at his hand. "Besides, we've got to leave some of the mystery for our next session." I can apparently still flirt as well.

His smile deepens. "I'll try not to disappoint."

"I suspect that won't be hard for you."

There is a soft knock on the door. The door opens after a brief moment and Morena eases in. She pauses at the door, taking us in, then approaches. I smile at her to try and let her know It's all ok. Then I notice Jesper is doing the same. She stuffs her hands in her pockets.

VAMPIRONY

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"It's almost dawn," she states. Then she and Jesper exchange a prolonged look.

"I no longer fear the dreams," he says plainly.

"Will you still have them?"

He looks to me in question. I take my cue and stand. "Unknown. I'd like to run some tests in our next visit. Better to assess your current state."

"What is there to know? I am—."

"Yeah, yeah. You may not realize it but I've classified over twenty different strains of vampire from around the world. It would help to know which one you are to help define a more complete treatment."

He stands up and while not exceedingly tall like modern Nordic men, he still towers over me. "And what is the goal?"

"To make you a happy, healthy vampire." I smile sweetly.

He smiles back. "Of course." He walks me past Morena to the door, opening it for me and just before I can head through, leans against the door jam, his arm preventing me from going. "Am I not meant to walk the night in infernal, eternal damnation?" his voice low, tempting.

"Not on my watch."

"Happy vampires. Seems sacrilegious."

"Hey, you can have lemons or you can make lemonade."

He laughs, letting his arm fall slowly from the doorway. I slide out. "Tomorrow evening then?" I turn to look back at him. He leisurely leans against the door jam, head to the side, arms crossed. Behind him, I see Morena standing stiffly, not wanting to watch, except doing so out of her periphery.

"Sorry. Another patient. Monday?"

He nods. I can tell I'm already looking forward to it but I'm not sure why.

"Sweet dreams," I whisper. Then I turn brusquely away, hurrying down the hall. I hear the door close when I'm almost to the elevator. I get in and let out a huge breath I didn't know I'd been holding in.

Yeah, lying to myself already. Not good. Damn. Charming and attractive. Exactly not what I needed.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

DJB: A dream revisited

It's the dream again. Much like the vision induced by the lemon. The sun is upon me. Then it's inside me, a roaring combustion. And I'm holding it in, spreading my arms, my eyes glowing, stoking this internal fire, and just as I'm ready to explode, I hear a squeaking. I look down and there's a little girl in long dark pigtails on a tricycle. She looks up at me with big brown doe eyes.

"Can I help you Mister?"

I want to tell her to go but before I can, she rides away. I move my head to watch her go, want to follow her but notice, I'm now tied to a cross, unable to break free of golden chains holding my arms out, legs dangling. My chest heaves, the strain of my own weight dragging me down. I'm not me anymore but an older, nay, historic, mortal, lesser version of myself. I raise my head up, straining against my chains, ready to be consumed. But I'm fighting it. I wrestle with it.

Then I feel a cool touch on my shoulder.

It's an angel with gossamer wings, the symbol of infinity branded into her skin just at her jugular. She alights down to me, hovering above me, drawing my chin up, kisses me, and a cool refreshing feeling courses through me. Tart but sweet. Tangy. She leans away, my lips still wet, and I open my eyes as she speaks.

"I'm here to help free you."

I smile. The golden chains are gone and I'm no longer attached to a cross. I'm standing in front of a great green tree, its branches laden with bright, glowing lemons. I turn and pull one from the tree, hold it in my hand, feel the life in it flowing through me.

I look back at her and she's Sophie, just standing there, just as she had that evening, eyes wide open and bright.

"You already have," I tell her. I then step away from her and burst apart into a shower of yellow and gold crystals.

I bolt awake in my bed. Sweating, still sweating, but not afraid. The room is entirely dark. But immediately, fatigue hits me and as I feel myself collapsing back onto the bed, I realize that it's daytime outside the dark cocoon of my condo. That for the first time in my vampire memory, I have awaked during the day. The knowledge greets me just as I slip back into unconsciousness.

Bellevue: The Office

I wouldn't have originally thought that miracle working was on Nick's resume, but I would need to remind him to add it. Standing in the newly cleaned office, I'm astounded. Not only has Nick's

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connections made the place spic-span, he has taken the liberty of providing some furnishings. The back wall of the reception area is covered by clean, empty bookcases and a rather weary but antique looking desk sits in the middle of the room. The only other article of furniture, a spacious riveted leather chaise lounge, occupies a large space just by the windows. The windows have also been repaired but not covered as of yet.

"Good work," is all I can manage. Too many surprises from the people around me. I sometimes forget that happens.

Nick isn't preening, isn't pumped up, isn't acting like this is his first gig. He seems serious about it all...but relieved, underneath it all. "Well, unfortunately, my brother's team couldn't finish up the exam rooms until tomorrow morning. And the window coverings will be installed tomorrow too."

"Still, quite the transformation. But yes, unfortunate. I can't see my first client here until the coverings are installed to my specs. Are you sure tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I tried for earlier, but my Seahawks tickets just weren't good enough for that."

I sigh. Another hotel room meeting is not what I had in mind and the thought of anything approaching last night with Skovajsa...makes me shiver. Nick tosses me a glance but says nothing.

"Well, I'll have to see him in his hotel suite then for tonight."

Just then, my phone buzzes. I check it. A terse text from Morena, wanting to meet. This afternoon.

"Would you like me to come too?"

It takes me a moment to get what Nick means. I turn to look at him.

He continues, "I mean, just to make sure you're ok. I mean, I still don't really know what you mean by fringe and for all I know, you are a drug dealer. I, uh, don't want to intrude on your, uh, clients, though. Just want to make sure you're safe."

"Nick, I'm not a prostitute."

"I didn't say that." He blushes. "Did it sound like that? Shit, it did sound like that, didn't it?"

I smile.

"What?"

"It's ok. You're taking a lot on faith. And really, It's sweet, your offer. But it won't be necessary. I do know how to watch out for myself with my clients. Besides, what's meant to be will be." But it'd certainly be a shame to miss my following appointment. With Jesper.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

I push the thought aside as I point to Nick's talisman as all the explanation I need.

He glances down at it, as if he's forgotten he wears it at all. Looking back up, putting his hands on his hips, "Yeah well, Confucius say *'The superior man, when resting in safety, does not forget that danger may come...'*"

"Well put. I'll leave my phone logged in, just in case. But right now, I've got a whole other danger to see to."

"What's that?"

I remember the look on Morena's face as I left last night. "Jealousy." I look at the message again.

"We should meet. 6PM. Bellevue Gun Club. Tonight."

Wonderful start to the evening, I'm sure.

Cohorts Anonymous

Meeting a client's jealous cohort/girlfriend ranks up there in my favorite things right after meeting a vampire lord in his lair on Halloween and offering to negotiate a treaty between werewolves and vampires in a Belizean jungle. In other words, I wouldn't call it my best move. But I'm one and one in these type of high risk choices and at the very least, dealing with humans has always seemed to be more about letting them know they're still ranked higher than an outsider like me than about an actual grievance. Companions are always wildcards. Remember Renfield? Not strictly the book version but more of the classic movie version. Crazy and selfless. I've met those kinds of companions. I've also met the kind that were talented in letting their vampire think that it was all about the vamp but was really all about that sense of power the companion inherited being in the company of One Who Is Vampire. Those were the companions I steered clear of...many of them wind up dead by their original vampire or by the next vamp that comes along to overthrow a territory.

So as I watch Morena empty her pistol into the target with a precise and smoldering calm, I wonder at what she is doing with Jesper, how they met, and what past man in her history had not listened to her advice. And lived to regret it. She's wearing her all black uniform which I guess she does out of utility but serves to make her look sleek and dangerous. She's well kept without looking frivolous. I suspect that she gets hit on by drunk guys at bars that can't tell she'd just as soon kick them in the nuts as talk to them. If she even goes to bars. Somehow, I can't see her wasting her energy.

She finishes her clip and I lift up my ear muffs. "You wanted to see me?"

She ignores me, replaces her clip, and begins firing again, forcing me to slap the muffs back in place. I can't tell where she's aiming on her target but I can imagine it's dead in the heart. Her look from

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the night before...that's what I've been focusing on. Not any of the other things about that night. I haven't scribed notes. Haven't dared to yet. Too fresh.

She finishes another clip and finally sets her pistol down, bringing the target forward. I can't help but step forward to see the results. As I suspected, she's shot so many tight shots that it's tore a huge hole right through the heart of the target. I remove my safety gear.

"Nice," I say out loud, under my breath. This is what I have to deal with. I find myself wondering if she knows those skills are useless against the supernatural. I clear my throat. "You wanted to see me?"

She continues to ignore me, doing something with her weapon.

"Fine." I turn on my heel and start to go. I have a limit to my patience too.

"I don't want you to see him again." I stop walking and turn back to her. She's slowing removing her safety equipment. She's not looking at me. I think she's embarrassed that she feels this way. "I'm beginning to think it was a bad idea contacting you." Her hand rests on her gun.

"Why? Because you think my helping him is going to make you less useful?"

That stings her and I'm stunned to hear the words fall out of my mouth. Where is this emotion coming from?

Her eyes flick up to me, liking the challenge. "I don't like your attitude."

I take a step forward. "Good. Because I'm getting sick of yours. You were the one that wanted me to help him and now that it seems to be doing some good, you feel threatened. Dare I wonder why you have no human boyfriend?"

Her hand flinches over the gun but she stops herself.

"I don't make a habit out of counseling humans but you should consider getting some. You're wound tighter than he is." I'm done feeling sorry for her. So strange how quickly that shifted. I begin to wonder in some part of my mind when the pissing part of this contest will start.

Whether it's my standing up to her or her instinct with the gun, I can see her resolve slipping. "Yeah that would be a great conversation."

"Morena, you have to stop thinking of me as competition. I've been hired to help a client."

"He doesn't look at you like that."

I throw up my hands and turn to go, so not wanting to cover this subject.

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"You were right."

That stops me from walking out. Turns me back around.

She continues. "I'm new at this. Jesper told me I would have to learn to accept him with other women, that it was just in a vam...his kind's nature to have more than one, uh, companion. I guess you're just my first taste of that."

"I'm not sleeping with him."

"But you will. Eventually."

A pained smile crosses my face, probably hoping to cover the blushing. I shake my head. "What makes you think that?"

She assesses me for a moment. "Because I think you protest too much. You feel it too. I can see that much. It's different this time. For you. Oh you're putting up your guards, maybe even will put up a good fight but he'll get through it." She sighs. "He just gets to you."

She needs to know so much more. Positive vampires just draw you in. She's never met anything else, doesn't know anything else. It's unfair how special she thinks he is. Well, except the glowing eyes part, of course. Which she doesn't even know. And now isn't the time to think about that.

Morena begins packing up her things, thinking she's had the last word.

"Jesper isn't the first vamp I've met nor will he be the last. The more you know about them, the less fantastical they'll seem. Believe me, it'll almost get ordinary, their abilities."

"Right."

We share a look for a moment. It's a tenuous peace at best, one that I recognize I need to work on. I can't proceed with his treatment at night while waging war with his companion during the day. At some point, tests will be needed that will strain her trust. Probably sooner than later. She's looking at my amulet, much like he had.

"You wanna tell me how you guys met?" I ask, hoping to find some common ground.

"You wanna tell me why you're so certain of your own immortality?"

Common ground indeed. This subject was so much easier.

"Let's take a walk."

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The Problem with Recovery

Out in the cooler night air, it's easier to think. Of course I had said take a walk but Morena didn't like the idea of hanging around that area of Bellevue to chat so I let her take me into her area called Ballard. Suddenly, I had been hit with the maritime history of the area and felt closer to the sea. She had to correct my thinking, that there was this large body of water called Puget Sound, that we weren't actually all that close to the ocean.

Many lifetimes past and the idea of open ocean still felt strange to me, proof positive of how much our current daily lives make us forget what once we had known. She's showing me around Ballard. It's very cute and towny in a way Bellevue just isn't. There's a realness, like someone could wear this place, live here that I just don't get from the artifice of Bellevue. Or at least the place Bellevue is becoming, so much glass and mirrors.

Morena wants to understand about my idea of what she calls *Immortality*. Jesper's been giving her the Vampire litany, I suspect.

"It's not that, really," I try to explain. "And theologically, I'm not quite Buddhist or Hindu but there are basic concepts I not only agree with, I know. It's the idea that I've lived past lives, each one leading up to a time when I will have earned enough karma to bypass this earthly world and reach the time of true spirit. Well, not exactly that, but that's the terms I know to explain to a layperson."

She nods. "And enlightenment. Or something like that."

"Not enlightenment. That dictates some sense of self. It's about becoming one with all things, losing one's individuality and melding into the universe." Lovely talk for a walk by the locks.

She smirks. "Like the Borg."

I laugh at the reference. "Um, no. Not at all."

"I don't get it. All I want is to be able to carve out a place for myself in this world and you seem to want to, I don't know, do the opposite."

I could finally see her struggle. "You're Catholic, right?"

She tosses me a look. "How'd you guess?" We keep walking and she seems to answer her own question, stuffing her hands in her pockets. "Recovering."

"No one really recovers from being Catholic. It's too strong a belief system for most to just give up. It promises Heaven...and Hell. But only through the Spirit and the Holy Ghost. It's a very digestible idea that when you die, you go live on a plane of existence somewhere, beyond pain and suffering, that you'll see you loved ones again, and will be with your God and will know the answers to all things. It's not so different."

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She sighs. "I don't know about all that. I used to. But if God allows demons on Earth...the Church never told us about that. I've seen things, done things, that I have to believe are sins but I've asked, believe me, I've confessed, only to be told to do penance, to amend my life, and do ten Hail Mary's."

And here we are at the crux of her conflict. "Did you tell your confessor that you're giving blood to a vampire?"

"Not in those exact words."

"Then why are you convinced it's a sin?"

"It's an unnatural creature. It has to be."

"No more unnatural than you or I. Somehow out of a bundle of microscopic cells, we grow into sentient beings with souls. Vampires are life, yes, just another form, a transformation out of human."

"But they are immortal."

"Not exactly. In the truest sense of the word, definitely not. They can be killed."

"If Jesper heard you, he'd say..."

I sigh, then mockingly, "Yes, I know. *I am Vampire.*"

"You've heard that before?"

"More time than I can count. It's a motto or something. Like *Be Prepared* or *Semper Fi*."

"*Don't Tread on Me.*"

We both laugh. "Exactly. As I've said, there are various types of vampires. But there are defining characteristics, just like you and I are both humans but in appearance, attitude, ethnicity we are different."

"But we're still the same subspecies. Even I know that. *Homo Sapiens Sapiens.*"

She's getting it and losing her tension all at the same time. We fear all we do not understand. Some seek to uncover the truth while others flee it. "What do you know about Australia?"

"Why?"

I tell her how Australia developed specialized creatures found nowhere else due to their landlocked, isolated populations, driven by external stimuli to evolve. "Vampires developed in the same way."

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"So that's why you talk about the Carpathian. He's a subspecies."

I can't help the shudder, hope I catch it before she notices. She doesn't seem to. "Next to the Jiang Shi, they are the most dangerous." We've walked past the locks toward some shops intermixed with bars in a warehouse district on the water. "They seem driven by fear and anger more than any other type. While I understand all those forces, I have yet to successfully rehabilitate one. Not for lack of trying."

"Rehabilitate?"

"As you have already seen, vampires don't need to kill to subsist. There are plenty of humans willing to provide for them. They are intelligent enough, powerful enough to control what they need to in order to stay safe and comfortable. And most adult vampires have aged enough to control their urges in modern society. It's sheer necessity. In a media age, too much killing would draw attention and expose them all. The modern vampire has adjusted."

"Like Jesper."

I would pat myself on the back later for not skipping a beat. "Jesper could be self-taught or the one who made him choose him quite well. I don't get any sense from him that he isn't in full control of himself or his thirst. The dreams seem his only trouble. Carpathians live in a constant state of threat to which their response is aggression."

"And you've tried to rehabilitate one before?"

"Twice, actually. Both times, I died."

Morena stops me walking by grabbing my arm. "I'm sorry what do you mean you died?"

I look her in the face and my gut tells me there's still something troubling her, some secret. Maybe it's because she's starting to trust me. I can't put my finger on it.

"My last death was caused by a Carpathian named Valerian Nyssus. He decapitated me and then cut my body into little pieces. He was hoping to have me alive during most of his torture but I so irritated him that he knocked my head clean off."

There is a deathly silence and even under the street lamp, I can see her face go pale. There's a bank of old corrugated steel buildings, converted to commercial retail spaces along the docks. A neon light winks above us: 24 hour TANNING.

"You are crazy. What would possess you to try again after...after something like that?"

"To be honest, I didn't know Skovajsa was Carpathian when I came up here. I'm still not convinced he's what he says he is. But I'll know more tonight."

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And that's when I begin to hear it, the murmuring. Just under the sound of muted traffic and geese. I lose sight of the neon sign for a moment and an image from the book appears to me, its pages flipping furiously, then everything blurs...

Excerpt: Who's Who

...

Valerian: Past Client, Male, Last Known whereabouts: Prague. Age, etc: Who cares? As long as he stays away from me!

Lucy and Maurice Burim: Clients & Charges, Last Known Whereabouts: Catalina 1510. Age: Unknown status, assumed dead Vborn:1467 Hborn: 1454 Albania. Horror Strain: suspect Carpathian, but unclear. Maker: Unknown vampire, killed during incident.

Able to wean them off human blood with no known complications. Had been turned accidentally, still unclear how. Suspect they had been drained and during fallout of battle, had feed on nearby vampire before being found by their mother. Mother fled country with immediate family once it was known they were vampires.

I wish I could find them again.

...

Reunions aren't for the weak

“Sophie?”

Morena grabs for my shoulder as I sway. I blink and the sensation of my whole being off-shifting two inches in my head is gone. The murmuring remains. There's someone here, someone familiar. But instinctively I know that, in this lifetime, I'm too inexperienced to be able to sort it out. Friend or foe? I honestly don't know. For the first time since I've met her, I'm glad to have Morena within reach.

She's staring intently down at me when I finally clear the cobwebs and meet her eyes. I give her a meager smile.

“What just happened? You just seemed to, I dunno, disappear for a sec there.”

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"I'm alright," I say and start to follow the pull towards the door of the shop *The Crimson Kukri*. Its sign says: *The world's only 24 hour gaming store*. In the same building is DayGlow, advertising 24 hour tanning. The irony, if there is a vampire involved, is not lost on me.

It's not smart but I can't resist it. I need to know what this is...who this is. I need to know now.

"Hey!" Morena keeps a hold of my arm, stops me short, pulls my head around due to the force of it. I lock eyes with her. "What, you got a sudden urge to tan?"

"Just have to follow a lead."

She follows along as well, although I'm not sure I should give her credit or blame for that. The door to the shop seems unremarkable enough except for the weathered, solid oak frame. I feel it vibrating towards me. It's enchanted somehow. I push the door open easily and Morena and I walk into the store. There's a small chime as we cross the plane, so simple and familiar it's almost sinister.

The shop is brightly lit, short beat-up wooden shelves stuffed with gaming books and various supplies. There's an entire wall of dice of every color and pattern in bins with signs for Chessex and Gamescience. Large surveillance mirrors hang in both front corners. I can feel Morena tense up behind me, her head moving from corner to corner.

Straight in front of us sitting ramrod straight behind the front counter is a very comely young woman with jet black hair hanging straight around her face, obscuring it. Her black t-shirt has a caricature of some sort of marmot looking creature, saying 'FUHyrax,. Her head is half turned and bent, looking at a computer screen, black fingernail of her index finger clicking on a crimson red mouse. She doesn't look directly at us but takes a very deep breath in through her nose. Her hand comes off the mouse and goes under the counter. I see her shoulders tense. Morena sees it too, probably even sees the twitch of the muscle in the woman's alabaster arm as she likely grabs something behind the counter. Morena unsnaps her gun from her back holster.

It all happens in a flash before I can say a word.

The woman's eyes turn black and she snarls at us, fangs bared. Metal bars fall over the store front locking us in.

A full six seconds behind, Morena reacts, shouting, "Down!" She pushes me down behind a case, her gun coming out. I turn toward her as I fall and before I hit the floor, I see a inky black streak of smoke explode next to her and suddenly, a young dark haired, well-dressed man appears beside her, snarling.

He tosses her aside before she can even turn and she slams into the dice display, ricocheting off the wall and landing in a thump, motionless on the floor. The young man gives her a snarl and then turns to me, stepping slowly over to me, glaring down. He inhales through his nose and his mouth

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opens in a fully fang-filled grimace. It's the last thing I see before he kicks me in the face, knocking me out.

The Gypsy Twins

"What could have led them here?" (In French, girl's voice)

"What does it matter? We have to get rid of them." (In French, man's voice)

"No! We can't do that."

"What else can we do? We don't know them. They smell of trouble."

At least, I think that is what they were saying as I came to. My French is rather rusty and from a few lifetimes ago. Kinda like the recognition of who they are. A smile creeps across my face and I blink my eyes open. My hands are bound and I'm sitting on the floor of a brightly lit storage room. Although, along one wall, is an elaborate display of bladed weaponry. Morena is slumped against my side, tied up as well.

I can hardly believe what I feel and what I see. The young woman and young man, vampires, obviously twins, are standing in the middle of the room. The woman/girl, dressed in her black T-Shirt and long flowing skirt, is leaning towards her brother, pleading. Her brother stands stiffly, stylish in a perfectly fitted maroon silk shirt and black slacks.

"It's good to hear you've kept your mother tongue alive, mes enfants."

The twins freeze, perfect mimics of each other now. They turn to me slowly, the only difference being her eyes are wide, his eyes are fierce.

"Course, to be quite honest, if you hadn't spoken it, I might not have made the connection. You're a long long way from Catalina." Lucy leans in first, Maurice grabbing at her arm.

In perfect English, not a hint of accent, *"Who are you? Why have you come here?"*

Maurice then leans in as well, half to protect his sister, half out of his own curiosity. *"You smell of dark creatures."*

My smile deepens. My heart confirms it as my mind recognizes the tics their countenance, hidden under new features but still plain as day to me. *"Ma petite Lucienne. Ma brave Maurice. My gypsy twins. You've grown so big!"*

Both twins look perplexed but anger and fear has turned to wonder on her face, suspicious and disbelief on his.

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"It can't be," Maurice says, leaning back.

"Tante Giselle?" she says, leaning further in, taking my face in her hands, Maurice still gripping her arm but her straining away. She sniffs both my cheeks, then tilts her head back, eyes closed. She then exclaims, and hops in place, staring happily at me. It's one of the first times ever that my past has been happy to see me.

Maurice releases her arm. "It can't be. Can it?"

Lucy begins to cry, black tears streaming down her alabaster cheeks. "Silly brother! Smell her!"

Maurice begins to lean in, to Lucy's right side but then freezes. I look down, confused, to see a small rugged knife, welded by Morena, sticking into Maurice's shirt. Morena raises her head quickly as Maurice's eyes turn slowly toward her.

"Back up," Morena commands.

"Put that away, Morena," I chide, completely aware of its futility.

"Give me one good reason, Sophie."

"Allow me," Maurice seethes. "First, because my Tante Giselle told you to. Second, because it would do you little good."

He grabs her wrist and leans his face close into hers before jabbing the knife into his side without a word or a flinch. A small wetness appears on his shirt, nothing more. He removes the knife and twists her wrist until she cries out.

"Maurice!" I object. He releases her wrist, stands woodenly. Lucy looks confused but goes to him, pokes him gently in the side, watches him grimace with an arched brow. I look to Morena who had managed to cut her bonds without anyone knowing. She rubs her wrist for a moment but then frees me.

"I take it you three know each other."

Maurice sulks and Lucy puts her comforting arms around him. They begin to move together in unison, looking down at Morena and myself, a unified front.

"Yes, may I introduce the Burim twins, Lucy and Maurice?"

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My, My, You've Grown

Lucy and Maurice Burim, whom I had known in a former life as pre-teen vampires, stand before me looking closer to twenty than twelve. Despite the obvious difference in their height, their faces have matured. The innocence has been replaced by purpose, the fear replaced by conviction. No, these are not the twins I had known. But somehow, they are the same as ever.

Maurice pats Lucy's arm around him. It's an old gesture. He used to do it to get her to let go of him when she was clinging too tightly. Now, it's an intimate movement of connection between them. They watch carefully as Morena gingerly stands up.

"Actually, it's Darnell now. Tammy and Thomas." His voice is richer, polished. His matured in a way I never would've thought possible. And she's bloomed, still slight but lithe and comely. And underneath it all, I feel it. Morena shifts her weight backwards in response. My darling charges are negative vampires.

"You want to help your old auntie up?" I raise my hand.

Lucy smiles widely and pushes Maurice forward. He's at odds, as a young man would be, reacquainting with his past. He steps forward uncertainly and the effect forces Morena back another step, out of his way. He notices it immediately and I sense him get a handle over himself. The twins had never shown such complete control before. He takes my hand gently and I'm on my feet without the slightest sense of having been pulled up. Yes, grown in every way. Including power.

I stare up at Maurice who stands about 5'10", not excessively tall, but inches away from where he had been when I had used to tuck them both under my chin for hugs. Lucy had always been willowy but somewhere, her brother has finally surpassed her in height. And there's more as he holds my hand. I feel the tension in him. He meets my gaze but in a way that tells me his focus is elsewhere, his thoughts in hiding should they show through his eyes. But he's reading me, trying to at least.

Lucy breaks the silence. "Old? You are much younger than last time we knew you, Auntie Giselle."

Maurice drops my hand.

"It's Sophie now. And you two, you're older. How is that possible?"

Maurice throws a suspicious gaze at Morena, who's starting to show the signs of her embrace with a wall. "You reek of bad blood. We were certain we'd finally been found."

I raise my hand up. "My bad. Some clients seem to cling about me."

A tight smile creeps over his face as he looks back at me. "Still on a fool's crusade, Auntie?" He shakes his head and sighs. "And what of her? A protégé?"

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"Hardly," Morena mumbles, gently dabbing at her bloodied lip.

Lucy steps forward, excitedly staring at Morena. "It was you I smelled first, before Auntie. You smell of blood and light and magic. Very confusing."

"I wondered why you were so slow," Maurice chides.

"Slow? You call that slow?" Morena asks, in shock.

Lucy looks somewhat between cowed and annoyed. Maurice fixes his glare back on Morena. "If she'd done as she was supposed to, you never would have seen her at all. And we both would have been gone before you'd even noticed."

She fights the feeling. "That's new. Vamps that cut and run."

Maurice bristles but I put a hand on his shoulder. Like old times. And it turns something deep inside of places I hide away that his response feels the same as when he was a child.

"Forgive her. She's greener than Kermit the Frog."

Lucy's face finally turns unkind. (In French) *"Terrible child. She seems more trouble than she's worth."*

Morena answers back, "Not near as much trouble as I need to be, apparently."

"Does everyone speak French now?" Maurice asks rhetorically.

"Lucy, Maurice, this is Morena, Morena Fourtenay. She's a cohort to a local vampire, a client."

A look passes between Lucy and Maurice and they stop breathing. It used to mean they were having a "twin moment," as I used to call them, a time when they could seem to know each other's thoughts, like telepathy. They stare back at Morena, now with more interest.

She notices. "What? I don't look like the cohort type? My...uh, master...he won't be happy I couldn't keep Sophie safe."

I blink just as my phone buzzes. "What? What are you talking about?"

Sophie's Voice Mail

9:05PM Nick: Uh, Sophie? Yeah, it's Nick. Nick Fujiyami. Uh, I was checking in to see if you'd made your appointment? Anyways, call me back at this number. It's my cell.

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9:25PM Nick: Sophie, It's Nick again. Checking in about your appointment. Well, It's not for a bit but I was hoping you'd at least let me know where you'll be and what time you expect to be done. [laugh] Kinda hard to keep your calendar when I don't know where you are. Ok, then. Call me.

9:45PM Nick: Sophie, Nick. Really would like to know your stats. When, where? Call me.

10:05PM Nick: Sophie. Did I mention I'm worried? You took off in a huff. Am I supposed to be worried about you or just supposed to be all Moneypenny for you? Does this thing even work? Call me. ASAP.

Getting the Kiss-off

Lucy interrupts, "Your phone has been ringing off and on for an hour."

I let it ring, try to catch Morena's eyes. When I finally do, I know everything. All of it makes sense. Now I know the real source of Morena's temper earlier. Jesper had told her to look after me. I feel heat rise up within me and I'm unable to decide if it's anger or flattery. Which makes me angry. Meanwhile, the phone keeps insisting.

I snatch it up. It's Nick. "What?"

"Are you alright? Been trying to call. Thought you'd stop by the office before your, um, appointment or at least let me know where and when...maybe even throw in a what."

"Appointment?"

"Yeah, It's in your calendar. Sko-Vaj-Say 11PM. Wow, what a fun name. Where are you?"

Crap! "Uh, Fremont. I'll be late."

"Fremont? Well judging by the traffic map, that's where you'll stay for awhile. Maybe you should cancel..."

"Where's a public place downtown that's relaxing quiet but still, public? Where you can have a conversation and no one hears it but you're seen?"

"The Ice Lounge, 3rd and Columbia. It's in a hotel, kinda gangster-like inside, lots of cushy places to sit...even settees. But never busy." He has good instincts. "You can be there in, oh, about 15 given a good driver."

I look at Morena who's adrenaline is wearing off. She's not fit to drive. "Can you call me a cab right away?" I ask Nick.

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"Give me the address."

I do so then hang up to text Skovajsa. With no immediate response, I turn back to the room. Lucy and Maurice are still staring intently at Morena who looks like she's long past wanting to leave.

"I have to go now. But we will catch up." I start for the door. Maurice catches me up.

"Auntie." The concern is clear on his face.

"Do not worry. I have always guarded your secret."

"This vampire you're meeting, that smells of magic. He will smell us off of you." He's assumed and gotten it wrong about my vamp clients but I don't correct him.

Lucy joins him. "And look at you...both of you. We were only protecting ourselves but Maurice is strong, no?"

Morena speaks up, testing her elbow. "She's right. I don't know how I'm going to explain to Jes—. J. how I got my ass kicked by teenage vampires."

I sigh. "Nor how my client will react to my face." I don't need to see it, I feel it. Puffy, hot, achy, skin tight. Yeah, major bruising. And Maurice had barely moved.

He looks uncomfortably at Lucy. She nods.

"What?" I ask at their conspiratory air. She steps up to me.

"We have a way but you're going to have to trust us," she says, taking my hands. Something in this I don't like, but she's sincere and I nod to her. She looks at Maurice and tilts her head toward Morena.

I watch the child charge he once was dissolve from his frame as I feel him exuding powerful forces of attraction against Morena as he approaches her. Lucy squeezes my hands.

"You must tell her to trust him. He will not hurt her."

I find myself a little befuddled myself before I realize why. He's not yet directing his abilities right at her, instead letting her see the effect on me, feel the effect herself. She throws a near-frantic look at me. "Sophie?"

"It will be alright, Morena. Better this than Jesper's interrogation." Maurice I know, Jesper I don't. And he and I are in need of a serious discussion. I let her how upset I am with him. Although, I have no idea what this is, really.

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Maurice stands in front of Morena and at first, I think he's going to share blood with her to heal her. That terrifies me, knowing how viral vampire blood can be, unsure of how it might affect her permanently. But as if he can hear my thoughts, Maurice says in a soft voice to Morena, as if she were the only woman in the world, taking her hands in his, "It will heal you. There will be no lingering effect."

She's staring right into his eyes, being the same height as him and while there's fear there, it's not the only thing I see in her eyes. As he leans in and she closes her eyes, it's clear what he means to do and I feel all flustered and turn my head away, embarrassed. But I can hear it. And it goes on...for awhile...and gets louder...

"Do you want me to make you not hear it?" Lucy asks me, grabbing my gaze. It bothers her too, I can see. Maybe more than she knows. There's worry there in her face, like back when she let him lie or do something but she offered up a unified front. She's trying not to look too.

"No, no, it's fine. It's just..." A throaty moan. I swallow. "Well, maybe we should leave them..."

Then it stops and I can't help but look over. Maurice is gently lifting Morena back to her feet, raising his head away from her. She looks, in a word, dazed, mouth gaping open, eyes still fixed on him. When he finally tries to step back from her, she moves forward with him until she blinks suddenly, realizes her hands are gripping his shoulders. She then steps back, blushes deep red. Then, she looks at me. And she's glowing. Literally.

Lucy sees my shocked expression and looks over. She shakes her head, "Brother, you've gone too far."

He steps back away, almost sullenly. "She was more injured than we expected. She has a high tolerance for pain." He stops near his sister who puts a hand on his arm to draw his attention back. "It was my fault she was so hurt."

"Now let her go, brother."

He fights it for a second. Then, the humming in the room that I scarcely registered goes quiet and he looks at the floor, suddenly winded. Lucy's face shows concern but she covers it quickly to look back at Morena, who blinks like just awakening from a dream. A really good dream.

"We need to go now," I say. I take my hands away from Lucy's and step to Morena, hand on her arm. This was not at all what she was ready for and soon, really soon, she's going to crash down from it. And I find myself more angry than ever at her so-called vampire Master. He never used these abilities on her and thus, she was unprepared. She looks at me with childlike eyes when I tug her arm. The crash has already started and she shakes off my hand and folds her arms about her.

"Let's go," she says and storms out, angry, confused, but holding it together for the moment.

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I follow her and as I pass Maurice he ventures a look up at me. And It's the look of his 12 yr old self seeking some sort of redemption.

I pause for a moment, as Lucy says, "Probably not wise to tend your wounds as well, Auntie."

I swallow past a lump of disgust in my throat, the mere thought of Maurice doing that to me. "No," I say. I give them my card. And I rush out after Morena.

Picking up the shards

"Morena?" I ask her as she stands with me on the corner, waiting for my cab. She's huddled herself together as if it's forty below out here instead of a pleasing summer night. The glow is gone and every remnant of cuts or bruising she had. No favoring of her limbs either.

"All vampires can do that?"

I sigh. "No, not exactly. The healing, that's the first time I've seen it done that way. Usually blood has to be exchanged not just saliva."

She cringes as I say it. "How about their speed, strength, their....other powers? Jesper can do all that too?"

I realize now I should have probed more about how she and Jesper met. I didn't realize things would get forced into her face like this. Four vampires in a metropolitan area like this, none of them related, I've never seen this. Not since the Old World.

"Jesper likely has strength and speed, likely much more than Maurice who is young in vampire terms." I can't think what could explain their aging. "Other abilities will depend on their maker, their strain, their type. There are lots of types of vampires."

She nods just as the cab rolls up. I hesitate just a moment, maybe I can reschedule Skovajsa. She answers that idea by opening the back door for me.

"I didn't know you were so unaware. I'm...I'm sorry."

She shrugs. "It's not your problem."

"Well," I say as I slide into the car. "You can bet Jesper's going to get a piece of my mind about setting you the task of watching over me."

She slams the door shut but I can still hear her say, "Not if I get to him first."

I lower the window. "Don't see him tonight. Promise me. You're not ready for that. Wait..."

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She grabs the window frame, "For what?"

I pat her hand. "For when you're stronger."

She slips her hands off the door and I pat the driver's seat to go ahead. Vampires. They complicate the living as well as the dead.

Phone Call: 206-555-3663 to 425-555-8267

Morena: I'm not coming over tonight.

Jesper: What's wrong? You sound upset.

Morena: Nothing. I'm just not coming over.

Jesper: You were with Sophie.

Morena: Leave it.

Jesper: What happened? Is she safe?

Morena: I said leave it.

Jesper: I can hear it in your voice, Morena. Just tell me what happened.

(pause)

Jesper: Morena, it's all right. Just tell me what happened.

Morena: You asshole! You shoulda warned me.

Jesper: Morena, tell me---.

Morena: (yelling) No warning, no nothing! You didn't prepare me. You think this is a joke? For me? For her? Protect her? How the fuck am I supposed to do that? You pat me on the head, make me believe I helped you save Camille. That was all just a big fucking joke to you, wasn't it? You didn't need my help. Is that how you get off? Watching humans thinking they can go toe to toe with you...you...You fucking asshole!

Jesper: Morena, calm---.

Morena: Fuck you! Don't talk to me. Don't call me. You...you should have warned me. You should have warned me what your kind can do.

Jesper: You ran into another.

Morena: No shit!

[CLICK]

Case #13 - Skovajsa: One Vampire at a Time

Ice Lounge. I'd made it a whole three minutes before the time I'd texted Skovajsa to meet me. He'd finally given me a curt text back: OK. It left me to wonder now that I had arrived after heroic driving efforts of Sergei: how the heck was Skovajsa going to make it here?

It was a hotel and the bar, on the second floor after a steep walk up stairs, was spacious but strangely cozy. Maybe the dim lights. The bar was at one end of the room and a white jacketed bartender was fussing over the marble top, setting garnish dishes to right. There were low couches and floor lamps throughout the space and, even better, art deco screens here and there. It worked

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to give the room an intimate feel. But it would also prove to protect against lip readers and keep quiet conversations private.

I picked a couch and an easy chair against a far wall, behind a screen. I turned off the light and used a napkin to partially unscrew the light. It wouldn't prevent the bruising that was showing on my face from being noticed but with all the shadow, it wouldn't be glaring. It didn't make much sense to attempt to cover it up; Skovajsa would be able to smell the blood pooling under my skin. If asked, I wouldn't lie about what happened. I'd have to act nonchalant. And hope he didn't pry. Some vampires are better than others at sussing out lies or half-truths. I have to hope Skovajsa has flunked that class.

Before a thought about Jesper fully forms, I put it in a mental box labeled "Do not open until Xmas" and place it high on the top shelf behind the really naughty porn and that box of German pistachio and milk chocolate. I didn't need to go there now. I couldn't. Too much was at stake. I thought about Dr. Kaga's breathing techniques and got in touch with an old life. Sometimes, when fear or doubt started to eat me up, I would go back into a past life, bring that version of myself forward for a little bit so I could remain aloof. It was just another method of compartmentalizing, Dr Kaga told me. But it had saved my life too many times. And I sorely needed it now. One thing at a time, one vampire at a time...

"I hope you haven't been waiting long."

I startle awake. Skovajsa stands looking down at me, wearing a heavy black trench coat that made no sense for the summer. I avoid the urge to stand, grip the arm of the chair with the hand away from him and wave him towards the couch with the other. "No, have a seat."

As he settles himself on the couch, I took out my notebook, readying for notes. When I looked up, Skovajsa was considering the couch.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Perhaps I should recline?"

"Um, up to you. Whatever makes you comfortable." Please...no....dear lord....don't...let...him....

He smiles and tosses his long legs over the top of the couch and lays back, folding his arms over his chest. I take a measured breath, reasonably sure he doesn't have the social skills to notice. This is going to be interesting.

Several moments later, the adrenaline has worn off and I'm left stifling a yawn as Skovajsa continues to walk me through his own personal epic.

"After serving Vlad Dracul and Stefan Bathory to place Vlad back on the throne that was rightfully his, I was hand-chosen by Vlad to become one of his blood brothers...."

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Blah blah blah. Like I haven't heard this sort of origin story before, like, 10 times. Member of Vlad's honor guard, his personal favorite, hand-chosen to be turned...if every vampire that claimed to be hand-chosen progeny of Vlad Dracul stood up at once, they'd fill a cemetery the size of Wrigley Field. Ooh, then there's the defender of Vlad part, fought off assassins, nearly killed protecting him....

"...when the infidels were done with me, I was broken and spent, near death..."

...Sheer luck that he didn't succumb when the blood line was severed, wandered for years struggling to survive...

"...I don't know how I survived, hunting on my hands and knees. It was..."

...Horrific...

"...humiliating..."

My phone tings. "Oh, I'm so sorry." I promised Nick I would keep it live, having logged myself into Messenger before the session started. I thought I'd set my status to Busy. But it isn't Nick and it isn't Messenger. It is a text. From Jesper. And as I begin to read it, the strangest sensation washes over me, like he is right behind me...*I understand from your assistant Nick you are unharmed. I hope so.*

"Go ahead, Skovajsa, I'll just jot some more notes." He is so into telling his epic, he simply settles back on the couch and continues.

Just behind me, hands on my shoulders, whispering into my ear: *I must explain to you about Morena...*

Case #13 – Skovajsa: The story behind the story

I blink and find myself still sitting in the arm chair in the Ice Lounge. Skovajsa is pausing for a breath. Had I made a sound, startled as I was to have it feel so real, Jesper whispering to me? Am I startled that I feel him standing there still behind me, his hands gently squeezing my arms, breath against my ear? I blink again deliberately. I'm holding my phone, his last text there. I push a few buttons to switch it to silent mode.

Skovajsa is waiting for me. "Shall I continue?"

"Yes, sorry." I set my phone in my lap, turned up so I can see the next text as it comes in. "Please go on." Can't remember what he was saying last so I guess. "So spawn of Vlad Dracul would make you...uh, five hundred and fifty, give or take?"

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He settles back down, convinced for the moment that his story has me in rapt attention. This guy's survived on ego, his details are all out of a book somewhere, nothing authentic which means he can't remember turning, someone brewed up that story for him, or he's fooled himself into believing it and how old it would make him. Either way, he's showing positive signs of all sorts of pathology and I should be paying close attention to him. Instead, I keep glancing down at my Smartphone screen.

"Yes, I traveled southern Europe for years after, weak, alone, hunted first by the Turks then the Greeks..."

I should have made a break from Morena. But she was not afraid when she learned what I was. And it was fascinating to me.

Right. I bet.

It's not what you think. I never meant to deceive her. I've been trying to back away.

Not. Trying. Very. Hard. How can I blame you? She's beautiful, strong, intelligent, tall, and yet fragile...You back away after you've peaked her interest, she's just going to want to reach out to you more.

"...as I moved towards the coast, over the decades, I fed off more and more powerful victims, my powers growing rapidly..."

My head pricks up and I stare at Skovajsa. Strike Two. He has no idea what he said is so very very wrong. The only way a vampire grows in power besides age is to feed off of other preternatural creatures. He probably hunted other young vamps during the Great Blood Hunt of the 17th Century, taking advantage of his own. This changes things. I'm not sure I should tend to a vampire who has killed his own for power. I'm not sure I can.

You've saved me again, done what I did not have the strength to. Freed her from me.

I have a moment of doubt and my gaze is draw back down to Jesper's words.

"...I've always looked for ways to make myself safer..."

Cannibal. I need to get out of here now.

I owe you a great debt that you must tell me how to repay.

"...you've probably never met a vampire as old as I."

VAMPIRONY



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And for the first time in a long long time, I feel the kind of gut wrenching fear that fills your belly like churning ice water. Jesper. Help me. My fingers twitch toward the keys just as the phone enters locked mode.

I drop the phone when Skovajsa grabs me around the throat and slams me hard against the nearby wall. For some reason, I remember the intricate raised velvety patterns of the brocade wallpaper the moment I hit. It reminds me of paisley. Paisley stars in my eyes.

Amber Waves of Grain

I blink awake and lift my head. I'm sitting in the Scout, the engine turned off, on the shoulder of the road. The farms and plains of late harvest spread out around me. There's a twinge of manure in the air. I can't remember why I'm here. Something about picking up a pot roast for dinner.

I look down and the white leather seat which Dan had spent eight months hunting down and being able to afford is covered in red as well as the crotch of my khaki crop pants. Blood has dripped over the lip of the seat and has pooled around my Merrell slides. I glance to my right. For some reason, my white socks are sitting in a pile on the seat next to me. Strange. I gaze down again, hands smoothing over my newly rounded belly.

Dan will be so upset about his seats. Or is it something else?

I start to feel the itchy skin again. My cell phone is sitting in the holder between the seats. I pick it up and dial home.

"Hel-LOOO, hon. What did you forget?"

He sounds happy to hear from me. He always does.

"Hon?"

"I messed up your seats."

"Soph, you sound funny. Where are you?"

"I'm sorry but I don't think the red will come out." Nonsense, really. A wave of nausea hits me as I faintly hear Dan yelling into the phone. It's a funny thing, fainting. The edges of your world start to get all fuzzy and then this perfect circle starts to eat at your existence until there's nothing but black.

I come to again and I've dropped the phone on the floor. It's ringing. I pick it up and answer.

"Ma'am, this is Ohio State Patrol. Have you been in an accident?"

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"Uh-huh," I say, removing my belt. I set the phone down to help me. I take the keys out of the ignition and set them in the seat next to my socks and then open the door and slide out of the Scout. It's a beautiful fall day, although it's a little cold. My legs are freezing.

I've lost the baby. And even worse than that, I feel this strange mingling of fear, disappointment, and underneath it all, in my darkest heart of hearts, I feel relief. Having felt so empty for so long, it felt sacrilegious of me to bring another soul into this world. I never breathed a word of my doubts to Dan. But lately, all I've felt is this strong desire, this wish to be anywhere but here.

I walk down the road, letting the vastness of fields shroud me. Why couldn't I just be happy, contented with this life? Why did nothing I say or do seem to fit? No one deserves this. Especially not Dan. Nor my little princess. They never asked to be connected to me, this heartless, thoughtless, meaningless hole in the world.

My legs have frozen up and I slump to the ground, landing in the ditch. Bad timing to have taken a deserted back road to head to the store. Maybe someone will come by eventually. My skin feels itchy, the nausea is still here, and in my heart, there's just nothing but stillness.

Maybe it's a fitting end for a woman who doesn't care for anyone, not even herself. Who doesn't seem fit to inhabit the very skin that she's in. Fitting to die alone in a ditch somewhere, covered in blood. Well, at least that would be going somewhere new, dying.

After all, anywhere but here.

The Meat Market

Nick Fujiyami had finished the last of the clean-up, set up the laptop as instructed by his new employer, and had the innards of the office sealed as tight as a drum against encroaching light. It had been a long day and something kept tugging at him. He knew where his new employer would be; he'd suggested a place that he trusted, knew the bartender there Viktor to be a good reliable person. He considered the place safe. But what it needed to protect against, he still didn't know. Sophie had promised to clue him in now that his statement of work was signed off.

He should just wait until morning. He still had to pick up his last bartending check at Jerry's but then the Ice Lounge was a quick swing out of the way of his parent's place in the International District. It was really no trouble to stop by and check, make sure she made her appointment all right. I mean, he was her new assistant, right? He's just being thorough.

He bounded down the stairs with such purpose that he failed to see Oksana, the eldest daughter of the Russian deli owner until he was literally bumping into her as she stepped out of the shadows.

"Hello," she purred.

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"Shit!" He took in her appearance in a hot instant: trashy, skimpy outfit, fuck me boots, black stockings showing underneath her too short skirt. But it was her face that turned up his caution: she looked strung out, pupils too big, eyes too dark, mouth messily stained with dark red lipstick, hanging open almost unnaturally. "Sorry, you startled me."

"Well, you're a pretty one." She took in a long inhale as she casually put a long arm around him. With her boots and her natural height, she was a smidge taller than Nick. There wasn't any part of her that didn't send his tramp-ho Klaxons off. "Where are you going tonight? And can I come along?"

"Uh, sorry. I gotta head to work. No rest for the barely employed." He gently tried to extricate her arm. She replaced it with her leg, wrapping it around his waist, leaning him back against the wall.

She pouted. "Don't you want to party with me?"

"How can I say this nicely...not really." He tried to step away from her, without pushing her away.

She let him step away but just enough to put both arms around him. "You sure smell nice. I can hear you blood throbbing." She laughed deep in her throat.

"Yeah?" He said, willing himself to be cool. Then he forced all the concern out and began to put on the mask of indifference. "Probably just 'cause I'm late." He shrugged, stopped trying to evade her, let himself go limp with her arms around him.

The effect was immediate. "Mmm, you're no fun." She stepped away.

He shrugged again and slowly began to walk around her, toward his sport bike. He finally hazarded a glance back as he spoke, "Maybe next time."

She was gone. She hadn't made a sound.

Later, at Jerry's, a bustling hotel bar full of the pretty sort of people, Nick leaned over the bar. "Hey Tobie, Sal was gonna leave my check."

Tobie, equally hip and just old enough to serve, waved him around. "He left it behind the register, man. Serve yourself, it's hopping tonight."

Nick came around the bar and glanced over the crowd in the darkened lounge. It was complete with the model types, the cougars, the traveling businessmen, the waitresses that all looked like they were walking a catwalk. Every man's possible type was wandering about, plying and cooing for appletinis and ceviche. Including tall, leggy, trashy, Russian fake blondes.

He saw her across the room as if the crowd parted just for them to meet eyes. Hers were darker than before, pools of obsidian peering at him as if expecting him to be jealous as she brushed barely

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covered breasts against the arm of some 40-something suit with a bulging wallet as he ordered yet another round of overpriced appetizers.

Something told Nick that pork dumplings weren't on her mind for curbing her appetite. She kept her eyes locked on Nick's and he couldn't look away as she nuzzled the suit's ear, then ran the tip of her tongue along the rim of his earlobe, showing teeth that seemed too sharp and large to fit in her mouth. Nick blinked and turned his back on her, grabbing his check and stuffing it into his pocket, struggling a bit with the fit of his jeans. He rushed out from around the bar and dared to look back in her direction. She blew him a kiss and smiled, lips pulling back.

He hadn't imagined it. He felt the cold dread creep through him. The pieces illogically fit together and he hurried out of the bar. Ice Lounge was ten minutes from his parent's place. If he pushed it, he could be there in fifteen. Somehow, he just knew Sophie needed a hand. Though he couldn't figure out what he thought he'd seen or why he thought he'd be able to do a damn thing if he was even right.

He sped off anyways, kicking it into a new gear and risking a serious ticket, if only to shake off the willies the blonde had given him.

When Honesty is the Best Policy

I didn't know how long I'd been out of it but it can't have been long. Skovajsa still had me by the neck, feet hanging helpless a foot from the floor. Having been in this position many times before, I know my weight and the pressure on the arteries in my neck will cause me to lose consciousness (or suffocate me) in mere moments. I lift my sagging head as much as I can to look Skovajsa in the eyes.

He seems to have been waiting for that very thing. "You have not been paying attention." He says it matter-of-factly, no hint of displeasure in his voice.

I croak a response. Impossible to talk with his hand around my throat and my struggling for breath. Now is the moment when I find out how far gone this vampire is beyond the reach of society's morays. There's really no reason to kill me. No reason when he has gone to such lengths to seek me out and try to impress me. Even if I could speak clearly, I would be tempted to keep quiet. Petulant behavior should be met with stony silence.

The edges of my vision start to blur in that all too familiar way just as Skovajsa sets my feet back down on the floor. He relaxes his grip a little but doesn't release me. My eyes dart for a moment around the room, making sure no one has taken note of the interaction. The last thing I need is someone swooping in thinking they will save me and getting themselves killed in the process. Disgruntled vampires are better left alone.

I cough thickly, trying to get the muscles in my throat to obey.

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"I am over five hundred years old. You have never met a vampire as old as I. You should pay me better respect."

I clear my throat. "Actually, Skovajsa, I've met lots of old vampires. If you want to be an elder, you need to work on your manners." I can't help that a little anger enters my voice. My skull is pounding like jack hammers are trying to get out of it. But before he thinks to squeeze again, I add, "I've heard every word you've said. The trials of the Carpathians are well documented."

"You seemed distracted."

"I was trying to place your origins, your maker. I do have to think while I listen, Skovajsa. It's part of my job." Now the anger is barely contained. You don't give vampires orders but if he doesn't remove his hand from my throat, we are effectively done.

"You are familiar with my plight." His statement has a hint of a question. Then he removes his hand.

I rub my neck and then bend over a bit to take a few deep breaths. "Yes. I know several of your brethren who suffered through those dark times. And I can't help you if you insist on doubting me." Time to push the boundary back into place. "If you don't trust me, then I cannot help you and we're done."

He frowns. Not a practiced expression like so many of his I've seen. This one looks sincere. He doesn't know what to do or say. Then his hand reaches up and traces the outline of the bruises on my face. I flinch but manage to hold my ground. As his finger moves over my skin, he's surprisingly gentle.

"What happened to your face?"

"I had a run-in earlier this evening and got kicked in the face." My policy with dangerous vampires, especially ones on the verge of killing me is always the same: tell the truth. That way, if they kill you, you take your best karma with you into the next life.

He drops his hand and continues to stare down at me. The effort to keep upright, helped by my right arm clinging to the wall, is still substantial. I'm not sure how I'm going to make it through this.

"I apologize. I overreacted." It's almost a question.

"I think we're done for tonight."

He looks really saddened by this. He really does love to hear himself talk, I conclude. "I will let you decide when next we can meet."

He then steps away from me and strides away. I watch him walk out of view before I start to slump to the floor. There's a play of shadow beside me and suddenly an arm reaches out.

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Book One

“Auntie!”

For the third time this night, the dark gobbles me up.

Allies Eternal

My ears are ringing and I feel clammy. I've fainted, a feeling I'm too familiar with. But I'm on a comfortable riveted leather chaise, a black trench coat draped over me. As I stir, try to lift my head, the Stars and Stripes start to play like a brass band in my forebrain.

“Ouch!”

“Auntie, try not to move.” A hand forces me gently back down on the chaise.

It's Lucy. And relief floods me. It's not the relief of seeing an old friend whom you've been parted from. It's difficult to explain to those who don't believe in the cycles of reincarnation, the evolution of our souls. Dr. Kaga once tried to put it into words for me: *It's the warmest feeling of knowing you've ever had coming from a deep but open space where there is no doubt, no fear, just true and complete belief. The moment is fleeting, ships passing in the night, a cherry blossom in full bloom.*

But as relieved as I am to see her again so soon, it troubles me.

“Tell me you did not follow me and share a room with another vampire.” It's more a statement of fact than chiding. The moment I say it, I know it's true.

In days gone by, she might've bowed her head, looked embarrassed. Instead, she hikes up the coat around me as she simply says, “You were not fit enough for your meeting. And I was never in any danger.”

“Oh?”

She meets my eyes. “I can become completely invisible to others.” She smiles wanly. “After so many years of hiding, I have perfected it. I was never more than a hand's reach from you.”

I slowly digest this. Against humans, I can totally believe this. But against a powerful vampire like Skovajsa?

She sees my doubt. “You were receiving texts on your phone. That's why you were distracted. And you were about to answer when he attacked.”

I try to sit up again and this time she assists me.

“It was foolish. I can't remember you being so lax.” It's her turn to admonish.

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"Well, you can't say I haven't paid for it."

"Auntie."

I brush her hair and pat her cheek. Lives divided and reunited. There is some magic at work here.

"Was it only for my health that you followed me?"

Her face becomes guarded in a way children's faces cannot. It's yet another reminder of where I have failed. I'm avoiding the flashback caused by what is clearly now a concussion. It's too soon to go there and yet, it's bubbling underneath, especially with these maternal thoughts for Lucy and her brother Maurice. Charges I loved dearly and lost with my own death to disease.

"I cannot believe that you are here. It seems Fate still drives our lives together, even if death tore you from us." She exhales heavily. "You must help Maurice. He struggles with what he is becoming."

Case #13 – Lucy: Lesson Number One

"I suppose I should catch you up. It has been ages."

Lucy stands, walks the room while she collects her thoughts. Or rather, reviews what she intends to say. It's about 2AM; She's had lots of time to think waiting for me to come to.

"That would be nice. I'll save my myriad of questions about how you've grown for later."

She tosses a careful look back. "Oh, that. It's simple really. We don't drink human blood. Therefore we age more quickly than others that do."

I think my jaw drops.

"I can tell you're surprised."

"I never knew there was such a tight tie between taking human blood and the aging process." I try to think through the fog, to let all the obvious other conclusions fall into place but they won't. What is it you do for a concussion? I'm trying to remember.

"Oh yeah. But it's strange, you know. After a few decades, Maurice and I didn't miss it, didn't really crave it." She snickers. "He calls us Vegan Vamps."

I laugh. "That is funny." I take a deep breath. For some reason, there's more to this that is hurting me than what logically makes sense. "What else?"

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She finally decides to alight on the desk. The moment is like a murder of crows coalescing in one gentle but awful swoop. She waits watching me for a moment before I pick up on it.

"Yes, I guessed earlier that you are both negative vampires. Perhaps even..."

She holds her hand up. "I know, I know. And maybe that's why I followed you. My senses are more acute than Maurice's and given time to reflect, I was able to distinguish two creature scents on you, one that I've picked up before recently."

"Our lovely Carpathian. So he's recent to the area. How recent?"

"Well, I've only noticed him in the last few months. You know, Mo and I often do recons just to know who's about." She shakes her head. "And I have to admit, we're both curious about our heritage. We tell each other not to investigate vampires that move into our area...but we've both been guilty of it. This guy, he's dangerous."

I rub my neck, "Don't I know it. You really were just feet from me?"

"I know, I wanted to step in but then I remembered how angry you would get when we interfered with your fate. I honestly didn't know what to do."

"No, you did what I always taught you. To hide."

Case #13 – Maurice: The Becoming Part One (as told by sister Lucy)

We've never really been vampires. We weren't human for very long either. We've been living in this half-life together for so long, it seemed like nothing could separate us, like we were growing into one being. And then one day, it all just changed. It seemed like such a small thing at the time.

Moving to the New World had taken a lot out of us, traveling in 1838 by steamship across the Atlantic. The voyage took a little over 18 days and the only way we survived it was we took turns going into a sort of stasis while the other kept watch and fasted. We arrived in New York famished and weak but managed to take up residence near a butcher shop. It was providential in many ways. The butcher had suffered a horrible accident just weeks before and Maurice and I were able to offer up our help to the butcher's wife to keep the shop afloat for just a small room in the basement as payment. The family never suspected what else we helped ourselves to but they admitted that the shop never looked so clean.

It took many months working there for us to build up our strength but we enjoyed our time there. The Old World had become rampant with Undead but it was still a frightening prospect for most vamps to brave the voyage to the New World. That's why we had chanced it. We were tired of running and hiding. And in the city, we could slip in and out of hiding as we pleased. We learned

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English within days, our brains able to harvest all the sounds around us into words and thoughts with strange speed.

But we stayed too long, we should have kept moving. We looked just like teenagers then, maybe 16, street urchins, about the same age as the butcher's children, a boy and a girl. Neither of us knew what it was like to have playmates beyond each other and, well, we indulged in the idea of having a family. We kept to the shadows during the day, claiming skin disorders but worked hard. I cleaned while Maurice learned the art of butchery, seemingly learning overnight. And I noticed things about myself, my strength had grown, my hair seemed longer. While the trip had taken much from us, the limitless supply of fresh blood seemed to be rebuilding us in new ways.

In a year, we looked like we had both gone through puberty. My body filled out some, my hair grew, and I sprouted a few inches. But for Maurice, the change was so much more dramatic. He had always been smaller than me but he grew tall, he filled out into what a normal 18-year-old man would look like, his face became all angled losing its roundness. I wasn't alone in noticing. I would catch both the butcher's widow and the daughter Annabel admiring him. I knew it was trouble but I too had an admirer in the butcher's son Lucas and I was unwilling to give him up. Being able to sit and talk, to have eyes stare into yours kindly as you spoke about faraway places, eyes wide with wonder and emotion, it was what we had never had.

Even with us growing up, maturing, Maurice and I still felt very much like one. Maybe that is why we felt so much for the Butcher's children. Maurice's infatuation with Annabel fed mine for Lucas and vice versa. We would even share experiences back then, intense ones. It was a strange and wonderful thing when I awoke one evening to feel Maurice receiving a kiss from Annabel as he awoke. The wonder was followed by fear as I heard her call him her "Dark Angel," a term she repeated as if knowing exactly what it meant.

With that kiss, everything changed. A wall went up between us as I urged him for us to move on, that it wasn't safe anymore for us nor the family. Maurice refused to leave and I had misunderstood why. The family had become dependant upon us and I knew he felt strangely honor-bound to provide for them. And his feelings for Annabel were complicated. I think he knew before I did that she was ill; he struggled to decide what to do. But before we could decide, both Annabel and Lucas succumbed and they were both slipping away.

I didn't know that Maurice had tried to turn Annabel until she lay screaming hours later. He probably hadn't even been unaware what he had done. Whether by bite or by kiss, he'd infected her but his fluids did not have the strength to turn her completely. She remained in horrifying pain for hours. Whether her mother knew it was from the illness or something else, I never knew. I never blamed Maurice because I had harbored the same dark thought about Lucas. Sitting there watching my first love waste away, I had come to a similar resolve. But it was Maurice who paid the price for acting first. It was because Annabel had been sick first I suppose.

We all huddled around her bed, all of us, one dark arm of the family, one light. Maurice held her and she spoke soft words to him before she sank unconscious and finally slipped away. Her brother did not last into the evening of the next day. The three of us, Maurice, me, and their mother cried

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together. It was then that she knew that we were not human children. Still, she had just lost her own children and so beset by the anguish of losing her whole family in the course of months, she adopted us. She had squirreled away most of the money from the thriving shop and she decided we would move on West, get away from the city that had cost her one family.

As we traveled, I took Annabel's name, Maurice took Lucas's. It was the first of our false identities in the New World with our first daytime companion. The more we opened up to her and told her of our lives, the more determined she became to find a new safe place for us. West, she said. She did everything for us as we traveled, heading slowly west as far as the trains would take us.

Her name was Caroline. And I learned that she had been Maurice's first love.

A Hero Too Late

Nick rushed into the Ice Lounge ready for action against...well, maybe he wasn't quite ready for he knew not what. A quick glance around revealed...nothing. A few couples, a lone business traveler. A busy night for the hotel bar. He spotted a familiar bartender in a white jacket and headed for the bar, where there was only one lone patron.

As he walked, he noticed that the few couples seemed frozen in place, their eyes glazed over, their bodies held at strange angles or in mid movement. Nick slowed his pace, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. The businessman in the easy chair also looked more a mannequin than a man, glass held in his hand halfway to his lips. Nick took a few quick steps and rushed the bar where Viktor was still straightening the garnish dishes. The lone patron, a shorter man in a maroon shirt and dark slacks, was swirling a glass of dark red wine quietly while leaning against the bar.

"Viktor," Nick called. Viktor ignored him. "Yo, Viktor."

"Viktor, take a break," the man in the maroon shirt said. Viktor, drone-like, turned and walked off without a single look at Nick. The sensation of the willies was back again as Nick took in the man as he took a long draught from his wine glass. While the man looked quite a bit smaller than him, Nick felt a chill coming from more than the chilled ice river built into the bar top.

The man considered the liquid in his glass for a moment before setting the glass on the bar. He lifted his other hand in which he held a cell phone, one of those palm-sized ones with the QWERTY keyboard. "So what's your rush?" There was something in his voice, something menacing and yet cajoling.

"My boss, I thought she might be in trouble. There's weird shit a-foot in the hood." The words tumbled out of his mouth before they had finished forming in his mind.

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The man smiled a deep, fierce smile and turned his face to Nick's. Dark stubble was seeming to grow into place faster than any five o'clock shadow Nick had ever seen. And his eyes burned black, sending an icy chill down his spine. What the Hell had he gotten into?

"It seems that there are no damsels in distress for us to rescue here this night, Nick Fujiyami."

"Huh?"

Nick couldn't remember saying his name but his memory of what had just happened felt like it was slipping away as quickly as it happened.

The man stepped towards him but he was frozen in place. Unable to move, Nick watched in horror as the dark mysterious man shoved something into his chest. His arms found movement again a split second before the object dropped and Nick grabbed at it. It was the cell phone.

He looked down into the man's face as his dark eyes caught him. They weren't black at all but deep blood red.

"Your boss will be missing this. At least one of us can be useful this evening."

The strange man then began to slowly walk from the room and Nick felt compelled to watch him go until just at the top of the stairs out, he exploded into a murder of crows. Words Nick would never use. Not even in his most poetic moment.

He shook his head and suddenly the room was alive with movement and Viktor walked hurriedly back to the bar.

"Nick! A-ha, good to see you. What's new?"

Nick clasped the phone. "I have no fucking clue."

Case #13 – Maurice: The Becoming Part Two (as told by sister Lucy)

It was Annabel's death that threw me off, hide the truth that was right before my eyes. And the wall was there between us although us three traveling together, depending on each other seemed to drop most of the barriers between Maurice and myself. Things had changed but I thought in many ways, we were stronger together. The closeness between them I thought was that of a mother that had lost her children only to gain new ones. For Maurice's part, I still clung to the idea that he and Annabel had been first loves. Well, I'm sure it might have been for her. And for a time, I'm sure he was smitten with her. But that's not why he tried to save her. She was a gift and a test. And a trap all in one.

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You mustn't think poorly of Maurice. He did none of that with malice in his heart, no true understanding of how his childish ambitions would play out. I'm not even really sure that he consciousness knew how all of it fit together. He was too close to it and reacted. He wanted to keep her with him. And as her child lay dying, in the way that our partly vampire minds think, he weighed so many variables. As we've aged, I've watched many other vampires, seen how they think, felt it. Perhaps it is another gift I have. It's not quite telepathy. But I've been watching them for so long, I can feel their intent as it flows into their actions. It's kept us alive, in the most dire of times.

But I suffered from nearsightedness, I was too close to it all to see it for far too long. I was also inexperienced; we had been children made and the interactions between men and women, while I would see them, knew of them, my young vampire mind did not understand. I had very much liked Lucas. But I had not loved him. I had not wanted him in that way. Maurice and I had agreed to take turns surveying any new area during the night, Caroline would do so during the day while helping to get us situated. But never for very long. West. She wanted us to move West.

The hints were small. They would tense when I interrupted them. Soon, I was taking most watches because I was better out sneaking around, becoming invisible. It was true but something in his intention when he suggested it...well, like I said, it took me some time to question it. Plus, I loved to go out into the night, watch how humans interacted, especially in the cities. They lived on, danced, played, celebrated, never acting as if their fragility mattered when it was always there, just a hand's breath away. The actress, the courtesans always fascinated me. How little power they had in that man's world but how much control they could possess. I watched it with fascination only to see it crumble so many times. The tools of their trade: makeup, perfume, clothes, manners, caresses, beguiling glances...I began to see it in her, began to see how she played him, how she whispered.

For awhile, it didn't bother me so much to know. I love my brother. I didn't begrudge him any happiness she might've shared with him. But as the years passed, I began to see her frozen in time. At first, she seemed to become ageless. And then, the fine lines began to disappear, the sagginess becoming taut and curved. Her years of laboring were falling away from her and soon, the arguments started. She was getting the sort of attention from all men that my brother must have lavished on her at night while I was away. And she liked it. They would have spats and he would take watch, unsettled, angry. Sometimes, he would forget to bring us fresh blood. Once, I was so starved I had to follow him to make sure he didn't neglect us.

He had killed a deer. But he had not drank. After I took my turn, I held his hand and sat with him. The wall had started to crumble. He was afraid she would leave us. He didn't know what she wanted any more. He was certain he'd never be able to give her enough. But I knew what he did not. Caroline had become addicted to the attention she received. And while at the time I did not understand how she was able to do it, she was regaining her youth, maintaining it through Maurice. I tread with care. It had helped him to talk some; it quieted some of the brewing storm. But the spats would happen, he would retreat, and I would comfort him. Little by little, he admitted what they had done together. The more contact with her he had, the more time seemed to turn backwards for her.

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We had to stop the lie of her being our mother...she became our elder sister which made all of us uncomfortable. But she quickly got over it. So much easier was it to play the role of elder guardian than poor, widowed mother with two children. She might be emancipated from us. I was afraid it would break Maurice. His powers were growing as were mine and his needs, they were growing too. I knew I had to do something. To keep my brother, I would need to break the bond between them. I would have to find a way to make him choose. His lover or his sister.

He choose Caroline and so I left him to her. We were apart for a year and a day. Our reunion was bittersweet. He found me in Fort Shaw, Montana, where I was helping a blind priest named Nathaniel minister to the natives there. It was 1887 and he wanted me to travel back East to St. Paul to clean up his mess, to undo what he had unleashed. Caroline had changed into something neither of us could've predicted. Maybe it was his fluids, his blood as he had begun to share that with her too. Maybe it was that something was lacking as neither of us were quite mature yet. It didn't matter. Enough had happened that he finally realized what she was and what, with my help, he needed to do.

We had to kill her, you see. We had to kill Maurice's first love. She had become a succubus.

Scribbled Notes from Case #13: Maurice

- How viral are vampire "fluids?" What properties of blood, sweat, saliva...healing, bonding? Effects on influence?
- What was L's relationship with Lucas? Why is she not talking about him much? Interest in courtesans?
- What big cities did the twins travel through at what times? Maybe can show migration path of European strains into No. America.
- How exactly did M try to turn Annabel? Methods vary among types/strains, blood sharing being most common. Perhaps she wasn't completely drained before she took his blood?
- How common is it for vampire masters to share with kindred how to turn?
- L's ability of intention seems to be more nature of her of her sharp perceptions, not telepathy. However, vampires tend to not have body language. Perhaps they do but it is so slight...can that observation be taught to a human?
- Where did L learn about the birds and the bees? Or M for that matter?
- Why was Caroline insistent on moving West? (Check Memento for any Caroline references.)
- Caroline's transformation: what does it suggest about M & L's strain?

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- *Are hybrid vamps possible? Blood-Soul, Soul-Sex, Blood-Sex? Can strains carry multiple types in them? nature versus nurture?*
- *How does one kill a succubus anyways!?*

Case #13 – Maurice: The End (As told by sister Lucy)

Maurice's first attempt to end his mistake left him with a broken jaw that by the time he'd found me still hadn't finished healing. By his admission, his own flesh had held the jawbone in place. He'd had to wrap his jaw to his head and it had healed too tight. So I had to break it again and wrap it correctly.

Caroline had a bevy of young, capable rail men to aid her and, well, even a vampire can be outnumbered. And Maurice has been foolish in allowing Caroline to marry a rail baron as a means to support them both. Coupled with her intense influence over the older baron, it had given her enough independent financial means that she had attempted to shut Maurice out. But several weeks later, she had crawled back to him all cajoling and seducing; she needed him to keep her young. When he'd refused until she'd left the baron, she slinked back to her mansion.

It hadn't taken long for the rumors of the beautiful, enchanting railway wife to be superseded by local whispers of young men missing. Her husband ailing, Maurice withholding, she had sought out others to fill her needs. When she'd returned to visit Maurice a month later, looking flush, hearty, and full of vengeance, she had delighted in telling him how surprised she'd been when she realized that when she was with these young men, they gifted their virility to her. She was now one to be worshipped and these men, all of them, treasured her and would give anything for her, including their very lives.

Maurice had underestimated her capacity to comprehend her own abilities and the speed with which she would harness her influence into a veritable army. He tried to threaten her, reason with her, and finally tried to reach her with his heart only to have her rip it asunder. He was horrified, heartbroken, and out of options.

And unfortunately, I didn't have any answers for him. I'd never heard of such a creature let alone understand how we had made her. I blame myself because we should never have mixed with humans so much. We had fooled ourselves into thinking anything good could come of it. And now, we were both left with the tattered remnants of those illusions.

Inspiration came from the most unlikely of sources. Brother Nathaniel, whom I had been assisting with the natives there, had managed to overhear our discourses. Imagine our surprise as he introduced himself as a member of the Order of the Mysteries, a military order aligned with the Catholic Church but predating it. He told us his mission was to tend to the sick, spread the word of

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Christ, but also to redeem evil where he could and if not, vanquish it. He was not alone. To fulfill his mission in the wilds of the West, he had needed to find those willing to assist and after so many years amongst many native peoples, he had found that while they may never come to accept Christ, they fought against evil; tricksters, spirits, and bad people. His two guides, Little Rain and Kokosik, both warriors in the local Blackfoot tribe, were willing to travel with us.

I'll spare you the horrid details of how we hunted her down. It was not dignified, efficient, or elegant. But between the five of us, we were able to end her unnatural long life in a cold stream at midnight. Which was lucky neither Maurice nor I could smell the blood or do anything about it all draining away in the frigid waters. While we'd hated what we knew we had to do, all the excitement of the hunt taught us we were not immune to our vampire heritage.

But that was the end of Caroline and a new beginning for Maurice and I. It took years to perfect and while we still prefer to flee or hide, we can fight if we have to. We've become quite good at it.

I tell you all this, Auntie, so you will hear me and know that I speak from truth and experience. This vampire of yours tonight, he is not to be trusted and not to be saved. He will be the death of you.

Things Lost Forever

Somewhere between the mention of the secret Christian order and the comment about blood flowing in a frigid stream, I start to cry. I think Lucy is caught up in memories, sifting through what details to tell me and what to omit that she fails to notice. But after she falls silent and the room is plunged into eerie silence, she lifts her sad eyes to me as I sniffle noisily and wipe my face.

"Auntie?"

It's the concussion. But it's more than that. I think I'd honestly thought that Maurice and Lucy wouldn't survive, hoped against all hope they would but in the end of things, thought that they would've perished, freed from their monstrous being to start fresh again with cleared souls. But the true is far worse. They've survived, scratched and crawled their way through this imperiled existence to be betrayed, to fail, to suffer heartbreak, loss, loneliness, isolation. All the things a guardian never wants for her charges and the knowledge of how they suffered alone feels me with unspeakable sorrow that unhinges me.

But it's more than that. I feel the walls of purpose tumbling down in the face of the most remote odds that I will ever make a difference. And at what unbelievable cost my small gains? My memory haunts me and I can't hold back the sorrow any longer.

I'm bawling as Lucy hurries over to me.

"Auntie, what is it?" She pulls me into her arms and I cry. Doubt, fear, regret...all these things have been kicked up like the dust after the first specs of rain. I can't speak; I can barely breathe. And how

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can I even tell her how her story about Maurice has coalesced with the story of my lost child? So many pieces of so many lives ripped from me and I barely feel connected to this one. Kaga warned me of this. Maybe this lifetime should be for prayer and penance, not for the same goals as before. Maybe I'm not ready to step forward in this lifetime. How can I help others if I can't find a reason within myself to do it?

The emptiness is threatening to swallow me whole.

"There, there, Auntie. We've become strong because of you. Because you taught us what was right and how to fight for it." She strokes my head as I rock back and forth. "I'm sorry I told you that horrible story. Things haven't all been bad. This thing with Maurice, it's new. And here you are, back when we need you most. But maybe this time, we can be there for you."

Her words are kind, meaningful, and supportive. But there's something lost in all of this that is terrible to behold. It's the loss of innocence and there's nothing anyone can do to get that back.

Concussion (from the MayoClinic.com)

Concussions — Comprehensive overview covers symptoms, causes and treatment of this common brain injury.

Definition

Concussions range in significance from minor to major, but they all share one common factor — they temporarily interfere with the way your brain works. They can affect memory, judgment, reflexes, speech, balance and coordination.

Usually caused by a blow to the head, concussions don't always involve a loss of consciousness. In fact, most people who have concussions never black out. Some people have had concussions and not even realized it.

Concussions are common, particularly if you play a contact sport such as football. But every concussion, no matter how mild, injures your brain. This injury needs time and rest to heal properly. Luckily, most concussions are mild and people usually recover fully.

Symptoms

The signs and symptoms of a concussion can be subtle and may not be immediately apparent. Symptoms can last for days, weeks or even longer.

The two most common concussion symptoms are confusion and amnesia. The amnesia, which may or may not be preceded by a loss of consciousness, almost always involves the loss of memory of the impact that caused the concussion.

Signs and symptoms of a concussion may include:

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Confusion
Amnesia
Headache
Dizziness
Ringing in the ears
Nausea or vomiting
Slurred speech
Fatigue

Some symptoms of concussions are not apparent until hours or days later. They include:

Memory or concentration problems
Sensitivity to light and noise
Sleep disturbances
Irritability
Depression

Sometimes, you have to call it a day

I awaken to a rattling of the doorknob and a squeak as the door swings open. I'm pinned under Lucy's rigor mortis weight. The bodies of some vampires become like marble when they become dormant. It's an ancient protection mechanism. Lucy, still being underdeveloped, only weighs as much as a wood carved statue. Oak, maybe. The room is dark except for the single desk lamp that Lucy had left on.

"Sophie," he calls as I struggle back from unconsciousness. "Shit!"

I feel the weight start to release me as Nick pulls Lucy off me, struggling with her form.

"What the Hell?" His grip slips and the way her foot pointed on the floor causes her to teeter over, leaving Nick only a second to get out of the way as Lucy thuds to the floor right beside Nick, maintaining her curved pose. Nick stares at her, her fangs barely peeking through her grimace.

"They're coming out of the woodwork! What the fuck!"

I try to sit up but only manage to prop myself up on a single elbow and rub my forehead. "Who are?"

Nick looks back at me, holding my gaze. "The vampires."

I sigh. This wasn't how I'd meant for him to find out. In fact, I would have preferred he never even know about Lucy. But it cannot be undone.

He gets up and comes over to me again, helping me slowly sit up.

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"Good thing I got the door sealed like you asked late yesterday." I nod and that, along with my sitting position, sends shuriken into every corner of my cranium. My head's pounding still. The calm from awakening has lasted all of 2 minutes before being brutally reacquainted with my concussion.

"Yes, indeed."

Nick sits next to me and I hear more than see him contemplate Lucy on the floor.

"She a new client?"

"An old friend."

"Why does she look like that?"

It's not really the first question I expect him to ask. In fact, if I had all my facilities, I'd be amazed at how calm he is. He's freaked but managing.

I try to see what he sees and confirm that blurry vision appears to be another sign of last night's troubles. It's coming and going of its own will.

"Like what?"

"Her face. It's all screwed up with her, uh, fangs poking out. Was she trying to bite you?"

"No." I squint and see the curve of her body. "I believe she was trying to balance herself as her mortis set in so she wouldn't crush me."

"Oh."

He pauses for a moment.

"I have no idea what any of that means."

"I know you don't, Nick. But for now, I need you to help me get her into one of the exam rooms. Away from any light or disturbance."

He stands up without another question. He looks down at her and then the room tunnels away for a brief moment. I don't completely go under but there's no way I can stand by myself.

He flicks her skin with his fingernail. "She fragile?"

"No, her skin will be tougher in this form. Why?"

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He grabs under her shoulders and starts to drag her. In between pulls, he says, "Because it's obvious you're going to be no help."

I try to nod but it causes me to lose a few moments again. It takes Nick about 20 minutes to get her into the last exam room and "secured," which simply means a lightproof sheet tucked all around her, the individual thermostat in the room set to 50 degrees. When he's done, he turns on the overhead light and he returns to kneel down in front of me. I haven't moved in those twenty minutes.

"How bad is it?" he asks me.

I drop my hand from my forehead.

He doesn't say anything as I struggle in vain to fix my eyes on his. A few moments later, I hear him stand up and call for a cab.

"I'm taking you to the emergency room," he explains after hanging up. "She'll be locked up as tight as a drum and I'll come back right before dusk to greet her."

I sigh. "Help me with this." I lift my talisman. "You can tell her you work for me."

A half hour later, Nick checks me into Overlake Hospital. It takes some explaining, the throat bruises, the badly bruised face, the concussion. I admit I was mugged. Within five minutes, two detectives are questioning me but I tell them I didn't see my assailant, it was too dark, I was grabbed from behind, my assistant found me in the office this morning. They seem disappointed. There have been several disappearances in the Bellevue area, including a body from the morgue. I'm not sure if Nick picks up on it but the UVA in the area is climbing to a critical level. As he leaves, I call the Crimson Kukri and leave a message for Maurice simply stating Lucy was safe and Nick needed protection.

It was all I could do before succumbing to waves of nausea and a splitting headache that the doctor wouldn't give me meds for.

Vampire Factbook: Excerpts

Protective Transformations

Vampires of differing types have developed latent ways of protecting themselves from threats, especially during their resting periods, by changing their form or being. Most of these methods are strictly legend or myth and have never been verified.

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Rigor Dormitus

Akin in humans to the stiffen of the body after death (Rigor Mortis), the vampire's body stiffens upon dormancy to the hardness and weight of wood or stone. Depending on the age/maturity of the vampire, the quality of the rigor becomes more significant. Younger vamps with this ability will harden to oak or mahogany while older vamps will harden to granite or even marble. The additional weight and stiffening makes vamps harder to move or attack, in some cases their bodies are indestructible in Dormitus form, protected even from sunlight.

Smoke or Mist

Seldom witnessed, this is likely due to the clouding effect rather than an actual physical transformation. Invisibility - Not previously documented, some indirect evidence has suggested that a vampire may be able to mask their existence, even from other vampires, as to become "invisible." It is not clear whether this is true invisibility or another example of influencing which allows the vampire to cloak their scent, appearance, and sounds from the target, whether it can be learned, and whether or not it must be targeted or can be environmentally applied.

Birds, Bats, or Flocks

While there have been no observed cases of vampires turning into an individual bat or bird, it was just recently observed of a vampire seeming to disappear into a flock of bats or crows. This may also be an illusion of clouding, prevalent with the Carpathian strain.

Wolves, Dogs, or other quadrupeds

Vampires do not transform into quadruped mammals. These creatures are more likely either shape shifters using the vampire form or mistaken werewolves.

While there is certain new evidence suggesting that vampires may have some slight abilities to alter their physical appearance (verification needed - see Lyles photo), it is generally believed that most reports of transformation are strictly the influence of the vampire on the human's perception. This can also be inclusive of some projecting abilities, where it seems like the vampire thought of or engaged in conversation is closer than possible, perhaps even standing in the same room, within reach when it is

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clearly not physically possible. Potential causes for this include overactive imagination, aural influence, or the clarity of modern VoIP technology.

Bogus Abilities

Like many of the undocumented Protective Transformations, legend and myth have ascribed a multitude of abilities to vampires over the centuries. The following list has been, so far, clearly discredited:

- Flight
- Telepathy
- Shimmering or sparkling appearance
- Immortality

The latter is tantamount to the vampire legend and clearly the most egregious falsehood. There are various ways in which vampires can be killed.

Ties that Bind

After a few hours trying to sleep, I finally call the nurse in about my headache. She steps out into the hallway for a moment and then opens the door a crack. She pauses, pursing her lips before speaking.

"You feel up to a phone call?"

"Yes."

"I'll see about something for your headache then. Be back in a few so you should keep it short."

The phone at my bedside rings and I pick it up.

"I was hoping they wouldn't trouble you."

"Well, frankly I'm surprised you haven't taken me off of your emergency contact list."

It's good to hear his voice and I instantly feel the same old wave of guilt for feeling this way. He deserves better. But the fact is I can't take him off the list. There's still Jasmine to think about and she, well, she is what forever ties us together.

"You ok? What happened?"

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"I'm fine. Just a concussion." I pause. "You know I won't tell you what happened. It's better this way."

"Yeah, you keep saying that." I can feel his tension through the phone. "What should I tell Jazz? I can't keep cover for you every time something happens."

"Put her on the phone."

"No. Way."

"You're right. You shouldn't have to cover for me. I've never asked you to. But you will not explain things to her as I would."

"That's because what you'll say is all crap and nonsense!" He catches himself immediately. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that."

"Yes you do."

"But it doesn't help. You're hurt. And I..."

"It's alright, Dan. You do mean it and I would rather you not lie. But you can't ask me to lie either. This is who I am."

I hear him sigh. Then, in a faraway voice so I know he is covering the phone, "Jazz? It's your..."

"Hi, Sophie!" Her voice is unmistakable. She must have picked up the other line.

"Hello, sweetie. Were you eavesdropping?"

"I got it, Daddy! You can hang up now."

I hear a soft click. No goodbye. No get better. I don't deserve it from him. I struggle with the guilt but I do not wish that what we were had never happened. A little girl back in Ohio stands as witness that life is bigger than any of us can know.

She whispers. "He's off now. I checked."

"How are you doing?"

"I liked the dress. But you don't need to send me those gifts. I love you anyways."

Nothing keeps the tears from falling. "I know, sweetheart. But I still like to think of you growing up like a normal little girl."

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"Like you were?"

I was. At least, I had thought so. I had once wanted to be a princess and get carried off by a knight on a gleaming white steed. I had even thought I'd convinced myself that Dan was that knight and that I could make him happy. But you can't make someone happy when they think everything you believe in, everything you are is "crap and nonsense."

"Ok, ok. Miss sassy mouth. You don't dare say things like that to your father, do you?"

"No. But he can tell I'm different. He just ignores it. For now." She is old beyond her years. But no memories...well, not yet. Hopefully not for a long long time. "You ok, Sophie? Daddy was really worried about you."

"I'm resting. I don't mean to make him worry."

"You can't stop him. He likes to worry about you. But you sound fine. Ooh, send me something from Seattle! Isn't that where that tower is?"

I laugh. She loves collecting from my travels. I'm not sure what is local flavor here but I'll have to get her something. "It's called the Space Needle and I will, honey." My throat clenches as waves of loneliness and yearning pour through me, through the phone. "I miss you, baby."

"I miss you too. Nite Nite, Mommy."

DJB: Memoirs, Volume 3: It's in the way you use it

It had been a few days after Morena's phone call, after I knew that another vampire had attacked her and Sophie, that I called a special meeting of Conclave. It was the first time I had done such a thing, taken such an active role in anything to do with Conclave besides seeking members out to clarify comments or opinions voiced.

I explained recent events, showing them the police interest in recent disappearances of a corpse from the morgue and a businessman. I even used Sophie...I mean, the Vampire Psychologist's UVA scale to impress upon Conclave how serious things were getting.

While the other vampire elders seemed agitated by events, wondering how things had so quickly changed, Valerian was strangely silent during their escalating debate. Should they send in the sanitation team? Or simply a spider team to collect information? Teng-Wen voiced the opinion that the region, which had always been under populated with our kind, was due a surge and a curate should be assigned immediately.

The dark, round room fell into quiet at the suggestion. Valerian, dressed in velvet black ceremonial robes, took a long, measured sip of his tea before setting the cup and saucer aside. He waved his

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servant Aubry forward, whispered a few words, and Aubry went to fetch more tea. He then cleared his throat for effect before speaking.

"Whenever, wherever she goes, vampires seem to congregate. It is nothing to be alarmed about."

Teng-Wen, our only Jiang-Shi in Conclave, a calculating and dangerous member, pursed his lips to contain a retort. Aubry returned with more tea and while Valerian busied himself with the newly refreshed cup, Teng-Wen spoke a careful crafted reply: "If this is so, perhaps it is time again to rid us of her unnatural influence. Only this time, we should seek ways to make it permanent."

Valerian shot a dark and glittery gaze at the other elder. "You presume to know of such a way? You have passed through death and know its secrets?"

Teng-Wen fell silent, knowing he had been outmaneuvered. But Valerian was not done with him.

"You do not know the deaths she has endured and yet, she rises again, like the Phoenix, the same and yet different, her memories somehow intact." He let out a single meek laugh. "More a cockroach, an irritant. Forgive me for overstating her importance. We have not seen her threat, even lifetime after lifetime. She is merely to be observed and who better than Jesper to do so."

Galscythe, one of the oldest, her age reaching almost into ancient, stepped forward. She seldom spoke, some thought because her mind was becoming too frail but no one would dare, in her presence, allow that thought breath. "It would be prudent to be sure this time. We've seen how a lone orphan can create a tide of blood."

Valerian sighed deeply. He didn't like to disagree with the others, didn't like agitation among the ranks. But he hadn't garnered as much respect within Conclave without a clear series of successes in navigating our kind through the modern age.

"I will not send any more of our kind into a were stronghold without knowing our proper action." He then raised his eyes to me. "I trust with guidance, Jesper can identify the problem and we can then discuss what proper action is required."

Galscythe stepped back lightly. Teng-Wen bowed in humbling agreement. The debate was over.

But there was no specific guidance I received from Valerian. When Conclave ended, he remained until the others left and then he too departed, with no further word to me on what he expected me to do.

So I put a call into Aubry, his servant. There was a question I needed answering before I proceeded. Generally, it is considered a break of manners to use one's vampire abilities against other Conclave vampires except in sanctioned combat. And by extension, servants and companions were due the same courtesy.

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"Hello?"

When Aubry answered the phone, I appeared standing there in the room just behind him. He heard me like a whisper in his mind, just below the creaks and moans of this ancient house on Na Příkopě.
"Hello, Aubry. What is the tea that your master takes?"

Dazed, he let his arm drop the phone from his ear. He pirouetted towards my presence. "Pine needle tea."

"Curious. Why does he take it?"

"It's a curative. To keep the balance."

As quickly as I had affected him, I released him, retracting my presence back through the phone line and spoke simply. "Valerian had no particular orders for me, eh, Aubry?"

"Oh, Mr. Jesper. No, he left no instructions for you except to say he appreciates the call, you are to report once you've made proper contact." He paused, as if trying to remember his instructions. My doing. He was still shaking off the cobwebs of my affecting him. "You haven't contacted her yet, have you?"

I thought of every manner of response, remembering his master's words at Conclave. And then I lied. "No, Aubry. Not yet."

"Well, then. I will tell my master so. Do you have any other message?"

"Thank you, Aubry, no. That's all."

I hung up. Pine needle tea contained high concentrations of Vitamin C. More than six regular lemons. Something told me there was again much more to my Vampire Psychologist than previously thought. I did not know the nature of her acquaintance with Valerian, the most powerful and influential member of our government, but she had made an impact. One worth risking the penalties of bad manners to uncover.

Vampires 101: Trust

My concussion rated fairly high in terms of damage done so I thankfully let myself be monitored for forty-eight hours. I fully understand it is more to give the detectives time to try and find some angle I might have on a body disappearing from the morgue than my injuries, no matter how serious. Why they suspect a connection with me, I don't know. I guess I have that sort of face.

Forty-eight hours in a hospital is a lot of downtime. I think about the detectives, Skovajsa, the blonde Nick has told me about...and Jesper. And Morena. I feel responsible for the attack, even if she

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may have ran into danger eventually. And one cannot take the knowledge of vampires back. Well, I can't, at any rate. Offhand, I know three vampires with enough power over the mind to do just that. Boy, it would be useful for her to know that too. And Nick too. Dangerous times for newbies.

It's time for a class. I start writing up the syllabus. After all, a class is what started me on this path in this lifetime. Dr. Kaga couldn't have known the connections his course on transcendental meditation would awaken the memories, enabling me to find the book. Which awakened more memories. Most not happy ones.

I text Nick with the cell phone he returned to me, ask him to get some things ready. I also ask him to go see Morena, request she at least talk with me. As I get his affirmative reply, I get another text.

I lied abt u today.

It's Jesper. I feel him again, this time standing near the window, not so close this time.

Why u do that? <SEND>

Don't think I know enough abt u yet.

Why did u tell Morena to follow me to protect me? <SEND>

Wanted u safe.

Why? <SEND>

Felt it was important.

Who are u reporting to abt me? <SEND>

Not sure I should tell u that yet.

I can't help u if u don't trust me. <SEND>

There are some things a vampire cannot tell.

Means there are some u can. <SEND>

Would u be willing to attend session? Assistant, unfort, has discovered who my clients are, puts him at risk not knowing basics. <SEND>

U don't have to say anything but I'd like u there to naysay any facts that have changed over my lifetimes.

I...

U know it's important. <SEND>

Knowing hasn't kept u out of rm 824 in Overlake Hospital.

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No. But it kept me out of morgue. <SEND>

**sigh* (I can feel him sighing as if it's through my mind.)*

Can we talk after your class?

That's what I intend yes. <SEND>

Is there something u need to talk about now? <SEND>

It can wait.

U know, u can contact me anytime. Like to think u felt comfortable doing that. <SEND>

I do. Would never presume to interfere with ur recovery otherwise.

Why have u? <SEND>

It seemed the thing to do, considering.

U're not to blame for my attacks. <SEND>

A surprised current runs through the room, as if I shocked him by reading his intentions. Then it dissipates, accepted.

I am transparent.

I've gotten pretty good reading vampires. <SEND>

Not so good to know I contacted u because I really look forward to seeing u again.

It is my turn to feel flustered and off-center. He laughs lightly.

You're blushing.

Yes. <SEND>

It seems I too have not lost all of my abilities to read humans.

So u'll come to the session? <SEND>

Yes. I will audit your class.

I feel his presence leave the room like the time lapse fading of white fragrant flowers and spices, now with a hint of citrus. First order of the syllabus: abilities of a vampire. Because one cannot teach trust.

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When you have a bad feeling about it...

"Hey pal, let me see some ID."

Nick Fujiyami stopped at the door of The Mystic tavern and turned to the bouncer. It was noon straight up and there were about four people in the whole establishment.

"You serious?" he stole a look at the bar to see the woman he was seeking out deliberately cleaning glasses in that way that suggested she was waiting to see what happened. Indeed, what did Nick think to do with 300 lbs of washed up ex-Husky football player barking at him. He patted his jacket pockets and then held up his empty hands. "Damn, think I left it on the banana boat I just got off."

Husky, obviously playing for the Islanders, chuckled and waved him on. Nick rolled his eyes. This job of his was certainly taking him to unfriendly climes of all types. He faced the bar and the ever-so-tall and raven-haired Latina still obviously ignoring his entrance. He let out a breath slow as he approached the bar. Sophie had mentioned her looks but, well, the Hawt factor of 10 was frankly absent in Sophie's remarks. Although, she had said, "Morena will be hard to miss." He pulled up a seat at the bar as casually and coolly as he could. Then he waited.

After a few minutes of her continuing to clean glasses, he decided to speak. Before the words got out, she answered him.

"Let me guess, you're the errand boy."

He smirked, not letting her see the feathers she'd ruffled. Being called a "boy" of any kind by a beautiful woman was a terrible start. Maybe silence would be golden. But her continued disregard rankled and unnerved him. And he wasn't one to keep his tongue when unnerved. "Can I get a beer?" He waited while she got him something out of the tap at a leisurely pace. Which worked out nicely as he enjoyed watching her saunter towards him and set the mug in front of him. "And I prefer the term *Executive Assistant*, thank you very much." He grabbed the beer and took a long draught, almost choking on it.

"What the hell is that?" he asked.

"PBR. I hear it's what all the hipsters are drinking nowadays."

Nick nearly gagged, drinking down half of it quickly. "After I finish this, let me buy you a real drink. I only drink this shit at Mama's Kitchen accompanied by a 5-alarm burrito."

Morena smiled. And he knew he was done for when she tossed her hair back while straightening to full height, putting her hands on her hips. "I suppose she sent you here to talk me out of leaving him."

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"Huh?" It took Nick a minute to figure it out what she meant. She definitely looked like she could handle herself. He got caught admiring her toned arms and she crossed them instead. "Oh, no, I'm supposed to talk you into a class."

"I'm a little old to be going back to school." And there it was. He finally made direct eye contact and she immediately looked away, started moving back down the bar. He was dismissed, without another thought. Normally, if that happened in a bar while he was out, he'd let it be. The Seattle girls were, um, tricky, at best. But this wasn't one of the bevy of Belltown bars and he wasn't looking to score a number. But as he was about to speak again, he saw her straighten, suddenly on alert, her hand sliding under the bar.

He turned a head to see two rather unpleasant looking thugs pushing Husky the doorman through the door, doubled over. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Morena's hand patting under the bar, searching for something that obviously wasn't there. "Fucking Frank," she swore under her breath.

The two men pushed Husky to the floor and kicked him for good riddance, one of them pointing a pistol at the bar's security. The front thug, dressed rather shabbily, addressed Morena. "Now, Miss Fourtenay, maybe you'd like to talk again about selling."

In the midst of vampires, monsters, and other things that go bump in the night, Nick had forgotten that sometimes, daytime was no less nice. He got a firm grip on his beer mug and waited to see what she'd do next. He really should stick to culinary school.

Do you bring a Cleaver to a Gun Fight?

"What the Hell do you want, Garber?" Morena barked. Considering that the thug in question had a gun pointed at her, Nick was stunned at her indignant tone.

The thug waved the pistol while his charming companion practiced squeezing the bouncer's throat with his cowboy boot. "Don't play dumb, bitch. Your uncle was an old-timer and got by but you, you're all sorts of wrong, trying to keep my associates from conducting their business here and abouts. That's un-American."

Nick saw how Morena's knuckles turned white as she held the edge of the bar. Her face turned completely calm, though, eyes went flat, with no emotion. That didn't seem at all good.

"This will be your last warning. Get out and never come back," she spoke, quietly, controlled.

Garber laughed, turned to his companion to mock her. It would be his first, albeit not last mistake.

Morena flipped over the bar, black leather stiletto boot flying in the air catching Garber directly in the face, even as he swung back to her.

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Nick used his five seconds of martial arts training and threw his beer mug at the other guy, who stumbled back for a second. It was all Husky needed to grab his leg and twist. The guy screamed in high octave.

The bullet hitting the bar two breaths from his shoulder brought Nick's attention back to Morena. She had grabbed Garber's arm and twisted his wrist so the gun finally fell away. A chop to the throat and a knee to the groin and he was moaning on the floor.

Sudden movement behind her caught Nick's eye just as something hard hit him from behind. Apparently, these guys had the local riffraff on retainer. Two former patrons sprang behind Morena just as some guy dressed like a chef stepped from a back room brandishing a meat cleaver. The other guy driving into Nick, he didn't know where he'd come from so Nick just fell forward, letting the guy's momentum cause him to crash into the bar headfirst. He wanted to check that the guy was down but the meat cleaver coming at him commanded attention and Nick couldn't keep his eyes off it. Was that a Messermeister?

Nick turned in Morena's direction, hoping he could maybe grab another stein from the bar.

In three efficient, effortless, and beautiful moves that probably had sacred names like "Slippery Serpent," "Tiger Claw," and "Monkey Nuts," she escaped one attacker and leveled him.

While Nick was transfixed, she turned toward the second attacker, dark hair sweeping back in super slow motion, and just as he thought the guy was going to bull rush her, she grabbed the man's shoulders and let his forward progress help her knee slam even harder into his solar plexus and he dropped like a laundry bag. A smelly, stinky laundry bag even a mother wouldn't touch. She turned her gaze on Nick and their eyes locked.

He was enjoying a moment of strange erotic euphoria when steel pricked his skin. Oh yeah. That.

"I'll cut you up, noodle boy."

Morena, looking more than an Amazon goddess than any video game would ever capture, froze. Her lip curled menacingly. She leaned forward, looking like she'd twisted an ankle, hand going down to her boot.

"Fuckin' Frank."

"Now, darlin', I know that blue blood ex-government agent in you won't let an innocent bystander die for something simple like this."

Nick wanted to be staring at Morena, but there was a small matter of a shiny, hard piece of stamped steel cutlery touching the back of his neck. He'd never been very good with aggression, the very reason why he'd kept to the kitchen instead of the alleys with the other boys. He'd done enough to

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get by and talked himself out of most disagreements before things turned physical. And being able to bring a bowl of udon as apology for whatever imagined offense didn't hurt his charm.

It was because of all those hours honing his craft in his family's restaurant that Nick knew the weight and balance of a meat cleaver, no matter how sharp, would require a good swing to do any real damage. So he closed his eyes as the metal prick fell away, sank forward a little, and sucked in his breath before readying himself to make the dumbest move of his life.

Bang. Thud. Clatter.

He opened his eyes and Fuckin' Frank lay in a heap on the floor, his cleaver next to him. He had blood starting to pool just below his shoulder.

Morena stepped over Garber and picked up his gun while holding her small pistol ready. As he looked up at her, holding his wrist, she kicked him unconscious with her shiny boot. She put the safety on the gun, checked it, and then put it in her waistband before tossing him a look.

It was almost with a feral grin that she said, "Class is over."

Nick swore then and there, he was in love.

"Fat lot of help you were."

Or maybe just lust.

"I ducked."

She kneeled down to help Husky, got him sitting up. Nick was thankful; she seemed not to have heard the first post-adrenaline thing that had popped out of his dazed mind. When she got Husky into a chair, a police officer came running in, took ten seconds assessing the situation, and then shook his head. "Ah, Morena, I'll call it in."

Nick touched the back of his neck where the skin had been sliced open. It was bleeding a lot more than he expected. He put a hand on the bar and sank back onto the bar stool. Another cop filed in and Morena wasted no time handing him Garber's gun and pointing to him on the floor. She then handed over her small pistol he supposed to avoid any misconceptions. She then turned toward him and sauntered over.

"Well, just so happens, you happen to duck very well. You gave me a clean shot."

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Huddle Up

My early life in Ohio exemplified middle America. Girl Scouts, church potlucks, barn dances. I was even a cheerleader. I put on a brave face but I messed up various cheers paying too much attention to Dan getting hammered on a play. I hated to watch but didn't feel I had a choice. I was his girl, I wore his varsity jacket, I had to make a show of supporting him.

Once, during a cold wintery game, our quarterback got knocked back into last Thursday. Dan, who normally played tight end, filled in as backup quarterback since our school was barely big enough to field a team. He called the team to huddle up. They were down by 14 late in the fourth quarter. It was -29 degrees wind chill with flurries. Winning seemed out of reach. From the sidelines, the crowd watched the weary players crowd around Dan as he took a knee in the midst of them. By the time they yelled "Break!" in unison, infused with courage and determination from somewhere unknown, inspired by Dan's words, they anxiously lined up for the 4th and 4 play with 4:37 left on the clock.

Dan, looking like a steely general leading his team, hiked the ball, faked a handoff and did a quarterback keeper, running around the end, breaking a tackle, getting an awesome block from his receiver, and went in for a touchdown. Fired up by the score, the team rallied to tie the game and win in OT. As a junior, it solidified Dan as a high school legend and we both rode that legacy through the rest of our school days. We celebrated that night with the most inspired sex we'd ever had (or would ever have).

When I asked Dan years later what it was he said to the team to get everyone to move in such perfect concert to free the line for his run, he shrugged and said, "I just told them the truth. That as individual players, we were outmatched and didn't have a chance. But for that play, we all knew exactly what we needed to do and for one play, if we acted in concert, with full knowledge and complete commitment, we could have each other's backs and go down fighting...together...like brothers, like family."

He hadn't seem very impressed with it. This was after years of disappointments and family strife had robbed him of much of the steeliness that had made me fall for him in a life that never felt my own. I wanted to be around him because he seemed to have a plan and felt like he'd have my back. When he'd finished telling me about his little speech, he looked up to find me crying. I was holding our baby Jasmine and tears were streaming down my face. He asked me what could possibly be a matter.

I didn't have the nerve to tell him that he'd lost his family, lost his team to have his back, not just because of life's twists and turns, but mainly because along the way, he'd lost all vision that there could be another way out, that there could be a way to score, that even in going down with a fight, there was something of a victory.

I buzz the nurse and ask her to bring me writing materials. I'm scheduled for release in the morning and I haven't any time to lose. I need to write down the plan. I have players in the wings unaware of

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the game they are playing. And I desperately need someone to have my back. The twins, Morena, Nick, maybe even Jesper....all needing me to have the vision and draw up the game plan. Things could spiral out of control if I didn't do what I do best, assess the situation, pull it all together, draw up the play, and execute. So many lifetimes, ripping pages out of the playbook because I didn't want to put others in harm's way, didn't want the team. But now, whether I like it or not, I can't do it alone and others are in danger.

This time, it is time to play in concert, everyone will need to do their best, fulfill their role.

And this time, I will be ready.

3 Weeks From Now

All the signs seemed against them as the frantic group drove under the cover of morning's last darkness to the relative safety of the deli. It was Sunday, normally light on morning traffic except for this morning, a dawn-breaker marathon for some new en vogue health cause kept all the main surface streets in downtown Bellevue clogged. For the last few days, the Pacific Northwest had been socked in by morning fog and dark grey afternoon skies but this morning, the fog was lifting early, forcing one passenger even deeper under his hooded cloak. It was if the universe was trying to have its say with all these impediments.

And as for the blood, it seemed to keep spilling out of everywhere, regardless of what they tried. By the time they cleared the last stoplight and parked behind the old building, the interior of the Range Rover was soaked red and dawn was breaking through the wispy clouds.

It was going to be a beautiful day in Seattle.

Nick sprang in through the front door of the Deli, pulling down all the shades, making it as dark as he could. Jesper, the vampire, entered next, carrying his bloody burden while Morena trotted along beside him, flipping the deep hood of his cloak back once inside so he could see where he was going.

"Nick, clean towels or sheets, anything you can find. These are soaked," Morena called to him.

He nodded as he watched Jesper pick a clean Formica table to lay Sophie down on. He watched it as if removed from reality, like it was a movie. It was the beast that craved and drank blood, carrying a helpless woman seemingly bathed in it but making no move to devour her. Quite the contrary, Jesper laid her gently down, as if she weighed as much as a feather, his hand cradling her head until it gently met the table. He took his hands away then tore his cloak off, bundled it up, and again lifted her head carefully to lay the cloak underneath.

"Nick," Morena called.

"Right."

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Nick hurried into the back, noticing as he rushed past that Sophie's book, the *Memento*, had somehow come to sit on the deli counter, near the cash register. He couldn't remember how it had gotten there but he only spared a thought for it. He needed linens. As he heard behind him the sounds of Sophie's gurgled breathing, he knew he needed lots of them.

Jesper took a step back to let Morena take a look. She ripped open the leather jacket that was holding their makeshift dressings in and gasped at the puddle of blood already forming on top of the wading. She started to peel the drenched dressings off, revealing Sophie's bare stomach that was ruined by claw and bite marks. It looked as her stomach had simply been torn away.

Jesper croaked, "Why is there so much blood?"

"I don't know. They ripped open some arteries." Morena tried to apply pressure while waiting for the clean dressings but there was nothing to apply pressure too. Her innards, they seemed to be simply gone.

Jesper didn't pose his question again. Morena had clearly not understood him. He was not new to seeing traumatic injuries of this sort inflicted by all sorts of creatures. But that her attackers had left her mostly intact, he puzzled over. He'd noticed earlier the scratch to her neck. But other than that and her ruined torso, she was in one piece.

Not the way of most hungry packs. Nor the way of hungry covens looking for a meal to let so much blood go spilled, wasted. No, this was some sort of message. This method of ripping her open meant something to him. He struggled to understand it, to take responsibility for it.

Nick arrived back, arms full of the morning's fresh laundry in the form of table cloths, tea towels, and napkins. He passed them one by one to Morena as she repacked the barren inside of Sophie's torso with them.

"She's bleeding to death," he said.

Sophie again struggled to breathe. It was the only sound they'd heard from her as she lay mostly still.

"More likely, she's drowning in her own blood," Morena corrected him.

Jesper felt the truth tugging at him and it drew him forward with a purpose only to be met with the Kukri held to his throat. He couldn't remember Morena having it in her hand but he realized she must have had it available all along. Just in case.

"You try to drain her and you'll end up killing her more quickly."

Jesper looked down into her determined face.

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"What?" Nick asked, not understanding.

Jesper continued to look. And listen. They could all hear Sophie's gurgling breath, her gasps for air. And see. They could all see her utter lack of movement. At the very least, her back was broken even if her spine was not entirely severed.

He saw the determination in Morena's eyes begin to crumble as the wheezing and gurgling slowed.

She dropped her hand, turned back to Sophie. "I just don't know what to do. Nick, maybe some of that styptic powder. Under the counter."

Nick's thoughts were grinding to a halt. He was stuck on the last moment when he'd perceived Morena treat Jesper more like foe than friend. What was that? What did that mean?

"Nick, the styptic!" Morena shouted, louder than she needed.

Nick moved, vaguely conscious of his body going back to the deli counter and searching underneath until his hands found the jar of powder. Something was happening and he couldn't get his mind around it. He wasn't a fighter, he'd never do in the military, and here, his boss, his friend was bleeding out on the table of her own deli. Her friends were seemingly squaring off. What was happening to his world? Why couldn't he think through this fog in his mind?

Jesper could tell Morena would not look him in the eyes again. She had her back to him; her resolve devastated by each struggling breath. It had been her call to avoid the emergency room, even when Jesper had begged they go without him. But he trusted her so had let Morena decide. And she knew that these injuries were worse than they'd suspected. They had all assumed she'd endured a claw attack, not that she had been eviscerated.

He put a gentle but firm hand on her shoulder, felt her tremble. It wasn't fair of him, using his touch link with her to move her out of his way, but he could no longer rely on her. He folded back the collar of Sophie's jacket to look at her grazed neck. As he leaned down to her, the tears formed. No sobs. No cries. Not even a shred of emotion. But still, the water pooled in his eyes and rolled off his face, onto her neck.

Sophie's eyes opened for the first time in a long while. She saw him leaning over her. She tried to shake her head.

"No," she croaked.

"I cannot let you die," he said simply, his other arm reaching over to her other shoulder, his hand creeping under her neck.

Morena shook her head, horrified. The cries and panic were building in her but for the moment, she seemed unable to move.

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"I don't know what to do. Her injuries...she's been ripped open."

"I can save her," Jesper said, eyes locked with Sophie's. This was exactly what he'd wanted for so long. Somehow, there was no victory in them arriving at this place in this way. He'd thought of it less and less over the months, but it had always involved a candlelit dinner of some sort, quietly holding hands in some dark but splendid place, maybe a mountain top, and always, always, her loving eyes asking him to do it.

Her eyes were loving but denying.

"No, you can't." She swallowed, her voice just a hair stronger. "Get the Book."

"No," he protested.

It was the old argument over again. Even here and now, when she needed him most, when everything he was he could finally lay at her feet to deliver her from certain death, she pushed it all away. He couldn't find the anger at this point. Only the horror of time running out freezing whatever ran through his veins.

Nick stood up, hearing the mention of the Book and somehow, instead of the jar of Styptic powder in his hand, he found he had taken up the Book, as if it had driven him by its own will. He remained stunned and lethargic. Sophie kept meaning to tell him everything about the Book but there was always some other thing to teach him, tell him, something so much more urgent in the world he now found himself moving in. But he'd spent long laborious hours with the Book. She'd asked him to read it, not to transpose it but it had seemed so foolish not to, if it was so important to her. Paper was so fragile, so susceptible to the elements.

The leather-bound tome with pages discolored and aged from seemingly the very beginning of time was monstrous in size. Some eight inches thick with vellum paper, it resembled more an ancient cookbook than the life and times of Sophie Quinn. Or lives and times, he guessed would be more accurate.

"Here it is," Nick spoke, hurried back over, knowing it was the most important thing that he get her the Book. As he tried to give it to her, she pushed it towards Jesper.

"Keep it safe," she whispered. "... so I can remember."

"I will not do it."

Her will seemingly giving her strength, clearing some of the clutter from her voice, she insisted, "It's the only way I can find you."

He rose up, as if in protest, tears still dropping from his eyes, all over her. "I cannot wait for you again."

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As if awoken from a daze, Morena looked around her. "Nick, the powder."

Nick looked at her, agitated, "It's no use."

The cobwebs cleared from Morena's mind and here it was, her good friend, bleeding to death in front of her. And she had been the one that had made the call to avoid the emergency room and all its dangerous questions and suspicions. What had she done?

"I don't know what else to do."

Nick could see it was breaking Morena apart and just as suddenly as the will of the Book had imposed itself on him, he felt it free him. He pushed the Book against Jesper's chest, blocking his view of Sophie.

"Take it," Nick insisted.

Jesper didn't need to see Sophie's eyes to know she would never be with him again. They had skirted around the inevitable for months now. To be together, he needed to end his vampire life or she needed to embrace it. But she believed he would be forgiven, that he would return to the path if he ended his soul's unnaturally long existence in this form. That it might take more lifetimes but that they would meet again. And be together.

But those were her beliefs. He knew only fear and ultimate doubt when he thought about gods or religion. All there was in this life was what he had now. He had managed to make the most of what he'd been given. He'd begun a fearful, stupid youth worlds away. He couldn't relive it all. He couldn't believe that by good deeds alone fortune would shine on him and give her back to him yet again.

He'd done much in this long, long existence, much of it against any human or spiritual laws or rules. How she could pretend that any god she believed in would not deliver her into Heaven long before pardoning him from Hell had, at one point, amused him. Now it simply brought the horror of this moment into true fruition.

"Take it," Nick repeated, with much more force. Morena was falling apart by the second. He needed to comfort her. He needed to tend to the living. It was what Sophie had always told him he was best at.

Jesper looked down at the tome that was his enemy and gingerly took it from his young human friend, although he knew that Nick had no clue what that simple act meant. He held it tight against his chest. He would end his fight with it. He would accept the result.

His taking of the Book allowed Nick to move around behind him, put his arm around Morena, let her collapse against his shoulder, covering her face with her hands. She had always been strong, through everything. It was her turn to be vulnerable, to need comfort.

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Jesper looked down at Sophie and saw her eyes shining. "You cannot ask this of me."

She smiled up at him. Her innards ripped apart, a terrible secret between them that caused this vicious attack, and the Book that spoke of their eternal separation, and she smiled up at him. There even seemed to be some color back in her cheeks.

"The only way to save us both is to let me go."

She believed it so completely, he almost believed her.

He looked her over, his eyes having cleared for a moment. He pulled back the linens Morena had tried in vain to staunch the bleeding with and watched as blood flowed anew. His eyes watered again as he leaned over to inspect her ruin. It was clearer to him now what they had been after by how low the original attack had been and how far back into her abdomen they had dug.

And the horror of what they had done to her because of him shook all hesitation and regret from his entire being even as the teardrops fell over her again. She had no idea what they'd both lost.

"You have to promise me."

He must have paused for too long. She reached out her hand, grabbed at his arm.

"Love, please let me go."

Jesper moved his head back to her face, brushed her cheek just as her eyes rolled back into her head, body beginning to quake with seizures. He gripped her shoulders hard to hold her down.

"Don't worry. I'll save us both."

Jesper kissed Sophie's cheek as she suddenly went still, air leaking out of her mouth. His eyes suddenly cleared of moisture and he straightened stiffly. Without a look to Nick and Morena, he knew that their human senses would take many seconds more to realize, rationalize Sophie's end and it was the very time he needed. Before they blinked aware, he had moved to stand before the front door of the deli, clutching the Book against his chest.

"Sophie? Sophie? Oh no!"

Jesper heard rather than actually saw Morena grab at Sophie and begin to shake her as Nick tried to hold Morena back. But none of that mattered now. He'd promised to save her, even if he had not spoken the words. But he knew what he now must do was not what she had meant.

He stepped to the front door, aware of the beautiful sunny morning beyond it trying to leak in through the door's edges, and took the doorknob in hand. In a millisecond, he was through the door, standing on the front steps before Nick and Morena had even registered that Sophie was gone.

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But as the front door slammed shut behind him, Morena suddenly became aware. A shift in her thoughts, something that had been muddling them suddenly dropped and her senses sharpened. She didn't need to understand what happened before. She just knew. She couldn't say how. But she knew.

"No!" she breathed. She turned toward the front door, moving as quickly as she could before Nick even registered the sound.

Outside, the air was chilled. Jesper blinked up into the first sun he had seen firsthand in centuries, feeling the sun's light, a powerful burning roar somehow captured within his skin. He began to glow. Blinking up into the light, his eyes surprised him with how clearly he could see the sun, as if it hung just above his reach. So close he could touch it. So strange that it would be the last thing he ever saw, gaseous flames in such grand detail. He patted the Book, wishing he could hurt, damage whatever soul was kept in the inanimate object but even that rage was gone and all was acceptance as he realized there was no shame in this end. He did it for her. He remembered her smile just as he let go of any resistance left within him to his fate.

Morena had almost made it to the door as outside, Jesper's body, the glow becoming white hot and brilliant, exploded into a giant fireball, consuming all of him and the Book. The explosion blew the front door into a shower of glass and fire, shaking the building and triggering the brand newly installed sprinkler system to flood the deli with 20 gallons of water in 10 seconds.

In the street, all that was left was a pile of ash and a few scattered burning pages. Both the Book and the vampire who had gifted it to his beloved many moons before were no more.

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire...

- Robert Frost, "Fire and Ice"

Considering I've perished more than twice and have recollections of it all, I have a pretty good opinion that the odds on fire are pretty good. But this isn't the end. And it's definitely not the beginning. But sometimes the middle of the story tells you more of what you need to know to understand all the rest.

And so a new book begins...

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Class is in Session

Whatever expectations I had in seeing Jesper the vampire again, he certainly shattered them. First, he was exactly on time. To the dot. Secondly, he was taller than remembered. Much taller. And it unnerved me just as much as his charcoal grey knit turtleneck that his physique seemed to be trying to tear itself out of.

Dumbfounded is I think the exact word to describe me standing in the doorway, staring up and up at him.

“Ah, Miss Quinn, uh Sophie. I hope I’m not late.”

Shook my head mutely.

“Well, I do like to be punctual.” Nearly rakish smile suddenly muffled into sheepishness as he laughed.

Nod my head slowly.

“Just a little vampire humor. Break the ice.”

“Uh-huh.”

Still standing in the doorway, he let his eyes peer in through the halfway opened door I still barred him from entering. “Look, Sophie, I would like to apologize to Morena personally, although how she would ever agree to see me again, I have no....”

Morena opened the door wide behind me. I just stared. He **was** taller, wasn’t he? And his hair, was it always so golden? What color were his eyes, blue, green, I couldn’t quite remember? His voice....aaaarghhhh!!! Frustrating, this damn attraction.

“Hello, Jesper, good of you to come,” Morena said, without any such distraction.

“Morena,” he said surprised. “I know I have a lot of explaining to do...”

She kicked the door wider, “Then come explain it to us.” She then turned on her heel and heading back to the far wall, cross her arms and leaning a shoulder against it, daring him to enter.

He turned back to me. “Will you invite me in?”

Our gaze met and suddenly he knew that I knew that invitations aside, any vampire could walk into any home unbidden. And that awareness prompted the corner of his mouth to turn up. He was testing and teasing me.

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"Oh, come on in." I managed, now turning surly from wanting to do something so entirely different with him at this moment.

As he glided by me, he dropped his mouth near my ear and whispered, "Is it right to keep that one to ourselves?"

He was right of course and his reminding me of the reason I had gathered all us together at my office worked like throwing ice water with fire sand on me. Time to get my head back in the game and go to work.

But before I closed the door behind him, my attention was draw for a moment by a cacophony of birds in the sky: several starlings overhead were badgering a bald eagle. Yeah, the national symbol bald eagle. It was the first one I could remember seeing...in any lifetime. And it seemed to be quite harangued by the inky black birds. Whether a dispute over territory or food, the eagle seemed to be moving off to fight another day.

I shut the door behind me and looked over this motley crew. Morena, leaning against the wall and trying very hard not to look at Jesper. Nick, sitting on the settee with a laptop, ready to take notes. Jesper the vampire, who took in every corner of the room before leaning back against my desk.

I walked to the whiteboard we'd put up in the front of the room and took up a marker, just to have something to grip. "First off, vampires do not require your permission to enter a place."

Nick sagged, "Oh, really?" He started typing frantically. "I was kinda hoping that one was true." He threw a spurious look at Jesper but said nothing else.

Jesper folded his arms and revealed more well-defined guns than I'd previously noticed. Biceps were a failing of mine. I took the cap off and wrote on the board, stabbing it as I did. Something was different about him like I hadn't quite met him before. It was bugging me that I couldn't figure it out.

I turned toward him with the question in my throat but paused. Wouldn't Morena notice too? I mean, she'd been with him for longer than I. I mean, *been* with him. A-hum. I felt my face flush.

"Yes?" he asked since I was staring right at him.

"Would you like to say something before we begin?"

"Um, no. Let's just see where this leads." His face became suddenly impassive and I could tell the guard was going back up. His arms tightened, his neck muscles twitched in alert. So strange how he'd gone from totally relaxed to alert mode. When I looked back at the others, his eyes did another scan of the room, as if he sensed something. But nothing was there and he settled his eyes on Morena for a brief moment for returning them back to me.

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Senses. Perfect place to start.

"First off, it is true that vampire senses are sharper than almost any other creature."

Nick typed and then stopped. "Wait, there are other kinds of creatures?" There was an edge of panic there.

Jesper shook his head once. "You have no idea."

"Nick. Focus."

"Sorry." He thought for a moment. "So what, like, hearing, seeing...smelling?"

"You might want to have a little less mirin in your udon," Jesper suggested.

Nick didn't blink. "Yeah, it was too salty too. I need to talk to Khang about that...Wait, you can tell I had udon? That was two days ago! You shitting me?"

"He can smell it in your skin, your blood," I explained.

Morena and Nick looked ready to bolt. I needed to bring this back a piece. Jesper was a particularly old vampire and very special...in many ways. Using him as a prime example would just not do, in any regard.

"Not all vampires have senses that...sharp..."

"Or discerning..." he added, causing me to throw him a glare. He was preening over there, like some high school jock showing off his letterman jacket.

"But these are the basics you need to always remember so you don't ever try to, well, trick a vampire. He will be able to sense it."

"Not to mention the fact it's just rude," Jesper added for color.

Morena, who had started biting her lip, looked like she wanted to say something.

"Morena? A question?"

It drew Jesper's attention. She tossed her eyes to him then back at me, uncertain. "What...what about healing?"

Jesper's head turned back around but showed his displeasure. He and I had not yet discussed the vampire attacks I'd suffered and as far as he knew, Morena had not been harmed. I think the simple

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fact that he hadn't approached her sniffing like a guard dog showed that the twins were able to mask their smells and auras quite effectively.

I ignored him. "Vampires are difficult to injure. But I don't want to start there. That's not the point of this session. I know of all this may seem unimaginable, overwhelming, and frightening. And you need to know what you're dealing with. But not to fight back, not to injure, but to keep yourselves out of those situations. Most vampires are hard to provoke because using their abilities makes them vulnerable to disclosure and they prefer to stay hidden."

Morena shook her head violently.

"I know it may be hard to believe but if you don't walk into their lairs, if you avoid them, if you deal straight-forward with them, like you would a bear or a tiger in their element, you can stay safe. And that's what I want. I want you all to know enough to be able to avoid confrontations."

Jesper looked even more uncomfortable, his eyes shifting around, but his body was completely still. I should have known this class would've had this reaction on him. Unsettling to hear yourself described like a wild animal.

Morena and Nick looked unconvinced. "Ok, some basics. Let's cover what vampires **can't** do. There's actually quite a lot that has been ascribed to them that's false. Invisibility, turning into a bat, flight..."

Jesper perked up.

"What?" I asked.

"Oh nothing. Just...interesting...that last bit."

Then his lips curled in a smile. I crossed my arms, annoyed.

"If you've got something to add, please, go right ahead."

"I didn't say a word."

"Vampires can't fly."

"Yes, you've made that abundantly clear." I couldn't put my finger on Jesper's behavior. He seemed bemused by my vamp facts, but every so often, he'd obviously stretch out his senses and go still as a statue, as if picking up a threat. But right now, there was no threat, not exactly. His eyes were boring into me. And they were starting to glow.

"Oh, shit."

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He unfolded his arms, dropped his smile and took a step towards me. "What?"

He was standing facing away from the others, luckily. When I began to shake my head, my mouth falling open at his eyes changing color, he suddenly was at my side, his arm reaching out for mine, concern all over his face. I'm sure he meant to lightly grasp my arm to force me to look at him, nothing intended. But that's not what the murder of crows that suddenly descended on him thought he intended.

"Get away from her, you basilisk fuck!"

Vampire Practicum

Lucy spat as she materialized in mid-kick, wielding a sharpened spear, aiming it right for Jesper's heart.

I'd like to be able to describe firsthand what a well-trained, well-motivated Carpathian half vampire looked like attacking a 500 plus year-old vampire of questionable origins and mysterious new issues but I didn't actually see anything. Best I can figure, Lucy attacked, Jesper stepped to while pushing me back out of the way, and the next thing I saw was Lucy flat on her back on the floor, missing her weapon.

I think I yelled, "Don't hurt her! She's one of mine."

I finally saw what manner of weapon it was when Jesper turned back towards me. It was a gleaming silver short spear two feet of which were sticking out of Jesper's chest.

"One of your what?" he asked, voice clearly elevated but strangely, much less strained than expected. What with a silver spear sticking out of his chest and the vampire girl that attacked him doing a flip up from prone like I'd seen in many Jet Li films.

Depending on the vamp, wooden stakes may or may not do anything at all but huge holes in one's chest, that normally slows a guy down, at least for a bit. Jesper turned as if it were nothing; grabbed it with one hand, ripped it out, and swung it in front of him. Not at the advancing Lucy, I might add, just in front of him to ward her off. Then he threw it on the floor.

She kept moving, her face all fanged out, reached behind her back and tumbling for the spear, while Jesper moved to stay in between us. The movements were just blurs to me most of the time, but time started to slow down, making their actions more distinct.

It wasn't some special ability I'd been granted; it was the adrenaline pumping through my body, making everything run in slow motion. Unfortunately, I was in slow motion too. By the time I got to speak again, Lucy had resumed her attack with spear in right hand, a new strangely bent long bladed and very shiny shorter weapon in her left. A kukri.

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The sense of profound dread settled over me like a oppressive cloud. I couldn't allow that weapon to touch Jesper. Somehow, I just knew it. Just at this point, maybe six seconds into things, Morena made her first move, reaching behind her back for her gun. But I knew by the time she drew it, this might very well be over. Class turns into Practicum just like that. SNAP! Nick, thankfully, had flipped over the back of the settee to hide this one out. Good kid. Smart too. He knows better than to take up a profession without skills. But he was throwing a look towards Morena, one I'd take no time deciphering later, and was clearly going to head her way. Crap!

I needed to end this. Now.

Jesper was, as he should be, one step ahead of me. In Vox Compulsum, he commanded, "*Stand down.*"

Nick and Morena froze in that unnatural way when their bodies and minds have been disjointed from action. They wouldn't fall over, merely powerless to do anything. For a moment, I had thought his plan had backfired as Lucy pushed through the Vox as if it were nothing. Later I would get it: He meant it to be broadband, to catch everyone in the room, even me, especially in the event anyone else, namely human, thought they should get in the middle of two vamps fighting it out. 'Cause that would be stupid. Sign me up.

But for some reason, Lucy was unaffected and I, well, Jesper hadn't known the Vox didn't work on me either.

I scrambled across the floor, trying to find my legs and then my feet, all of which was taking too long. Strangely, Lucy and Jesper dodged and parried like matched sets, he could obviously overpower her at any moment but she was just capable enough to keep him from disarming or grappling her.

And it was frustrating him. I had to help.

"Lucy! Stop! He's a friend!"

I wasn't exactly sure of the sentiment but at this moment, *Friend* might have way more weight than *Patient*. Especially given my current client list. Will all the crazed vampires in the Seattle metropolitan area please stand up and be counted?

Lucy ignored me as if she'd heard not a word. She feinted and whirled a spin kick at Jesper's chest, catching him off-guard because of his injury. She must have seen him favoring just enough. But I didn't have time to be impressed. The one good thing about how good a fight she put up was it forced Jesper back towards me, by which point I could stand.

I felt rather than saw Jesper sense this, this feeling of alarm coursing through him (was it flowing through me too?), dividing his attention just as the spear came in again. He turned toward me, I think to again get me out of the way, felt the spear puncture his chest again, thought better of

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pushing me, and focused all his energy on Lucy, slamming her with both palms, keeping the spear from penetrating further. He hadn't had the time to pull his punch and Lucy went flying.

She crashed into the bookcase next to Nick's leaning body, then disappeared in a poof of black smoke. Jesper's command would not let Nick get out of the way. Two entire shelves of books went flying and hit him, dropping him in a heap to the floor.

I finally was going to get my chance to break this up. Jesper moved his head for an instant to me and I saw his eyes were glowing with that strange amber light again. I hesitated. Something tugged at a memory. Distant sands, mosaic tiles, strong coffee, call to prayers. I stepped toward him.

He hesitated too, too long to prepare a more subtle defense against the sudden reappearance of crows solidifying into a two handed swipe with the kukri. I know what it looked like to see death through decapitation flying on glossy raven wings because I was standing right in front of it.

"Neilza!"

Behind me, I felt rather than saw light, a wave of it, carried almost like Vox Compulsum, crash into me flowing all around me and hitting Lucy wherever I didn't give her cover. The force of the strange light smacked me hard into her and instead of my normal fading black circle of consciousness, this time light seemed to burn me up from the outside in. All the while my neck at the base of my throat was burning.

I closed my eyes with the impact and felt dark, cold sand between my fingers, underneath my nails as I dug. Then everything went familiarly black.

What the Eyes Can't See

I didn't pass out this time. Things had just gone dark. Bully for me. I felt my eyes blinking, but I couldn't see anything. I only heard a muffled scream, smelled something burning, and the scuffling of shoes. Beneath, I felt a body, presumably Lucy's, struggling against me. Just as I was rolling off of her, hands grabbed me firmly and I was clutched to a very warm, firm chest.

A collective gasp and a whimpering.

"Is everyone ok?" I called out, loudly, over compensating for my impairment.

No one spoke and there was silence for a breath as a thumb and forefinger cupped my chin and gently pulled my head back. My eyes followed the movement although they still saw nothing. I was blinking a lot, my eyes watering. Instead of fighting the position my head had been moved to, I relaxed into it. I felt strangely comforted where I was, on the floor, in this warm embrace. It must have been Nick and I put my hand out to pat his chest in thanks.

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Part of my hand slide into a strange depression that was slick with something. My hand didn't recoil from it, moved up along a throat, thumb reaching up until, Ouch! Something pricked it.

I brought my hand back, was about to put my pricked thumb into my mouth when a vice-like grip grabbed my arm. At the same time, a low, menacing ringing began in my ears.

"Don't," I heard Lucy say. Her voice sounded strained and she was panting.

"What's going on?" I asked, confused. "Someone tell me."

Then the fog over my eyes started to lift and I was staring up into Jesper's worried face. His fangs were still exposed; it was what I had pricked my thumb on. At first, it made sense to me that Lucy warn me from putting my pricked thumb in my mouth. Many vampires excrete anti-coagulant and paralyzing agents in their saliva, sometimes in massive doses. But as I took in more of my immediate surroundings, I realized she hadn't been talking to me.

With his fangs extended (I'm not sure how fully), pushing just over his bottom lip, holding onto me after just pricking my thumb, Lucy had moved over to us, grabbed my hand, and had the kukri in hand, ready to deliver a killing blow to Jesper's neck.

He ignored her completely, continuing to look at me until my vision cleared and I held his gaze. His eyes were normal again. Hazel, definitely. With green flecks.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

I nodded. Why was he so warm? Those narrow fangs, I'd seen them on two separate occasions with two different lengths. How long were they? They were almost pearlescent in color. Were they hollow? I went to move my hand and realized someone still held me by the wrist.

I turned to look at Lucy. The outer edges of her body and some of her hair were badly scorched. She was shaking from the effort of maintaining her defenses.

"Oh my god, what happened?" I slipped out of Jesper's hold and gently cradled Lucy's face. She struggled against me at first. "Oh for heaven's sake, Jesper won't hurt me. And he was trying not to hurt you!" I looked back at the kukri nearly against Jesper's completely immobile body. He didn't want to provoke her any more now that I was out of his hands.

I slapped her arm away. "Bad girl!"

"Tante!" she complained, lowering the curved blade before letting it clatter to the floor. Her skin had crisped all along the outer edge of her arms, her hair was smoking. Whatever had hit her had only hit an outline of her. She was trying to heal, her skin smoking now, but the effort was turning her skin ashen.

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I looked around for Morena to help to find her aiming her Glock just above Lucy's head, two steps away. I let a breath out in exasperation.

"When are you going to learn, Morena, guns don't kill vampires."

She lowered her gun and shrugged.

Turning back to Lucy, "Do you still carry?"

She was trying very hard not to scratch but was rubbing at her burned ears. Her lovely long hair would have to be cut. "Yes, in my backpack. I think it fell over there." She waved toward the bookcase. She cast a wary eye to Jesper who hadn't stirred.

"I'll get it," Morena said. She turned toward the bookcase. "Shit."

"What?"

She hurried over to the bookcase and pulled Nick's torso out of the chaos of books and papers by his shoulders. We had all forgotten about him. My breath stuck in my throat until I saw him come around.

"Nick?" I queried. Morena put a hand to his head, with a certain amount of care. There was a story there that I apparently hadn't heard. Or maybe the same haplessness that endeared him to me was working on her.

He blinked a few times and then spoke. "Huh." Then he pulled his arm out of the debris and with it, Lucy's backpack.

Morena couldn't help a genuinely tickled smile from covering her face, as she gave his hair a tousle. Hapless, maybe to some eyes. But one thing was certain, things only went so wrong for Nick Fujiyami.

"Hey, watch the 'do! Takes me hours to attain that perfect mix of Pattinson-McAvoy bed hair."

Morena helped Nick out of the heap while I also stood, carefully standing in between Jesper and Lucy. Jesper mimicked my action and stood as well while Lucy just watched us.

After settling Nick on the settee, Morena brought me the backpack, casting a spurious eye at Lucy who'd become perfectly still. She was starting to go into a healing shock, her body shutting down in order to regenerate. I quickly searched the bag and found one of the foil liquid pouches. Dropping the bag, I snapped the straw off and stabbed it into the foil bag.

Lucy greedily grabbed for the pouch and I felt Jesper take a step forward behind me. He could smell it too. Lucy began sucking at the straw like a thirsty kid at recess, the dark red liquid pulsing

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through the straw into her mouth. Her fangs slipped out from under her tightened lips, a reflex to the liquid coursing into her.

"What is it?" Jesper asked from behind me, a hint of revulsion in his voice.

"Dude, Capri Sun for Vamps!" Nick filled in.

I smiled. "Exactly." I think these guys were getting the hang of this.

Happy Accidents

"Do you need blood? Like right now?" I asked Jesper once he settled on the examination table. To get him here, it had taken multiple assurances to those left in the waiting room that I knew how to handle this and would take care. Of myself, I'm sure.

Lucy barely registered anything since she was replenishing herself; she was blood-zoned. Nick seemed to just accept that, for the most part, I had this. Before class, I had given him the Book to start reading through since much of my Vamp notes were scribbled in there along with the recollections.

It was Morena that looked at Lucy and then Jesper and then me. But before she could make the leap, I had flippantly said, "Let's take care of that scratch, shall we?" and escorted him to one of the newly finished rooms.

"No," was his simple answer and he took off the ruined shirt I had liked so much. I looked at those holes in his chest and marveled. He gave me a faint smile. He knew I didn't believe him. But this was part of that game called Trust. And to receive, one must give. Or maybe he was shy about being exposed.

I looked down at the table. I should be thinking about what methods I knew to close up a wound like that. *Blood*. Whether some stitching would help close it. *Blood*. Maybe just a bandage.

A hand covered mine, warmer than it had a right to be. Jesper bent his head, trying to catch my gaze as I was zoning out.

"You seem distracted."

It had been only a short time ago when another vampire had spoken those same words to me during a session. But that was where the similarities stopped. I raised my gaze to look up at Jesper. He sat on the examination table, shirt off, two large gaping holes in the middle of his chest, bending his torso so as to better meet my gaze, his left hand covering mine, brows lowered in consideration, maybe even concern.

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I must've looked shell-shocked. In the other room, another vampire, my long lost ward, was nearly burned to a crisp by a power I had never seen and two humans were trying to make sense of the dark and dangerous world that they had someone found themselves in. I'd had a game plan and it ended up with two injured vampires, one dazed human, and one that wanted any excuse to fire her pistol.

Moment of doubt? You bet.

His fingers curled around my hand, drawing my attention back down. He was looking down too.

"This didn't quite go as you planned, I gather."

I couldn't even manage a laugh at the complete absurdity of that comment. But I realized he didn't know how any of this was supposed to work. This was only our second official session. And our first session wasn't in any way something I would deem as standard.

"No. I would never introduce two vampires like that. Or put two humans in harm's way of that interaction."

His grip tightened for a moment. "Three."

I looked up at him, questioning.

"You didn't include yourself. You could've been hurt far worse than you were." He paused. "I'm not quite sure what that was that I did."

And there it was in his face, his own self-doubt. His eyes slide to the floor for a moment as he took a deep breath. I wrestled with what my appropriate response should be. This so wasn't like any other consult I'd done before. He lowered his guard in ways that lowered mine but still managed to tell me almost nothing. I should be finding ways of building up a professional dialog between us so he would trust me with his fears, open up, allow me to help him.

Instead, I squeezed his hand in return to encourage him.

"I don't know what's happening to me," he whispered. "First the dreaming, then the waking during the day, now this."

It was the slightest thing, like a switch turned on in some dark room in a very old unkempt and untidy building in a decaying ghost town hidden away in the woods. Suddenly there was purpose, decision, forethought...light.

My back straightened slightly and my demeanor made a shift. It wasn't Shields Up per say. Just the focus shifting away from what I wanted, needed to what needed to be done.

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"You've never shown that...that power before?"

"No," he said softly still lost in his own mind. But he was Vampire; it didn't take him much to notice the difference in me. He raised his head slightly which allowed me to straighten up completely. Our hands lost touch as if nothing had happened. "Never."

"Do you remember what you said?"

"Um, funny, I can't."

"It was Russian." I stepped away from the table and went over to the cabinet, pulled out my standard examination bag. I brought it over and set it on the table next to him. Then I stared at his chest. "Does it hurt?"

A confused look furrowed his brow before he glanced down at his chest. He seemed to have forgotten all about the two holes in his chest that showed no signs of healing. No bleeding either. "Barely notice it now. It hurt a lot at first."

"Good, that's pretty standard. Your brain can more effectively turn off pain receptors where needed." I opened the bag and started pulling out a few objects: measuring tape, a strip of Velcro, a small jar of cornichons.

He watched me patiently. "You're not going to make me eat those, are you? I think the lemon was quite enough." He smirked. It was good to see him so bemused with me, especially after we'd just been so, ur, intimate, a few moments ago.

"No." I grabbed the notepad out of the bag and jotted down a note. "I'm more impressed with your complete lack of allergy to silver."

"Oh. That."

"Ever had a problem with it?"

He scrunched up his face in a way that was, frankly, adorable. "Um, not that I can remember currently."

I smiled. Vampires had particularly keen memories, when unfolded. It was time to impress upon him that this really wasn't my first rodeo. "Do you use a journal or a talisman to fold your memories?"

"I'm sorry." It was like I had slapped him awake. I had caught him off-guard.

"Vampires jealously guard their memories but also need a way of folding them away for safe keeping to leave room for more current ones. Most vampires use either a writing method or a

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prayer method, like rubbing a talisman, to gain the focus to fold the memories in their minds with a mental key that they can use to unlock later."

His face went blank. "That's a very closely guarded secret of our kind. Where did you get that information?"

"The same place I found out about how different vampires are allergic to different metals." That stirred a nightmarish thought in black velvet that I cast aside. "You obviously are not bothered by silver, which is very unusual. If you had been allergic, Lucy would have -."

"I suppose yes, she might have killed me." A look passed across his face that assured me otherwise. If Lucy had been any greater threat, she would be dead right now. As it stood, she was probably still alive by his intention because of her obvious bond with me. And perhaps, by happy accident, because I had gotten in the way.

I put down the book and took up the measuring tape, not wanting to think anymore about anyone's death. Mine, his, or Lucy's.

He continued, "Are you examining me?"

I sighed, "Well, yes. How else am I to diagnose what is happening to you?"

He seemed disappointed. "Oh. I just thought you wanted me with my shirt off."

I still blushed. "Come on," holding up the measuring tape.

"And what do you hope to measure with that? Before you answer, it is a bit chilly in here." He paused for a moment. "But if you keep leaning in like that, I don't think that'll matter."

In any other circumstance, with any other vampire, I would've jumped back once he'd called attention to the fact that I was leaning against him and reaching up with the measuring tape towards his mouth. But I was already well aware that Jesper was not like any other vampire.

But the tape did make him uncomfortable. He tightened his lips even as his instincts flexed his fangs out slightly. I tried to get the tape aligned but he moved his head away.

"Come on now," I said, lowering the tape. "Fang out for me. I need to measure."

"No."

"Why not?" I put a hand on my hip. This sudden shyness about I Am Vampire was startlingly endearing.

"Why does the length of my fangs have to do with anything?"

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I scratched my brow. "Historically, vampire strains have been hidden in everything from local legends about demons to kung fu movies about hopping corpses. I never know what reference material is going to equate to some yet-to-be-determined strain of vampire. You are unique. Your strain isn't likely to be in the Vampire Encyclopedia."

He crossed his arms. "Even if there were such a book, why would my strain help any of this?"

I couldn't tell if he was being obstinately charming or charmingly obstinate. If he was truly worried about my cataloging him, he hid it well under very normal self-consciousness.

I spoke in my most professional and serious voice. "I won't tell anyone what I learn or use that information in any way without your consent." I put my hand to my talisman since he still seemed dubious. "Jesper, I promise."

His eyes fixated for a moment on the infinity symbol over my neck. It was a classic subtext, one that he must be well aware of. An offer of blood (my throat) if I broke my vow. His eyes flipped up to mine again.

"Well, ok. But can't we start with some other test? I don't *fang out*, as you say, on command."

"What? Like foreplay?" I joked before I could filter the thoughts and therefore words out. Blushing again.

"You don't like foreplay?" He looked amused and surprised all at once.

Oh so not professional. Damn him and his facial expressions. Most vampires looked like they had too much Botox when they spoke, with immovable faces. I tried to hide my reddening face. Stupid, he could not only see but smell, almost taste the blood rushing into the capillaries in my cheeks, face, now neck even.

I handed him the pickle jar. "Here. Open this." He did so without issue and idly set it back down on the table, lid loosened but not off. I paused to write that down. "Pull this apart," handing him the Velcro. He examined it for a moment, ripped it apart gently, paused to stare at me, then set each strip separately also to the side.

I grabbed the box of flat toothpicks out of the bag and "accidentally" dropped it on the floor. When he moved to get off the table to pick them up, I gently pushed his chest to stop him and watched him settle back on the table with a shrug.

"Ok, now fangs."

"That was your idea of foreplay?" He rolled his eyes. As the long, thin, elegant fangs slid down from his mouth, he said, with very little impact to his speech, "I will remember to teach you a few things about that if given half a chance."

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"It'd better be more than half," I idly commented as I again leaned forward with my measuring tape.

The Theory of Relativity

For moments after Sophie and Jesper had left, the reception room was quiet, except for the sucking sounds and crinkling of the foil bag. Morena just stared down at Lucy, marveling at how oblivious she seemed to be, how completely enraptured in drinking she had become.

"Are you gonna be ok?" Morena asked and received not even a blink of acknowledgement.

"She doesn't say much, does she? All kick, no conversation. You two cousins?" When Morena didn't rise to the jibe, Nick offered, from the relative safety of the settee, "Maybe he charbroiled her ears?" Morena tossed him a glance and shrugged.

But as a matter of fact, there was something a little odd about the shape of Lucy's ears, like a piece of flesh was sticking out. Morena kneeled next to her which prompted a suspicious look from Lucy but nothing more.

Morena slowly raised her hand and touched Lucy's hair just above her ear. When she didn't get attacked and Lucy just turned a shoulder to protect her drink, Morena tucked the still crispy ends behind what remained of Lucy's ear. It wasn't flesh but a flesh-covered piece of metal, electronics to be exact.

She touched it and tensed when audio feedback was her reward. Lucy ripped a cord from behind her neck off and both pairs of inserts came out of her ears, hitting the floor.

"What?" Lucy shouted, crushing her foil bag into a tiny ball in her hand. The wounded vampire girl then fished another out of her bag and began sucking it down.

Morena stared down at the device. When she didn't respond to Lucy's remark, Lucy glanced down at the floor. She stopped feeding, sighed deeply, setting the pouch down.

"Oh. Those. Sorry, were you trying to say something?"

"What are those?" Morena asked, now fascinated by all things Lucy.

Lucy smiled. "Anti-Vox *Compulsum* Modulators."

Morena just blinked.

"Noise-cancelling earplugs?" Nick asked.

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Lucy half turned towards him. "Simply, yes. But specifically calibrated to a vampire's control voice: *Vox Compulsum*."

Morena picked them up in her hand. They looked just like ear buds with an extra thick cord but the wiring had partially melted. "Shame."

"Oh, not really. I have loads of them."

Morena threw her a look of amazement. "Really?"

Lucy seemed more chipper and her skin less discolored with every moment. "Yeah, I get them from a manufacturer in Taipei. I buy in bulk." She sighed. "Still haven't figured out why some human voices don't make it through, though."

"So you couldn't hear Sophie tell you Jesper was a friend?"

Lucy's eyes went wide. "She said that? Oh boy, no wonder I'm in trouble." She dropped her head but Morena saw the furtive glance she cast toward the hallway where Jesper and Sophie had gone. "I hope she's right about that. I've never seen any vampire like him before."

Morena cast her own glance at Nick, who asked the question for her. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure I should say."

Nick huffed, "Look, Sophie set up this class so we humanoids could learn about vampires and be better prepared. I hardly think she had this in mind but it's probably been the best for us. Sure beats trying to decipher that book of hers."

Lucy's newly regrown ears perked up. "She gave you the Book?" To Nick's dumb nod, she nodded herself. "Well, that certainly settles things. She has given you the book of her past lives and experiences. If she has trusted you with that, than I am to trust you too."

Lucy looked at Morena.

"Um, I tried to save her life once? Badly, I know. But maybe, if I knew more, I might be successful." It was more a question.

Lucy nodded again, her eyes straying to the hallway. "What do you want to know?"

Morena shifted her weight slightly to half-turn. "Right now, I want to know why you seem so intent on the hallway. Is Sophie in some kind of danger?"

"I don't know."

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"You obviously think something," Nick prodded.

"Vampires heal serious wounds only through consuming their *food*. In my case, blood."

"Yeah, you both got your licks in," Nick quipped, trying to lighten the mood. "So?"

She answered with a question. "How much blood do you think I just had?"

"Could you ask a grosser question?" Nick blanched.

Morena shushed him before turning her full attention to Lucy. "Maybe a pint? Why?"

"Each foil pouch holds 10 ounces and it took almost two full pouches before I began to regenerate. It will likely take me several weeks of heavy feeding to fully recover from both blood lost and cell damage done." She then tossed a stern glance at the hallway. "How long do you think it'll be until he needs to heal?"

Morena looked back at Nick.

"When you say you've never seen a vampire like that, you mean the high beams, right?" Nick asked.

"Well, that's another thing entirely. Even without that, if I'd known a vampire could sustain that much damage and be seemingly immune to silver, I wouldn't have attacked him by myself."

Morena swallowed, her stomach churning. Her eyes locked with Nick's.

"Maybe we should check on the happy couple," Nick said.

Lucy picked up the kukri from the floor. "I would heavily suggest it."

"Great," Morena agreed. "You go first."

Right to the Jugular

"Ahhhhh," was all the sound Jesper could manage pulling his bottom lip up over his bottom teeth.

"Ok, done," I said stepping away. I took note of the measurement and wrote it down, amazed.

"So?" he asked rather tersely, fangs still fully extended and pinching into his chin slightly.

"Six."

"Six?" his eyes widened, almost impressed.

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"Centimeters, I'm afraid."

"Oh." He suddenly looked deflated.

"Yeah, I know. Disappointing." I paused to take in his suddenly sullen mood. "It's only a full four centimeters longer than any other vampire on record."

He shrugged before he caught it. "Wait, just how many vampire fang measurements **are** on record?"

I smiled. "I'll never tell."

The examination had gone well with more surprises than I could swat a stake at. And he endured it all with only a mild irritation and mostly a bemused grimace. There was one more test. I rarely got comfortable enough with a vampire to do it. But it only made sense to try.

Whatever his disposition, he was quite a troubled vampire with abilities he didn't understand. The sooner I tested his control, the better I'd be able to prescribe some remedy.

He caught my hesitation. "What now?" his arms tensing as he held the edge of the exam table. His chest wounds still showed no sign of healing however he'd showed no signs of needing to feed either. His fortitude was remarkable. On top of all the other test results I'd need to pore over later.

It needed to be done.

"Why do you suddenly look like neither one of us are going to enjoy this next test?"

I let out the breath I was holding and reached my hands out towards Jesper's neck. He grabbed both wrists immediately, as if aware of what I intended. But the look of caution in his eyes had nothing to do with him warding me off. Well, not in the way I was used to.

He held my wrists for a few breaths more and after I didn't struggle against him, he simply released his hold and lowered his hands back to the table. Another deep breath, this time from both of us, almost simultaneously, and I put my hands gently around his throat.

At first he froze but the blood vessels beneath my hands thumped like timpani. His eyes rolled back into his head and he collapsed off the table, on top of me, letting out a moan on the way down.

I gasped as I landed on the floor in a thud, Jesper on top of me. Somehow, I had managed to keep one hand on his throat, while the other had tried to absorb some of the fall. My hand had moved to the back of his neck, rubbing along his skin, which felt prickly. Almost sparky.

It was called the Jugular Reflex test. Much like the Patellar reflex test in humans, it showed a reflex arc of vampire sorts. Vampires of all types were very sensitive around their throats and I had developed a rough scale of a vampire's inherit protectiveness from attempting to touch the throat

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of said vampire subjects. I had been killed twice administering it thus I reserved it for my most dire or perplexing cases.

As I was about to say something to him, I thought better of it, moving my fingers again, up into his hairline at the base of his skull. He moaned again and curled up into my lap. Like a cat. And his breath sounded like he was...purring.

In that moment, with his whole body curled on top of mine, my hand at the back of his neck, he was completely defenseless, either unaware or unable to protect himself.

This was a serious problem for which I had no solution.

So stunned was I that when a knock to the door came and it suddenly opened, I made no attempt to move from under Jesper. Which offered the line of observers, Lucy, Morena, and Nick behind, a rather compromising view.

"Well," Nick quipped, after a stunned silence washed over everyone. "I guess the lovebirds are getting along just fine."

Always Have an Exit Strategy

The first time I administered the Jugular Reflex test was strictly an accident. I had lived in the hills of Darjeeling at the base of the Himalayas, completely unaware of my previous lives. My mundane life as an upper caste bride of a handsome, charming but moody older man came to a calamitous end when I had brushed the side of his throat trying to calm him during one of his increasingly common rages. He had transformed in front of my eyes, revealing gnarled hands and a mouth full of jagged fangs. He had ripped my throat open before I could move my hand.

As I lay bleeding to death in my wedding garb, the blood matching that of my hand beaded dupatta, he had sobbed over me, confessing that he was rakshaka, an ancient vampire who had always used his abilities to fight for good. He had tried to find some way to soothe his soul as he aged and became more restless. When he'd met me, he had felt calm sweep over him and proposed, certain I could calm the gathering darkness in him.

He had been right about what I had been meant to do but at the time, I had no way of forcing myself to remember my past. And it had taken more time to understand what the reflex meant in vampires struggling with age depravity. But I hadn't understood in that lifetime. Past lives had flashed before my eyes, maybe only four of them, as my current life had bled out and I had neither time nor inclination to be able to do anything with that knowledge. There was only a moment's fleeting remorse at not being able to help him before I passed into the unknown again.

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The smell of sand, blood, and some floral perfume washed over me before I jolted back to the present, to the problem at hand. Having a lap full of Danish vampire wasn't really my plan but something so familiar kept tickling the hairs of my neck that I literally felt frozen to the floor.

"Please...stop..."

His voice was barely a breath, not recognized by my head until after my hand had already complied. Once I stopped caressing the back of his neck, Jesper pushed himself up and off me, stumbling back into the exam table. He blinked, looking around as if he had no idea where he was or how he got there. Then he saw me still sitting on the floor and met my eyes for the briefest moment.

"I, uh, I gotta go."

He turned, knocked into my bag, almost spilling it over but righting it before pushing past the crowd at the door. All but Lucy followed him and I heard him grumble to Nick, "Can I borrow your jacket...thanks." Then I heard the door open, heels clicking quickly across the floor, a whoosh of wind, and a loud thump.

"Hey!" I heard Nick yell.

Lucy watched the scene in the reception area unfold while I remained stunned on the floor, hands held up in front of me. The smell of flowers threatened to pull me back into my memories. Looking at my hands, sunshine began pouring down on me and sands were running through my fingers. Far in the distance, I heard Lucy call out my name but the memories gripped me.

I was digging in the sand. Not the loving act of making the sand tomb as before but clawing at the sand with every fiber of my being. But the sand from the dune kept filling in what I uncovered. For a moment, my fingers brushed through golden hair, felt warm skin, but sand rushed over those places my fingers touched.

As I dug, cold crept over me, tightening my hands, making my fingers numb. At first, I thought it was the abrasiveness of the hot sand. But when I looked down where I kneeled, the sand was wet with red. It reminded me of sitting in the Scout, the blood flowing just the same.

I snapped back, gasping. Lucy had her arms around me, gently shaking me. I grabbed her shoulders.

"Don't tell the others. Please."

Heels and feet moved back toward the door. When I looked up, Nick and Morena appeared in the doorway. Lucy, without another word, gently hoisted me up and neither human noticed my fingertips pressing tightly into the vampire's skin.

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She leaned me against the exam table, where I put my hand down flat to steady myself. I didn't look at her, afraid another memory flood might be triggered. Instead, I looked to Nick, knowing he was new and different and not connected at all to my past.

He smiled tightly and leaned against the doorjamb, "Are vampires always such dicks? He stole my leather jacket."

"Borrowed, I think is the correct term," Morena spoke.

"Yeah, right, borrowed."

"He took it to cover his wounds. Why would he possibly want to keep it?"

"Well, he's lucky it's a balmy night. It can be a cold ride across the I-90 late at night." Nick sighed. Then perked up again, "And did he actually *poof* into smoke?"

"No, just disappeared."

"Oh."

The light banter brought me all the way back to the current living and as Lucy sensed this, she stepped away. I glanced up at her movement and saw her pulling her hair forward to cover her burned ear. When I tilted my head, she spoke.

"I'll be ok in a few days. I don't think Maurice will notice it."

I tried my voice, found it worked. "I wouldn't mention any of this to him."

"Who's Maurice? Your head vampire?" Nick asked.

Morena slapped him on the chest. "This isn't *Lost Boys*." Then she threw a look at me. "They don't have to be with their maker, do they?"

Before I could reply, Nick pointed at Lucy.

"Say, does that Maurice dude look like you?" Nick asked her.

"Why, yes. We're twins."

"Dude's creepy as shit. He gave me Sophie's cell phone when I finally made it to the Ice Lounge."

Lucy and I exchanged a look. She and I would have to find time to talk about just how much Maurice could be called upon in my current endeavor. But not tonight. I didn't have the nerves for it. I put a hand on my doctor's bag, just to feel something familiar to ground me and glanced in. A smile

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crossed my face. At least I was getting through to him. On his way out, Jesper had grabbed a few lemons out of my bag to take with him.

I should have tried not to think about *him* right now but somehow, with the lemons, a more pleasing memory came into my mind. My grandmother had had a lemon tree at her house in El Cajon. I still carried seeds from that original tree with me, hoping to sometime find a climate that I could cultivate them properly. Apparently, seeds of a thought had taken root in Jesper's mind.

I sighed. He hadn't killed me. I'm not sure what had happened but he hadn't harmed me in any way. That instinct of mine, from when I had first met him, seemed to be holding true. And he trusted me. Trusted me enough to take the lemons of his own accord.

"I take it class is over for the night," Morena said when the silence had lengthened.

"Gee, ya think?"

Morena slapped Nick lightly on the arm again.

We all walked back into the wrecked reception room where I noticed the Memento was sitting on the floor just near the door. When I tossed a look back at Nick, he explained.

"Oh, I had the book in my jacket and when Glowy Vampire Guy grabbed the jacket, he touched it or something."

"He tried to take it with him?"

"Uh, not really. It sorta tried to follow him."

"What?"

Morena spoke up, "You probably knocked it over."

Nick violently shook his head. "No, I didn't. It was in the jacket, then he headed for the door, went POOF out the door, it sorta vibrated or something and flew across the room just as you closed the door."

I made my way over to the book.

"It did not fly across the room. That's impossible," she argued.

"How the Hell would you know? You were looking outside. You had your back to it."

"It's just a book. Books don't fly across rooms unless someone throws them."

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"Look, do you really think I need to make this shit weirder than it already is?"

Morena was just about to start in again when Lucy asked, "Sophie?"

I leaned down to the book, careful not to touch it. Jesper had inadvertently touched the book. And it had moved. Moved towards him.

That sealed it. There was no more doubt. As sure as I was of Nick's newness in my history, I was just as certain of my prior acquaintance with Jesper. Somehow, somewhere, he and I had met before, the tale of which was hidden somewhere in the pages of the Memento, pages kept currently hidden and protected between hard leather covers.

I flipped open the top cover. Nothing more happened. I started slowly flipping through pages.

"What're---?" Nick started.

"Don't you ever stop talking?" Morena asked.

Lucy chided them both quickly back into silence, a small twist of *Vox* in her reply. "Shush."

With her voice, pages seemed to flip on their own, her and Maurice's page wavering aloft for a moment before flipping one more forward. I knew this page, its edges well worn. It was the same page the book had flipped open to when I'd first arrived. Jesper's page. Something told me the story on this page could not be revealed unless both he and I wanted it to be.

Time for another email to Bruno, the current guardian of the Memento. There were secrets here that needed telling before someone else was lost to this lifetime.

DJB: Memoirs, Volume 3: Housecleaning

Didn't know what happened to me, my mind was all a jumble. I had to get out of there, head bursting suddenly with places and faces and none of it made sense as to why. I grabbed the lemons. At the time, didn't know why, just seemed important.

Grabbed the kid's jacket and out fell the Book. Old, worn, leather, excellent craftsmanship. Fingers brushed it as if familiar. All went quiet in my mind and I remembered one singular memory: My heart in anguish as I wandered the desert alone at night. Something about blood in the sand. But the memory teased me, wouldn't come back fully formed and the moment my skin broke contact with the book, the torrent of other lives began knocking around in my head again like so many rubber balls.

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I stuffed the lemons in the pockets and I fled. Couldn't remember how I'd wound up in such a desperate state but my impulse was to go to ground, get to the safety of my lair, try to stop the tempest in the teacup that was my skull.

I flew out of there. I never do that, not with such abandon. One moment I was standing at the doorway, the next I was at my balcony. The speed at which I had traveled only served to create more confusion but I had enough current presence of mind to push the door open and get inside.

I made my way directly to my study, pulling all my books off the shelf, aimlessly. I couldn't focus on what I wanted but I kept searching. There was an annoying chirping coming from my pocket. I took out this cold piece of black, vibrating plastic, held it out in front of me. I closed my eyes for a moment. The memory of it was there, being pummeled by strange and grandiose vistas, snowy mountains stretching high into the sky, buildings clinging to these pillars. I pushed the mountains away, recoiled from the sands, antlers trimmed in fur and lace, dread and more dread, the smell of jasmine in her hair...

Calm returned. I opened my eyes. "Cell phone," I spoke out loud.

The words on the screen said *Morena*. My brain remembered what the phone was and vaguely who Morena was but also did not want to currently pursue it. I finger hit a button to silence the machine and I looked back to the shelves of books. It looked much like the reception area mess.

The sense of now was returning to me. I wanted one of my journals which all seemed to stubbornly remain intact on their shelf. Volume One: mostly my human life and as much as I could remember of how I became Vampire. Volume Two: My wanderings throughout Europe and Asia. Volume Three: My life in the New World. My fingers went between Volumes One and Two. There was a gap of time in my recollections between the first two volumes. It could have been caused by folding memories too deeply or some injury which had taken me some time to recover from while I wandered.

But a new explanation dawned as keenly as the memory of anguish felt so deeply upon touching familiar pages of another book that looked exactly like mine. She laid here, between these volumes, the memory of her so fraught with peril that I had sought to wipe it out of existence. I had folded her away without talisman or gesture so that as I aged and folded more memories on top of her, she would be compressed into nothingness, out of my reach. Or so I had thought.

I had never once considered that the gift of a book of mine long ago would have undone centuries of forgetting. That a simple caress would replace the folding gesture that had become reflex and second nature to me. And that's why I had run. I was not ready for any of this. The first memory to rise up out of the abyss was that of tormented loss. And with it, an insatiable panic.

Vessels within my chest contracted and when I placed a hand there, I found it covered in blood. Glancing down, I remembered the fight with her Halfling. My flight had exacerbated the injuries to full wounds that now needed attention. I stuffed a hand into my pocket, bringing out the lemon. I let my nails grow to pierce the rind and then stretched back my head, squeezing the juice into my open mouth.

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Radiant light roared inside my mind before I blinked into darkness.

When I came to later, I was lying on the floor. As I shifted up to my elbows, I noticed my chest had started to heal. In all my vampire life, I could never remember healing from anything other than blood. I repeated the same with the other lemon, went lights out again.

This time, there was a brief smile of a memory there for me right before I awakened. A curve of skin. A dimple. My chest had completely healed and was now itchy with scar tissue. Scars. It felt so odd to have scars. I scratched and instantly drew blood from the purple skin. The panic began to grow. I had closed off this part of my life long ago; the muscles needed to tend to it had atrophied.

The cell phone chirped again. A message.

R u alright. U left ur shirt.

I laid my head back on the floor. She'd liked that shirt. I'd caught her eying it with keen, unprofessional interest. The panic began to ease, if just enough to let me breathe. I focused on my breath and somewhere, underneath layers of memories, I heard her voice, soft in volume but firm in belief: *It's going to be alright. I'm here to help you.*

Hours have passed and I'm scribing again, sorting through the memories that have been unsettled. Some of them force me to reread my journal to fold them back but some, I leave open to me, questions suddenly raised all over again. If I cannot trust my own memories, than what does this immortal life amount to?

One thing is certain: her book is no ordinary tome. It was crafted from the best leather, lovingly made by hand with sycamore maple and vellum, the pages imbued with ink in a special process that allowed the scribe to bring the ink to rise up from the page rather than just adding ink on top of it. There was more than a little magic folded into the making of that book, straddling the edge of alchemy and science. It was intended to hold memories.

And as certain as I am that I crafted that book for her, I am unable to remember who she was to me except to know that her memory is a void in my own history. And whatever ancient science enabled the peculiar abilities of these books of mine, it was past to me from her.

She taught me to read. She taught me to write. She taught me to fold my memories. Something as simple as her mere gesture, one that I had repeated ever since in my own folding process, had broken open a torrent of disconnected memories that had been carefully stored away.

My powers were changing, manifesting in strange ways that threatened everything I had known for years. There was no telling how the Conclave would react to these daylight abilities, usually only reserved for our South American relations. There was heightened Vampire activity in the area that needed to be handled. Valerian and his dealings with the Conclave were becoming ever more complicated and tense.

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But this woman held more power over me than I ever allowed anyone anymore and that frightened me more than all the rest.

It sent my pulse hammering. And I think I secretly liked it.

Sharing is Caring

Looking like a statue frozen and expressionless, Skovajsa waited across the street from the Deli, hidden within the tree line, for some sort of sign. About an hour after he began his vigil, a young blond man of medium height stepped out the door to the office on the top floor of the building.

“There he is,” Oksana, wearing a very expensive version of her previous garish outfit, stepped forward, purring. She focused on Skovajsa, her face enraptured that she had reason to be this close again, sure that her reward would be great with the information she had revealed to him. She reached out newly painted nails of glossy, glittery red to touch his arm.

While Skovajsa turned to look robotically at Oksana, the man in question disappeared in a streak across the sky. Skovajsa’s complete lack of emotional response to Oksana’s touch forced her to let her hand slide from him and Skovajsa returned his gaze to the building. The doorway was now empty.

“Hmm,” was all he uttered and breathed in deeply, sensing powerful waves of energy emanating from the building.

Oksana felt cheated that he didn’t offer her praise but when she looked back at the building, she noticed the obvious. “Where did he go?”

“Disappeared. Through shadows. Or stealth.”

There was cunning and conniving in his tone that Oksana readily recognized. Maybe this would lead to reward after all. She narrowed her eyes, tilting her head looking up at him. He was tall, handsome, powerful. Everything she wanted in a man. And he owned property, including that shit hole she knew as her family’s Russian deli. When she had first laid eyes on him several months ago when he’d taken over the loans her family owed, he was, by his very presence, intimidating her grandmother.

That alone would’ve inspired her admiration.

She had tried to talk to him then but her grandmother had forbid her. And then the community Orthodox priest had come to minister to her. It meant this stranger, dark and foreboding, had power that her family feared she might be drawn to. And she was. She had obsessed about him, wondering when he might notice her, intrigued that the few times he did visit, he came in a shiny black Escalade and only at night, when the shop had just closed.

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But he never noticed her. So she made her own luck. About a month ago, when he was talking to her grandmother, she had gone outside to his car and left him a note inside the car, in the driver's controls. It was the business card of a nightclub she liked to visit in Pioneer Square where she had written on the back: "I know who you are. Come at midnight."

She had gone to the club for three straight nights waiting for him to show, dressed in her best. She ignored all the other men who tried to paw at her, not wanting him to arrive and see her with anyone else. Then early one morning, after the clubs had closed, she was about to board the bus back to Bellevue, disappointed when a voice called to her.

"Why don't I give you a ride?"

Back at his condo, he had told her he'd watched her, wondered what she meant. She told him she knew he was a man, a big man, a powerful man. He proceeded to show her otherwise.

The fact that he was this powerful creature bothered her little. In fact, it made her love her even more. She worshipped everything about him. How insignificant everyone else in the world seemed when he was this beast, this god. He was Vampire! She loved it when he said it, meant it, and then sunk his teeth into her to prove it. She wanted that power all to herself, wanted to become one with him, wanted to do what he did.

So one night in the throes of sex, she had bit him, hard, drawing blood. He'd thrown her across the room. She begged for forgiveness, groveled that she just wanted more of him. Even how he had thrown her thrilled her. Such strength. And it was all hers now. Well, if not now, it would soon be. He would be all hers. It would only take a little while.

He had seemed perplexed by her devotion. But he was like any other man to her. He had invited her back, the next night and the next. The right amount of flattering and seduction convinced him she was his to enjoy and command. Then, after letting him drink from her until she felt dizzy and empty, she had asked if she could bite him again and he seemed eager to let her try.

The biting had led to bleeding, the bleeding had led to this beautiful, dark place where she could hear his heart beat and imagine she could see the years that folded out behind him in his long unnatural life. Her heart collapsed under the weight of unimaginable and horrific ecstasy.

She had started to convulse and ultimately expired.

She didn't fault him for disposing of her body. He hadn't expected her to die. He had been surprised, shocked even, when it had happened and shock must've driven his actions. He had been equally shocked this evening to have her call his private line, asking him to meet her back at the deli. Confusion had to have been his primary emotion because he had first hung up on her.

"There are others here like you."

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That had grabbed his attention when she had called him back and had to leave a message.

And now he turned his head to look back down at her. Whatever he wanted was what she wanted. And now she knew that others like him were important to him.

He cupped her cheek in a very practiced way.

"You've done well, copil. A very powerful and providential find."

She lowered her eyes, smiling, swaying in sensuous pride. Yes! A reward was due her. She had struggled the last few weeks, finding substance, fighting the itches under her skin. She had managed a few random feedings but they had been horribly messy. But a few credit card purchases later from that businessman or that geek savant and her clothes were getting more to her liking.

She looked up at him through her lashes. His face was expressionless. It must be hard for him, she thought, to open up again after he had thought she'd been lost to him. He dropped his hand and turned back to the deli building. He considered it for a moment before beginning to walk in the opposite direction.

"What will we do next?"

He paused, as if he'd forgotten she was there. He was such a thoughtful man.

"Come with me, copil. We should finish our relation."

Back at his place, she found out exactly the nature of his thoughts. He valued her find and not really her. He had summed it up nicely for her right before ripping her throat open.

"I am Vampire. I do not share."

Bastard, she thought as her life expired yet again.

DJB: Memoirs, Volume 3: Bad Beauty

Folding memories can be taxing in the best of times, depending on the emotions embedded therein. And a split-second of an image, much like a single Chinese character, can hold a multitude of meanings when removed from context. One particular memory refused to be folded. It had always been such even though the memory was over two hundred years old. When I had been human, I had been exceptional only in my ability to be mediocre at everything I tried and in my first decades of being a vampire, I had been equally disappointing.

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I hadn't become a vampire by choice so it wasn't something I had entered into hoping it would override the days of languishing in stupefying uselessness. However I once I had come to terms with it and learned where my peculiar vampire abilities lie, I had learned to enjoy the results. The more mastery over myself as vampire, the more confident I had become...and the more I wanted to bury the weaker times of my existence.

This memory was of one of those times as a young vampire. And the only way I seemed to be able to deal with it was to pen it back into my last volume of memoirs, in third person narrative. The years had given me perhaps a chance to find something new in my recollection, something that might be useful to the now...

When Dag Jesper Bretton, vampire, had stood upon the docks in Hong Kong, his clothes in tatters and soaked, his face smeared with ash and dirt, all he could think of as the first twinges of dawn began to taint the clouds was that he wanted to get to anywhere else but where he was now. Hong Kong had been a serious miscalculation from the start. His Danish looks made him stand out in any crowd, even at night, and even his maturing cloaking abilities did not shield him here.

The local Jiang-Shi, soul vampires as he had come to know, would never be willing to share their nighttime haunts with a foreign European devil. More than once, he'd been mistaken for German and attacked as the local vampires had a particular dislike for them. He looked nothing like a German but his fair looks still seemed to elicit their strongest ire.

It hadn't helped things that his female traveling companion had vanished days after they'd arrived. He'd admittedly been a little glamoured by the French vampiress and running away to the Orient with her had seemed ever so romantic. She'd been petite, beautiful with marble for skin and by all accounts had been duly impressed with him being many decades her elder.

It had been a harsh reminder of how horrifyingly bad his love life had always been excepting one bright spot which he even now refused to let himself think on.

The little French vampiress had abandoned him, likely tired of him in favor of some rich, exotic opium dealer. She'd talked of little else on the trek over. But then again, travelling in the night, sometimes nailed into burlap-wrapped boxes, strapped to coaches, in trains, on ships, for hours with nothing to give them peace from each other except the dawn and its insistent comatose sleep, surely that was more time together than a casual affair could bear.

"God kveld!"

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Jesper raised his head at the familiar sound. He never forgot a voice anymore. So intrinsic to his survival was it that he knew immediately that it was the big friendly if slightly myopic Norwegian he'd met earlier in a brothel while trying to find his vampiress. The place, more opium den than pleasure house, was trying to cheat the burly but affable sailor. Normally, Jesper stayed clear of entanglements but when thoroughly drunk and trying to make sense of his circumstances the big Norwegian started to curse in Danish as well as Norwegian, the sound of his mother tongue had compelled Jesper to help. It had been a small matter. The Norwegian had been settled with exactly the kind of company he'd wanted.

"God kveld, Gregers."

A smile of all his crooked and missing teeth split the Norwegian's face. He extended a hand and slapped Jesper on the shoulder. Had Jesper not his preternatural strength, the blow might've landed him in the bay.

While short on conversation, more mutters and grunts, Jesper had been able to surmise that his assistance had been timely: Gregers' ship was about to sail to the Americas, San Francisco to be exact. Had Jesper believed he had any other luck besides this current string of bad, he might have felt that fortune was finally smiling upon him. Gregers had noted Jesper's keen eye and they needed a night watch onboard. With very little prodding, Jesper soon found himself onboard, glamouring the captain into strict instructions on how he must never be disturbed during the day so that his sight would be sharply adjusted for the night.

Weeks of searching for his vampiress had netted more than a few scraps with the local Jiang-Shi warlord, Teng-Wen. He'd managed to escape each time but a whisper grew into a rumor of a night banshee that was high on drugged up missionaries.

Jesper had no proof that it was Bellecroix, the French temptress, with her doe like brown eyes. But the Jiang-Shi had started to call this night banshee the Dark Pearl and since Jesper had known her, Bellecroix had never removed the string of pearls from around her neck. Yes, it was time to leave before Teng-Wen and his horror made any connection between Jesper and this Dark Pearl.

Whatever evil she had fallen under (here, the author must remind himself that Vampirism might be considered the ultimate evil incarnate), Bellecroix was beyond his reach.

Within an hour, just as dawn was breaking through, Jesper was buried deep in the bowels of the ship, huddled under tarps, living in those last moments before dawn took all his consciousness. The

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fear was there again, yet another place to learn, new arrangements to try and make, all on his own again. But there were possibilities too. He'd always wondered about the new world, been curious to see it but like so many vampires, the voyage itself seemed ever so daunting and unbelievably perilous. But as night watch on a boat full of the proverbial drunken sailors, this had to be the golden goose, he's very best chance of staking a place out for his own.

In some ways, Jesper didn't really care. The dread he was under had repeated its refrain, over and over, until it drowned out all fear and doubt: Anywhere but here.

The Fetching of Far Flung Familiars

I'd been scribbling down notes for what seemed like hours last night, in between drafting text messages to Jesper to check in on him after he went radio silent. I should have been focusing on eye beams that torch vampires. Or vampires that curl up in your lap like kittens. *Ok, scratch that, I won't think about that.* But every time I tried to focus on what happened, I had one thought:

He took the lemons.

And I'd wind up smiling like a moron.

Great, what was this helping!

I wrote down phonetically what he had said before going all Cyclops on Lucy. Maybe my downstairs neighbors could translate for me. I didn't trust my Russian. It was too rusty. So rusty, I couldn't quite remember how I'd learned it.

And then there was the vamp in a lap. I'd been killed twice giving that reflex test and to have that reaction...with Jesper...well, just having Jesper in my lap. My cheeks started to flush. Embarrassment or something else. Um, yeah, something else.

Snap! Broke my pencil lead. That's when I noticed I'd been clutching the pages of the Memento so tight, my knuckles had gone white while I was scribing. The page I'd been writing on all these random thoughts turned stormy. That is to say all the graphite from the words I'd written had gather on the page like storm clouds.

I straightened and relinquished my grip on the book and pages flew until it stopped with a loud SLAP! It was that page again. His page. Even the book was aware I was writing about him, thinking about him. I pushed the book aside and grabbed a notepad from my desk, drawing Nick's attention.

He was milling around, cleaning up the bookshelf. I'd asked him twice to go home. He refused, said he was to unsettled to drive. Which was a truth wrapped in a lie. Morena had had no problem

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waving a hand in sayonara saying she needed to get some sleep. I'd let Lucy leave, taking the Kukri with her, even though she had seemed hesitant.

But Nick was worried about me. And as the minutes ticked by and I scribbled notes in ink on a legal pad and heard only silence from my cell phone, the earlier elation devolved into worry and then into fear tinged with resentment.

He's a big vampire; he can take care of himself.

He had curled up in my lap, utterly defenseless.

Whatever this is, I'm sure he's seen it before and knows how to deal.

He admitted he didn't know what was happening to him.

Ancient, powerful, seductive vampires like him, their motives are their own, any gentleness or openness is not usually without some aim. Even the slightest gesture, like holding one's hand, could be to another purpose.

He had begged me to stop, as if he had no control over himself anymore.

Ummm, I got nothing.

Why or how a vampire would respond that way was beyond me. But I needed to track it down. Long, long fangs, longest on record, impervious to silver, super speed, knows Russian. Maybe a Russian strain? Then, there was the searing ray that had come from his eyes, burning Lucy to a crisp. Coupled with dreams of the Sun...it was hard to know where to start.

I threw a furtive glance at the Memento. It was again keeping its secrets from me. But maybe it had secrets that only its Guardian could tell? I jumped online and found Bruno offline. I typed him a quick note, in the utmost urgency, and then proceeded to start trying to cross reference symptoms on that largest of Vampire encyclopedias: the World Wide Web.

"You know, Fetch is a much better way of doing multi-word searches on a topic."

I jumped. Nick was looking over my shoulder. "Sorry," he apologized and moved away.

I watched as he headed back towards the door. He pulled back the curtain and peered outside. Tonight, he'd been under a cascade of books, stunned by vampire fight club, and witnessed his new employer in a compromising way with an undead client. And had what I was suspecting was a favorite rite of male youth passage stolen by said undead.

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And then there was that tousled hair bit, that unguarded moment between Morena, a woman of little affection and much angst, and him. As well as what could only be deemed a stream of playful banter. Hmm.

“You and Morena seem to be getting rather chummy. Want to talk about it?”

He didn’t miss a beat, nor turn from the window as he retorted. “You had J. Crew Vampire in your lap. Wanna talk about that?”

“I suck at this, don’t I?”

He gave a laugh and looked back at me. “*Suck? Really?*”

I was about to launch into some sort of apology and decided it was too late in the evening to approach anything remotely appropriate. Instead, I said, “Why don’t you go home, Nick? I’m sure you can see to the rest of this in the morning. That is, if you decide to come back.”

He grabbed his bag and just as he was about to pass my desk, he stopped and picked up the Memento. When I said nothing, he slipped it into his backpack and headed for the door. He opened it, threw furtive glances around outside before turning back towards me.

“Are you kidding? After what I know now, I’m thinking this might be the safest place in Seattle. But next time, maybe we can start class with the Cliff Notes version?”

I smiled. “Good night.” And then he left.

The chirp from my laptop woke me several hours later. I started as a single sunbeam fell on me from the curtain Nick had left aside last night. But there were no vampires in danger here now. But after a night delving into Russian folklore and Djinni, my dreams had landed on a strange meld of Rasputin and Raskolnikov. And a singing rat.

The chirp was insistent. For the barest of instances, I thought, well, hoped it might be Jesper but then I realized my stupidity. It was full sun up; he would be deep in rigor dormitus (had to keep myself wondering what form he took when in that state.) We also had yet to exchange online personas and I vacillated between thinking having each other’s cell numbers was more or less intimate.

It was Bruno.

U there?

Am now. Questions about the Book.

Got some other news too.

You first.

Ok. Been scouring chat rooms for any word of your Skovajsa.

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I shivered at the thought that the Carpathian was *mine* in any way. At this rate, I probably wouldn't be hearing from him anytime soon.

Nothing yet although a lot of talk recently about Vampire Cannibals. Some of the more plebian societies are warning members about accepting new members, especially since an incident in Seville.

Along with any subculture of substance came the pretenders. With such myths of immortality and power ascribed to vampires, there have long been societies of humans that would try to claim that birthright, oftentimes in complete ignorance that the creatures actually exist. So they have their dark parties, pass around fake fangs, wear yards of black velvet and, on occasion, drink blood from some utterly benign source. Most Vampires avoided the vampire subculture like the plague; too many fickle fanatics with dreams of power and hunger and glory. They usually turned out to be easily offended or grossed out. I knew of one case where a real Vampire was rejected from entering a vampire club because he wasn't goth enough.

What happened in Seville?

There were a series of attacks on members of various so-called vampire covens. Many of the groups started to advise members to keep from congregating.

Yet another inaccuracy between the little 'v' and big 'V.' Vampires do not name their familial groups after witches. They use the term 'horror' in part to keep themselves as separated from that human fantasy culture as possible. This isn't to say that Vampire devotees aren't frequently found from that group. Like I've said before, familiars and companions are a tricky lot. Sometimes, it's better to just start fresh, with someone who isn't quite looking. But it doesn't prevent Vampires from slumming.

Was a profile ever distributed?

Typical Carpathian. What's interesting is that on a few monster chat rooms, I saw similar posts, seeming to corroborate. Members were disappearing. Then, there's a series of reposts of the same story: a so-called familiar was going to meet his vampire lord and stumbled upon his lord fighting with another vampire. But by the account, it seems like this familiar's lord was the real deal.

The Vampire lord was slumming?

Apparently, and fought with this other vampire of Carpathian description. Now here's the interesting bit: the eyewitness says the Carpathian bested his lord and then 'feasted' on him.

I blanched.

You mean to say he really ATE him?

Unclear. But the pot was repeated, reposted verbatim so many times in these message boards, blogs, and chatrooms, I'm having a devil of a time hunting down the originating post.

How on Earth did the familiar escape?

He seems to have been saved by a hunter. And now has turned unfriendly now that he's seen the true nature of the beast.

I sighed. This was so not good news, it undid any success I might have felt from a lemon or two changing hands. Creature hunters, some ordained by various churches, were one of the reasons my job was made more difficult. Instead of trying to help creatures exist alongside humans in managed co-existence, hunters set out to exterminate.

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In my experience, they didn't care who or what got in their way and they had led to as much of the vampire expansion as any other cause. The only reason why Vampires had sought out to create hordes of their own to protect each other is that Hunters usually didn't last long and where they might be resistant to a particular beast, another would typically come along and resolve them.

A couple of options occurred to me. If I could track down the hunter that had witnessed the fracas, I might be able to figure out whether this Vampire Cannibal was Skovajsa. Conversely, if Skovajsa deigned to meet me again, I might probe his recent history to see if there was any correlation. Neither scenario was particularly safe. I probably had more enemies in the Hunter ranks than in the Vampire ones. It was also possible to try and track down the familiar, perhaps if I could find out which Vampire had been consumed.

Most vampires stayed close to the ground that made them. The process of transformation was slightly different for each vampire but it almost always involved "going to ground," burying themselves up while their cells converted or whatever other term you wanted to use. The earth became the chrysalis and whether just emotionally or in practicality, Vampires liked to stay close to where they were vampire born.

It had been too many years since my last map of worldwide vampire activity had been updated so it would take some time to try and track the Vampire of Seville.

Anything else there?

Yeah, do I need to cover up my tracks on this? Cannibal vampires creep me out.
No, just don't do anymore looking. You've done enough. Now I have some Book questions for you.

I won't have to crawl up into the belfry, do I?

Probably not. Ever known the Book to have a connection to anyone other than me?
What, you mean, like the maker or something?

It was something I had never considered. Someone had to have made the Book. Nick had claimed the book had flown across the room after Jesper had touched it. Maybe Jesper had a connection to the book's maker. While that thought certainly might explain the Book's strange behavior, I tried to wrap my mind around its significance. This bond I had with the Book, it was so intimately the home of my deepest thoughts, secrets, years of memories, the thought that someone else might connect with it...should be deeply unsettling. A hundred times more than someone reading your diary, without your knowledge. And yet...

Do you know who made the Book?

I'm sure I could find that out. Seems rather simple.

Ok, do. I suspect I may not be the only one with a connection to the Book. Maybe I'm not the original owner.

Bruno sent a quizzical smiley my way. Yeah, it seemed farfetched but at this point, after a night of sunbeam eyed vampires and flying books, I didn't have a lot of disbelief left in me. Not where our Vampire Jesper was concerned.

I signed off with Bruno, who was up late himself and grabbed for my phone. There was a single text message and a sting of nervous excitement whizzed through me as I looked it up. But it wasn't Jesper apologizing for missing my text and confirming that he was retiring in the comforts of his home. It had been sent in the earliest hours of the morning, before sun up.

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Meet me this night. We should continue getting to know each other. -S

It was Skovajsa and like it or not, he was willing to meet me again. And it scared me to death.

Something about frying pans

Nick arrived home to his parents' place above their restaurant GoButa in the International District several hours after midnight and sat in bed, reading from the back section of the Memento, what Sophie called the "Vampire Factbook." The large vellum pages held a small tight script that gave up secrets about familiars, ground tombs that gave birth to newly made vampires, and, most frightening, unbound vampires. Unbound vampires were ones made by mistake and the vampire maker, for whatever reason, was not there to help mentor the newborn into the Vampire world. According to the book, unbound vampires almost always went rabid and wound up causing terror.

Nick shuddered and typed a few more notes into his laptop. The image of the blonde vixen vampire from the bar came into his mind and would not go away. Inspired by that fear, Nick flipped through the pages, looking for hints, tips, tricks, anything on how to actually kill a vampire. Just as he was beginning to get frustrated, he stumbled upon what appeared to be an obituary page. It listed vampires (presumably) and the manner in which they had died.

Beheading, infernos, sunshine, massive blood loss. *So the movies are true?*

The movies never mentioned vampires with laser beam eyes. Strangely, for as much as gentleman vampire Jesper seemed powerful, he seemed ok. The petite girl Lucy, she was a conundrum. She seemed to not really be one of them. At the same time, the thought of her sucking that blood down creeped him out. He'd never hear that sucking sound and the crinkling of the foil package again without cringing. He wondered where it came from. The blood inside.

Again, the blonde appeared in his mind and he remembered her businessman companion. Nick read the section of Vampire Influence. Twice. Memorized it and then typed it into his laptop. The idea of a vampire "wrecking" his mind, well, he never would have believed it until he'd made eye contact with the blonde vampiress. It was the merest feeling of his body disconnecting from his will and it was scarier than shit. He didn't want to be a vampire. He was too much the foodie.

Her eyes. Pools of obsidian. And did she make that businessman her food, her slave, one of the unbound? Did she wreck his mind?

By the time the fish monger arrived at the back door of the restaurant, Nick had the kitchen in a frenzy of activity. He stopped kneading yet another batch of soba noodles to sign for the shipment and went back to work, ignoring his elderly parents entering the kitchen and staring at him. His forearms were sore from rolling the dough out over and over but his mind was finally clear.

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Cooking calmed him. It was the only thing in this world that he was a natural at, from his earliest years. He first cooked up omurice, an omelette with fried rice, since he'd skipped dinner. Turned out, he wasn't very hungry. He rolled up his sleeves and got the mill out. He needed to work on something involved, something that wouldn't go to waste and that would benefit the restaurant.

He started making soba for the next day's service. After an hour, he felt his worries slip away, if not entirely, at least to the back of his mind. The action of rolling the dough out, folding, and rolling again had a calming repetition that he lost himself in.

Right before the fish monger had shown up, he started working on some sata andagi, Okinawa donuts. The smell of the fryer made him think of all the mornings he'd woken up to that smell, bounding down the stairs to his mother at the stovetop. She would slap his fat fist away from the stove as he tried to sample freshly drained treats.

By the time he'd moved on to pork-filled gyoza, his mother was there, standing just inside the kitchen door, watching. She'd seen him do this before, with a new disappointment, stress, or strife. In the past, a strict word about waste or the mess would be enough to chastise Nick, set him back to rights having exorcised his demons. Her eyes took in the sheer volume of his labor and assessed that no words she knew would quell this, his latest worry. It must be great indeed.

Now she walked over to him as his father started the chores of the morning. She put a hand on his shoulder and handed him an envelope. He wiped his hands on a kitchen towel before taking it. He opened it and removed a check from inside. It was made out to him for more money than he'd ever made in such a short stint, barring, of course, that one summer in Alaska. His mother asked him a simple question.

"For school?"

"Yes, Mom." He stuffed it into his back pocket and rolled out a few more rounds for filling. But the thought was there, niggling at him. *If I live that long.*

His mom said nothing, just put on her apron beside him and started to package up his excess of energy. When she opened the back door to start with the deliveries, she started to discover a tall, dark haired woman standing there.

"AY!"

Morena grimaced, putting her hands up. "Sorry."

The sound drew Nick's attention and he threw a look over his shoulder, rolling pin still working. When he saw Morena, he whirled, angry. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

His mother began to chatter at him in Japanese and he responded back, equally upset. He stormed over, arguing with his mother whose eyes kept darting from Morena to her son. She finally

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wandered away in a huff, still mumbling, and then sent a final volley back at him as she went through the kitchen door.

Nick threw his head back Morena's way. The calm he had labored for hours to achieve shattered.

"Didn't mean to frighten her," Morena said.

"What is the matter with you people? Don't you know it's rude to just show up at someone's house?"

Morena looked, for a moment, like she was about to get her own dander up but she swallowed it. "I'm sorry. I thought we might talk." Then, her eyes went past him, assessing the state of the kitchen, before returning to his upset face. "I couldn't sleep either."

All anger fled out of him. She was some Amazonian warrior goddess in black heels, battle hardened and able to dispatch a room full of thugs with her pinkie toe and a beer stein. If she, of all people, couldn't sleep after that night, what nightmare was he really living in?

"Come on in," he spoke as he turned and went back to the table where gyoza waited to be filled.

Morena stepped gingerly into the room, her heels making no sound on the concrete floor. Her eyes roved what he had done and she watched after he began spooning a ground meat mixture onto round dough, one by one, following up by folding the dough over and sealing them up.

"How did you find me?" Nick asked while he continued his work, as if it were an afterthought.

"Oh, I have some friends still in the force." She stared at the table, her face impassive but her eyes watching.

"So let me guess, you searched out the Fujiyami's that own restaurants in International District?"

She looked up at him. "No, I had them run your plate." She seemed aloof and nonchalant.

He stopped working and looked up at her, his lips pursed against another harsh comment. He struggled with it for a moment and then, thinking of the terrors he'd already witnessed, the danger he'd likely already subjected his family too, he let loose. "This is my home. More importantly, it's my parents' home. And their business. Their livelihood. You shouldn't have invaded their privacy, and mine. It's..." he struggled for the word. He remembered what the vampire had said about tricking a vampire. "Rude."

He met her eyes and found a flaw in the impenetrable nature of her gaze.

"I was worried about you."

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Nick, caught off guard, took up a towel and began to wipe his hands. He let his mind think all sorts of things about trickery, deceit, wrecking. But he couldn't hear it in her tone. He looked up at her again as she sighed, her gaze falling to the floor.

"I'm worried about both of us," she said. "I haven't slept well in days."

"Well, he's your boyfriend; surely you knew all of that stuff already."

Her face went all quiet. "No."

Nick considered her for a moment and then took up a pan of the gyoza. He walked over to the large refrigerator, opened it up, and slid the gyoza pan on one of the open racks.

"And he's not my boyfriend. That's...over."

He turned back to her, closing the fridge. Did she look forlorn? Afraid? Regretful? Fooled?

"Well, in that case, I recommend we both have plenty of questions to ask him tonight when we go back. After, of course, we both get some rest."

She lifted her gaze to him. He couldn't tell what she was thinking except to guess that neither one of them could step out of this now if they tried. He might be a coward and inept at fighting and, well, just an overall nice guy in a wicked world, but if he needed to interview a vampire in order to learn how to protect himself, then that was what he'd do.

She nodded, with a half-smile on her lips after a moment and began walking to the back door.

"I do have a question for you."

Morena stopped her exit, turned back to him. He looked sheepishly around the kitchen, the piles of gyoza, the oodles of noodles, and a huge pot of soup stewing.

"Do you suppose Vampires eat real food? I expect we'll have extras for tonight."

Relations in Blood

Years in the Secret Service, hopping around the world to places like Spain, Turkey, and Pakistan to name a few, had taught Morena one valuable lesson: sleep when you can. Which isn't to say that she didn't require a little help now and then. But after a string of sleepless nights and equally stressful days, the clock was ticking down on her full system crash. T-Minus...right now.

She'd managed to keep it together a lot longer than what would make sense given her emotional state. But it had been those very emotions that created the need for perpetual awareness. At first,

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concern for Jesper had fueled the hours. Then jealousy over this crackpot wannabe shrink she'd made the mistake of contacting had become the source. Fear had then begun to creep in after the shop attack and what came after, married up with the sense of betrayal and utter vulnerability. And now, now she was just numb. Spent.

She needed her perspective back. She needed something to get her back to that office tonight for round two. She couldn't let the errand boy fend for himself. She'd seen the way he fought...nope, couldn't let him go it alone.

She popped a few melatonin pills, said a mental "F* you!" to the nightmares to come since the herbs gave her nasty-mares, and slipped under the covers. She was snoring within a half hour, never mind the sun streaming in from a gorgeous, not-so-sleepless-in-Seattle summer day.

As day turned to night, the sun slipping beneath the Puget Sound amidst the ferries and cargo ships, the Space Needle pointing up at a moon in first quarter on the rise, Morena's awareness began to fuse back together, first a sense of the weight of her covers, then the briny smell from the nearby locks, and the far away buzz of traffic as the Ballard crowd began to fester out onto the streets.

So deep had her slumber been, she barely remembered any dreams at all and she stretched her limbs, her hand reaching under her pillow for the comfort of her Glock. Instead, something smooth, cold, and hard nicked her palm and she sat up with a start.

Even in the low light of her apartment, she could see the blood oozing from the gash across her hand. Flipping the pillow up, she found herself staring at a familiar looking slightly bent blade. The kukri. But how...

"Sorry about that."

Morena started again as Lucy shrugged out of the shadows. She pressed a bandage into Morena's palm and began wrapping a dressing around it. In an instant, Morena clearly understood Nick's earlier anger at having his parents' business and home invaded by her noisiness. It had been with the best of intentions. But what possible intentions could this vampire have with her?

Lucy finished the dressing and met Morena's gaze with dark eyes that seemed bigger than her face should allow. She'd chopped her hair into a flapper girl bob, looking very much like Clara Bow. The thought almost made Morena smirk. Her ears seemed healed.

"May I sit?" Lucy asked, still holding Morena's hand.

When Morena said nothing, Lucy took her silence as consent and sat on the edge of the bed. After a moment, Morena took back her hand, brought it to her chest, and covered it with her other hand, not wanting a repeat of the previous interaction with Lucy's brother.

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The room fell into an uneasy silence and Morena surmised that Lucy was expecting questions. When Morena couldn't form any, or at least decide on the first one to flow from her still sleep addled mind, Lucy spoke up.

"I'm sorry about the cut but it's the safest, best way to form a bonding."

Morena blinked, "Bonding? What sort of bonding?"

"Between you and the kukri."

"And why the Hell do I need to bond with a knife?" There. That was better. She was feeling more herself already.

Lucy relaxed back an inch, the corners of her mouth deepening into her cheeks. "It's not a knife. And it's not just any bladed weapon."

Morena made to stand to which Lucy quickly put a hand out.

"I wouldn't do that just yet."

Lucy was right. The moment Morena reached full height, the sensation of a disconnection between her body and her mind hit her and she collapsed back onto the bed. Morena managed to stare down at her bandaged hand. There was a warmth trembling through the meat of her hand, moving up her arm. "What...what's wrong with me?"

"It's just the blood bond with the kukri. It'll pass in a moment."

And so as suddenly as the feeling seemed to be building up to a crescendo that threatened to engulf her arm, it crested and dissipated. "Wha...?" She threw a questioning look to Lucy.

Lucy crossed her legs casually. "Well, you don't expect to do anything with that silly gun, do you? Just relax for a few moments." Then she reached around behind her, producing the kukri to show Morena.

"And how is that thing going to help me with vampires?"

Lucy rolled her eyes just as Morena noticed that she was wearing gloves. When she was sure Morena noticed, she nodded. "Now are you getting it?"

"You can't touch it? What happens if you do?"

"Hard to say, really. I'm allergic to silver, which is folded into the blade. But its effect on other vampires will be more pronounced and will vary. Legend says the kukri, once bonded by blood, protects the bearer by finding its enemy's weakness and revealing it."

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Morena blinked at her. It was hard to tell what was harder to swallow; that Lucy was giving her a weapon to kill vampires or that this mumbo jumbo was real. But considering Jesper could emit sun beams from his eyes and Lucy here could disappear into a cloud of birds, why shouldn't the blade work like some magic talking sword?

Lucy held it out to Morena and she took it gingerly. It was heavier than she expected as she held it in right hand, her cut hand. Funny, it didn't hurt to grip it tight. She hefted it, feeling the weight. While a strange shape, somehow, she knew exactly how it would feel to throw it.

"Good, you're getting the hang of it. But you'll probably still need some training," Lucy stood.

Morena sneered, looking up at her, "What, from you?"

Lucy threw her a sharp look. When Morena looked back down, Snuffy, her favorite stuffed animal, a pink Easter Bunny, was in her hand. The kukri was on her desk alongside her Glock. With the clip removed. And the bullets moving around the desktop. The thought was utterly sobering. Might as well have been her head.

"Don't mistake bravado for stupidity. You still haven't fully seen what your boyfriend's capable of."

Morena took in a deep breath. "It's not like that. Not anymore."

Lucy relaxed, letting out a breath. "Good. Vampires make terrible boyfriends."

Morena couldn't find it in herself to laugh but when she looked at Lucy, she sensed the punch line hadn't hit yet. "Oh, and why is that?"

"Because they'll bleed you dry, given half the chance." Lucy's lopsided smirk belied a deeper message.

Morena didn't want to think about that part of her acquaintanceship with Jesper. That had been quite enjoyable, on reflection. And that she did NOT want to reflect on.

"You'll get over it. I promise you that."

Morena stood, "Already am." She shuffled over to her desk, lightly touching the Kukri. She noticed a box sitting on the desk chair seat. "What's this?"

"Oh, that's a box of the modulators. Figured you might want to carry them, just in case. Damn nuisance that I can't figure out why Sophie's voice doesn't come through."

Morena opened the box, adding idly, "Maybe because she thinks too much like a vampire."

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Lucy shrugged and headed for the door. "Maybe so. In a few days, we should start training with the kukri. With all the activity around, you should be prepared."

"Is Sophie going to like you training me to hurt vampires?"

Lucy opened the door, tossing a casual look back. "Don't mistake me, Miss Fourtenay. I'm not going to train you to protect yourself against vampires. I'm going to train you to kill them. Goodnight." And as if to accentuate her point, she exploded into a murder of crows and flew out the door, the sheer gust of flight sucking the door closed.

But she didn't go far, up the staircase, through an open window on the landing, out into the sticky night air, to alight on the rooftop. She craned her neck to look down, standing just above Morena's apartment window. It was risky using her powers so openly but Morena needed to know what she was up against. Her very soul depending on it.

Lucy turned and walked towards the roof's charming garden, a few rows of raised cedar boxes, with every kind of herb growing. The summer had been hot and sunny in the last few weeks and the plants were taking full advantage. There was a quaint rusty patio set with a rocking chair and a trellis. It would suffice for her first night's vigil.

As she approached the patio, she noticed a shadow from the trellis lengthened over the gravel rooftop. She started as a figure materialized out of the shadow and grabbed her arm.

"Maurice!"

Her brother's face bristled with intensity, as if devouring every detail. It had been hours since sundown and she had not checked in with him. She couldn't be sure if it was concern or anger etched into his countenance.

As he was about to speak, his eyes took in her shorn hair. "What happened to your hair?" his voice trembled in barely controlled emotion.

Her ears had healed sufficiently to all appearances but under the surface, the bruising of rapidly regenerated flesh still lingered and would for some time. With his deep breathing, controlling his anger, anger that had started to turn dark of late, she knew he could smell the blood pooling in her tissues. There was no use in lying to him. He was still her beloved brother, no matter what he was struggling to become.

"I burned my ears. Scorched them doing recon."

He released her arm, his face falling. It took the breath from her, this sudden shift. The grouchiness she was getting used to, even the anger when it flared. But this, this was something new.

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"How have I failed you so completely, dearest sister?"

She shook her head, "I don't understand what you mean."

When she thought he might speak, he swallowed his thoughts away. When she reached a hand to him, he turned his shoulder away, staring up at the moon. For many moments, they fell into silence and Lucy tried to reach out her mind to him, to find a shred of the bond they had shared for so long that would unlock the puzzle her brother had become. But all she felt was his deathly silence.

"Did you give her the Kukri?" he asked softly.

"Yes. And I was going to watch over her tonight. Just in case."

He nodded. "Would that things were different and we had met her under other circumstances."

"Life proceeds as it does, brother."

He turned to her, his eyes gone dark. "But we should be its master."

The shadows around the rooftop began to swirl around Maurice, as he took a single deliberate step towards her. "Come, we have work to do."

Lucy steeled herself. "Someone should stay behind to protect her."

"She is a Fourtenay. She can take care of herself. At least, at the moment." Maurice put his hands gently over Lucy's shoulders but the effect upset her more than relieved her of worry.

"But Maurice, the Kukri is new to her. What if the wound still bleeds? What if others find her? We must protect her."

"We must protect our own. And for that, there is work elsewhere needed." He rubbed her ear, saw her grimace. "I know what you have been stalking. You must come with me now." The shadows began to inch up their legs as they stood there, uniting them in darkness.

Lucy tried to twist from his grip, resisting. "But Maurice, she---"

"You WILL obey me!" Vox Compulsum shattered ceramic pots all along the rooftop. And then, the shadows made in his image roared up, consuming them entirely before dispersing into the night, leaving only an echo of Lucy's scream.

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I Must Not Fear

I woke early evening after being hunted and tormented in nightmares brought on my too little sleep and too much melatonin. How quickly I had moved from the troubles of the dreaming, sun-endowed vampire Jesper to the more sinister evils of the Carpathian cannibal Skovajsa. Something about it all just seemed so off.

How much of it could be explained by his not having known his maker, not having a mentor to work him through the process, I wasn't sure. The very survival of a newborn usually demanded a maker, a parent to provide for and protect, especially in the cities. The era of bloodbaths and the countless missing peasants whom no one noticed was over. Even if a newly made hunted the homeless, someone would take note.

And then there was Skovajsa's textbook story that seemed all too...textbook. But he seemed so proud of it, so caught up in it. Never mind his aggression; he'd already shown himself perfectly capable of violence with little regard to the fact that it was uncivilized.

No maker, a back story that reeked of a Bela Lugosi film, the emotional depth of a teaspoon, and the vanity of male model...it went without saying. I was afraid to see him. Afraid for my life. I was ashamed of it. I'd lived lifetime after lifetime, becoming acquainted the my many selves, knowing that because I fell so far from perfection, so far from being able to give up that which might free me from mortal concerns that I was doomed to be reincarnated again.

But it wasn't the life that I feared losing...it was what was left behind. The mystery of a dreaming vampire and his glowing eyes. Just the thought that my going out to meet Skovajsa tonight might mean that last night would be the last time I saw Jesper curdled the blood in my veins. I'd lived so many times that the loss of my own existence no longer fazed me. But the loss of his, the sheer impossibility of ever connecting with him again the way he was right now, warm, funny, vulnerable, and so very very intriguing; it terrified me beyond all else. I couldn't wrap my mind around the thought because my heart finally ached not to be parted from him, not just yet.

Maybe he felt the same, maybe he was just his positive vampire self, taking advantage of the situation to his own ends. I had never cared that my emotions be returned in kind. The fact that I had them for once...finally...after feeling so bereft of emotions for so very long. The emptiness, the void was suddenly bursting with this all-consuming fear and I was shaking in my damp sheets, clutching my arms around me.

He was everything that Skovajsa was not. I knew Skovajsa was bad news. So why would I even consider going to meet him?

There was a Carpathian long ago that I had tried to help. I had been fascinated by him, fallen in love with him, and watched him slip from my grasp as his imbalances had turned his interest in me to obsession, his love into fear, my refusal to be turned that fear into hate, my attempts to minister to him twisted into ridicule of him, contemptible conceit. In the very end, his very love for me had

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been my undoing. I hadn't seen how far he'd gone into this madness, hadn't been aware or prepared.

My failure had cost me my life. It had been the last time I remember feeling anything more than fondness for someone, excepting, of course, my daughter.

One dark night in London in 1883, I met a vampire named Valerian, in the flat of a Mr. Roland Emmerick, during a meeting of the Ghost Club, an organization founded to investigate spiritualism and science in a quest for knowledge. While women were not allowed in the Ghost Club officially, having a strange aptitude for reading people's past landed me an audience in the club as a medium.

Valerian, who must have been already over 400 years old by this time, was investigating this club for what threat it might have against him and his kind. I suspect he had already started a horror of his own and wanted to see about setting London up as his home. He cut quite an impressive visage; tall, dark, and handsome with angular cheeks and deep set blue eyes.

Whether he was actually attracted to me physically or rather some of my comments had piqued his interest initially, he knew well how to mete control of his abilities to charm and attract. It had caught me off-guard. What was worse was that as we began to talk, the wall between my professionalism and his, well, vampire nature, slipped seamlessly away. He led me to a quiet corner of the room to share a brandy with him. Since most of the assembled might disapprove of such a strong drink for such a gentle lady, I agreed to this secretive spirit, thinking, mostly, that it would settle my nerves.

It did. It emboldened me, matter-of-fact, into revealing what I suspected of him.

"A vampire? Surely you are letting these zealots of the supernatural influence you," he joked, but a darkness crept over his face.

"Zealots they may be but the fact remains, you are a wolf in sheep's clothing, testing the shepherd's flock for your own designs." I took another sip. "It speaks of your refinement, maturity of one of your kind. The fact that you can meld so well in such animated company further demonstrates your power and capability."

"If I were sufficiently capable, as you suggest, wouldn't I be able to charm you into thinking me just a man having an entrancing conversation with a beautiful and yet enigmatic woman?"

"Lord Valerian, as you have already been made aware, I have supernatural tendencies of my own. Though, this brandy helps me to confess, I feel the power of your sway most strongly. I do hope you will not take advantage of a lady who only seeks to offer up her abilities for the benefit of others."

"You can rely upon me, sweet lady, to take the utmost care with your person. Although, I too must confess myself strangely held captive like no time in recent memory. If we were to pretend, for a

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moment, that I was this, uh, creature of which you speak, what special skills might you lay upon my person?"

Looking at him coyly, drunk off brandy, "I would help you find the balance which you seek."

He guffawed heartily. But as I remained steadfast in my gaze, his face sobered into incredulity. "Let me make sure I understand you. You believe that I, a stranger that you have just met for all of an hour, am unbalanced?"

As I held his gaze with my own, I watched the thought sneak under his armor and behind those dark blue eyes, there was a tremor. First, it was a flash of anger and he seemed about to bolt. The room was heady with incense, smoke from gas lamps, and some other odor. Pipe smoke filling the room and the brandy like liquid courage in my veins, I moved to ease his mind, putting my gloved hand out.

I misjudged my mark, my hand landing not on his arm as intended. Instead, it fell upon his upper thigh.

His eyes flashed and his mouth dropped open just enough that I clearly saw his fangs snap out. It would've been quite acceptable, maybe even expected of him, a gentleman, to recognize a lady out of her depth, too much in the drink, and in danger of, perhaps already sullying her reputation.

He was old enough, mature enough, powerful enough that my small slip of propriety should have been nothing to him. Even as Vampire, such a touch, such a conversation, should have done little to move him from his plan. But I got to him that evening, just as he had got to me and we were staring at each other, as if suddenly both naked.

He wasn't without any subtleties. He leaned forward, letting the fabric of his jacket drape over my arm so that no casual observer might notice where my hand lay. The room was stifling, my head began to swim, and I surmise now that it was in no small measure because he lost control of his abilities. I dropped my brandy glass and put my other hand to my head before fainting away.

The rest I know from Emmerick who told me later how Valerian gathered me up in his arms, declared that I had just had a powerful psychic fit in reading his future and that he would return me home posthaste in his carriage.

When I came to later, my head was resting against his shoulder in the carriage. But contrary to what could have been, he had taken no other liberties, both of his hands rested on his walking stick. As I stirred, opening my eyes, he spoke.

"I must apologize. There must be some truth in your words for only if I were not quite right would I take such a risk and spirit you away from that assembly." He took a long, slow breath. "But I find I cannot be parted from you just yet."

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I lifted my head, felt his being all throughout me. I put a weak hand to my throat.

He noticed the movement. "No, I have not bitten you...yet."

"You've done far worse." I spoke softly. Without a bite, it could only mean that his sheer power alone had been brought to bear. He'd charmed me, nay, perhaps even worse than that, he'd entranced me. The pull felt so strong, I had to clench my hands to keep them from him.

He turned to look at me. Instead of a jaunty smile, there was regret and a sheepish look. His fangs peeked out from under tightly drawn lips. "I did not intend it."

I should've been fighting with all my remaining strength against him, to get out of his carriage, but I believed him. I read in his eyes the truth of the situation, that it was almost a reflex; he was Vampire and he must keep what was his. And somehow in that drawing room, I had intrigued him enough, shocked him enough, that it had forged some bond.

"Perhaps, my lord, if your mind was put at some ease, you might be able to relinquish your hold." It was like gasping in air to make any sense, no matter how he was to be believed. I tried not to fight it, that could only lead to wrecking of my mind especially if he had no control over this binding that had happened.

He smiled without mirth, moving a hand to take my chin gently in his grasp. "And what possible ease could I find in your presence, when you look right through all four hundred and thirty three of my years and make me feel like a schoolboy scraping my knees at the altar of the divine?"

I couldn't think past the current moment. The only thoughts that seemed to make any sense were to give in enough that we both might find some calm. With shaky fingers, I undid the top buttons of my collar. His fangs grew involuntarily at revealing my neck to him. I blinked my eyes shut, wanting to dive headlong through this moment so I might find a way back out the other side.

He moved to wrap his arm around me, tilting my chin with his hand. Besides the bumpy nature of the carriage, once I was completely in his hold, I was no longer jostled, his strength so complete that I felt like I was floating.

His thumb moved over my cheek causing me to open my eyes to him again. There was a question in his gaze. "You think this will break my regard for you?"

"Yes," I breathed. Arrgh, I just wanted him to hurry!

I could feel my veins throbbing in my whole body, heart thumping just for him. If this didn't work, I'd be lost.

"My lady," he whispered, eyes still searching mine. "What is your name?"

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"Darcie Sherbourne," I replied simply.

"Darcie Sherbourne," he tried the name on his tongue, head leaning over me. Then Lord Valerian, loyal lieutenant to Stephen the Great, Prince of Moldavia, who fought to repel the Ottomans during the Battle of Vaslui in 1475, ancient vampire, gentleman and scholar, professed his own prescience.

"You will be the death of me."

Then he bit me.



I was in no way ready to meet Skovajsa. I was too vulnerable. I realized I was still willing to give Skovajsa a chance because of my past with Valerian. But Valerian had killed me. Our bond had been broken in one way in that carriage and forged in another. And it had been the undoing of us both.

The twins might be my biggest regret but Valerian had been my ultimate failure.

And here I was, afraid of losing this life more than any other I could recall, stepping into a cab at half past ten to meet the vampire fraud in the heart of downtown. As I settled into the seat, my phone buzzed in my pocket.

A text. From Jesper.

Got yur message. See u later?

Nothing in this life was ours to keep. Everything we acquired, every happiness we managed, only moments on loan to us. The trick was to accept those moments as gifts and linger over them only for a moment, not to clasp them tightly until they turned to dust.

Sure, I texted back. I leaned my head back in the cab, watching the water of another lake fill my view. This moment, right now, with my heart beating warmly in my chest with relief, this moment I would savor.

NEW MESSAGE: Is this your guy?

From: bruno bonne (brunbon@unilu.ch)

Date: Sun, 26 Jul 2009

To: vampironyis@live.com

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Attachment: BeItalian.jpg

Tried to IM you but you've been offline all day. So I put one more try out there in the great wide web to see if I could catch anything on this Skovajsa and came up with this strange thing: a male actor/model in 1930's Italy named Vasa Skoda. He was of Yugoslavian descent, apparently migrated to Italy to do advertisements for the growing interest in travel to the Mediterranean. Apparently, tans were all the fashion.

Someone at Jagiellonian University is trying to do a new history of the House of Vasa, a Swedish/Polish royal house and, well, she found his info and posted it up, trying to find any descendants.

Trippy note here: apparently, one of his few acting roles was an extra in which famous 1931 film? You guessed it, the classic Bram Stoker's Dracula with Bela Lugosi.

I've attached the ad picture. Is this him? Get back to me ASAP!

-bb

Bruno Bonne Kasernenplatz 6 Postfach 74553 6999 Luzern 9 Universitat Luzern

DJB: Memoirs, Volume 3: The Look of Things

"Sure," was the length and breadth of her response to my text.

It didn't leave me much to go on, which troubled me some. I scratched at my chest, my scars prickling under my shirt. It took me a while to notice that Conclave had gone suddenly quiet, as if the conference call had been dropped.

I pitched forward at my desk, realizing that I was no longer actively projecting into the room where the others had gathered. Someone had called this emergency session to talk about some slight somewhere or something. I had to admit a failing on my part as Conclave scribe that I hadn't been paying much attention.

As I peered into the room, trying to re-establish what was happening, I saw a form move in front of the camera. A laptop was usually setup on the far side of the room where I could see everyone assembled and easily project myself without getting in anyone's way. It tended to unnerve some of the others when my projected self interfered in their space.

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The form was Valerian, clearly seated in his chair on the dais. He raised an eyebrow at me and blocked the entire room from my view as I heard the heated conversation continue in the background. But before I could grasp the thread, Valerian spoke, his voice low, just for me.

"You look a little different today, my absent-minded friend."

"Huh?" I was scratching at my chest again. I made myself stop.

He didn't say more, just slowly sat back out of view.

"*That* is an insolent allegation--."

I pushed my awareness back into the room just as Valerian, just behind my left elbow, spoke up.

"Considering that the focus of the allegation has not appeared to this conclave, perhaps it would be better to reserve these proceedings for a better time."

Across the room from me was a very young looking Latino, wearing chinos and a white sports polo shirt with short cropped sun-streaked brown hair, more modern day soccer player than vampire. But his jaw was set with selfless resolution. And he stood alongside a very old friend to the Conclave, Imperius from the Jaguar clan. Imperius was no vampire, but had been a vampire servant from his Roman days, then traveled as a monk throughout Europe. He'd been a servant for so long and his bonded vampire had been so ancient that when his master had to be killed due to insanity, Imperius had survived on. It was a bit of a miracle that no one could still explain.

Xi, current member of Valerian's staff although originally from Teng-Wen's Jiang-shi horror, had stepped down from the dais, as if advancing on the Latino. His long dusty black locks were bristling, the tattoos over his naked torso rippled with magical intensity. It had been his voice that Valerian had forestalled. With his clenched fists and forward posture, he was a hair's breadth from disobedience.

Imperius set his shrewd eyes to studying Valerian. He'd been old before Valerian had been human born. There wasn't much that passed his notice or reasoning among vampire affairs and he had very deftly helped the South American contingent carve out equal rights among the vampire Conclave, including this particular privilege of direct access. No other horror would allow anyone but the leader to directly address Conclave. But the South Americans were different in many ways and we'd all chosen to respect that in their one small request for fear of the bloodbath that might follow denial.

"And when might young Bianchi, who's already traveled quite far in service to the Conclave, get his satisfaction?" Imperius asked, suspicious.

Valerian stood, a signal this Conclave was at an end. "When the vampire in question can be found."

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The Latino Bianchi stepped forward, "I only wish to be heard, Lord Valerian. We in the southern provinces believe in your wisdom handling threats to all vampire society, regardless of their source."

Xi made the slightest inhalation in temper but before breath escaped his lungs, his lips and jaw clenched shut tight and he began stepping back heavily, up the steps of the dais, behind Valerian. His eyes darted to his master but no other part of his body moved. He became a glorious statue of a warrior, frozen on the precipice of attacking. It was the first time in a long time I'd seen Valerian have to reign in one of his own at Conclave. His kindred were among the most obedient, mainly because they had been hunted the most throughout the ages and relied so heavily on him for their continued existence.

His full expression was hard for me to see from my vantage but his sharp face was dented in a pained smile.

"But of course. We shall adjourn from this larger group to talk it over."

Valerian stepped down the dais towards the Latino vampire, his robe falling thick and dark around him. When he reached Bianchi, he put an arm around the boy, leading him away, with Imperius hesitating behind. For all his power and darkness, there was something so fatherly about that arm that it beckoned me forward.

"So, scribe, how will you record this session? I fear there was more unsaid than you could hope to surmise."

I hadn't realized I had pushed further into the room, some fifty feet from the laptop. Imperius looked at my projected self as if my presence were commonplace. Absent-minded indeed. Valerian was right; I wasn't quite in control of body or spirit at the moment, both wanting to be elsewhere. But there were too many questions in the here and now that were hinted at, most of them from our appointed leader himself.

"What did the boy mean 'regardless of the source'?" I asked, still looking after Valerian.

"Hmm, he refers to the Taint."

I turned my head toward him. I was familiar with the blood cleansing programs. Valerian had just returned from one not long ago and had still deigned to meet with me about Sophie. I now knew he had been drinking pine needle tea as a restorative. I kept away from the cleansings as I had never had the thirst for gorging as some had, even though I understood the necessity of the process. But some programs devised more recently hadn't always used such a direct approach.

"Yes, what of it?"

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All manner of vampire concoctions had once been tried to affect a larger group of people without exposing vampires to direct blood consumption. All attempts had significant side effects moving Valerian to discontinue them and every unintentional spawn had been liberated. He'd had to argue very vigorously with Shadria and Galscythe, ministers of the programs, to revert to vampire individuals doing the direct cleansing, volunteering himself to start. They had not seen a few errant orphans as being statistically significant even after one had murdered a school bus full of children in Argentina.

Horrific as it had been, they had still thought to refine, not end the practice. Valerian wanted it eradicated immediately and every potion, powder, or bottle collected and destroyed. Their disagreement had come to combat in the Conclave chamber, Shadria calling Valerian soft in his concern for the humans and weak for his fear over a few fevered and wild offshoots. Before that day, the list of punishable offenses in vampire society included only two: Endangerment of vampire society and interference in another vampire's horror or territory.

That day, Valerian in his swift and utter defeat of Shadria, a vampire two hundred years his senior, had added another. Children of any kind were untouchable. Of course, he explained that infanticide was a great threat to our treaties and our secrecy and therefore violated the primary law. But the ferocity with which he had physically mutilated Shadria and mentally wrecked her in unknowable ways gave rise to suspicions of his exact motives.

Imperius chewed the side of his beard, looking much the portly monk, still in his old traveling robes. "Valerian promised Jaguar clan that he would destroy every remnant of Taint from the Earth. It's rumored a few still elude him, that his agents work even now to recover them. But Jaguar clan remembers how he fought with honor to protect all vampires from ultimate ruin and avenged the defiled children of the Argentines."

"Yes, he's become quite the family man."

"Hmm, " Imperius scoffed, slapping air where my chest would be. "You might ask Xi how he feels about his adopted father right about now." He took his leave.

He was right of course but this interaction had revealed something a lot closer at hand. As I looked down at my chest, the V neck shirt hinted at something strange beneath, something Valerian had tried to hint at earlier. I pulled down the fabric at the neck and noticed that my projected self had an unblemished chest, even as I felt my real chest still itching. Somehow, my projected self was the old one, not the one with a few new scars that Valerian had woken from reverie in the laptop conference call.

The Truth Will Out

What should have been a beautiful warm Seattle night to enjoy a breathtaking view of the Sound from the park across from Pike Place Market wound up being more an education in how public

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places could hide anyone. Vagrant, socialite, drunkard, hipster, tourist, killer...the naïve masses crushing themselves through the night, walking the harbor steps for a view of the pier, lights from ships bouncing across the water.

When I found the totem pole that Skovajsa had arranged as our meeting place, I found myself facing a fifty foot log of cedar rising up into the dark sky. At eye level, some sort of bird, talons up and raised, staring at me. It made me think of Lucy and her flock ability, power of transfiguration that I had never seen. Of course, in the here and now, with the memories of Valerian coming back to me, I realized that I was not fully back into myself yet. The nightmares that haunted me were images from my past that I fought to keep hidden.

I seldom thought back on how I'd become aware in this lifetime. It was still too painful to remember all of it beyond what Skovajsa's attack had forced me to relive. But my crisis in this life had connected me back with lives that had come before. But still, mostly snippets and fragments had emerged over the last two years. Even now I had to admit how little I knew of the Memento itself, how it had come into my possession, how its magic had been forged.

Had I invented a reality to cover over those gaps, much like Skovajsa had? Were our struggles so very different, trying to understand what we were and how to become that next thing, the next step in our evolution? Looking up at the pole, towering over me in the dark, I realized that the dance was over. I needed to push Skovajsa, challenge him to know what he was really about, whether I could really help him.

I turned away from the totem pole and felt Skovajsa near. He kept his distance, observing me from across the street. He still wore his dark long jacket and once he could tell I'd seen him, he strode over. Interesting. He seemed intent on not frightening me.

I met him halfway, where we'd be full under street lights.

"Thank you for meeting me here," he said, voice even and calm.

I simply nodded.

He reached out a hand to touch my cheek and I stepped away. Flashbacks of that hand wrapped around my throat were all too recent. He dropped it, immediately stuffing both of his hands in his pockets.

"Shall we walk?" he offered.

"Ok," I said. As long as it's within full view of everyone else in the whole of Seattle. And maybe even a few spy satellites. I wasn't going to take the lead on this. He'd called this meeting. He needed to explain what he wanted.

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It took him awhile to get going. In fact, we'd reached to the end of this stretch of safe walkway before I halted us. "Look, Skovajsa, you called this meeting."

"Yes, I thought we might talk."

Um, right. It was talking to a brick wall, all six plus feet of it. The tension was getting to me, especially since I was getting his back currently as he looked around. But I needed to give this one more chance. I needed to be sure. It was for a life's work undone.

"I'm listening," I said, my tone blank.

He turned toward me, a look of compassion and regret on his face. "I have committed an offense. I have not treated you with due respect and I apologize for my short sightedness. You are a woman of great worth and understanding. I see that now."

O-K. If the hairs on my arms would just sit down, maybe this wasn't going to be too bad.

"You see, I do not trust easily. My life has been full of strife and death. I have been hunted, even by own kind. And humans," he paused, looking away, suddenly pensive. "Well, they seem to stick around for more than they are wanted, for their own ends. It is why I have had so few servants." He looked down at me again. "Finding a companion, it is difficult for one such as me."

Lost, misunderstood, confused?

"Someone of talent, knowledge, and strength of character and purpose to match my own power and resources is...rare indeed."

Oh, sorry, egotistical, maniacal, sociopathic.

He reached a hand into his coat and thirteen lifetimes stood up in me, ready to scream in one voice for help. But instead, he retrieved a velvet rectangular box, holding it out to me. "Please. A token of my apology."

I was about to halt him with my hand but one of those voices, a young bride from Darjeeling, bade me give in for a moment, to not tempt the beast when it was most contrite. I took the box and opened it. Even under the dim glow of street lamps, the diamond necklace glittered shamefully. Oh, shit.

"Skovajsa--."

"Please, you must hear me. I feel if you give me the chance, you may come to see that our lives might be bond together in perfect circumstance. If I might just be allowed to give you the stars, you might yet bring me the sun."

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My eyes darted up. The sun. My blood ran cold. What possible reason could a vampire like him want with the sun? He had learned to speak in metaphor. My talent and knowledge, his search for a companion. This was something I never expected. Skovajsa didn't want to kill me. Far from it. He wanted to bind me to him, to use my knowledge for his own purposes. Perhaps to hunt down other vampires.

The Sun. Jesper. Somehow, my instincts told me, he knew about Jesper. I didn't know how or for how long. Had he read my thoughts? Was that yet another talent vampires of which I had been unaware?

He put his hands over mine to close the box, pushing it gently to me. I blinked very slowly up at him. My mind ground to a complete halt and the very worst that could possibly be had come to fruition.

"Skovajsa, you are not the vampire you say you are. I do not know how you were truly made but your life story seems a contrivance to make up for being abandoned by your maker."

This made a dent in his temperate manner. His eyebrow twitched but he slowly smiled to cover it.

"I can try to help you, help you try to recover your story, your memory...as your psychologist." Then, I pushed the box back into his chest. He let me draw one hand back, but he gripped my left before I could get it back safely. He stared down at the box.

"What do you mean, you think my story is a lie? That my struggle...that it has been a lie?"

He let go of my hand as if I'd hit him. His words should have been filled with hurt, anger even. But they fell flat and devoid of anything resembling humanity and all the gracelessness of pure, raw emotion. It was as if someone was typing in the words and Skovajsa the mannequin spoke. He was either buried so deep underneath the lies he'd told himself or the man he'd once been no longer existed at all.

"I have no doubt you have struggled. But I can only help you if you want to know the truth. If you really want to know yourself."

He held out the box again, as if diamonds really were a girl's BFF. I stepped away.

It was heartbreaking, in a way. He wasn't Valerian. He wasn't fighting to maintain himself while I tilted the world on him. I could see he just didn't understand this rejection. It didn't fit. But nothing showed in his face. But the gears must have been turning.

"You will...try to help me."

"As your psychologist."

He gazed into my face again, his impassive. "You'll help me...uncover my story."

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Something felt off, like he was backing me into some corner that I couldn't see. "You wanted to know yourself."

He looked down, dropping his arms to his sides. "Yes. I said that." He straightened up to full height. "I have many holdings, pretty houses, stores, nice things. Cars, furs, jewels. You would not be wanting for anything. Perhaps in time, when you know me better, you will change your mind."

Damn, if he wasn't persistent.

"No. I won't. I want to help you. But not like that."

His body relaxed all of a sudden, as if I'd given him exactly what he wanted. "Well, I will just have to find some other way to convince you. While we continue our treatments, of course."

Not only was he not listening, he wasn't going to take no for an answer. He'd made up his mind. I hesitated. It might make more sense to stall him into thinking we were good until I could figure out what to do next. But he was Vampire; he had it in his head that I would make a great addition to his many holdings. Being used for my knowledge was something that Valerian had once warned me about.

If you are not protected, you will become a pawn.

I nodded. "Right. I'll contact you for your next appointment time. In a few days. Good night." I began to walk away.

"Sophie."

It was the first time I remember him using my name. It chilled me. I wanted to scour my ears. Was there just a little Vox in there?

"You turn down the finest jewels. What gift would be more appropriate for my...psychologist friend?"

I'd turned down the nearest thing a vampire gave to a marriage proposal and realized that this was by far one of the most dangerous and unhinged vampires I'd ever met. There was no doubt now. Skovajsa was the Vampire Cannibal I feared. I was stalling for a plan, for something brilliant to come to mind.

"Don't suppose you have any fine wine?" I quipped.

"Certainly." He smiled. "Something just perfect for the occasion. A very rare old vintage Sherry. I just recently got it for a steal from a collector in Seville."

Remember what I said about fearing a smiling vampire?

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The Secret Ingredient

"There has to be parsley in there."

The last thing Morena expected to be doing during a second course of Vampire 101 was challenging Jesper to name the ingredients in Nick's gyoza recipe. But here they were, leaning over plates overloaded with the remnants of Nick's sleepless night, testing Jesper's super-sensory sniffer.

"You sure about that, pal?" Nick smiled, chopsticks halfway to his mouth. He proceeded to shovel noodles damp with broth so efficiently and effortlessly into his mouth that Morena didn't wonder why entire nations found no use for spoons.

Jesper's face screwed up in concentration. His face was right next to hers alleging that he could smell best as she released the flavors with her chewing. After getting over Nick's gagging look and her own discomfort having a creature whose face had been even closer to other more private parts of her body, Morena had to admit this had become fun.

She sat on a floor cushion in front of the settee where Nick reclined. They had pulled over a coffee table to bear the weight of Nick's culinary insomnia. Jesper sat in a straight back chair, wearing a tight navy short-sleeved T-shirt, dark relaxed jeans, his once-auburn now nearer to bronze shoulder length hair flared out around him in waves. The most noticeable difference? His eyes. They'd seemed grey before and now they were alive with all colors, but mostly hazel.

"Take another bite," Jesper told her.

"Why don't you just eat it?" she complained. She was stuffed. If she ate another gyoza, she was certain she'd pop the top button off her designer jeans.

Jesper jerked his head back, aghast at the suggestion. "Me? Oh no, I follow a strict non-vegan liquid diet."

Nick laughed as Jesper played it totally over the top. Morena rolled her eyes and sighed, picking up one more. When she went to dip it into the soy sauce, Jesper halted her.

"Without the sauce this time, the sodium is throwing off the scent."

As she tore the gyoza into two between her teeth, Jesper leaned in close, breathing deep. The playful look in his eyes earlier banished as he became all focus, closing his eyes.

"Now exhale at me," he instructed, hands on his thighs.

She tossed Nick a look.

"That has to be cheating," Nick commented.

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She breathed openmouthed into Jesper's face and he inhaled, straightening up and back away from her, eyes closed tightly.

"And that there is so gross."

Morena almost choked on a laugh. "You stop it! You'd think you tried to rig this."

Nick shrugged, "Yeah like I was totally thinking of putting crazy ingredients in there this morning as I was trying not to think of mind wrecking." He sobered for a moment, burying his face into his bowl to try and cover it.

Morena couldn't help the smile sliding from her face. The fear of this morning seemed so far away and yet, her hand was still covered by a bandage and she was packing Nepalese heat in her bag. The cut from the kukri had mostly healed; the bandage was more a reminder to be alert and wary. She hadn't thought that would need to be on top of her tasting ability. It wasn't a talent she pretended to have.

She looked over to Jesper to see if the mood shift had impacted him too to find him watching Nick very closely. Nick seemed to still be investigating the bottom of his bowl.

"Ask me, Nick."

Nick shrugged, "I dunno. I just was wondering if you'd ever wrecked a human before." Before Jesper had a chance to answer, Nick continued. "It's just, it sounds so horrible. I mean, I don't think too much of my brain. I'm not Einstein or Hermione but, it's the only thing that's really mine, you know. My thoughts."

Jesper considered Nick for a moment, waited for Nick, who was lounging on the settee to meet his gaze. Then Jesper looked to Morena. She couldn't help it. She wanted to know too. It was all fun and games, she knew, until she found out how badly her ex-whatever-he-had-been had behaved in his vampire life.

"It is horrible. Our minds, our memories in particular, are what shape us into what we are. But being what we are doesn't come with instructions. Without proper guidance, our abilities can do a lot of damage, especially when we are first vampire born."

"Is that supposed to be a yes or no?" Morena asked directly.

Jesper met her eyes. He lowered his eyes slowly, regret covering his face. "I'd like to be able to say no. But much of my early years I have no memory of. It happens sometimes, when there's enough stress. I have to hope not. But I have never knowingly bound a human to me."

"Why not? Isn't it safer to have a companion?" Morena asked, suddenly concerned. She didn't know his age but to think of him alone for all those years, with that horrible secret, it seemed unbearable.

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She had held his secret for only a few months and she found it so isolating, even with Camille sharing it.

Jesper raised his eyes to hers. "Safer for whom?"

She couldn't fault that logic. It didn't take the hurt away from him not sharing more about what he was truly capable of with her, but it gave her a hint of why he had kept it from her. It also let her know, all in a rush, that he never meant anything long term with her. She dropped her eyes realizing that.

"Uh, you guys want a moment?"

Morena slapped Nick's leg and a smile crossed her face. Boy, he made her laugh. For now, that was worth a whole lot. His face was a strange mix of discomfort and naivety. He hadn't really known what she was thinking, but somehow, he could tell she went into that darker part of her thinking, the place she normally dwelled with regards to her relationships.

He gave her a tentative smile. She'd swung by to pick him up, partly to keep an eye on him, partly to help him haul the night's dinner. He'd managed to get a good amount of sleep, like she had, and they'd had a pleasant chat on the ride over. That was when she wasn't hounding him about how they were possibly going to eat that much food.

"Basil!"

"Are you shitting me? How the hell do you DO that?"

Jesper grinned ear to ear while Nick filled up his bowl for the fifth straight time. One thing was for sure: that boy could eat a mean streak. "Now, for our daily double," he added, stuffing his mouth again with rice, "how much are you willing to bet in potent potables?"

"Hmm," Jesper thought about it, index finger to his temple, fingers curled under his chin. "A new leather jacket?"

Nick's eyes got wide, "Well ok then."

He was obviously pleased with himself. This one was bound to be harder than Morena believed Jesper would expect. Jesper had already returned Nick's leather jacket that he'd borrowed last night, just like she'd said he would. He'd even apologized for racing out. There had definitely been more unease there than she was used to seeing from him but she realized this Jesper was entirely new to her. It was like meeting him for the first time, the veil finally falling away. She had to admit, with an admiring look at him, it was rather bittersweet. All thanks to Sophie.

"Where do you think Sophie is?" she asked to no one.

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Jesper stiffened, noticeably.

Nick shrugged. He knew but wasn't saying. Quite the dutiful employee indeed.

"Would either of you tell me if you thought she were in danger?" Jesper asked bluntly.

"Um, what part of her job isn't dangerous?" Nick retorted.

Jesper fell silent.

After a few moments silence, Morena targeted her harsh tone to Nick, "She's with that Castellan, isn't she?"

"That's not what it's called," Nick pouted.

Morena saw the tension all over Nick's face and leveled a seething eye at him.

"I don't actually know where she is. She didn't tell me, alright?"

"She said she'd be here," Jesper said stiffly.

Morena turned back to him. "You talked to her?"

"Not exactly."

Morena looked between the two of them and realized that no one had, in fact, made sure Sophie wasn't doing something stupid. Just as she was going to get up in a huff, Nick fished out his phone, tapping a few buttons.

A tremulous silence fell for a moment but Morena noticed that Jesper hadn't moved an inch.

"Who's the Carpathian? The woman from last night?" he lightly touched his chest.

Nick tightened his lips. He wasn't about to say a word. He was trying to be the dutiful assistant.

Morena had no such compunction. "No, there's another one. She told me she'd never successfully treated one; that she'd been killed by the last one she treated. Are they that powerful?"

Morena saw his eyes narrow in a way that made her realize that yes, there was something dangerous lurking there. She wished she understood more. The not knowing was the worst.

"She was right. There is a lot you two must be told. Like how to avoid us."

Before Jesper could continue, Nick's phone chirped back. Nick hastily grabbed up the phone.

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"She's on her way back to the office. Should be here shortly," he announced, relieved. He looked up, smile on his face. Then, casting a glance at Morena, he asked, "You going to finish that?"

She shook her head and watched him finish off the last of the gyoza with a flourish, as if moments before they weren't all thinking Sophie was in danger. It made her smile, how easily he let go of it. She tossed a look to Jesper, expecting him to be relieved as well.

But Jesper was lost in thought, hand moving over his chest idly.

She drew her brows together and then remembered the anecdote about Vampire healing. She didn't really want to ask but found she couldn't help it. "So, um, did you, uh, go out last night?"

When he turned a blank expression on her, she almost lost her nerve. The memories she had of sharing blood with him involved very little clothing and very pleasant sensations. She swallowed. The last time had been about a month ago, something she had tried not to think too much about as it had rattled her in lots of ways. Enough that she had broken her confidence, taken a business card, and made a call to a stranger.

"To heal, you know," she continued. It had been different when she'd been helping him pick willing donors. She needed to get over it, needed to hear him say that he was with someone else. It would make it easier. It really would.

He blinked, his hand stopped moving. "No."

"No? Are you healed?"

He nodded.

"Then how?"

The smile slowly spread over his face. "I followed doctor's orders."

She smiled back, shaking her head.

"Yeah, two blonde co-eds and a redhead chaser."

"Nick," she exclaimed, slapping his leg.

"What?"

"I think I'm ready for that potent potables now," Jesper added.

"I don't think you are but you can try."

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"Ah, I'll take that challenge."

"Yes, one Italian leather jacket."

"Oh, it's Italian now?" Morena accused.

She watched Nick and Jesper spar verbally, enjoyed seeing this side of Jesper, even though she realized she was so not over him. But yes, she could see it. There was a bond there. She'd seen it the first night after he and Sophie had talked. And she remembered the shock of seeing Jesper curled up in Sophie's lap last night. It was something strong and she needed to get over it. Soon.

Just as she was about to re-engage the conversation, the office door creaked open and Sophie shuffled in. They all turned to look and one look was all they needed to know where she'd been and who with. And with his usual knack for the obvious, Nick addressed it.

"Damn, boss, you look like Death warmed over!"

The Point of Failure

The first of Buddhism's noble truths is simply this: suffering exists. Not a particularly mind-blowing concept, considering the state of the world, and I had never had troubles with that. The next truth also had always made sense to me: suffering arises from worldly attachments and desires. Self-evident when you look at all the wars and strife caused by this guy over here wanting what that guy over there has.

Even the third and fourth truths get no argument from me: ending suffering comes from releasing those attachments and that can be undertaken through following the Eightfold Path. And like any follower of a faith, the difficulty lies in the execution.

When I'd first learned of the Path, back in my life in Darjeeling, following it seemed part of the moral duty to which we all belonged, to be right in understanding, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration. But as I came back again and again, as I understood more, as I felt I'd progressed further along the Path, certain things slipped askew.

I hadn't needed Bruno's nostalgic Italian vacation ad to tell me that Skovajsa was our vampire cannibal of cyberspace lore. I hadn't even needed the vampire in question to bring up Seville. I'd known it the moment he'd given me the present and started talking about the stars and the sun.

He'd followed me. He'd seen Jesper. Somehow, he'd figured out that Jesper was worth *acquiring*.

This sobering thought had spun around in my head the entire cab ride back to the office in Bellevue. What did real psychologists do when one patient threatened to...uhum...harm another. I'm not sure

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Dr. Kaga would have any worthwhile advice for me. Slipping further off the board, away from right mindfulness.

I had shuffled through the door of the office expecting to put my head in my hands, maybe cry a little, and spend another sleepless night wondering what on Earth I could do about this impossible situation. I certainly hadn't expected Morena, Nick, and Jesper bantering back and forth like school kids waiting for the school bell.

I froze.

Jesper's face went from smile to scowl in an instant and with a *whoosh!*, he was standing in front of me as if he'd been there all along. As low as I felt, with him towering over me, sniffing with barely controlled rage, I wasn't ready to see him. And yet, I wanted to see him so much. I was horrified and glad he was here all in one untidy bundle. I wanted a hug.

"You've been with the Carpathian," he seethed.

I looked up at him, no hint of professionalism on my face, just the raw, naked emotions. I knew this rage. Had seen it so often over my lifetimes. There was supposed to be a point in reincarnating, that you would figure out how to change your fate, amend your ways, and stop making the same mistakes. I wasn't learning the lesson. Slipping away now from right effort.

The rage slid off his face. "You're afraid."

"Not afraid," I said simply, lowering my head. "I feel helpless." *Please, no crying.* "I don't know what to do," I breathed low, so only he could hear.

He put his hands around my shoulders, his grip gentle and kind, all the previous anger a memory of some other vampire at some other time. He breathed deeply, as if trying to control the emotions, fighting what his instincts would tell him.

"You must tell me about him. I can smell death all around you."

I shook my head a minute amount. "I can't. You know that."

I felt his hands tighten around me for a moment. Then, he moved his hand to lift my chin towards him. Having him so close when I really wanted him even closer, it was hard to put on any shell to ward off these feelings. My eyes sought his. There was an awareness there I didn't expect.

"How can I protect you if you don't let me?"

But it's you I'm trying to protect. I wanted to tell him. I was trembling wanting to tell him. I was sick to my stomach with it. Slipping away from right livelihood.

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"If I told my patients about one another, I wouldn't be much good at gaining their trust, would I?"

He dropped his hands from me in a huff. "You don't care if anything happens to you. You're not afraid of that."

"Was I when I first met you? When you threatened to bite through my arm?"

He grimaced, his words suddenly sounding foreign, "*Oh but that was different!*"

"No different. I'm trying to help him like I'm trying to help you."

"You don't think all the deaths, the disappearances around here are because of him?"

"It doesn't matter. I'm sworn to try and help if I can." The calm was ebbing away, replaced with a building frustration. He was right but there was nothing for it. I was a lapse Buddhist. I preached nonviolence, balance in all things. This aberration that Skovajsa represented was a moral dilemma that my teachings had no answer for. What do you do when that which you hope to help is beyond all help? What answer do you have then? Slipping away from right action.

I had none and the only answer I knew Jesper could offer was death. Jesper stepped toward me, not as a threat but as a means of letting his will be known. I hated the posturing. It reminded me of Valerian. Kill or be killed. *"He's a Carpathian, likely an orphan. You don't know what he's capable of."*

That touched a nerve. *"Oh, I think I am most intimately aware of what a Carpathian is capable of! More so than you'll ever know!"*

Slipping further away from right speech.

He swore something under his breath that sounded Russian. Again, the awareness of what it was he'd said, of where I might have learned to speak Russian, was just outside my grasp. Like the answer to this problem.

"Sophie, your belief in your faith is admirable," he sighed. *"But do you not consider the innocent ones you would leave behind?"*

That cut deep. Ready for a salvo of bravado from him, his empathetic question cut me to the quick, left me breathless. Tears were welling. I had sacrificed everything to save the ones I loved from the harm of what seemed to be my singular destiny. To minister to the undead. To try and bring them balance so that they might be freed. Slipping away from right intention.

I would never have left my daughter if the danger to her had not been made so abundantly clear by...

"Sophie?" Jesper grabbed my arm as I swayed. No, I couldn't go there yet. Not yet.

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I looked up at him. His face held such concern; his touch was firm yet gentle. The wound was not intentional. "You want to help me?"

"Yes, of course."

"Tell me what you know about a vampire killing in Seville."

I'd stumped him. He swiveled his head at me, confused.

"Then there are still things that a vampire cannot tell."

I stepped away from him.

"This is what you would ask of me." He released his grip.

I met his question with silence. He had enough of a network to know that I was a Vampire Psychologist. He had admitted to consulting some others about me. Whether he was hiding more from me now, I had no knowledge. But I knew what his answer to my conundrum would be. And I could ill afford such consul. It would cost me my soul and make all my previous sacrifices for nothing. Slip...

He looked to Nick and Morena, who seemed frozen in space. They would not take a side now that their teacher had asserted some sort of authority. His gaze returned to me and the disappointment there caused them to flash amber. But he turned silently on his heel toward the door.

Morena stood, "Jesper, wait."

He paused for a moment. When she didn't continue, he walked out the door and as the door shut, a loud whoosh rattled the door.

The room returned to silence and I moved to lean against the desk, catching my breath. It was the closest I'd ever come to breaking the confidence of my practice and it hurt like Hell that I hadn't. I surmised that somewhere in our exchange, Jesper and I were setting boundaries that would continue to be challenged. That is, if we continued to interact.

"I hate it when Mom and Dad fight."

"You said it," Morena agreed. I lifted my head to see the confusion on their faces. I'd seen that look before, from kids in my class in Ohio when I, the authority figure, had let them down. It was a horrible look and I felt ashamed.

"Especially in Turkish," added Morena.

"Huh?" I didn't know Turkish. Not that I recalled.

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"At least that's what it sounded like," she said. Nick strode over as she continued. "You, uh, were a bit harsh with him, don't you think?"

"Funny, you of all people accusing me of that," I replied. When I looked up at her, there wasn't anything mocking or sinister in her face. She waited for me to explain. They both needed me to explain.

"Right intention depends on a commitment to harmlessness. It's one of our fundamental teachings." I pointed to Nick's amulet.

He held up his hands. "Don't get testy with me. I wear this because my Gran gave it to me on my eighth birthday. I just try the best I can and figure it'll all work itself out in the cosmic wash."

I hadn't realized my voice had been that way. I was exhausted, tired of not knowing what to do. And the weight of too many lifetimes weighed on me. I pinched the bridge of my nose to try and sharpen my thoughts.

"I don't think you're much up for teaching tonight," Morena said.

I laughed, almost manically. "No, no you're right about that."

I sighed but couldn't say more. Maybe because I was fighting back tears. My thoughts kept replaying the disappointment on Jesper's face. *This is what you would ask of me.*

Morena grabbed Nick by the jacket and started pulling him toward the door, ignoring his momentary protest. "Come on, let's give her some peace."

I laughed again, coming a little unhinged each moment.

Nick halted at the door, "Hey, don't you want to grab your bag?" He pointed to a small khaki knapsack tossed on the settee.

Morena took a rather long, measured look at me, hands on her hips, and shook her head. "No. Teach might find it more useful to her at this point. I suspect she'll know just what it's good for."

They left without another word. It took me a few moments to sum up my evening. Bad patient left feeling encouraged that he might bind me to him. Good patient left feeling I didn't trust him. Both trainees thinking I'm some crazed nut.

I walked over to the settee, pondering all the meditations I might use this evening to find a handhold back onto the Path. I was so absorbed in that thought that I absentmindedly reached into the knapsack and pulled out the object inside.

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The Crimson Kukri was in my hand and it occurred to me that I was either going to pass this cosmic test or die trying.

DJB: Insults and Injurious Thoughts

Valerian had once given me a protocol to use in the event and only in the event of an emergency. The protocol included a way to contact him, even in his most private chamber of his redoubt. Over the years, I suspected the technology attached to the protocol might have changed but the accessing it was the same.

An iron lockbox welded with no remaining seams covered in raised silver gilding. The silver would cause some burnt flesh to most vampires. I had chosen to keep it secret that it had no effect on me. The nature of the box was to ensure that it took quite some effort to get into.

In the security of my condo, it had taken me only a second to punch my hand through the box and tear into it. Sophie's reaction be damned. This was an Emergency. She was going to get herself killed. And I couldn't let that happen, no matter what she believed.

The anger released in getting into the box calmed me enough to think about our fight. It was an old one. The book and now the old grievance, argued in the old tongue. The memories were still mostly locked away, but not the feelings, not the emotions. I hadn't felt this on edge, this unsettled in a long while, emotions rumbling under the surface waiting to erupt. I had approached her in anger, not directed at her, but at the threat she continued to protect.

The Carpathian. When she'd spoken, I felt more than saw the need in her eyes to fix wrongs done long ago, her desperation to repair the past. I could not help her with imperfect knowledge. She did not know what to do. I had to help her see that the only way out was through.

Inside the box, it was lined in black velvet with a single scrap of vellum. I fished out the ancient paper and tossed the box aside. On the paper, in simple handwriting, were a number and a location. The number was an old style phone number, from the 1930's. The location was 9 Universitat Luzern. Switzerland.

I did a quick online check and came up with a phone number. Then I used my computer to dial it. Once the line was picked up, I forced myself through the line into the room. It gave me a few seconds before I would be discovered, my form taking the time to solidify. In the meantime, while the receiver was being brought to someone's ear to answer, I overheard the conversation.

"The child was already lost. I had to do the unthinkable to protect her."

The voice was familiar, smoothly accented South American. But it was the voice of the reply that I well recognized. As my form materialized, my vision took shape as well. Valerian, head bowed, hand clutching something to his chest, spoke as if to himself.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"I'm still cleaning up the wrongs I did you in the past only to find troubles are drawn to you in the present."

"My Lord, we have an unexpected visitor." Aubry didn't bother to put the receiver completely up to his ear as by now, I had materialized right in front of him.

Valerian turned to look at me, but his mind still clung to the memories of his past. I knew the feeling and suspected more than ever that Valerian had a direct relationship with Sophie. I believed her now about her past lives. In what lifetime had the two of them met?

"Jesper. Not an unexpected surprise." He stared at me for a moment, giving me the sense that he read me cover to cover.

"Sir, he called the Luzern line." Aubry carefully set down the receiver of a very antique phone alongside its base. The room was his private chamber, alright, but not in Switzerland. It was his castle in Prague that the number had been forwarded to. Layered in baroque opulence, Bianchi looked like some Latino Ken doll posed uncomfortably on a red velvet chair.

Valerian spun his whole body towards me and his eyes flashed black for a moment as he commanded, "What has happened?"

I felt Vox buffet against me in a way that showed me only a glimmer of the power this Carpathian held. Sophie was right. I'd seen many things in my years but beside some sanctioned combat, I'd never seen the full fury of a Carpathian unleashed. Perhaps it was easier not to know the depths of evil my brethren were capable of. It had always been easier to turn my head away, distance myself from all those concerns.

But right now, Sophie was in the middle of it with an orphan, half mad Carpathian animal and she needed help. And somehow, I suspected that this Carpathian owed it to her.

I shrugged off the Vox and commanded in kind, "Tell me about the Vampire killing in Seville."

Valerian stared, caught off-guard. But his face sobered and he sighed.

"I'll fetch tea, my Lord." Aubry left the room through a curtained doorway.

Valerian spread an arm to Bianchi, "Alejandro, you've heard of our scribe, Jesper Bretton."

"Si, señor. Mucho Gusto." He stood and bowed.

My brows drew together from the formality of it. But another word from Valerian cast some light on the situation.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"Bianchi had been keeping an eye on our Vampire Psychologist when she first surfaced from her slumber. Before she had to abandon her home in Ohio."

"Then you already knew what she was doing, what she was up to. You didn't need me to investigate her." It felt like a betrayal deep down. He'd sent me to do work that had already been done. What game was he playing at?

"Alejandro, perhaps you might give us a moment? Jesper has not been brought up to speed."

Bianchi nodded simply and withdrew, leaving me with the vampire who had me spying on the Vampire Psychologist.

"You lied to me."

"You were never told to investigate her background. Simply to learn what you could about her current circumstances." He moved slowly over to his seat, the black dress robes encumbering his movement, weighing him down. He sank down, weary, his hands spreading over the arm rests, gripping them. He breathed heavily and he finally let me read his face. After a moment, I could really tell what was going on.

"You're protecting her. You sent me to see that she's safe."

"She has a tendency to get involved in situations...beyond her capabilities." His finger drummed on the armrest in a building rhythm. I could see the tension in him finally, as if the day had worn him down. Aubrey, as if on perfect cue, arrived at his master's chair, passing him a cup that Valerian drunk down rather quickly. As he handed the empty cup over to be refilled, his hands had stopped their nervous movement and he'd seemed to get a grip on himself.

"But why?" I asked.

"Because you are the only one I can trust with her."

It didn't make any sense. If he valued her so highly, Xi would make a better guardian. I wasn't half the vampire in strength or speed that he was, that any Carpathian or Jiang Shi was.

"I can see what you're thinking and it's true. I might've sent a better warrior to guard her life but I couldn't trust anyone but you with her soul." He sipped from the cup again, then set the cup deliberately back on the saucer. "She's at it again, trying to save another Carpathian, isn't she?"

"Tell me about Seville."

He set the saucer down and settled deep into his chair. "A bottle of the Taint, disguised as wine. One of my agents was sent to retrieve it, trace its lineage. Alphonso. He reported the rumor of an abomination, one taken by the Taint. The rumored seems to be true."

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"And this abomination, it was made from your own elixir. Your own blood?"

"Yes, the sins of my past."

I stepped toward him in the room, suddenly angry beyond anything I'd felt in a long while. "Did you know it would find her? Did you?"

"No. I had not seen that."

"And there's no helping this thing, no way to balance it, as she would say."

Valerian's eyes met mine at hearing the words. "No," the words exploding with more force than perhaps he meant. Then, more softly, "No, I know of no cure for such a creature." He shuddered through a sigh. "But there's no telling her that. You must know that about her. That's not how she learns. She's not much on talking about things, she wants to feel them, touch them, understand how they work. And so you show her, thinking it is so wholly separate from who you are and how you feel and then she's crawled right under your armor, under your skin to where you live and breathe. Reminding you that you still do live and breathe."

I knew exactly what he meant. She thought she knew it all, thought there was always another way, another hope, even for those whose cause was lost. But I didn't like hearing all this from him, as if he could teach me about my Helene. The fog was lifting on a lifetime spent in spices and sand, one spent in love and loss. I may not have begrudgingly another for feeling some semblance of what I did for her but there was no quarter given for one who claimed to know her better.

"You wanted the recipe for some tea, Mr. Jesper?"

As I moved to take the proffered paper from Aubry's hands, I saw a muscle twitch in Valerian's jaw. He saw me as a tool, sent to become a guardian, that was clear enough. He had felt certain that her charms would work on a vampire like me, a romantic like me, in ways that were predictable. He was playing the puppeteer and I vowed to cut the strings the first chance I got.

"I wouldn't take that draught just yet," Valerian warned. "Oh, Aubry may act as if it's nothing but you're not ready for that remedy. He's just angry that you violated our laws in charming him to reveal secrets."

When I looked in Aubry's face, I saw the fierceness just underneath the veneer. But it was only what Aubry meant me to see. If he had wanted it, there would've been no warning at all. I read the recipe from the paper and handed it back to Aubry, who crumbled it up into dust, eyes seething.

"I tried to explain to him how you did it to protect our mutual friend but you see, that's the rub. If you can't trust your friends to behave, then who can you trust?"

VAMPIRONY



Book One

I straightened and bowed, "You have my utmost apologies. If you'd like to call me out, I completely understand."

Valerian sat upright in his chair, as if strike by lightning and full of fervor. "We've no time for that. You have a job to do. I expect you to do it."

I swallowed hard and then nodded. I was no match for Valerian or his horror if it came to that. And as much as I trusted that he did want her protected, I had no idea what connection lay between Sophie and this particular Carpathian. I would have to ponder it all later.

I started to release my hold on the connection but Valerian had some parting words for me.

"If I didn't know you better, Jesper, if I thought you had skeletons in your closet and weren't the closest thing to a priest we Vampires can be, I'd think you were utilizing Sophie's services for yourself. And I'd perish the thought."

And All Sorts of Messes

With a vampiric growl, the tea cup sailed across the velvet room like a missile, smashing into dust against the opposite stone wall.

"Something tells me this isn't going as planned."

Valerian now sat forward, robes askew, panting with the effort to keep from ripping the room apart. "If I had other choices, Aubry, I would use them."

Aubry floated silently over to the wall and began to brush the dust into a pan that he pulled out from his robes. He always seemed to be cleaning up messes these days. "You could still send someone else. Or better yet, let me handle this."

"No. I cannot afford to show more interest. And sending anyone else into that area would alert the Shapeshifters." Valerian bowed his head, shaking it from side to side. "Jesper is all I have at the moment to work with. And what he lacks in actual vampiric ability, he makes up for in intelligence... and charm." Valerian chewed over the last word as if it were moldy bread.

"He has altered from his time with her, has he not?" Aubry spoke, still bent about his task, his back to his master. But he did not need to see Lord Valerian's face to feel the vampire's displeasure nor wonder at its source.

"You saw his wounds?" Valerian asked softly.

Aubry stood, surprised. "No, I did not."

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"I only noticed because I've always felt he was made quite young, never having truly lived and experienced, showing no scars at all." Valerian sighed heavily. "He's sporting two recently healed round scars in the middle of his chest." His fingers started tapping again.

"Stakes? Is that possible?"

Valerian nodded to himself, his eyes staring off into the distance.

"Perhaps Mr. Jesper is a better guardian than you thought."

Valerian leveled his eyes upon his servant. "What good does it do me if he won't obey later? If he wants her for himself?"

Aubry smiled cautiously, "Perhaps we should focus on the immediate need: keeping Sophie alive."

"If it is the Taint, Aubry, she'll need more than our bookish vampire to save her. There must be more we can tell her."

"The last thing she asked about was the Book itself. She never answered back about the photo. She wanted to know about the book's origins."

Valerian stood, a glimmer of his weary mind showing in his slow movements. "Never mind about that. That damn book of hers is no longer important. I should have burned it a long time ago instead of allowing you to reunite her with it."

Valerian made his way to the door while Aubry waited. He could see the wheels turning in the vampire lord's mind. Hundreds of years of experience and this one human still vexed him sorely.

"No, Bruno has served his purpose for the moment. It would be best if he went dark. We could use him later to draw her back in, if all else fails."

"And the tainted one, this Skovajsa?"

Valerian steeled an eye on Aubry. "Jesper had better hope his resources are enough to keep her safe. His life won't be worth much to me if she dies. I can't afford to wait another hundred and twenty-five years for a reunion."

Valerian shuffled out of the room, leaving Aubry with nothing but doubt about this course of action and everything but hope about what the future held for his old friend from the Ghost Club.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

DJB: J'Adoube

"I need your help."

Morena's response was immediate. "What can I do?"

I hadn't asked Valerian for help. For whatever reason, I had pushed the Panic button and not followed through. There was not going to be some cleaner team of fifteen military trained Conclave sanctioned assassins coming to Seattle rid it of a dangerous Carpathian vampire. I was left to my own devices. And my own choice of allies.

I projected through the phone line. This was the trickiest bit in a Vampire's existence, revealing one's abilities unaltered by charm or influence to a human. No softening the strangeness. I'd been interacting with her in this way, albeit with more subtlety, since we met, most of our online interactions mixed with a bit of presence to make sure she was discreet. But not in any way she would be aware.

I came all the way through, my mental projection taking shape in her apartment moments before my bare feet felt the seam in the boards of her old wooden floor. I groaned at the effort; it hurt like Hell. My body strained as thought became form, bone, muscle, flesh. My skin sweated, my scars itched, and I felt nauseated, shaking and panting like a junkie in front of her.

She dropped her arm, still holding the phone, shock and awe written all over her face. I had just materialized out of thin air in her apartment. As much as she probably would have questions about what else I could do, this was exactly what I needed her to know that I could do.

"How?"

"Through...your phone."

She turned her head, raising the device as if it had sprouted hair and was sending secret signals to satellites. I dropped to a knee, struggling with the aftereffects of transformation and her attention returned. She ran over to catch me before I completely collapsed. I needed to get much better at this very quickly. Like now.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

I smiled. "I could sure use a drink."

VAMPIRONY

Book One



Morena set her phone down, all emotion tied down, perfectly calm, resolute.

“Camille is on her way.”

She tied her hair back. I hadn’t asked it of her. It didn’t feel right to do so.

I sat on the floor, shivering under a blanket. She’d brought me the lemons like I asked but in this state, I felt unsure of the results and wary of being knocked unconscious. It was four in the morning. Which meant it might take Camille a little while to get here.

Morena kneeled beside me, her hand on my bare shoulder.

“This would be for her,” I explained.

She nodded. “I know.”

“Then why?”

“Because she’s someone worth protecting. Like Nick is. And Camille.” She got closer. “I get the sense you’re going to need a lot more than you planned. And I don’t want to put Camille at risk in any way.”

I nodded but kept her gaze. She moved closer.

“What about the girl vampire?” I could smell the basil in her blood. My fangs grew against my apprehension. I shook.

“Lucy? She’s gone dark. I think she’s helped as much as she could. I left the kukri with Sophie.” Morena sighed as she sat down, pulling the front of the blanket down. “I’m not sure how it’s supposed to help but Lucy said it would.”

“Morena, I don’t want this.”

“I know. That’s why it’s ok.” She needed more Vitamin D in her diet. Her blood was low in it. Perils of life in the Pacific Northwest.

“It’ll hurt. I don’t have the strength now to prevent that.”

VAMPIRONY



Book One

She smiled and it was the most sincere I'd ever seen her. "Good," she said softly, her brow creasing. "I think I need it to hurt."

With that, she eased into my lap, her arms sliding around my naked back, her head turned away, carotid artery pulsing beneath my face. I brushed my lips against her throat all on instinct before catching myself. Before the fog took over, there were things she needed to know.

"Try to stay calm. If your heart races, it'll be harder for me to stop because of the adrenaline in your blood. Long, deep breaths." My hand weakly cradled her head as she better positioned herself.

"Like Yoga."

I licked at her skin. Her heartbeat remained steady. Good.

Her hands clasped together behind my back as she was anticipating her own weakness from anemia. I couldn't help but smile. She felt it.

"What?" she asked.

She wasn't expecting it which was what I wanted. My fangs slipped into her skin like needles, causing the smallest cry. It was almost an out-of-body experience for me; I felt such hatred for myself wash over me.

"Please," she croaked. My anger at having to do this crashed against her and she felt it all. "Think of Sophie. This is for her."

At the sound of her name, as the blood rushed into me, I pictured the woman I knew as Helene, gone from my world and my thoughts for so long. Too long. She sought only to help others, through all her lifetimes, the purity of her soul and her beliefs constantly challenged by the world she lived in. In this lifetime, she was Sophie Quinn, Vampire Psychologist. And she was not mine.

But she needed protection, as did her wards, one of which now trusted me beyond all else that, with this offering, I would be able to protect them all. I forced myself to relax into what I was, what Sophie needed me to be right now.

The steady rhythm, Morena's heart pumping blood directly into me through tiny slits in her carotid. Her hands clenched, her cries becoming more vocal, and I pushed her mouth against my shoulder as I felt renewed vigor flowing into each of my cells. She bit into my shoulder hard, breaking the skin. I didn't really know how much pain she was in and, for a little while, I lost all caring. Several breaths later, her mouth released and her cheek slid against my shoulder.

With sustenance came clarity. I needed to be careful, not to take too much. That was why we called Camille. Morena was worth more than her weight in blood in a fight to come. After a few moments that felt like forever, I felt her grip slacken around me. I retracted my fangs, licked her skin clean.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

The two slits were imperceptible. She lay in my arms, very quiet, her pulse a little weak but her heart strong, her bones already at work to replenish. On my shoulder, the tiny break in the skin where her teeth had drawn blood had already healed. I tucked the blanket carefully around us. Unintentional and the effect very likely temporary but it would help her recover more quickly.

"Jesper," she whispered.

"Yes?" I brushed the sweat from her brow.

She turned her head to me, eyes clear but fatigued. "Make sure Camille doesn't feel anything."

All new strange abilities aside, there was one thing that remained constant and I knew full well how to use that, especially after the influx of rich, strong, vibrant blood.

I am Vampire.

"Don't you worry," I promised her. "When I'm done, she'll never remember she ever met a real live Vampire."

Remembering How It Started

October 1883 Darcie Sherbourne meets Lord Percival Valerian. February 1886 She dies.

Late Fall 838 A young Darjeeling woman of the aristocratic caste meets a Rakshasa prince, becoming engaged weeks later. Early Spring 839, day of her wedding, she dies.

There were memories floating around, still unbound to a life, still as of yet unidentified in time. Some, more terrifying than others. Thick, rusty chains and screams echoing in a damp, stone dungeon, somewhere, sometime in Paris. The sounds of sheep bleating in the morning mist, before the heat of the day. Yards and yards of raw silk bundles stretched out before my bamboo cane in Japan. The sporadic memories that welled out of me all started from a single spring.

Late summer, 2006, a small community college in Ohio, a woman recovering from a tragedy sneaks into a special lecture for an advanced comparative religions class. Dr. Kaga, a world renowned expert on religious meditation, PhD in Cognitive Psychology, was speaking on internal alchemy, the Taoist practice of developing the mind and spirit for immortality. He led the half full lecture hall in a series of breathing techniques which left most of the students becoming very sleepy and yawning.

I, on the other hand, had collapsed in the back of the room, not to be found until after all the students had left and Dr. Kaga was collecting his things. He had heard my cell phone chirping. He had kindly helped me into a nearby chair and assured my panicked husband Dan that I would be safely sent home.

VAMPIRONY

Book One



"Do you remember what happened?" he asked me.

"I'm sorry?"

"What were you doing when you collapsed?" he asked politely. He reminded me of someone I knew. But that would be impossible. Maybe someone I knew from a movie or television show. This was before I knew of my pasts.

I touched the back of my head, feeling for a bump. "I was doing your breathing."

"Would you mind showing me? Those techniques are not known for causing young ladies to faint. Perhaps you were not exhaling properly."

It was an odd request but as I was a student on scholarship taking a few summer courses and sneaking into much more expensive talks, the least I could do was humor him. So I began to breathe and black closed in on me once more.

When I came to, I was on my back again, this time with my legs raised up in the chair I had been previously sitting in. When I tried to sit up, Dr. Kaga gently pushed my shoulder back to the floor.

"I've called an ambulance. They should arrive shortly. Have you had a head injury recently?"

I broke out into a cold sweat. "Please, please no more doctors." I agitatedly kicked the chair away and tried to get to my feet.

"Relax," he said.

"I want to see no more doctors," I hissed back.

He started and sat up bolt straight in his seat. I stopped struggling, realizing that I felt awful, my head was splitting open and nausea welled up. Purse strap wrapped around my wrist, I clamored to my feet, forgetting my backpack, and made a quick exit to the nearest bathroom, just outside the lecture hall. I threw up in the nearest toilet and then spent a few minutes chilling my fevered brow on the outside of the bowl while it flushed.

Feeling marginally better, I made my way to the sink, rinsed my mouth out, and then splashed my face with some water. I popped a couple of breath mints into my mouth, and then fished my makeup bag out of my purse. As I searched for my powder, Dr. Kaga opened the door a crack and called to me.

"Is it ok to come in?"

"Yes."

VAMPIRONY



Book One

He stepped inside, walking with great quiet and care toward the sinks to stand just behind me. I'd made it to applying lip gloss before he uttered another word.

"Do you remember anything you said while you were under?"

"Excuse me?"

He took a measured step towards me. "I don't want to alarm you. Nor would I like you to faint again. Especially since I cancelled the ambulance request. But you were not speaking English before. It was Japanese. Do you remember that?"

He stood close, just behind me. I think he was readying himself to catch me if I fell again.

"Don't be ridiculous. I substitute teach Spanish at the school sometimes but I don't know any other languages besides that."

He caught my eye in the mirror in a way I'll never forget, his whole demeanor becoming calm and soothing, like a confessor or a priest. The palm of his hand touched the middle of my back, not with pressure, but just touching there, offering support, understanding, solace.

I felt a panic rise up.

He said something in what I assumed was Japanese. But it sounded foreign.

I shook my head.

"May I?" he pointed to my makeup bag.

I nodded, not even knowing what I was giving him permission to do. I just stood there, his right hand against my back, his left digging in my makeup bag, my left hand holding the lip gloss cap, my right holding the gloss halfway to my parted mouth.

"Sometimes, it's better to let other parts of the brain work on a problem for a while." He brought out the eyeliner pen, the kind with an end like a little paintbrush. He took off the cap and handed it to me as I set down the lip gloss cap in the sink.

He stretched my left hand with the eyeliner pen out and touched it to the mirror while my eyes were riveted to his face. He was humming. Or maybe singing. I could almost make out the words.

"Did you really cancel the ambulance? No doctors are coming?" The eyeliner pen moved against the mirror as he stepped back, just his right hand still on my back. My head turned to follow him, my body remained straight forward.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

He had the kindest eyes and a very nice baritone. His lips started to move into words and he seemed to finish a verse before assuring me. "Yes, no doctors."

My right arm dropped the gloss into the sink and rested there.

"But you're a doctor."

"Not that type."

"I suppose you're going to tell me I'm crazy too."

His eyes flicked to the mirror and then the most genuine smile formed across his tan, wizened face.
"No, I believe you are most sane, Ms. Quinn."

"You just met me and I fainted in your lecture. Because of breathing. Why would you think that?"

"Because an old soul reaching forward into a new life is a very rare and beautiful thing, Ms. Quinn. It should be cherished and nurtured so that it may come into its full bloom. But sometimes, it needs quiet to lose itself enough to be heard."

He gestured to the mirror and I turned my head back to see black eyeliner arranged in a most beautiful design. And my left hand holding the pen.

"Wha—What does it say?" I asked in hush tones.

As it turned out, Dr. Kaga hadn't known exactly either. It had taken his expert several weeks to decipher. But in the end, it hadn't mattered too much. The dam had been cracked and Dr. Kaga had been able to help me control the damage by lowering the proverbial reservoir of water. Weeks of narrative therapy let some of the most pressing memories out while allowing me to sketch others into existence, making them available for translation.

By the time the winter had arrived and I couldn't drive the hundred miles to school every day, Dr. Kaga and I had developed an online correspondence, sending me the translation of what I wrote along with the description on how old it was.

An expert in Japanese writing identified the early kanji characters phrased with some local Japanese spoken influence and dated it circa 410 CE. Kofun era, when it was rumored that writing first began in Japan. It was the earliest identified memory I had from all those we freed that autumn.

There were two books most important in my life. The first was the Memento, its format dictated to me when I gained possession of it sometime after all that. There were the fact pages, scribbled notes over the years. Stories and myths here and there. Then there were the more emotive pages, like Lucy and Maurice's. But timelines, dates, descriptions of who I was when I met them, no, that wasn't in there.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

That information lay in my case notes; simple leather bound volumes of ruled paper. The first volume started as the record of my narrative therapy which I had extended to include my own treatment of vampires. In two years of searching for clients and doing what I could, two years of my own stories had gone ignored. Somewhere along the way, I'd forgotten what had kept me sane. It was the ability to let the memories out to blossom.

So I wrote an entry in my notes, one just for me, only about me. It began like this:

July 26th, 2009

Not able to divine treatment for Case #13-4, afraid this is a lost cause. The paradox of how to save a vampire may be to let another perish. Discovered today I know Turkish. Perhaps the recent memories of spices and sand came from that place. Must remember to investigate.

Realize these feelings for Case #13-5, Jesper, run deep. We have met before. God help us both stick around long enough to remember it.

And it was at that moment, I took particular notice of the Kukri that Morena had left with me. It was as if the thing held itself up and said Hi! Remember me? I picked it up and felt a queasiness move all through me. It was obviously an anti-vampire weapon. It was ridiculous to think I would have a use for it.

No, the absurd thing was that in this case I was beginning to believe the most heartfelt and profound action would be no action at all. To let the Universe have its way with me, bend me to its needs and whims.

You hear that Universe? I'm not going to fight you. You have me in an untenable position. Instead of moving a piece, I prefer to let my clock run out, force you out of hiding your purpose.

It was about that moment a cacophony of crows could be heard outside. It raised the hairs on the back of my neck so that I went over and opened the door, looking out. Under a streetlight, I could see a crowd of them fighting around the dumpster toward the back of the lot. There seemed to be about twenty of them. Almost four and twenty.

Hmm, but no pies. I put my hand to my throat and remembered that my necklace was still missing. I'd given it to Nick to give to Lucy when she awoke from her Rigor Dormitus. It seemed an age ago. It was just one week. I should call her, make sure her ears were healing.

I closed the door, went back to my desk, and a memory came back to me. When Lucy was little, she would leave me gifts on days when I had to be awake during the daylight hours. She'd hide it somewhere I could find it and wrap a black ribbon around the gift so I would know it was from her. A silver spoon. A posy of lilac. She was my dark little cherub and I could always count on her leaving me something. She'd once found a knife bayonet in the forest and wrapped it in a black lace ribbon.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

In a way, I wondered if the Kukri was from her, via Morena. Except no ribbon. I wondered if she'd forgotten all about that or folded the memory away. It seemed such a small thing to remember. Like a lover's kiss hidden behind a veil.

I wrote both memories in the case notes. Then after a quick text to Lucy, I managed to down a few bites of the food that Nick had left behind. An inscribed anti-vampire weapon. Turkish fluency. A vampire orphan.

Maybe he wasn't responsible for the killing around here. Maybe something else was going on. Maybe there was another vampire involved.

The crows made a bunch of noise as if to argue that thought. I wasn't in a position to know. I sighed. I hated waiting as much as I hated failing. But there was nothing for it. When one has no clear action to take, the only action is stillness.

I packed the kukri with me, tossing it into the same non-specific bag as I'd found it along with my case notes and my laptop. Back at my hotel room, I started a hot bubble bath, took as much Melatonin as was safe, followed by one of the little bottles of merlot in the mini-fridge, soaked until I felt drowsy, and slid into Egyptian cotton sheets that reminded me of nothing.

Alright, Universe, your move.

Sunglasses at Night

The sun had been full down for fifteen minutes. Morena, decked out in all black, except for the electric blue of her earphones stuffed into her ears, elbows resting on the top of a counter, checked her watch one more time. One of the hotel staff stared at her from reception. The sound of Lincoln Park blared from her headphones. She turned her eyes to him just as he thought to go speak to her about it. She raised an eyebrow at him as if to say, "Yeah? Come try it."

She frowned, checking the time on her phone, about to text, again, when she finally spotted Jesper striding towards her from across the hotel lobby. His movements seemed tight, controlled, like some sort of caged animal. There was an aura around him that almost looked like the heat coming off scorching pavement.

It was the blood doping. He'd explained. He'd be at maximum capability stuffed to the proverbial gills with fresh blood. A lot of it hers. And it had hurt like hell. Still, it made him damn sexy to look at. Except he had to lose those ridiculous sunglasses. And the strange platinum blond hair.

He paused next to her, seemingly taking in the lobby while she remained, holding up the counter as it were. She studied him, wondering what else got revved up by that much blood in his system. Her eyes finally settled on his hair.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"It's the bite, you know."

"What?"

He turned his head towards her. "I can see the way you're looking at me. Sense it. It's just a side effect of biting my shoulder, drawing blood."

She lowered her elbows off the counter but remained where she was. "Sure. What's with the sunglasses?"

He stared her in the face and lifted the shades to show her. The iris of his eyes was a golden red color.

"Oh."

He dropped the shades back in place and turned his head.

"She had any visitors?"

"Naw, no one's gone up or called her room. Alex, the security guard on duty, woulda called me if so." There was something in the way his head was turned, the look on his face; it was like he was only half paying attention. "What?"

He turned his head slowly to her. "Listening."

"For what? You couldn't hear her from here. She's on the 12th floor."

Morena saw his eyebrows go up and down.

"You are shitting me, right? You can hear 12 floors up right now?"

A smile crept across his face. "Just this floor. And maybe one more up. Or two."

Morena stared for a moment. She wasn't sure what she would've done if, per chance, this nasty vampire dude had shown up. She'd given the Kukri, the only weapon she knew of that could help humans deal with vampires, to Sophie. She'd even decided that carrying her piece actually made her react in too human of a way and left it at home. She thought she might feel naked without it, especially after having a good portion of her blood drained the prior night.

"How are you feeling?" Jesper asked, as if reading her damn thoughts again.

She felt wonderful. Like she had just done some amazing cleanse and all the bad juju had been drained out of her and was being replaced by the bright, shiny, new. She couldn't help flashing him a smile.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"It's your marrow. You're feeling it regenerate your red blood cells."

"Way to spoil an oh so fresh feeling."

"When the cells regenerate--"

Morena held up her hand. "God, Soph was right. Once you guys start talking, can't shut you up." Before he could interject anymore vampire wisdom, she fished an electronic card key out of her skinny jeans, thought about stuffing it down the front pocket of his jeans but thought better of the impulse and handed it to him. "Room 1234."

He smiled. "Thanks. I got this."

It took Morena a moment to understand what he meant.

"No, seriously, I got this."

He put it all into the look that passed between them. Whether it was because this had now turned personal between him and Sophie, or because he would likely be fighting another vampire, he didn't want Morena involved further.

Her face showed her disappointment. She was in this with him. She wanted to see it through.

"Nick. You need to make sure he's safe. Watch over him. I'll take care of Sophie."

It took a moment. From inside, there was this thread that wanted to follow him anywhere in the world that he might lead. It was the bite. She knew that. Residual influence from direct contact with his blood. Whatever he had taken from her in blood, he had kept his promise. There was no binding in it, no charm, no intended influence. He had further seen to it that Camille didn't even remember what had happened or that she had ever thought vampires existed. It didn't matter; the pull was still there.

But then there was Nick. He probably would be rolling into the office at any moment with no clue what Hell was about to be stirred up in Downtown Bellevue. For Jesper was convinced the Carpathian would attack this evening and he had done everything to be prepared. And now, it was time for her to play her part.

She nodded, stuffing her hands in her pockets. He exuded such vampiric strength and confidence; she had no doubts that he could handle whatever Bad Vamp could dish out. But still, you never knew what could happen in combat.

As she was about to say something, to reach out to him, he stepped to her and kissed her cheek.

"It's going to be alright."

VAMPIRONY



Book One

She nodded, her eyes getting misty. Then, before a tear escaped her eye, she turned on her heel and heading out into the night.

Jesper took his cell phone out of his pocket and proceeded to send her an email. It would probably take a few minutes to get to her but, by then, she would be able to do nothing to change his fate.

Morena,

If I fail, it was not because of you. If he finds you, sever the neck, clean through. Then cremate the body, to be sure. Do not bury anything. Scatter the ashes.

I was not deserving of such a friend.

-J

He caught a scent on the air. It was time to go. It was time to fight.

The Running of Errants

The vampire Skovajsa, once the human called Vasa Skoda, was having a very frustrating night. Although not known for his patience, he had decided that the bonding of this human Sophie Quinn deserved a bit of wooing. She obviously wanted more than just a simple generic trinket of diamonds that he'd picked up in a pinch from a nearby jeweler. The song had lied. Diamonds were not best friends to all girls.

His own pride also dictated that anything belonging to him would wear his unique style. That was why he'd arranged to have a special piece made with what he considered his symbol, a crown, joined with what seemed to be hers, an infinity symbol.

He'd noticed the amulet around her neck when they'd first met, assumed her vampire male had given it to her. It was said that sometimes it was better to acknowledge a woman's ex, even as he was meant to be replaced by one older, stronger, more worthy. It would be so obvious that she was choosing the best once she compared the paltry leather strapped silver amulet to the magnificent piece that Skovajsa intended to give.

So on this night, before he finally made her his, bonded her to him for all times and gained the valuable information she contained in her passably tolerable visage, he would appeal to her romantic side with offerings of gold, jewels, flowers, and, at the end, wine. The special wine. His own blood.

He admitted to what seemed to be butterflies of anxiousness. His last episode in bonding, however inadvertent, had ended...poorly. The creature he had begun with, while beautiful in form, had lacked considerably in lifeforce, essence, style. Not that this human Sophie had any discernible

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style. She seemed to favor the same jeans and t-shirt only opting for chino shorts in this latest heat wave.

And frankly, her form was underwhelming by modern standards. Short, doughy, curves in the wrong places...brunette. Her one redeeming physical feature was her very long statuesque neck. And her blue eyes were a sort of pretty. But he'd seen the remarkable nature of the ultimate makeover on many television programs and was convinced that once undertaken, she would not degrade the impact of his flawlessness. After all, style could be applied, substance need to be intrinsic.

And what a wealth of knowledge she was. Rumors abounded on her reincarnated lives, lending her centuries of vampirical experience. She would help him greatly, help him find others of worth so he might expand his capabilities.

But it demanded the right touch, the right offering. And so instead of heading straight to her hotel room, 1234, of the Hyatt, he headed into downtown, needing to run a few errands, the first picking up his "Crowned Eternity" necklace at Gilbert's Jeweler's, near Pioneer Square.

Which was where things began to go wrong for Vampire Skovajsa. As he entered the shop after hours at his appointed time, the dark curly haired woman behind the counter was not as he expected. He approached while she continued to jabber away on her cell phone, while blaring music in her other ear.

"Oh my God, I can't believe he said that. That's ridiculous!"

Skovajsa put both hands on the counter, straightening to full height and impressiveness. He reminded himself that he needed to remain calm tonight, of all nights. It would not serve to lose his cool in front the human Sophie and he had noted that his calm, once lost, was nearly impossible for him to recover.

"*Excuse me,*" he said, pushing just a little Vox in it to gain her attention.

The tousled haired woman stuck her finger out at him. "Just one second." For a blink, he didn't know if she'd said it to him or her phone. Then, she tapped an earpiece on her other ear and the music leaking out of her ear reduced to a dull hum. She twisted the phone receiver from her mouth and settled her dark almost black eyes on him.

"Can't you read the sign? It is after hours. Unless you're this...." She glanced down at a guestbook in front of her, finger tracing the page. "Victor Bella?"

"Yes, I am. I'm here for my package," brow furrowing. The Vox didn't seem to work although he wasn't at all practiced in using just hints of it.

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Book One

The dark haired woman, perched on a stool and strangely dressed for the weather in a black turtleneck, gave him the once-over with her eyes, hovering just at his waist.

"Hmm, I'll say you need to a pick up for your package." Then she spoke back into the phone. "What? Oh no no no no. That's just wrong. You tell that fuckin' little fish faced rat bastard---"

"Ma'am, I really am in a bit of a hurry." He suddenly felt unwell. It was really bright in the small store. The lights were blaring at him and reflecting off of all the glass and mirrors. He was suddenly sweating in his leather jacket, blinking his eyes.

"*Ma'am*, who you calling *ma'am*? Alright alright, if you're going to just keep interrupting," she said. "Tommy, I gotta go. Yeah I know, some dude that couldn't be bothered to keep normal hours. Yeah, call you in a few. Buh-Bye." She smacked the phone down on the counter and slide off the stool. Then she stood there, tapping long fingers on the glass. "Well?"

Skovajsa was confused, digging a finger under his collar. "I'm sorry, who are you? Where is Mr. Gilbert?"

She tilted her head, "Mr. Gilbert spent the last five days straight fashioning your, uhuh, package, the last two nights of which he spent refashioning part of it to change moons into that boneheaded '8' symbol because somebody didn't like his original design and changed his mind last minute. So Mr. Gilbert spent some quality time with Mr.'s Beam and Bitters and went off to bed."

"I see." He looked up at the ceiling lights, blinking furiously. "Have you changed your lights recently?"

"Why yes, Mr. Twenty Questions. Just got them installed today. They use natural light to better show off the brilliance in the diamonds, best in the Emerald City." She laughed. "But yeah, they can be a bit much. Why don't you put these on?" She reached plastic glasses that looked like Roy Orbison's sunglasses to him and he gladly put them on. While he still felt uneasy, the light wasn't directly in his eyes and he felt better for it.

She waited for him to respond. He waited for her to do something. "Am I supposed to say something?" Really, human females were so tiresome to predict.

"A claim ticket would be nice. And your ID. I don't mind handling Mr. Bella's *package* but would like to make sure I give it only to him." She smirked as if she'd made some sort of joke.

"Oh," he got his wallet out and produced his ID, handing it to her.

She lifted it up so it was aligned to her view of his face. "Not a very good picture, is it?"

"What?"

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"No one's driver's license picture is any good. I think they practice taking bad photos at the DMV. Ok, your claim ticket?"

"But you already know that I am..Viktor Bella. *You should just hand over my package.*"

Her hand went to her hip and she leaned forward, all slender 90 lbs of her. "Look, pal, my uncle didn't spend forty years sweating in cramped dirty musty basement cupboards of New York giving his hand toiled artwork away for free out of the goodness of his heart. The store policy on your receipt clearly states both ID and claim tickets are required for pickup."

Skovajsa the Vampire could feel calm ebbing away as his cool dissipated under the premium lights of the store. Harridan. He took in a deep breath, ready to unload a torrent of Vox right in her face when she spoke again.

"Unless, of course, you have your receipt."

He huffed the air out. Where *had* he put that? In his preoccupation of the last few days, he realized that instead of filing his receipt away with the rest of his financials, he'd left it in his wallet. He fished it out and handed it over, one eyebrow raised to see what else she would throw his way.

She unfolded it carefully, raising the ID in one hand and the receipt in the other, examining. Then, a shriek rang out, causing Skovajsa to jump back from the counter.

"BARTY!"

She lowered the paper and ID, gave him a shrewd look, and tossed her head around. "Barty! Customer here for a pickup!"

A muffled sound was heard from beyond the showroom towards the back room. What shuffled through the door looked like half man, half metallic spider with crutches and braces everywhere on its 4 foot minus frame. "Yes, miss?"

"This kind gentleman is here for his package. Go fetch it."

The man named Barty looked utterly confused and nearly incapable of movement. "Um, name?"

"Yours, mine, or the customer's?" the woman replied snidely. "Look, it should just be on the back desk. Uncle Gilbert made this after-hours appointment special."

Barty's head turned as far as it was able to the back room while his bottom lip jutted out in a way that suggested he didn't quite know where the package was. And as Skovajsa was about to pitch a fit of his own, the woman flew after the retreating Barty, her white sparkling flip flops making as much racket as she was chattering after him as the two employees went into the back to find the necklace.

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Skovajsa decided patience could be found when someone serving his own interests was verbally flogging a fellow human as savagely as the woman was doing to Barty. So he waited and nearly an hour and a half of his patience which involved minutes of finding the right package (after two wrong ones were offered), inspecting the workmanship (which was excellent, by any judge of taste), having to try several of his credit cards while the Versa machine went down, then the computer, then the cash register locked, finally paid off as he made his way to the door and was about to step out when the woman called to him one last time.

"Sir!"

"Yes," he tensed.

"Would you like complementary gift wrap for that?" She smiled. "Any special lady deserves extra special presentation."

Skovajsa sighed and resolved to the next half hour of selecting just the right presentation. It was the gift of a lifetime and he couldn't explain how the exasperation resolved into pride and anticipation with his elegantly wrapped, one of a kind offering.

He was so satisfied with himself that he thought she couldn't possibly refuse him. As such, he was later than he'd wanted, now staring at midnight, and he was about to skip the flowers part of his offering when he ran right into Mariner's late night game traffic. With the crowds, there was no direct way of getting Eastside without being seen or messing up his perfectly coiffed hair, so he called the specialty florist to rouse her from bed.

Strangely, she was perfectly agreeable to opening up for him at the late hour so he turned his black Escalade down Alaska Way towards lower Queen Anne. It wouldn't get him out of the city sooner but he might as well use up the time while the traffic cleared to improve his case. Of course, his florist Vicki kept insisting in adding these ugly pussy willow stems to the bouquet and seemed to have installed the very same Diamonique lights in her store so he kept those ugly Roy Orbison glasses in place, even as they seemed to hum a bit.

Another hour lost but with a gorgeous bouquet of lilies and roses, and yes, the damn pussy willows that he intended to yank out on his own but traffic had cleared and he used all 403 horses in his Escalade to cruise across the 520 bridge. He was feeling relieved as if this evening had been some sort of trial and he had survived it with his calm intact.

Until, that is, the red and blue flashing lights jumped into his rearview just as he was taking the Bellevue Way exit. Skovajsa the Vampire, having lived for many years had never received a speeding ticket or parking infraction of any kind so gave himself a calming breath as the cop approached. He had to say, he was little impressed with the figure approaching. The man was smallish and his pants seemed quite ill-fitting. It actually made him smile, almost as if it was some sort of jest in this night of all nights.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

The officer approached sideways and did not exactly step up to the window as Skovajsa lowered it.
"License and registration, Mister."

Skovajsa, full of humor and pride from knowledge that this fellow would be easy prey to the Vox, had thoughts that maybe he'd make this fool dance the jig down the centerline in the middle of traffic.

"Aren't you a little short for a state trooper?" he remarked, Vox issuing with vigor from his voice.

The officer stepped up to the window, facing him with dark aviator sunglasses and these odd earpieces that seemed familiar, before flashing him full in the face with some sort of halogen torch that seared his eyes, making them tear up.

"Laugh it up, jackass. Now hand me your license and registration so I can properly write up your ticket for going forty over the speed limit and talking back to an officer of the law."

No, this night was not going as Skovajsa had planned. As he got out his wallet, it was only going to get worse as he realized the woman from the jewelry store had never handed back his ID. The officer appended driving without a license to the ticket with a smile and a relish, seemingly as impervious to Vox as everyone else he'd had contact this night had been.

Perhaps it might make more sense for a bite to eat to settle himself. He began to look at the officer in a new light.

"You do realize that this registration is three months expired?"

His fangs began to extend all on their own. "No, officer." His hand moved to the door handle.

Just then, a road construction crew with a portal light generator pulled over on the opposite side of the off-ramp and the crew began to unpack, the lights shining right into his windshield, causing him to shield his eyes, removing his hand from the door.

"Sonofabitch!" The officer called over to them. "You can't just set up like that without a flagger!" The officer tossed his id and registration into the car, tearing the ticket off the pad and tossing it in the window as well. Then he took several steps back, across the pavement. "Oh, Hell! Move along, move along!" The officer waved at him angrily to get out of the way.

Skovajsa, assessing the situation, realized with so many witnesses and his recent spate of luck, maybe he should take this opportunity to consider his errand run concluded and get moving towards tonight's goal. So he put the SUV in drive and got the hell out of there.

The officer watched Skovajsa race away and picked up not his 2-way but his cell phone. He dialed a number and paused, waiting for the call to connect.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"Yeah, Ritterreiter, package is coming your way."

57 Channels and It's So On

Just after sundown, Alex the night guard had sat behind his close circuit TVs in the Hyatt Regency's security office watching while Morena talked to a tall, athletic-looking, fair-haired guy wearing shades in the lobby. He had smirked, wondering who Corey Hart was, wearing his sunglasses after dark. After a few minutes, Morena had quickly turned and exited, like she was in a hurry. A few moments later, the tall guy had made his out of the lobby towards the hotel bar only to come back about twenty minutes later, looking rather nervous and, well, shifty.

Alex had once been one of Morena's students in her Personal Protection Pistol Class that she had taught at the Bellevue Gun Club. Honestly, he'd signed up because one of his D-Day Reenactment buddies had told him this total babe was the teacher. Within ten minutes of the class, she had a smart ass student flipped over on his back near to kissing her boots, while she spun and shot off a perfect round. Hot for Teacher had never been so true but she turned out to be a cool chick, great at what she did and appreciative of his former turn in the Service.

Not that they hung out. But once and awhile, he'd run into her at the range and she always said hello. Not interested but hello. That was fine with him. He appreciated the honesty and not being treated like a pariah. So much so, he liked to keep an eye out for her, go out of his way to walk her to her car when it was late, opening the door when she was hauling her rifle case in.

There was a rumor that she was not only ex-military, ex-Secret Service, but also that she was ex-CIA. Or maybe not so Ex. She kept a network that was for sure. He'd heard that bust up at her bar in Ballard a few days ago hadn't even been written up because she still had friends in the Force. So it wouldn't have been unheard of if she'd come and asked him for a favor.

What had been intriguing was that his supervisor at his security firm had beat her to it, telling him that she would be seeking him out tonight, even switching his work location to make sure he was working the Hyatt. Occasionally, his firm did fill in work when companies had temporary security needs or training.

This landed him perusing Hyatt security cameras and wondering who this fool in the shades was. That wouldn't be a hint of jealousy, would it? Crazy. The dude had kissed Morena on the cheek before she stormed out.

Hmm, this guy's bad news. Looks like he's waiting for something.

He was about to get on his cell and call in when the phone rang. It was his supervisor.

"Hello?"

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Book One

"Sidewinder, time to report in," the voice said.

"Oh, yeah, there's this jerk off loitering about. Is this your guy? You want me to send Rob and Brock down?"

"Was he with Morena?"

"Uh, yeah but she left--."

"Then no. He's not our guy. He's fine. Brock's got road duty and Rob, well, he'll be busy later. Send up the gift."

"The gift? Now? It's not morning."

"Now, Sidewinder."

Alex shrugged. His supervisor also did reenactments but always for the Axis side. Still, the guy had a lot of street cred and had helped him out with shifts and things for a while. He was one to be trusted.

"Ok, Ritterreiter, I'm on it."

He hung up his cell phone and picked up the house phone. "Yeah? Hospitality?"

Universe 1 Vampire Psychologist 0

The first response from the Universe I received after our little chat came as a knock on my door just an hour after sundown. I had slept all through the day and awoke groggy and drooling into my pillow. I raised my head from the pillow and watched as a paper was pushed under my door. It would've seemed strange at this hour had I been fully in my mind.

But as I was still woolgathering from dreams spanning the centuries, I just figured it might be worthwhile to check out the paper. So I crawled out of the covers, switched the bedside lamp on, and shuffled over to the door in my premium hotel slippers, curious to see the Universe's response to my defiance.

There was a room service cart complete with a coffee service, an ample silver lidded tray, and an orange bubbly drink in a champagne flute. Confused, I checked down both directions of the hall, seeing no one. Looking back at the cart, I saw a card and picked it up.

"Miss Quinn,

For being one of our frequent stay guests, here's breakfast on us!

VAMPIRONY



Book One

The Management"

With that, I shrugged and wheeled the cart into my room.

I got comfortably seated on the bed and uncovered the tray. Pancakes with maple syrup, scrambled eggs dusted with cheese, heart slices of bacon, a fat sausage link, wheat bread lightly toasted, and country potatoes steamed and smelled delicious as I set the tray lid aside.

The Universe had decided to respond to defiance with...breakfast. I smiled just as my stomach growled. A hot version of the most important meal of the day seemed just the thing, even if it was almost 11 PM. I was about to spear the sausage link when I took note of the bubbly orange concoction.

I took up the champagne flute and sipped it.

The Universe toasted my defiant spirit with a Mimosa. I knocked it back, felt it burn all the way down to my empty stomach and resolved to relieve the discomfort with a mouthful of banana pancake. Which I followed with that speared sausage link, and proceeded to challenge the sin of gluttony with wild abandon.

It didn't take but a few moments before I felt very sleepy. At first, I'd thought it was all those carbs hitting my stomach like anchors showered in fairy dusted powdered sugar but after my eyelids kept drooping, it became as clear as it could in my befuddled mind that the fairy dust was not of the naturally occurring dietary kind.

With the knowledge that dumb arrogance would be trumped by belligerent righteousness, I groaned as I toppled over in bed, my whole body going numb. My eyes spotted the empty champagne glass, as if in a spotlight of a cosmic boxing ring. In this corner, the Universe, aka The Management, intended to strike back with sugary carbohydrates and spiked Mimosas.

"Shit," was all I could manage before I fell back asleep.

Birds of a Feather

Nick pulled in front of the Deli a little after 8PM. It was earlier than dusk but with the late Mariners game versus the Blue Jays, Nick wanted to skip the fray of traffic before it got into a frenzy. He figured he'd clean up some of the last remaining paperwork about the office rental and call his career as a real estate agent done. After shutting off the engine and removing his helmet, he heard some other sort of frenzy, angry birds squawking unusually loud. It was coming from behind the building.

He went around back towards where the office stairs were and saw what the ruckus was. A collection of crows had taken up residence at the dumpster and were whooping and squawking

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loudly. The dumpster had seemed to have seen better days, it looked dented and the ground underneath looked like it had recently been roto-tilled. He shrugged, figuring the birds were just fighting over territory, although, they didn't seem to be attacking or addressing each other.

In fact, they seemed to be in some sort of solidarity and as he watched the separate crows all started vocalizing at the same exact time, creating some sort of crow chorus. Weird. There was a crash, like a bottle shattering back around front and, worried that someone had backed into his bike, he ran around the front.

It was the girl from the Deli and her grandmother. The grandmother had been carrying a grocery bag and it had split open, a jar crashing on the pavement. Both the girl and her grandmother were carrying too many bags apiece to do anything but set their burdens down to try and assess the damage.

Nick flipped his messenger bag behind him and trotted over to help. Within a few minutes, he and the girl had hefted all the bags inside the Deli, letting the grandmother head grumbling towards the back towards the small office, her hand to her head, without even acknowledging Nick's help at all.

As Nick dumped the bags on the counter, the girl turned to him, suddenly shy. "Thank you for your help. It was most kind."

"No problem," he trailed off, at a loss.

"Irina." She tucked her hair behind her ear, suddenly bashful.

"Nice to meet you. Again. I'm Nick."

She averted her eyes, starting to remove items from the grocery bag. "I know," she said quietly.

Nick had a hard time believing this was the same girl that had given him such a hard time just a few weeks before. Even more surprising was how her grandmother, aka the Iron Curtain, had transformed. He could just see through the hallway into the back room where she had put her leg up on a stool, took an embroidered handkerchief out of her sleeve, and put the cloth to her eyes.

"Is your Grandmother ok?"

Irina followed Nick's gaze and then walked to doorway, pulling a curtain into place. She approached him slowly, arms wrapping around herself. "Grandmother is very upset. My sister Oksana has been missing for several days." Irina sniffed and rubbed at her nose with her sweatshirt sleeve.

A sick feeling moved through Nick's stomach. He swallowed. "Your sister? Oksana? Was she blonde, tall, short skirts?"

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The hopeful face that jerked up to look at him looked familiar and confirmed his suspicions. "You've seen her? Where? When?"

Nick felt his mouth go dry. How do you tell a teenage kid that you suspected her older sister had joined the ranks of the undead? However small those ranks might be? Or not? Nick wasn't sure what to say so he opted for the truth. "Sorry. It was a week ago, over at Jerry's."

"Oh," her face fell. "She used to go out all the time but she'd always come home. Sometimes, she'd wake me and tell me who she met, who'd flirted with her, crazy stories. She is always struggling to fit in here in America, to not feel so much the outsider. Drives Grandmother crazy, that she is giving up her heritage to be someone she's not."

Nick nodded. He'd heard that argument before. "It's not easy being first gen."

Irina met his gaze and understood him. "But it all got worse when she saw *him*. After that, she seemed almost possessed to break with us."

"Him?"

Irina pulled at the cuff of her sweatshirt. "Shishka. Our landlord. You know him."

Nick remembered that when the Landlord had gotten mentioned before, the girl and her grandmother had become afraid. He regretted the deception.

"Look, I don't really know the guy at all. I was just trying to show the office."

Irina kept pulling at her sleeve. Nick worried that she'd clam up now that *HE* had been mentioned. She had started to gnaw on her lip so Nick took a peek into the grocery bag. "I don't see any beets for the borscht."

"Chjort! Grandmother told me I'd forget."

Nick smiled, "Look, why don't I ride down to the market and pick some up?"

Irina looked undecided. "No, that is too much. I can go."

"Come on, it's a ten minute trip on my bike. Besides, don't want you wandering around alone out in the dark." He could see she was teetering on agreement. "I'll come back and we can have some pierogi."

She turned thankful eyes up to him. "But I don't really know how to cook."

He was already heading for the door. "Don't you worry. I know my way around a kitchen."

VAMPIRONY



Book One

Every Plan Has Its Loose End

The walk from the Hyatt over to the office only took Morena twenty minutes and it gave her plenty of time to think. And she really wished she had brought her gun. But she realized her gun was a crutch and she needed to unlearn what she'd learned about how to fight if she was ever going to hold her own against a vampire.

She recollected how Lucy and Jesper had fought and the speed alone had been insane. Before she'd even recognized an action, the two had moved on to a parry and another block. Super speed super sucked for humans to have to deal with. She wasn't sure how a kukri was supposed to counter that.

As she approached the building from the back of the lot, the first thing she noticed was a cluster of crows around the dumpster making an insane racket. She didn't see Nick's motorcycle as she bounded up the stairs. At the landing, she paused with her hand on the doorknob, turning back around to look back down at the dumpster. The birds were calling up to her in perfect unison. It creeped her out.

It was no wonder. It looked like some kids had been having some fun roughing up the dumpster. It had been flipped over on its side and there were quite a few holes punched into the bottom. It was hard to tell more but the ground just there looked like someone had dug something up. She couldn't see much better; the streetlight right over that part of the parking lot was out.

Crows? Really? When there's a dangerous vampire that Jesper is probably fighting right now? She shook it off and went through the front door of the office.

The office was dark but something immediately felt off.

"Nick?"

She stepped lightly over the wooden floor, stopping at the desk to flip the lamp on. That was when she noticed a sliver of light from the doorway of one of the examination rooms down the hall. She put her hand in her pocket and pulled out her Asp. Her gun might be her crutch but she wasn't stupid to not carry anything at all.

With a flick of her wrist, the Asp snapped open into a 16" black chrome baton and she slowly headed down the hallway.

"Nick?"

She got to the slightly ajar door, took a breath, and then kicked the door open, blocking the entrance, eyes darting around the room. There was a small exam light on but the room was empty. She listened quietly for a moment and then, hearing nothing but crows squawking, she relaxed. She spotted a folder sitting open on the exam table and entered the room to take a look.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

It was a collection of papers that looked like Sophie's case notes. Instead, it was some sort of timeline that looked like a record of her life. Correction, lives. Morena picked up the folder and began to read, marveling at the concept that anyone could really reincarnate, let alone remember their pasts.

She shook her head. She certainly didn't want all that baggage to drag around. She had enough in this lifetime.

Just then, the door slammed shut and Morena jumped. She quickly crossed to the door but when she turned the knob, the door didn't open. It was locked. A shiver went up her spine and started her scalp tingling.

"Nick?" She knocked on the door. "Nick, are you out there?"

She was quiet for a second but couldn't hear anything. She wrestled with the doorknob and then, unsuccessful, pounded on the door, "Is anyone out there?"

She got her cell phone out and saw that there was no signal in the room. She recalled Nick being particularly proud of being able to fulfill some of the stranger requests in the exam rooms, like no wireless coverage, virtually soundproof, lightproof. It was meant to hold vampires to keep them safe. As she walked around all corners of the room and still no signal, she realized it was well built to hold her too.

She continued to pound on the door in futility for about five minutes but was already silently cursing one important point: Nick was good at his job.

"Shit! Nick!"

DJB: Kiss and Tell

When I first caught a scent of the Carpathian early in the evening, I had followed it out to the street expecting that a fight would ensue. I found myself facing yet another new condo complex under construction just across from the Hyatt. If its originality was already marred by its banal advertising of luxury condos, it looked like a wine bar was nearing completion on the ground floor. Imagine, a wine bar in Bellevue, home of the nouveau tech rich trying to convert into a more cultured existence beyond their bytes and stock. I'd have turned up my nose if I hadn't been actively sniffing with it.

But after that first very strong whiff, the scent faded and I was standing there for far too long being buffeted by toxic car fumes. Unable to ascertain its direction further and unwilling to hunt it down, I'd taken up watch back in the Wintergarden, grabbing a magazine.

At first, waiting was a blessing. It meant I had more time to assimilate the bounty from my blood gorge the night before. I could feel my cells bathing in it. It made me feel strong, fast, nimble, lethal.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

In other words, I felt little like my normal self. I was a terrible vampire, in the traditional sense, and I had plenty of time sitting in the Wintergarden, surrounded by the vacuous space of modern hospitality architecture, to rue my decision of not letting Valerian help.

I wondered if my pride and anger had gotten the better of me and, in doing so, would be the worst for Sophie. Stretching out my senses, I tried to hear her, feel her but we were not that acquainted yet, not in this lifetime. When she was my Helene, I could discern her heartbeat as if it were the thundering of hooves from miles way.

I pushed those thoughts away before they dragged me back into reverie. Here I was, spoiling for a fight I did not want to have, impatiently wanting to see Sophie. But did I want her to see me like this, blood gorged eyes, barely controllable fangs? Maybe not.

After a mind-numbing article about Marrying Mr. Wrong and a rather more intriguing one about six ways to simultaneous climax that I intended to file not too far back in my mind, I really needed to see Sophie. I realized I fit too horribly close to the first article to even spare a hope of the second. When last we'd talked, we'd argued...in Turkish. The time before, I had run out of her office after collapsing in her lap. I wasn't having a very good run.

And now that I recognized her, now that I remembered bits of our past together, it pained me even more. Not to mention the fact that I was depending on some security guard and my own limited vampire senses to let me know if Sophie was in danger.

By midnight, I'd worked myself into such a fuss, that I had to get up and stretch my legs. And then I just happened to walk past the elevator for her tower when the doors opened. And then I just happened to get into the elevator with someone else going to the twelfth floor. When we stopped on that floor, an odd thing happened.

"Oh wait, I forgot they moved me to a suite, guess they are doing some work on this floor. Ha ha. Sorry, buddy."

I paused for an instant as the young man pressed the button for the 21st floor. But then I stuck out my hand to catch the door just as it was sliding shut. The man gave me a strange look.

"Beg your pardon, I believe this is the right floor for me." I slipped out the door without another look. No need for expending any extra Vox.

As I stood in the hallway, I realized how quiet the floor was. The man had been right; there seemed to be no guests on this floor. Save for one. I heard a faint slow heartbeat, a woman's heart, toward the very end of the hall and I headed towards it.

I didn't know what I would say. I should apologize. Shouldn't I? I should tell her I would make it ok. I would tell her about the Taint, break the Conclave confidence. Then she would know why I needed to do this. She would understand.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

As the room numbers counted down, I realized that she would not understand, she would not condone, she would not give up on her principles. I fervently hoped that somehow, this situation would be out of my hands. But I knew what I had to do. I had to protect her and hope for the best.

I knew her door from the sounds of her heart beating and her breathing just inside. I saw an evening paper lying there pushed partly under the door. When I picked it up, something fell out. It was a business card, with one black side and one white. On the white side, there was a single black symbol: a tied satin ribbon. On the other black side was the phrase written in white letters: "Gypsy Twin Irregulars."

It made no sense to me so I pocketed the card and got out the card key Morena had given me. I breathed in first and knocked softly, head listening. Her breathing was even, uninterrupted by my knocking. I slipped the key in the door, watched the lock sensor light turn green, and turned the handle, pushing the door open.

There was a breakfast cart in front of the bed and the lamp beside the bed was on. Sophie lay on the bed partially obstructed from my view by the cart, outside her covers, in a heap. She was fully clothed so I stepped inside, softly closing the door.

"Sophie?"

Again, her body gave no response and I cautiously approached the bed. There was something in the way she lay that looked unnatural, like she'd fallen face forward unintended. I sat on the bed beside her, brushing her hair away from her face. Her mouth was open, pressed against the bedcovers. A sort of worry quickly overcame me but I was gentle when I grabbed her shoulders and drew her back against my shoulder. Her head lolled to the side and I used my hand to turn it toward me, all the while the sense of concern growing. Her heartbeat remained constant throughout.

I smelled around her head, her hair, and finally her mouth and something quite off struck me. A medicinal smell. Somebody had drugged her. Maybe even a poison. My head turned toward the food cart and the most obvious choice was the champagne glass, completely drained of its contents. I reached over and picked it up, putting it to my nose. Orange juice and champagne but no hint otherwise. I would've tried to taste it but there was nothing left.

I set the glass down and looked at her again, lying limp in my arms. I laid her carefully back on the bed, warring with myself over what to be done. Her heart rate was solid...but I didn't know if that would last. Had someone meant to knock her out or poison her? There was only one way to tell.

I leaned forward, both hands braced alongside her head, and kissed her. I couldn't taste anything from her lips so I took liberties and opened her mouth, tongue exploring the tastes. The sweet taste of citrus made my eyes shock open with light for a moment and I lifted my mouth from hers. I couldn't taste any poison and I immediately felt guilty. I'd wanted to do that for days but had not envisaged our first kiss with her unawares.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

My hand turned hers over in mine, my thumb moving over her wrist, feeling her pulse. As if I needed any more assurances that she was fine. Drugged indeed, but nonetheless fine. Perhaps she'd taken something herself. Not that I believed that. The drug had obviously hit her suddenly.

But what kind of a lout was I? Under pretenses of protecting her, I had snuck into her room and then, worst of all, taken advantage of her. No, this wasn't what my Helene deserved.

But she wasn't my Helene. I did not know her like I had known that other version of her from years ago. And she did not know me. I was a perfect stranger who barked at her in a foreign tongue and collapsed into her lap. I claimed to want to protect her but here I was invading her privacy. I rose, tucked her carefully under the covers, pulled them up over her, took one further liberty brushing her hair carefully aside, then stood looking over her.

Would she know to call me for help? Would she even need help?

I picked up the receiver on phone by her bed. It took me a few moments to understand how to dial out, but I pressed the numbers and heard my cell ringing. I took my headset out of the pocket and put it on as I heard the call connect through. I then set the receiver on the nightstand. If something happened inside the room, I could hear it and be here straight away.

I gave her one more long look.

"Next time, Sophie Quinn, you will ask me to kiss you."

I left her room then, slipping the card key in my pocket in case of the most dire of circumstances and headed back to the elevator to wait in the lobby. I pressed the down button and when the elevator opened, it was the same young man as before.

"You look like she said no," he spoke.

"Huh?"

He smirked. "You know, the bar on the 21st floor is much better than the one in the lobby. Closer too for catching an elevator in case she calls you back."

I stood there stunned while the elevator doors slide shut. Then I pressed the button up and waited for the next elevator.

Possession is Nine Tents

Nick returned from a longer than expected shopping trip with bags full of goodies and proceeded to show Irina that the difference between pierogi and gyoza was a matter of language. After all, dumplings were dumplings, boiled, fried, or steamed.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

And no offense to her Russian grandmother, which he discovered was actually Georgian from the city of Tbilisi, but her pierogi was crap. Boiled and tasteless, it might serve perfectly for wartime peasant folk without much access to anything but staples...but for the more adventurous and less ethnically sensitive Bellevue crowd, any food had to have the name of authenticity with a decidedly fusion blend.

By the time he was done with them, the pierogi had taken on a chipotle-infused mutton and oozed like more familiar soup dumplings. When bidden by the smell Grandmother Iron Curtain ventured out from the office, pushing Nick out of the way as she fished one onto a spoon and surely burned her mouth sampling it.

Her face screwed up, flushed, and just as Nick was certain she was going to slap him upside the head, she grabbed him in a fierce hug and streamed rapid-fire Russian in his ear. Stunned, Nick was just getting his balance back when she quickly released him, shoveled ten of the doughy pockets into a bowl and retreated back behind her calico curtain.

Irina laughed heartily, "You reminded her of home."

"I hope in a good, pre- or post-Communist way," he joked and scooped two platefuls for himself and Irina and then sat down at one of the Formica tables in the restaurant proper to eat. After a few moments where they both greedily slurped up the pierogi, Nick asked, "Your family been here long?"

"My parents moved to America when Oksana was just two, right after the Soviet Union fell, in '92."

Nick smiled. He'd meant *here* as in the deli but obviously, it was a story she wanted to tell. He played along, his interest piqued, "Isn't it a little odd to leave Mother Russia when it had finally become free?"

"Free? Yes, for the mobsters and criminals. Not for simple people with not a lot to pay off the gangsters." Irina looked down at her plate. "Grandmother used to tell us stories, how it was better with the Communists because at least they had a predictable system of corruption."

"Still, you were able to leave."

"My parents were athletes. When the system fell, there went their support. So when they could, they moved over and brought Grandmother back a few years later when I was born."

Nick chuckled, hooking his thumb back toward the office. "Oh, so it's your fault."

Irina laughed, a wide smile with a gap toothed smile that reminded him of Madonna. "Sure, blame it all on me." Then, she turned suddenly serious. "Grandmother is the best. She took care of Oksana and me when our parents died."

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"How...?"

"Car accident."

"Ah, gee, sorry."

"Maybe because I never knew a life without her, I just was used to Grandmother. But she and Oksana, they always fought, even when she was little. I think she was embarrassed about Grandmother and her peasant, folk ways." She sighed. "Grandmother warned her to stay away from *Him*."

Something occurred to Nick just then and he stood, grabbed his messenger bag. Irina watched him silently as he dug into the bag and fished out the rental documents for the office space. When he found what he was looking for, he asked, "This guy, Shishka? What rubbed your Grandmother the wrong way about him?"

Irina shuddered. "Big shot. Fancy clothes, cold, looks down on us. Grandmother thought worse."

"Like worse how?" asked Nick, holding up the rental paper.

Irina hunched over her food, fork pushing a pierogi around the plate. "She called him *upyr*."

"What does that mean?"

She shrugged, "Bad man. It's silly."

"Victor Bella, that's your landlord, right?" Nick put the rental paper down on the table in front of Irina, pointing to his typed name on the listing.

She shook her head. "I've heard that name but that's not what she called him."

"Your grandmother?"

She looked up from the paper, confused, "No, Oksana."

Nick let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. It all made sense now.

"Let me guess. She called him *Skovajsa*."

Irina nodded, dumbly.

"You want to tell me again what *upyr* means? It isn't *bad man*, is it?"

VAMPIRONY



Book One

Whether Irina didn't answer because she didn't want to believe it or whether she could see that Nick knew it to be true, Nick didn't know. But he did know what happened to her sister. He grabbed his phone out of his jacket, dialing Sophie's number only to have to leave a voice mail.

"Hey boss? We may have a teensy problem. You know the office? The one I just retrofitted for your clients? Well, it happens to be owned by one of your clients. And you're not going to like which one."

Even an hour later, Nick was still trying to convince Irina and her Grandmother that they needed to pack up immediately. He had to use, as his last straw, the story about how he'd seen Oksana chewing on that guy's ear in Jerry's. Irina still denied it and was refusing to translate things that Nick was saying to her grandmother when the Iron Curtain stepped right in front of Nick with a week old newspaper.

She spoke to him, gesturing to the picture.

"Yes, that's him."

"Bah!" Grandmother spat. She threw the paper at Nick and went back into the office. A zipping sound could be heard and as Nick pulled the curtain aside, he saw that Grandmother had a small suitcase out and was packing. She came out a few moments later and cleaned out the till of the cash register.

"What is it?" Irina asked, confused.

Nick stepped to Irina, showing her the photo of the businessman under the headline which read: *Missing Business Man Found Mauled*. She shook her head as she read it.

"Now do you believe me?" Nick yelled. He dialed his phone again, this time getting Morena's cell number. Again, it went straight to voice mail. "Morena, it's Nick. Where the Hell are you? I got a situation here. Call me back." He hung up. "Dammit, where the Hell IS everyone?"



Morena was wondering the same thing at that moment. It had been so much time she'd made it through the recorded life and times of Sophie Quinn...twice. She'd been mildly surprised that Sophie had been married so many times.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

She'd tried everything she could think of to break through the door, the lock, the hinges...but nothing worked. And her cell didn't get any signal. She'd watched the battery drain to almost nothing.

For lack of anything better to do, she'd started reading through a few magazines left in the room. She scoffed at the article about simultaneous climax and found herself nodding at the article about Marrying Mr. Wrong. It made her think of Jesper. She forced her mind to other things. Then she lay down on the exam table and while her brain turned over and over what might be happening, she nodded off.

It was early morning, 3:30AM by her watch, when her phone chirped, the battery finally giving due notice of impending shut down. She started, surprised she'd slept at all. She'd had the strangest dreams, red rivers of blood flowing down from Jesper's shoulder as she clawed her fingernails into his flesh.

There was nothing for the cell so she turned it off. Just as she did, she felt the room rock violently.

"What the Hell was that?" She went to the door and started banging on it anew. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up and she strained for a second to listen just as the floor rocked again, almost as if something had hit it.

"Shit!"

She needed to get downstairs. NOW. Her vision focused and, as she grabbed a side of the frame with each hand, she felt this surge of pure, unadulterated power boil from within. She kicked out at the door, convinced she was going to get through it even if she broke her damn leg.

The door buckled in where her boot splintered it and the force was so strong, the lock popped out of the frame. Stunned with herself, she stood there staring. Her leg hurt like hell and some strange part of her brain realized that she had fractured her thigh but blood was already swelling there, healing her.

"Sonofa..." She didn't waste any time. She hobbled out the doorway just as the building shook again, this time the sounds of crashing and glass shattering urging her on.

The Problem with Technology

Skovajsa, after a quick bite to eat to settle his nerves and improve his color, arrived at the Hyatt crisp and fresh from a quick toilet. He made his way calmly through the Wintergarden, perfectly tailored in a charcoal suit with maroon silk shirt and matching silk tie. He carried the bouquet of flowers under his arm and a very ancient looking wine bottle in the other, shifting the bottle under his arm as he pushed the elevator call button around four AM.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

He stifled a smile as he shifted his weight. He was actually a little nervous, his feet tapping in anticipation as he balanced from side to side waiting. It had been a very long time since he'd been this close to such a boon and he'd never paid this much care to his approach. Sheer strength and ferocity usually got him exactly what he wanted. This wine and dining approach was all new to him.

He pushed the button again, tossing a casual, caustic glance at a maintenance man on a ladder just opposite him. Those beneath him didn't deserve much more notice than that. He jumped slightly when moments later, the maintenance man as at his shoulder, his music blaring from his headphones.

"That one's not working."

Skovajsa recoiled, shifting the wine bottle away from the man. He wore just a non-descript gray one piece with a belt full of tools dragging him down into a stoop. His short cropped hair was mussed, and stood up on a side.

"That elevator?" The man pointed. He waited as if Skovajsa would address him. "Isn't working."

"Oh." Skovajsa quickly moved around the little maintenance man to another set of elevators, pushing the button with haste.

"Um, don't know if you want those either." The man called to him.

"Why? It works, doesn't it?" Skovajsa fired back, stepping inside quickly as the doors opened. The man waved as if to say more but it was lost to Skovajsa as the doors slide shut.

The maintenance man put hands on his hips, as his headphones blared R.E.M.'s "End of the World." He looked at the elevator labels to read "15 – 21 Floors." It wasn't a music player connected to his headphones that he lifted up, but a cell phone. He punched a few keys.

"Yeah, he's on his way up. Oh, it'll take him a bit; I rigged it to go straight up to the top floor no matter what button he pushes. You still babysitting?"

On the other end of the line, a young man with silvered temples and wire framed glasses looked down the length of the bar at the blond man in the sunglasses who sat nervously waiting, listening intently to his ear bud although not having spoken a word into it. "Yeah, I'll try to keep him distracted but he sure looks like he's about ready to jump through that phone."

"Whatever, Mordecai. Ritterreiter was clear. We leave that one alone."

"Awrighty, Chain. I'll do a smoke screen. Should confuse the other one to avoid any random encounters." With that the bartender hung up the phone, pulled a box out from under the bar, and walked over to one of his regulars, sitting right next to the blond Viking. "Hey, Billy, have you tried these new White Star cigars?"

VAMPIRONY



Book One

After which point, Billy took the proffered cigar and lit up, after being assured that he wouldn't get in trouble for lighting up. The Blond man didn't seem to notice anything around him, just gripped the phone he had sitting on the bar lightly. It was hard to tell with those sunglasses. After a few moments of smoking up the bar, the bartender wandered over to Sunglasses.

"You know, the bar officially closed a few hours ago. But I took pity on you; you looked like you had woman trouble."

Jesper didn't even turn his head to acknowledge the voice speaking to him. He wasn't actually sitting there listening to the bartender, who decided to pour himself a tall glass of water and begin to spin some tale of marital woe.

Jesper's consciousness was sitting in a chair across from Sophie's bed, listening to her breathing, training his senses on anything nearby that felt or smelled or sounded Vampire. Which was why he smelled the twinge of bloody decay mixed with some musky cologne and the fragrance of lilies and roses before the elevator door alarm went off. He stood up walking towards the door to the hotel room.

Back at the bar, the bartender paused his story when he heard the cell phone in Sunglasses' hand chirp.

"Hey, buddy, think your phone battery is going dead."

His warning fell on deaf ears.



"Jesper?"

Jesper's head swiveled to the bed. Sophie was still asleep, under the covers, but her sleep became troubled. She shifted, her arms stretching out, reaching around a pillow. He paused but the smell would not be denied. His sense of smell was the worst of all his sense when he projected which meant the Carpathian had to be close.

When the elevator alarm sounded, he sped to the door, but paused before going out. He turned back to the bed. He could take her, now, run. Get her to safety. Fly her away from here, to Morena. Why had he not enlisted help from Valerian? He felt the nerves knot together his stomach as he put his hand on the door knob.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

Even without the smell and the elevator alarm, he could sense the Carpathian approaching. It was time.

Except, his hand suddenly wasn't on the doorknob anymore; it was around his cell phone. He started.

"Hey, take it easy, fella. I tried to warn you."

Jesper stood, feeling suddenly ill. The call had been disconnected and he had been snapped back into his skin. Without forethought, the transition produced ill effects that he termed Projection Sickness: dizziness, weakness, in some cases vomiting...fainting.

He reached a hand across the bar and grabbed the bartender in a panicked grip. "What happened?"

"Erk, I tried to tell you. Your phone died."

Jesper swayed against the bar, the edges of his awareness blurring, fraying. "No," he mouthed, hand still around the bartender's neck but now slackening.

"Say, you wanna call her back, you can use my phone," the bartender added. He dragged a desk phone over and dialed, without asking for the number. "I'm getting a busy signal."

Jesper slid along the railing of the bar, and then toppled over, hitting the floor taking a stool with him. His face smacked hard into the wood but the pain helped him cling to awareness. *No*, he couldn't abandon her to her fate again.

"Sophie," he moaned.

The bartender came around the bar and looked down at the vampire at his feet. Then he used his own cell phone only to have it go directly to voice mail. "Come on, Greg, get off the phone!"

Time to Galvanize

At around 4:30 AM, a light on Alex the night guard's panel went red, drawing his attention. An elevator door alarm on the twelfth floor corridor had been triggered. He leaned forward, reaching towards the 2-way but instead picked up his cell phone sitting just beside it. He flipped it open and pressed a series of numbers.

As the call rang through, a haze seemed to be filling the camera view right in front of the elevator door but nothing else could be seen. The call picked up and he spoke, "It's Sidewinder. Yeah, we got that alarm, just like you said. No fire alarm, just the elevator door. What would you like me to do, sir?"

VAMPIRONY



Book One

"Nothing. Reset the alarm. If anything else happens, in the hall, of course proceed with protocol. But anything in the room, leave it. We'll take it from here."

Alex paused. They'd had to do a bit of jerry rigging to move guests from that particular wing, stating that there was a maintenance request and upgrading them to better rooms with restaurant comps. Cindy, one of the front managers, hadn't wanted to do it but the footage of her getting horizontal with the new chef on top of a conference table after hours convinced her otherwise.

"Sidewinder, do you read? Leave the situation alone."

"Yeah, ok."

"Follow protocol on all other matters, except the room and guest in question."

"Yeah, yeah, ok. I'll monitor and will call if anything more happens."

On the other side of the phone, just across the street, tucked into the shadows at the base of the construction site for the new condo complex, a short, nondescript man in a green fatigue jacket with German eagle crest on the sleeve lowered a pair of binoculars with a hint of a smile.

"That won't be necessary, Sidewinder. We've just pressed Play. Ritterreiter out."

The man known as Ritterreiter hung up his cell, lowering his binoculars and tucking them into his coat and pulling out a flashlight. Turning it on, he picked up crowbar that was leaning against the finished foundation wall and made his way away around the side of the structure. The first several floors of the structure had been completed, even to the point of having the beginnings of a wine bar almost ready for retail.

The top ten floors above were a different story, an organized mess of steel beams, rebar, plywood platforms, and concrete mixers wrapped in a bow of orange plastic safety fencing. A yellow industrial crane towered over it all, American flag flying proudly over the months of work yet to complete the new condo/retail space.

Out of the old was arising the new. Wide vistas of flat concrete space were being replaced by towers of glass and steel. The Bellevue skyline had been and would be permanently home to a nest of cranes as the city refactored itself from sleepy downtown host for local computer entrepreneurs to entertainment mecca for the jetsetter trophy families of the rich and digitally minded.

Ritterreiter came around the corner to a parking lot with a lone truck and checked the sky. The black sky of the Pacific Northwest was feeling its first twinges of dawn. Night was ending and monsters were in play. As he lowered his gaze, two hooded figures came out a side door of the construction site, dragging a jackhammer.

VAMPIRONY



Book One

The two figures loaded the jackhammer into the back of the truck and threw him a wave. He smiled, taking his cell phone back out.

"My finger is on the button." He dialed and put the phone to his ear.

The Price of Tea

The smashed tea pot was Chinese, from Yixing, thousands of pots of tea brewed into the pot until the purple clay had so absorbed the flavors that one need only add water to get the tea. It was a terrible waste. Not that either Valerian or I cared in that moment as his fingers brushed through my tousled hair.

The office was tucked into a far corner of the laboratory, a converted warehouse where our scientific and paranormal research could be conducted with no interruption from curious neighbors. The added benefit of the warehouse was that while it had been boarded up tight so no light could leak in, steam machines roared to produce the electricity that ran through the building, casting a wondrous orange glow around. Valerian often said it made me look like I wore a halo.

After another long embrace, our skin damp and clinging together, he laid back on the small cot, arm tightening around me. I nestled against him, head on his chest, hand in his, catching my breath. The pot on the floor seemed to catch both of our attention simultaneously. I heard him chuckle, the movement shaking his chest and me along with it.

"Well, another splendidly failed experiment. But admittedly, if all failed experiments end like this, I will have to adjust my success criteria."

As much peace as I felt right now, I had worked very hard to try and synthesize the right dosage of juice and tea. His seizure was both unexpected and intense. I hadn't know what else to do but push him onto the cot and try to hold him down, pushing a wooden dowel into his mouth to keep him from choking. The panic I'd felt was gone now but the memory of the failure was profound. I pushed myself up, looking down at him.

"Yes, but how do you feel, Val?" I caressed his face, the cuts around his lips already healed where he'd struggled against the dowel. My fingers traced his lips.

He raised one inky eyebrow at me. He could do that. "You ask me that after what we've just done?"

My hand moved to his chest. I asked, exasperated, "You feel no relief at all? I was certain adding the lime juice in that concentration would have a calming effect. Lind's work with scurvy in the Royal Navy seemed to be so promising."

He could tell I was disappointed. "I cannot tell if it's the *antiscorbutic*....or if it's you that effects the change."

VAMPIRONY



Book One

I blushed before catching all he said. "So you do feel something!" I was excited. He had never before admitted that my silly experiments with what I had deemed *sun-starvation* had any impact on his vampire self. I was beaming with feminine pride when I leaned over him. "Hmm, perhaps if we didn't work so hard at confounding the results of said experiments, we could isolate the change agent."

But there was a difference in his kissing after some tea, whether he admitted it or not. His lips were softer and while his mouth sought more, his arms more insistent, it was more to persuade, to intoxicate me into loosening my laces, sliding fabric gently aside so he might touch me more. So while it hadn't really been my intention to make him into a more tender lover by curing his sun-starvation, I felt the full benefits of it.

With the slightest pressure of his hand cradling my head as we kissed, I felt him push my face gently up and away from him, his eyes boring into mine. I was pleased with myself. His eyes searched mine but still, I hadn't unlocked that look although I'd begun to see it more and more lately.

Instead of the open emotions that had roamed his face more often, a mask of appraisal clouded his brow. "My darling girl, you need a man you don't need to fix."

I rolled my eyes. Crossing my arms over his chest, I commented in a huff, "We all need fixing in some measure." My fingers played with the buttons of his undone shirt.

His large cold hand covered both of mine. Again, with the eyebrow. "You're not ever going to cure me of vampirism, Darcie. It is what I am and where I belong."

I hated when we talked about this, his vampire world. He had worked hard to keep it so separate from me from the beginning. I knew he had a vampire family, what he called a *horror*. He told me he kept me away from them to protect me. They were unruly, his brood. "Whatever made you think I was trying to cure you of that?" Still not looking him in the eyes.

"I know you. And I know that as much as I treasure these fleeting moments with you, I will never satisfy you." He lifted my chin, forcing me to look at him. "I am not what you are searching for. And no matter your skills, you cannot fashion me into whatever it is you seek."

It was just like him to completely misunderstand my efforts and to put a damper on my accomplishments. Whether there was any truth to his words was irrelevant. It was more a matter of the change in his demeanor that he seemed to be fixating on how I thought of him as vampire than it was my wish to change that about him. It was his very vampiric nature that made me feel I could help him, that I was uniquely qualified to find him some balance.

My lip must've been sticking out as I pouted because he lifted his head and used his tongue to caress that lip away from the other so he might enjoy another deep kiss. And when he did such things, I forgot all my cares and in some dark part of my heart, I began to fear the day when I couldn't help him anymore. His fingers brushed my throat until his kisses lead there too and I felt a jolt flow

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through me remembering his teeth sinking in and the feeling of eternity clawing out of me. I wondered if his fangs would appear now as they often did when we engaged in our scandalous behavior. I waited for him to bite me.

But this was not that day as he sighed, completely satisfied, and sunk back against the cot. "Although, I confess I will miss it when you cease your efforts." His arms wrapped even tighter around me, his hand cradling my head as I relaxed against his chest. Listening to his relaxed breathing and feeling not the warmth exactly of another human being, but instead the strength and electricity that moved all through me wherever his body touched mine. And at this point, there wasn't much in the way of clothing left between us.

I caressed his chest, my hand moving lower. I didn't want him to be anything but his best self. But at what point this dark angel would find me lacking, keeping me separated from the world that was his, that he surely ruled, now that was another matter entirely.

"Then perhaps we should endeavor to not make these attempts so brief. Fleeting moments indeed. You've made me a ruined woman in appearances, Val. You might as well ruin me completely. Again."

And my heart hammered as we once again put anatomical pursuits ahead of scientific ones.



My heart beat like the sound of the hoof beats that approached the tent. At any moment we could be found out. The caravan, while it had been travelling for days and had orders to leave our cart and our tent alone under strict order of the Sultan, was now a long way away from Kostantiniyye. But the hooves stilled and so did any doubt that it was the horses and not the fingers stroking just there below my veil that caused my heart to race.

"Jesper! Shhh!" I complained, trying very weakly to still his hands.

"Indeed, shhhh," he murmured and caught at my mouth. I gave into him completely as there was nothing for it. Even if we were disturbed, his growing abilities to charm the intruder would have them leaving the tent wondering why they'd come, even as they saw us here, my sitting in Jesper's lap on the rug and pillows with my veil unwound around us, my red hair tumbling down.

His charm wasn't the only ability in which his cocksure attitude was apparent. He'd boasted just this morning that he'd spent the full afternoon under the scorching sun helping the captain of our expedition find water. But I wasn't currently concerned about his divining besides how his hands,

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one still wrapped in bandages, managed to remove my salvar trousers with little assistance from me.

I pulled my lips away, "Jesper." There, I said it. Now I had no idea why, his hands moving to push my tunic over my head. When he'd swept into the tent after his nightly sojourn, it had been most of the day since I'd talked with him, and we both seemed particularly needy tonight. As the tunic came over my head, so was I over any hesitation, pushing him back against the rug. He hummed in appreciation for my newly found enthusiasm.

It wasn't fair. He'd come in perfectly naked and yet I still had yards of fabric between us that I struggled with. I never hated our palace garb more than now. He seemed oblivious to my frustration, just enjoying how I was moving against him in trying to free myself.

"All day without you. All day without you in full sun and not able to share it with you until now." He marveled, his mouth finding a particularly sensitive crease in my neck.

I couldn't help but smile as he helped rid me of the last stitch of fabric. "Mmm, Kemal would not have appreciated it much if this was how we celebrated your first midday sun."

Jesper's warm amber eyes glowed as he looked up at me playfully. "No?"

"No," I shook my hair out over him and he cupped one side of my face with his good hand. I put my hand over his and then pulled his other bandaged hand up to look at. The Sultan might indeed be benevolent in most cases to this strange visitor from the North, but there were limits to his patience. The dropping of the Valide Sultan's favorite tea set, smashing it to bits by his reckless fit, had brought a severity that had surprised me.

"Oh, something else for you to see."

I looked at him confused as he unwrapped his hand, showing four perfect fingers and one thumb, the skin tan and new. He turned his hand in front of me so I might fully appreciate it. Two days ago, back at the Palace, I had wrapped his hand myself after his smallest finger had been amputated to protect the rest of his charred fingers.

I touched his hand, grasping it in both of mine. I pressed it to my lips, smelling none of the decay from two days ago. I met his eyes, "It has regenerated? This is amazing."

"You still believe I am no demon?" His eyes held a doubt. It was the old one, the one that he would not, could not let go of.

"My heart, you are no demon. You are one of the Djinn. Sacred," I kissed his thumb. "Kind," another kiss. "Noble, wise, immortal." Each finger, I kissed in kind, until he cupped his hand behind my head and drew me down to him.

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It wasn't until much later, as I held him and watched him dozing, that I felt the fear growing. If the Sultan knew that his strange Northman who had wandered out of the forest to save him from a runaway horse was capable of such miracles, what would he do? Would he see him as the sacred Djinn and revere him? Or brand him an Ifrit, an evil demon, and cast him into some ritual sacrifice?

Or worse, would the Sultan, upon finding out that a guest at his palace, an emissary, was taking liberties with one of his concubines, one of the Harem, however acquired for political and intellectual favor, seek greater retribution than a burned hand and a chopped off finger?

I clutched him, partially rousing him so that he wrapped his overly warm body around mine to stave off the evening chill. Hours spent under the fierce Persian sun now emanating from him like he was some smoldering star. I whispered it to him and the kisses that followed did much to reinforce my sentimentality. I would have to write it in his book. He'd like that.



The suckiest part of waking up out of a dead faint is the disorientation and the general sense that nothing is right in the universe. And I didn't want to wake up. I couldn't remember if I'd dreamed or recollected but whatever it had been, my lips still tingled from it.

So imagine my disappointment when I finally sat up in bed, hand to my pounding head, to see Skovajsa sitting there at the edge of my bed with flowers and a bottle of wine.

“Fuck!”

His brow furrowed.

“I said that out loud, didn't I?”

He didn't bother to nod. Universe 2, Vampire Psychologist 0.

Wine and Dine on Her

As nerve-racking as first dates are, I wasn't holding a lot of sympathy for Skovajsa at present. The floral bouquet was making me sneeze and the wine was anything but a drinkable vintage. His demeanor was on par with some snooty playboy who wasn't getting his fair share of adoring attention.

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Oh, and the fact that he'd broken into my room under some romantic pretense and after receiving a not-so-favorable reaction had resorted to force and at present he held me down on the bed to smell at my hair, wasn't endearing him to me right now either.

"It's impolite to address me in that way," he spoke without a shred of anger or feeling, as if he was reading cue cards for some hack version of Romeo and Juliet. "I came to offer you my special bond. You should be honored."

Then again with the smelling. Slowly, from the base on the left side of my neck, up past my earlobe, around the crown of my head, and down the other side. Vampires and their heightened senses dictated no need for this kind of scrutiny so I had no idea what he was up to. I just hoped to heaven that this strange sense I had, that Jesper was or had just been here with me, would not be something he could notice.

"Excuse me if I'm reading more into your actions than your gifts."

He jerked back, staring at me. Since I had his attention and he looked a little like a scolded child, I figured I'd push it.

"A woman prefers not to be pawed at!" It took every ounce of my thinking mind to not slam my free knee into his groin, a move so instinctual and yet fatal in this instance, that I had to bite my lip. I was flexing my wrists against his grip but only to keep the blood flowing. Any direct resistance would trigger him into fight mode. And there would be no way back from that.

He released my hands and sat upright. His face looked mildly confused and he pursed his lips.

"I brought flowers." His attempt at explanation.

I didn't trust him so kept my position on the bed. I wanted to rub the feeling back into my hands but putting them together would make it easier for him to control me if he went feral again.

"Yes," in my most stern school teacher voice. "And with no greeting, no explanation of how you came into my room, startled me and attacked me, unprovoked."

He shook his head once and, like some ancient punch card machine, he calculated his mistake. "I brought you jewels."

"Irrelevant while I'm still pinned to the bed. May I ask you to control yourself and get off my person?"

With vampire speed, he moved to stand just next to the bed. But it seemed like he paused, like he'd meant to go farther but something grabbed his attention. He looked down at the bedside table where the phone off the hook was beeping. He carefully picked it up and put the receiver back in its cradle.

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"I have disturbed your sleep," he said softly, his back turned to me as he crossed slowly to the other side of the room.

I sat up carefully, not taking my eyes off him. He was in some state, anxious, fang-happy, on the edge. But his shoulders were slumped, as if his intentions had been shattered. He stooped to pick up the flowers that he'd dropped when he lunged at me. He'd trampled the lilies.

I sneezed.

He turned toward me. "You are allergic to the flowers."

"No," I paused to rub my nose. "Actually, the pussy willows."

Skovajsa stepped to the door, which hung ajar from him forcing it open. He opened it long enough to throw the entire bouquet out the door and then stepped back, turning to me.

"Thank you," I said quietly. It seemed very strange that the one item out of all the ones florists might use in a bouquet that I was allergic to would be one that ended up in his offering. I touched my lips, which still tingled. I wish I could remember my dream and more importantly, why the room felt like it did when Jesper's presence was around. I almost thought if I whispered his name, he might hear me. I bite my lip again. That was sure to enrage Skovajsa, who seemed to be calming down.

He gave me a determined look that made me think "Uh-Oh" and stepped to me, hand reaching into his jacket. In a swish of supernatural movement, he was on his knee before me, holding out a rectangular jewelry box.

"Forgive me. I have misbehaved. I had meant to shower you with gifts so you might see how much I desire you to join me."

He flipped open the box, as eager as a schoolboy, but even I had to marvel at the creation inside. Not that I was warmly impressed. It was a stab of icy fear that a man with resources to acquire something so obviously expensive and unique would've set his sights on me. It was a prelude to the kind of ownership that was absolute and completely devoid of any semblance of familiarity with me.

"You are of great value to me, Sophie Quinn. You should be with me."

This is the part in most romance novels where the heroine tosses all care to the winds and recognizes that all was done for love, all should be forgiven, the sins of the past were forgotten under the spell of adoring admiration and undeniable sexual chemistry, recognizing the beast is simply misunderstood and in need of a good woman to be his better half. Of course, in most romances the heroine was exquisite in form, wily of spirit, just in need of someone to love her obsessively, no matter what.

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The only thing Skovajsa *loved* about me was my wealth of knowledge about vampires. The thing he truly cared about was his own safety and he would kill anyone and steal anything to safeguard it by becoming more powerful.

“You say nothing to my proposal?” His brow furrowed.

My eyes narrowed. He had backed me into a corner and there really wasn’t anything I could say that wouldn’t wind up with him killing me. So I might as well put a name to his doubt.

“Vasa Skoda.”

He took it like a slap. The lid of the jewelry box snapped shut and he was on his feet, his eyes hurt, his brain percolating. “What did you say?”

“Vasa Skoda. It’s your name. Your real name.”

He shook his head violently. “No.” He backed away, into the breakfast cart. “No.”

For the first time, I saw a hint of humanity in his eyes, a hint of fear. I had to take advantage of this opportunity. It would be the last I would get to try and pry him open. I flipped off the bedcovers and stood up in my sock monkey jammies and tank top.

“You are Vasa Skoda, Yugoslavian by birth, born sometime in the 1930’s,” I spoke with certainty, taking a step toward him with each bit of information I revealed. “You were a failed actor, model, who moved to Italy to try and become famous.”

“You lie! You know nothing about me. I am Skovajsa! I was blood brother to Vlad Dracul.” There was a note of panic to his tone.

“You were not. Vlad Dracul was never even a vampire. I have *that* on good authority. *Dracul* is a reference to the Order of the Dragon, a Christian group founded to defend Europe against the Ottoman Empire.”

He crouched away from me, his hand grabbing for the antique wine bottle. It seemed to be a talisman to him and, with it in hand, he straightened and took a step towards me. “*I am Vampire!*”

The force of his Vox shattered all the mirrors in the room and sent me to the floor. I didn’t stay there for long as he quickly grabbed me by the throat and threw me against the bed.

“You would slander me. You would deny me!”

With one hand around my chin forcing my mouth open, he flipped the stoppered top of the wine bottle open and began pouring what I knew to not be wine into my mouth. I seized my throat

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muscles shut, held my breath to try and prevent the liquid from getting down my throat but it didn't do any good.

With a familiar flash of consciousness that harkened me back to the winter of 1885, a red searing pain cut through me, flooding my consciousness with all twelve prior lifetimes as they tried to exert themselves against the vampiric flood. I screamed as my head felt about to explode with the strength of thirteen enraged personas, tearing at the influence of the vampiric strain.

It was a familiar strain. I'd felt this before; the force of immortality trying to rip me asunder and staple me back together with rusty velvet ties. It was Valerian, his blood. His oppressive figure appeared in my mind, just as he had stood over me when an accidental taste had given us both a glimpse into what would come. Tearing at my hair, screaming at the burning within my mind and my very soul, there had been no room for him in me. There was no room for him here, years later. But he pushed on anyways, his blood in wine format summoning his dark demands of complete surrender.

The sisterhood of my lives formed ranks again to try and fight him but with only one new recruit and her fighting every thread of memory she had of him, they would be no match. It was a tapestry hallway in my mind, skirts of different ladies shuffling around each other, clustering together to protect the most essential part of my soul while the rest of me lying naked, convulsing on the floor while Valerian approached.

He kneeled down to me, his lip drawn back against his fangs, his hand brushing the hair pasted to my face from sweat. "No, no, no...."

The skirts stilled and then suddenly rustled as a figure stepping through them, tailored pants in short ankle leather boots. The figure stopped right next to me and the fanged Valerian looked up to see...himself.

"You cannot have her."

The other Valerian, the one brought here by the tainted wine nodded and caressed my cheek. "She needs me. She is injured."

"Fine," my guardian Valerian spoke, looking dapper and every bit the fine gentlemen. The skirts of my past lives gathered behind him, each putting a hand on him to feed him energy. "You may go wherever you need to heal her, except beyond this door. You will not speak to her sisters. You will not dredge up any memories. And when she is healed, you will go, entirely."

The tainted Valerian smiled fiercely. "She will need protection. She has always needed protection."

A dark eyebrow rose. "Oh? I don't know, ladies. I think we're doing quite well, don't you think?"

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Heads of different styles and colors nodded. The taint of Valerian burst into a red flood and washed all through the hallway but parted around the back doorway, crashing into the carpet, completely absorbed. The pain continued but I felt the Guardian Valerian clasp hands with Darcie and the pain ebbed to an ache. I started to feel my body again, pushed gently back to reality by a young girl with hennaed hands I didn't quite recognize.

Just as my mental redoubt was shoring up, Skovajsa chuckled in a pleased way, producing four fearsome, uneven fangs. Coming back to that was as jolting as waking up in the first place.

"No one denies me!" he snarled and tore into my neck with his mouth.

Well, then, there's nothing for it, Sophie dear. Knee to the groin then.

It was Darcie's voice. I had never realized she did have a distinct voice until just this moment. Her accent reminded me of Maggie Smith. Wasn't she in that one Masterpiece show? I launched my knee into Skovajsa's groin only to have my suspicions realized. The man had no balls to speak of and my knee hit his pelvic bone hard. Ouch! Great. It stilled startled him for a split second.

The kukri, Sophie. Call to it. The accent this time was Indian, from the mountains, English not natural to her. The girl with hennaed hands. A familiar fragrance carried with her words.

I didn't have to call to it. I'd kept it close. Under the pillow. All I had to do was grab for it but I couldn't reach and my consciousness was starting to fade as Skovajsa's hand gripped into the opposite side of my neck. Damn!

Just as another persona swelled up, this one dark and dragging chains, Skovajsa jerked up and spat my blood out. I'd never seen that happen, realized I wasn't seeing it happen from within my body at all. I floated just above and watched my body racked by seizure, Skovajsa still holding me down, the wine bottle forgotten on the bed, soaking into the bedcovers.

The tainted wine and Skovajsa's bite had caused me to jump out of my body. My other lifetimes were taking turns inside to try and get me free. I'd have to ponder over how it was possible later but the pain was a smidge less although I still couldn't breathe yet. Skovajsa was still choking me. But he suddenly staggered away from me, lifting the bottle to his lips and drinking down all that was left.

Somehow I recognized that whatever protection tainted Valerian offered might have extended into my blood. Or maybe it had been whatever had rendered me unconscious might have somehow altered my blood chemistry too. I wasn't able to string the thoughts together to figure it out. Whatever it was, it meant he couldn't feed from me which, in this case, meant he probably couldn't convert me.

Universe 2, Vampire Psychologist (via her Secret Super Friends) 1

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A sudden scent of jasmine and gardenia tugged at me hard, propelling me back into my body. *I was dimwitted for certain but this nameless persona stretched my hand out and grabbed the bag the Kukri was in. Her strength suddenly faded as my skin contacted the metal but there was one last thought she shared.*

“Jesper. Help us.”

I couldn’t know if it was she or I that breathed it but Skovajsa, eyes now red with fresh blood, raised his arm and smacked me in the face with the wine bottle. Before I could crash into anything, he’d already snatched me up.

“You *will* tell me everything. You *will* guide me towards the power I seek. And you *will* be my vampire bride.”

With that, he crashed us back through the hotel door, out a fire exit at the end of the hall, and jumped across the rooftops until he landed in a construction site across the street. Amazingly, I’d managed to keep the knapsack with the Kukri. Furthermore, the sky seemed to be lightening up with the dawn of a Northern summer.

Universe 2, Vampire Psychologist 3

The odds seemed to be stacking up for me. I just needed to somehow survive the next half hour. The prospect of which was absurd. However, a soft voice reminiscent of the scent of flowers assured me I wouldn’t be alone for long.

With a Little Lemon Twist

“That won’t be necessary, Mr. Mordecai. I will handle *this*.”

Mordecai looked up to see Billy, the drunkard spirits distributor that was new to this area and nursing a broken heart and a thirsty liver, straighten up in his seat and swivel toward him. At least, that had been where Billy, fifty-five, grey to balding, paunchy, shabby old tan suit too tight around the middle, had been sitting. In his place, a younger, dark-haired but pale looking man tapped his cigar ashes into his glass and stood, placing the cigar back into his mouth.

“Huh?”

As the stranger unfolded out of his chair, his clothing seemed to transform before Mordecai’s eyes, the suit reshaping to maroon with blue stripes, the fabric growing an expensive sheen as it stretched and fitted to exact tailoring as the stranger walked over to where the vampire lay prone and panting.

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Mordecai looked down at the vampire as he tried to push himself up. Was his hair a little less blond? Earlier, it had almost been platinum, like Monroe. The stranger paused just above him, stogy in his mouth, and removed a case from his inside jacket pocket. His dark eyes glared disgustedly at the figure struggling on the floor as he handed Mordecai a card, one side white, stating in black lettering:

Gypsy Twin Alchemy: Spirits & Potables

Thomas Darnell, Purveyor & Proprietor

As he turned it over, Mordecai could make out a glossy black ribbon embossed over the black matte background, the recognized symbol of the Irregulars. His eyes flew up to the stranger.

“I’m so sorry, Sir. I didn’t know it was *you*.”

“Nor were you meant to, Mr. Mordecai,” Mr. Darnell answered, placing the case back in his jacket. “For your own protection. And as to that, I must ask you to leave now as I handle this...snag.”

Mordecai paused, caught up in the moment. The actual head of the Irregulars. Well, one of them. One heard stories about the woman, she seemed more accessible even as it was clear that she shared top responsibility in all endeavors. But the elusive man behind the curtain? No such sightings existed, at least documented ones. This was he and Mordecai was seeing him, face to face.

But something was happening to his face, as if it was melting from memory before his very eyes. The shatteringly dark eyes were no more. The handsome pale face, the dark hair...wait, what was the color of his hair...was there hair? Hair of what? Mordecai wondered why he was still here, so late. He had delivered the cigars and that was that.

“There’s a good man, Mr. Mordecai. Perhaps we shall renew our acquaintance at a later time.”

Sam Samuelson, Mordecai as his MMORPG persona, shook his fuzzy head and walked out of the bar, muttering about being late and wondering if his wife would be upset that his night out with the boys had been longer than expected. The elevator seemed to open to him as if by command and Chain, the elevator repair man and earlier the state trooper, gently grabbed Mordecai’s arm and pulled him into the car.

After the elevator had closed, Thomas Darnell, once known to a very very dear aunt as Maurice, kneeled down to the fallen vampire with an unsettled rage that he could barely suppress. He grabbed at Jesper’s face, turning Jesper’s chin towards him and blew cigar smoke into his face. The smoke held strong notes of cedar and oak and after inhaling a face full of it, some of the red in Jesper’s eyes faded.

“You will remember this night as the one in which we all saved Sophie Quinn,” Maurice spat.

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Then, Maurice grabbed Jesper by the back of the neck and hauled him up to his feet. Jesper was blinking rapidly but still conscious, although still quite ill. Maurice shook him to keep his head from lolling. He grabbed across the bar, and produced a lemon. Using his short sharp fangs, he tore a strip of peel from the lemon, juice squirting out. His own eyes brightened to a dark blue as he shoved the naked lemon into Jesper's mouth.

Jesper's head shot up and after he swallowed, his eyes flew open, red eyes turned to glowing amber as his whole body convulsed. His hand grabbed at the fruit and squeezed more into his mouth as Maurice dropped him to his feet, seeing that he could now take his own weight. As Jesper devoured the fruit, Maurice swayed slightly and bent to a knee to keep steady.

Breathing heavily, he picked up Jesper's sunglasses. Then, bracing his hand on his thigh, he stood again, spreading his feet to support himself. He wouldn't show this creature his weakness. When he met Jesper's gaze, Maurice felt the rage recede, replaced with wonder.

Jesper's hair had changed to a dark auburn, his amber eyes had turned back to red, the texture of jasper. Lucy had been right: this was no ordinary vampire. But Maurice saw a will there that he had not expected. As Jesper turned to go, Maurice held the sunglasses against his chest to stop him.

"You could barely best Lucy. You cannot hope to defeat a Carpathian in combat, even blood doped. We're just keeping her away from him." Maurice paused to take a shuddering breath, his pallor turning green. He slipped "We've taken care of the rest."

"I am Vampire!"

The sound of Vox echoed through registers that no mortal could hear and both vampires looked around for the source. Then they settled eyes back on each other.

"Go!" Maurice said but Jesper didn't wait to be bidden; he was already running through the restaurant at inhuman speed, senses reaching out, trying to find another clue. The view from the restaurant was amazing, almost a full 180 degrees fully lined with windows. He could see the change in the night sky. He needed to hurry. He needed something more to go on.

At the other end of the restaurant, there was no smoke and his senses could clear. Oh now he smelled him, smelled the Carpathian. He was so close. Jesper put his hands to the glass on the south side of the restaurant. The lemon had cleared away all the cobwebs as well as some of his vampire strength. It didn't matter. A conscious vampire was worth more to Sophie than a comatose one.

"Sophie, I'm here."

Then he heard it, the faint drag of the vowels, the smell of jasmine in his memory, a voice from an age ago.

"Jesper. Help us!"

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West side. He flew to the windows along that side of the building but didn't have to wait too long. In a moment, he saw the Carpathian, carrying Sophie across the roof top, vaulting over to the construction site, up high on one of the unfinished floors. His vision focused in, like a camera in burst mode zooming in, closer, clearer, until he could see the Carpathian, a struggling Sophie held in one arm. She clutched at something that dropped from her hands just before Skovajsa stepped into the open shaft that would become an elevator and disappeared, obviously going to ground.

He took a few steps back from the window and then launched himself just as he pitched a *Vox* scream at the window, shattering it. Arms outstretched, he took flight, gliding through the brightening sky like a bird aflame on a mission to save the one he could not save before, for a chance to do it all over again, to fix his fate, and finally be the hero.



Lucy raced into the bar side of the restaurant to see Jesper race past her. She threw her gaze to her brother and watched him sink back against the bar.

"Maurice!" She put her arm around him as he shook. "What happened?"

"C poisoning. I'll be alright."

"What about Sophie?"

He shook his head. "It's out of our hands. We've done everything we could to prepare."

"The sun is coming. We need to go."

Maurice let out a cry of rage, slamming his fist into the bar before nodding, letting his sister whisk them both away in a flight of crows. This was one game that they had played to within stalemate. The final positions were being set and a new piece had just entered the board. He had risked it all, years of anonymity, years of hiding away to put this piece in play. He hoped for his sister's sake and for Sophie's, his call had been a sound one.

Hell in High-Heeled Shoes

The first thought that ran through Nick's head when Irina's grandmother went flying across the deli, smashing into a wall, and shaking the whole building was whether the old lady would leave a dent. It was a terrible thought and as she fell to the floor, whimpering in pain, Nick's taxed brain added insult to injury with the thought, *The Iron Curtain has fallen.*

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It was an infantile response to complete and utter fear. In this case that fear took the form of one recently deceased Oksana dressed in her tattered tranny outfit with gold strappy heels and boy, did she look pissed! She also looked jacked, blonde hair going every which way, her skin was mottled and gray, and her eyes cracked and red, like she'd just done a week of all-nighters or some not-so-legal substances. Or both. And she was filthy, like she'd just crawled through a garbage dump on her hands and knees.

Uh-oh. She had literally picked up her grandmother by the shoulder and thrown her some twenty feet across the room. This wasn't Oksana anymore. This was something else. Emphasis on the *thing*.

"Not good," Nick swore to himself. "Irina! Wait!"

Irina had already started to move around the counter towards her grandmother, catching Oksana's attention. Oksana made a step towards Irina when her grandmother struggled to her feet, grabbing something out from underneath her shirt. Her voice was strong as she addressed Oksana in Russian, holding her silver Orthodox cross out in front of her. That seemed to enrage the creature formerly known as Oksana and she jumped at her grandmother, grabbing at the cross. When her hand closed around it and hissed as the flesh burned, her grandmother straightened her bearing, full of fervor as her words pounded through the room. Nick thought she looked a lot like Hopkins playing Van Helsing.

Oksana shrieked, letting go of the cross, and slapped her grandmother, propelling her over the display case into yet another wall. The silver chain holding the cross broke and the object dropped to the floor, still smoking.

"Baba!" Irina cried and for an instant, looked down at the little cross. It had fallen just a few feet from her.

Nick saw what was in her mind and shouted, "Irina, no, leave it. Get out of here!"

He needn't have bothered to warn her. Oksana tilted back her head and let out an excruciatingly horrifying bellow that made Irina step back against the counter and cower under its ledge. Nick crouched too, hands over his ears. But as he looked at Grandmother Iron dragging herself across the floor with arthritic hands, blood soaking her head scarf and dripping into her eyes, he knew he had to do something. He'd been separated from Irina when Oksana barged past him from the back of the deli, knocking him down, taking them all by surprise. He somehow needed to get them both out of here. Or fight back.

Oksana had a fit of rage, grabbing the cash register from the counter just above Irina and throwing it through the front window, then smashing the glass of the display case with a kick. Ah God, what was he going to fight that with? He looked up above him at the wall of decorative Russian art, which included a heavy looking brilliantly painted paddle looking thing. He didn't have time to think but he did anyway. He was scared as Hell. But he saw Irina, hands pressed against her ears more in denial than sound, tears streaming down her face as her beloved older sister wrecked the restaurant. Yeah, he had to do something, alright. Something crazy.

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He jumped up and grabbed the wooden paddle from the wall and just as Oksana turned back toward him, he gave out a rebel yell and smacked her as hard as he possibly could in the face with the paddle. It split in two and he dropped it as the impact blooded her nose but otherwise did nothing but make her go quiet.

And this was why Nick never resorted to violence. "Uh...." Nick stammered taking a step back.

Oksana's face broke into a maniacal smile as two very jagged, incomplete looking fangs snapped down in her mouth. Her eyes went a milky white and Nick stepped back, tripped over a table, crab walked backwards on hands and feet, all the while an ominously calm Oksana stalked him.

Oh, this was so not how he wanted to go out. "Irina, get your grandmother out of here!"

Irina looked frozen in place, her head finally raised, hands still held near her head but her grandmother was by her side now, tugging at her arm. Irina and Nick shared a look, one of sheer terror as both of them knew what would happen next. Irina's grandmother shoved her into the kitchen and Nick's eyes moved back to Oksana, looming over him.

Her fangs looked funky, rotten, like the rest of her seemed to be. Her eyes looked more zombie-like than vampire-like. And Nick realized how ridiculous that thought was as she grabbed at the front of his shirt to haul him up. It didn't really matter how fresh a vampire she was. She was still going to make a feast of him and drain him dry. He hoped.

The entire side window exploded in a shower of glass, a human sized projectile launching at Oksana and smashing her back into the far wall. Nick fell back to the floor, head too slow to catch the movement as Oksana suddenly flew back the other way across the room, landing awkwardly in a mess of tables and chairs.

Morena's dark hair was flying all around her and that one-of-a-kind moment he thought he'd had at The Mystic was duly repeated. She saved him...again. He could get used to this.

But first, he had to duck a table that Oksana threw wildly about. Morena just phased out of the way. It was the only way to describe her movement; one moment she was in one place, then a blur, the next in another place. Awww, man, she hadn't gone vamp too? Nick pushed away the certain depression that would come from that reality and hopped up into a crouch.

"Nick, call Jesper. Now." Morena tossed him her phone and went after Oksana. The two women began a girl fight of epic proportions and on top of all the other bad thoughts and reactions he'd had this evening, this one topped them all. He stood there, Morena's phone in his hand, her orders clear in his head, with his mouth agape, watching as she scuffled with Oksana.

She ducked Oksana's swipe unnaturally fast, spinning into a round house kick to the solar plexus that again sent Oksana to the wall. Then, she was just standing there, fists raised but side turned away from Oksana, her eyes meeting his.

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"Nick!"

He snapped out of it. "Yeah!" He glanced down at her phone, ducked as a chair flew past Morena towards him. Her phone was locked. He raised his head to ask her for her password when he saw her do an amazing arm block, then twist Oksana off balanced into the display case, head first. Oksana shrieked and Nick decided Morena might be a tad preoccupied.

"Well, how complicated can it be?" he asked no one and typed the four digits to the The Mystic's street address in and watched the phone log in. "Awright!" he celebrated to himself and was about to look at her call history when a message popped up. It was from Jesper. He pushed a button to dial immediately but it went to voice mail. Like everyone else's had done all flipping night. "Dammit! Voicemail!"

Morena lifted her head a smidge at the news, only a split second distraction but Oksana wrapped her arms around Morena and flipped her up and over, down onto her back. Oksana tried to finish the move with a stab kick from her stiletto heel but Morena had rolled away. It was like watching brute force fight a fully trained fighter. So much different than the fight at The Mystic.

But Nick could tell that Morena seemed to be slowing down or tiring or both. He raced along the wall keeping Morena between him and Oksana, trying to dial again when the damn email reminder popped up again. "Damn!" he swore but clicked to read it anyways, scanning the message. "Holy shit! We need an axe!" This time, he dialed Sophie's number.

"What?" Morena shouted, her and Oksana taking a moment to rest and measure each other up.

"Or maybe a cleaver?" he thought to himself, having chopped through a few chicken necks in his day. As he was about to dart to the kitchen, Morena had made another move, feigned high and struck low, kicking Oksana in the gut. Morena grabbed Oksana by the shoulders and pushed her into the shattered display case, food and glass scattering everywhere.

Nick wanted to run into the kitchen but he couldn't take his eyes off Morena, couldn't abandon her, not for a second. While Morena leaned over Oksana, Oksana was smiling, grabbing onto each of Morena's arms and forcing her up and back and then, for good measure, squeezing her elbows until both of them let out a sickening pop. Morena screamed and Oksana threw her like a rag doll to the floor. Then, she kicked Morena in the face with her heel, an angry red scrap welling up across Morena's face where the heel had cut her.

Nick held the phone to his ear while he watched Oksana turn back in his direction.

"Leave a voice mail for Sophie Quinn after the tone."

"Uh, yeah, Sophie. This is Nick. We're all going to die now. Hope you and Jesper survived. Nice knowing ya." He then threw the phone at Oksana while he backed against the far wall.

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Oksana again stalked him. What the Hell did she see in him anyways? Maybe it was what he got for playing hard to get the other night. If it was possible, she looked even more gruesome, bordering on ghoulish as she stepped just up to the counter. That was when the skateboard flew in from the kitchen, tripping her and causing her to fall on the floor.

Irina suddenly appeared from behind the counter, her face strangely calm.

"I can't believe that worked," Irina spoke quietly.

Nick had no clue what was happening but he jumped on Oksana. It might not be worth much but he knew he needed to hold her down. And then Morena jumped on top of him, grabbing Oksana's arms as she flailed. Irina was then adding her meager weight and pressing the cross she had scooped up from the floor into the back of Oksana's hair. Her hair smoked and burned and she shrieked in fury, trying to get free.

"Baba, now!" Irina shouted.

Grandmother Iron emerged from the kitchen, holding a small axe in her hands, mumbling in Russian and then, swinging down hard, she spat, "Move!"

At that point, Irina jumped off and Nick and Morena both turned their heads away. It took Grandmother two hard whacks with the axe during which blood splayed all over but Oksana's head separated from her neck and her body stilled.

Grandmother panted heavily but didn't waste time. She picked up Oksana's head by her smoldering white hair and turned back to the kitchen. A few quick words in Russian to Irina and Irina picked up the necklace again.

Nick and Morena, blood splattered, still laying over Oksana's corpse on the floor, watched with eyes wide first as Grandmother shuffled into the kitchen and then as Irina put the necklace around the stump of Oksana's neck and bowed her head in prayer, lips mumbling the words. Meanwhile, Nick heard the oven door open and then slam shut moments later.

"Oh, Hell no!" Morena said.

Irina's head jerked up. "Grandmother explained. We have to burn the head now and then the rest of the body to ashes. You cook, Nick. How hot do you think we need the oven?"

And Finally, Diagnosis

The knapsack with the Kukri had slipped from my hands as we landed just in front of the empty elevator shaft on the top-most floor. If you could call it a floor with its mostly bare beams covered in sheets of plywood as a makeshift floor, with scaffolds on either side, filled with tied stacks of rebar,

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one of them with a cement mixer that looked way too heavy to be positioned there. I looked down into the shaft and apart from wire cable running its length, there weren't any pieces of the elevator there yet.

It made perfect sense for Skovajsa to own a building in progress; he could oversee the construction and insert anything into the specs that would help him as a safe house. It would be his fortress in the making, maybe even his bachelor pad to lure back unsuspecting victims. With or without my interference, he and Jesper would find each other; two vampires in such close proximity could not play nice.

If dawn was coming, there was only one logic place that Skovajsa was going. He jumped us down and when we hit the ground floor, he let me go, causing me to collapse to the dusty ground. I cried as I landed on my hip, scrapping up my leg.

Well, I guess there goes the last shred of manners.

I was about to try and push Darcie out of my head when Skovajsa snatched my arm, and began to drag me to another room. This construction site was the great shell of a condo complex and I'd noticed that the front of the first floor facing the street had already been completed. A wine shop. Likely another front business of Skovajsa's. He'd turned out to be quite the entrepreneur, rat bastard.

We moved to a back room with a strangely covered floor. Skovajsa's head darted around the room, sniffing. Something was wrong. The floor looked a tractor trailer had just groomed it.

"What...is...THIS?!" His voice was near panic as his shoe brushed aside the layer of wood chips. If I hadn't been in such pain and unable to feel half of my face through the bruising, I would've smiled. Not just any wood chips. Cedar. One of the most ancient and deadly woods for Old World vamps. Especially the youngsters.

If he was angry at the changes to the floor, there was only one word for his reaction to the opening to the floor cellar with its doors broken off their hinges: Livid. He actually threw me towards the entrance as some sort of release of his rage. Needless to say, I was prepared and landed with my arms out in front of me to break my fall. But I stayed on the floor. My head peered over the threshold down the cellar steps as he flew down into the darkness.

My eyes adjusted and I saw it was only about ten steps down, not very deep, not a tall enough chamber that he could even stand but inside, there was nothing but rubble. The broken remnants of a rather large, thick, cement structure. It looked like a jackhammer had been at it and quite recently for the amount of dust still hanging in the air.

"No! NO!" Skovajsa bellowed and as if on cue, strong lights from the ceiling of the chamber switched on, blinding him.

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That was when I saw it, right at the top of the stairs, glinting under the power of the UV lights. My infinity amulet, wrapped in a single black ribbon. Lucy. I looked around the chamber that had been Skovajsa's coffin and realized that they had destroyed and booby trapped it. He would never be able to seek sanctuary here again.

Ma petit ange. The short, stout old aunt I had been clucked in my head.

This time, despite the pain, my mouth curved in a smile as I picked up the amulet a split second before Skovajsa sped out of the blinding room, grabbing my arm with one hand, the other arm shielding his eyes. Each successive room we entered in his retreat lit up like a spotlight with those same UV lights and he shrieked in cold fury the entire way.

At the bottom of the shaft, he made a power leap and flew up from the strength of it, past the other empty floors until reaching the top, where he was snatched out of the air. One moment, I was flying up with him, the next I was watching him smack into a concrete pillar across the floor from the safety of someone's arms.

As stunned as I was to see Skovajsa go flying, I was even more stunned as I turned my face up to see Jesper holding me, his hair flaming auburn and windswept, his eyes the color of jasper. I blinked and felt that dark presence of Valerian, the one that had protected me from the Taint, take weary steps down into the recesses of my mind as all twelve previous versions of me thrilled to see this new savior.

"Are you alright?" he asked, concerned.

My mouth moved but no sound came out. We both heard a menacing growl to which he gently set me down, stooping quickly and handing me the knapsack.

"You dropped this," he announced before his fangs dropped, not the elegant thin ones but an entire mouthful of short, sharp teeth, like a snake.

Jesper raced across the plywood floor and charged full force into Skovajsa preempting an attack. He grabbed a hold of the Carpathian and slammed him back against the same pillar, which cracked. Jesper took a hold of the rebar behind Skovajsa and began to bend it around him as he struggled. Skovajsa laid him completely out with a right handed slap and then proceeded to simply rip the rebar right out of the concrete to free himself.

Jesper got up again only to have Skovajsa attack him first, driving the piece of rebar right through his shoulder. Jesper screamed. Skovajsa had been aiming for the heart but Jesper had turned just in time. He grabbed Skovajsa by the collar of his expensive suit and stabbed him in the abdomen with the end of rebar sticking out. The speed surprised Skovajsa who backed up a step as Jesper had to take a breath to recover. He took a few short, deep breaths before he yanked the rebar out and threw it aside.

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Blood was now pouring out of both Jesper's shoulder and Skovajsa's belly but the latter only smiled. His hands had grown into gnarled claws and he swiped at Jesper, who whirled away but a little too slow. Skovajsa swiped at the back of his neck and again at his back, tearing deep into his flesh. Jesper arched his back away then spun around, grabbing Skovajsa in a tight grip. As he grappled him, he squeezed and Skovajsa snapped his mouth full of fangs at him.

Jesper jerked his head away, which relaxed his hold enough to let Skovajsa get an arm free. With that hand, he grabbed Jesper's injured shoulder and wrenched it. Jesper screamed and his arms fell away. Skovajsa kept hold of the arm and twisted, the sound of bones cracking so terrifying that I wanted to cover my ears. Jesper fell to his knees, but Skovajsa still had his arm.

I dug out the Kukri and felt the metal come alive in my hand. My Indian past life roared up, whispering some ancient incantation that I had no idea how related to this weapon that seemed to know me. I was beyond caring about that. Jesper was in trouble. My fingers tightened and I stepped forward to do I know not what.

Skovajsa raised his other claw to swipe at Jesper's throat when Jesper swung his head around to look up at him. His hair seem to catch fire for an instant and I knew what was coming.

"*Neilza!*" Searing rays burst from Jesper's eyes, sending a burning Skovajsa staggering back into a pile of plywood. The plywood scattered, some dropping over the edge and down into the construction site below. The scaffolding just behind the pile also tottered precariously. Skovajsa slapped at himself as his expensive silk clothes burst into flames.

"Sophie," Jesper called, pain and fatigue etched into his voice. "Get out of here!" He struggled to his feet.

The sky was getting lighter and another real fear hit me. I needed to get Jesper to shelter and right now, but there was nowhere to go. Dangerous vampire, rising sun...this was not good.

Skovajsa grabbed Jesper from behind and crushed him, bones creaking and popping, causing my eyes to tear up from the punishment Jesper was taking. It was obvious he couldn't defeat Skovajsa who'd lost all semblance of humanity from his face. He was all vampire now.

He tossed Jesper aside like a ragdoll and laughed, his clothes still smoking. He was indeed burned, flesh crisped all over him but it did not impede him. He approached Jesper slowly, now seemingly at a point where he felt Jesper was no match for him.

"Copil. What wonderful powers you possess! But you cannot think you can defeat me."

He picked Jesper up, slamming him up against the scaffolding, slashing at his throat, blood beginning to pump out of him. Then, in a blur of speed, Skovajsa tied Jesper up in electrical cabling then grabbed Jesper's chin in his clawed hand.

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"You cannot heal when you cannot feed," Skovajsa spat.

Jesper was bleeding from back, neck, head, shoulder, chest, his right arm hung nearly disconnected from his shoulder, a large gaping wound right above his heart. But they all oozed rather than bleed as much as they should. It had all seemed to take place in slow motion but the entire fight had lasted nothing more than a minute, before I had finished taking a full step forward.

The movement drew Skovajsa's attention. "This? This is what you would have over me?"

"Sophie...Sophie, get out of here," Jesper panted, still struggling against the wiring, his left arm flexed and pulling. I couldn't figure it out, why he couldn't break free. Perhaps he was too weak.

Skovajsa punched him full in the face before walking calmly toward me. He clasped his hands together, like a schoolmaster or a priest before disciplining a child. "Now you have disappointed me enough, Sophie. You will submit. All of your knowledge, I will have it. After I make a snack of this rather mundane specimen. I'd had such high hopes for him but I obviously overestimated his specialness." He stopped in the middle of the floor, spreading his arms wide like some player on a grand stage. "You will make me the most powerful vampire that ever lived!"

"Stupid little man, vampires aren't alive. And that, that would be very bad for my business, betraying my clients. Not to mention bad karma." I gripped the Kukri behind me. The sun was creeping up. I could feel it. The birds were chattering away sensing it too.

He dropped his arms. Suddenly, he'd rushed over to me, gripped me by my hair, forcing my head to look up. "As if you have a choice."

That was when I saw it. The cement mixer. It jostled a bit as Jesper struggled to get free. Skovajsa twisted my head the other direction, taking in his bite handiwork from earlier.

"You still deny me? Have it your way. Such a nuisance that your blood is undrinkable. I so hate to waste a meal."

The twist to my vision revealed something else. The other scaffolding. It seemed to be damaged by the impact. If a little more force was applied, oh, say like from some rolls of safety netting that were stacked just behind it, maybe it would teeter over.

He thrust his face into mine. "It's so much easier for you to die in complete futility."

Crazy thoughts, that some Rube Goldberg machinery would work its way to topple both scaffolds, manage to free Jesper, and allow him to get free while crushing Skovajsa. Futility indeed. Much easier to try and cut Jesper loose.

I looked Skovajsa dead in the eye. "Vasa Skoda, there are no refunds on treatment."

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He growled at me, striking me, sending me to the floor.

"You ruin it, the pleasure of killing you. You do not fear death." He tossed a look back at Jesper. "But perhaps you just need the right incentive." He walked a few steps, pausing to take in the sky. "I tire of this. If this one tried to save you, perhaps you would bargain for him." Skovajsa strode over towards Jesper.

"Sophie, the Kukri. Do it now!" Jesper cried.

When I got my senses back, I caught Jesper's gaze. His arms were burned red from fighting at the cabling but as we held that look, he started to speed up his breathing, shoring up his strength. He tilted his head back, started a primal groan that seemed to reach back through the ages.

"Skovajsa, the sunrise!" I called.

He paused but then turned, a little too nonchalantly saying, "You really think a few weak rays of light would wound me?" He rushed over to Jesper, turning his head, exposing his neck. "Will you forfeit his life as you would your own just to keep your secrets?"

I stared open-mouthed. The truth was I hesitated. Maybe I would.

Skovajsa shrugged, "Very well. I'll end him and gain his power, however meager it might be." He then leaned into him for a bite. That one moment, everything cleared within my troubled soul. Yes, it was wrong to kill. It was wrong to take violence in hand and veer from the path. But it was also wrong not to fight for the weak, the poor, the impoverished... the injured. They deserved our stewardship, our protection, and...our love.

"Wait!"

Skovajsa turned his head as if he fully expected my interruption.

"You have a better offer?"

"More, a diagnosis."

Skovajsa looked curious, at least. Jesper had stored up his energies and was about to release it.

"You were made from the Taint, a wine infused with vampire blood. And you're sun-starved, like many vampires before you, including the one whose blood tainted you."

He shook his head, fully dismissive of my expertise. "And treatment?"

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I gripped the Kukri hard in my hand as I stood. "Well, you're also a fucking prick and unfortunately, there is no cure for that." I drew back my arm and pitched the Kukri at him, willing it to take whatever course it might to save our friend.

How Not to BBQ

The smell from the oven was so god-awful, that Nick, Morena, and Irina decided to drag the rest of the body outside before the people started milling about and burn it in the dumpster. The sun was just starting to threaten to break through the clouds.

"You know, I read in the Memento that the best way to get rid of a vampire is with sunshine," Nick said, walking backwards dragging the arms.

Morena gave him an exasperated look, holding up the feet. "Shouldn't we not be in close contact to the body if it's going to incinerate like that?" Her arms had already healed but all the rest of her amped up abilities had gone and she was left feeling like she'd done an obstacle course...in Pakistan...in June.

They both dropped the body in the middle of the back parking lot.

"Uh..."

The sun broke through and a hissing noise issued from the body. Irina stepped back immediately.

"Nick?" Morena spoke, alarmed.

Then she jumped him, taking him a few feet from the body and to the ground as the body exploded into ash. As Morena rolled off of him and he sat back up to see the smoking remnants that looked more like asphalt in a cul-de-sac after Fourth of July, he smiled.

"See! I told you so."

Why Vampires Should Wear Sunglasses

I never said I was Nolan Ryan. But the Kukri sung through the air at the same moment that the sun broke through the morning clouds, falling on both vampires. Skovajsa caught the ancient weapon up high and, as I had a split second of *Awww, shucks*, the sunlight reflected from its blade directly into his eyes, searing them. He shrieked as his retinas exploded in flame.

In Jesper's case, flames seemed to erupt from him as he wrenched forward, taking the whole scaffolding with him, the cement mixer falling through the plywood floor, which cracked and split.

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As I watched the entire temporary floor crash away, I first saw Skovajsa fall through into the void, then Jesper, freed from the wiring, seemed to levitate and then flew at me like some comic book hero, his jacket on fire, his hair too, grabbing me around the waist with his left arm, and broke for the elevator shaft. He turned so that he was the one who slammed into the wall, but as we fell, the flames had been smothered.

And as pleasant as it normally might have been to be in his arms again, I didn't enjoy the falling part and when he finally threw his bad arm around the cable and caught us, we jerked suddenly, and his grip tightened around me.

"Uff!" I exclaimed. Jesper made more of a yelp but then went strangely silent. Inside the shaft, we were protected from the sun, at least, for the moment.

Then, Jesper spoke, his voice strained, "Are you unharmed?"

I nodded, not sure I could speak. I was looking out across the floor at where I had been standing and there was only air there now and some steel beams. The fall would've been about an eight floor drop.

"Sophie?" he asked, more strongly.

I looked up and his face was right there, just above mine. And my chest constricted in a way that I wasn't ready to deal with just yet. But I felt glad, very very very very glad, to be here with him.

"You can answer me?" He pushed, a little anxious.

"Yes," my voice came out raspy. "Yes, I am unharmed."

"Good," he smiled, relieved. "Because we really should talk."

A Little Birdie in Your Back Pocket

Skovajsa crashed through several levels of temporary flooring and then through the ceiling of his just finished wine bar. He landed in the main room, crashed onto a table and chairs and busting them to pieces. He couldn't see anything as his eyes had burned away but because no other skin burned and the windows of the bar were obstructed from the horizon by other buildings, he guessed that no sunlight could get him presently.

But he went immediately on alert. He smelled something, something wild and musty, like the woods. Then he heard it, the merest sounds of footfalls, of dust scrapping floor, flapping of wings. He leapt up, crouching for an attack, fangs bared.

"Stay away from me!" He warned in full Vox.

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As Skovajsa swiped at the air in front of him, Ritterreiter smiled and folded his arms. This was a much better way to end things than just defiling the creature's resting place. Especially when the dumbass vampire had surrounded himself with enough oak furniture to build his own coffin, a lot of which had splintered around him during the fall.

"Crow, Fox, Dog," he called. "Time to wrap this up."

Three figures in all black tank tops and loose fitting khakis walked into the wine bar. One short man with bushy red hair, one taller woman with long braided black hair with a single feather meshed in, and one stockier woman with short pageboy white hair. They spread out in front of Skovajsa, taking positions.

He growled, "Do you know who I am? I am Vampire!"

Dog, the stocky woman, transformed into a massive Anatolian Shepherd, stepped out of her clothes, and began to growl on her own.

"Lucky for us," said Crow. "We're the Gypsy Twin Irregulars and we kill vampires." She jumped up and back, transforming into a larger than average crow and flew circles around Skovajsa's head, distracting him as he clawed the air in a panic.

Fox, keeping his human form, silently snuck behind Skovajsa, grabbing some wood from the floor. He cued Dog who lunged at Skovajsa, pushing him backwards, impaling him on the oak chair leg that Fox held. Skovajsa screamed but his whole body went immediately gray, the color of ash. Fox let the body crumple to the ground and Dog sat down on her haunches, panting slightly, smiling.

Crow dropped to the floor, transforming again, this time naked. She picked up another broken stake of oak and plunged it into his chest. Fox then produced a wide-bladed tomahawk from his side sheath and slashed at Skovajsa's throat, decapitating him in one strong stroke. There was no blood, just ash filled the room as the entire body went *Poof!*

Dog woofed.

"You said it, Dog. Just a damn baby vamp," Fox said.

Crow lifted her gaze up to Ritterreiter. "Really? You called us out of class for this?"

He shook his head with a polite smile. Kids these days. They weren't even aware of just how much more training exercise this was than an actual threat. The hard work had been finding the lair. Then planning to disrupt and distract the vampire while they dismantled it. Then putting all the pieces in play in an order and timing to make it work as best as it could without putting anyone in harm's way. The hardest part of that was the Vampire Psychologist herself, who they'd had to drug to keep out of the way.

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But he was pleased nonetheless. Everyone had played their role perfectly without really knowing of the others existence. All except Mordecai who'd suddenly abandoned his post for some strange reason. He'd have to follow up on that. Maybe at the next game night, if he could get a private word. Miss Gypsy would want a full retelling, he was sure, but he suspected she would already know the result. She always did.

"Relax. You'll get your chance again soon enough, Irregulars. Consider this just practice."

Getting the Hang of Things

"Now, you wanna talk right now?"

We were swinging from the cabling that Jesper had managed to wrap his injured arm around. His left held me tight against him as we dangled about six floors up from the bottom of the shaft. I was certain that the high powered UV lights were still glaring on the first floor and now that the sun had come up, I had no idea how vulnerable Jesper was.

"Well, do you have somewhere else to be at present?" He asked as the tendons in his shoulder tore audibly. "And it is important." He seemed oblivious to the fact that he was bleeding, burnt, and hanging floors above UV lights that could seriously damage him. Not to mention that, with Skovajsa's chamber damaged, I didn't know of any place out of sight to stash him for the day. Or when his Rigor Dormitus would set in.

But I also noticed, with his face so close, the faint hairs that sprouted from his chin, red-gold whiskers that grew before my eyes. And his eyes had shifted color yet again, from the jasper red to a more familiar hazel that was very pleasing. His hair too, a strawberry blond. I must've gripped his arm around me because he gently tightened his grip.

"But you're so injured," I protested.

"Who, me? Naw, just a scratch...or two." Suddenly, the skin over his shoulder seemed to percolate and then his arm popped back into his shoulder socket, raising us up a few inches. "Oh, see. Already on the mend."

My hand went to his chest. "But...it's full sun up. We have to get you inside."

His smile warmed me like a sunbeam. "But we *are* inside."

I didn't really have anything to say to that and finding words at the moment, looking up at him like this, words just weren't forming. At least, not ones that made any possible sense. What had happened with that other vampire, I didn't need to think about right now. What I'd drank didn't matter, the injuries didn't hurt, even the voices of my past personas were blissfully silent, except for a few whispers that made me appreciate his lips curved in that smile.

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Those lips straightened suddenly as I watched and he became serious.

"Now, Miss Quinn," he began, getting my attention with his formality. "In light of much conversation this evening, I've given it due thought and have decided I no longer wish to employ you...well, you're fired."

My head shook. "What? *What*!?" I stammered, unable to draw together my thoughts. "Whatever for?"

"You are obviously a dedicated professional with high moral and ethical standards."

Uh-oh. I didn't like where this was going at all.

"I'm sorry. I just don't want that to get in the way of getting to know you in a more personal way."

"Huh?"

His shoulder snapped, the socket cracking under the strain. He was becoming heavier, his cells converting as its daily defense mechanism. As the flesh started to tear, I pointed. "Jesper!"

"Oh bother." He looked at his shoulder and then back down at me. "Can you put your arms around my other shoulder? I am going to lower us down but I must ask if I can drop you some feet down. I'm not sure what that blinding light down there will do to my fair complexion."

"Yes, oh, please hurry, Jesper." I laced my hands around his other shoulder and he used the other arm to repel down the rope and jerked us to a stop a floor up. He wrapped his bad arm around the cable again and looked at me.

"This will hold us for a bit. Now, you're sure you can handle the drop?"

I didn't know, didn't care. I didn't want body parts to start ripping off of him, especially if he went into rigor. I nodded vigorously.

"Ok, grab a hold of my wrist and I'll lower you down. Roll when you land."

He was true to his word and after some movements that looked a lot like Cirque du Soleil, the drop was only about eight feet. I did as he asked, rolled and was running to shut off the lights as quickly as I could. I was back in a moment but he had already jumped down.

"See, I'm perfectly fine." Then he collapsed against the wall. He looked up at me meekly. "Ok, so maybe I'm not a morning person."

He then went into full blown Rigor Mortis before I could utter a word of thanks for saving me, a word of annoyance at his firing of me, before I could hug him for everything he had done for me. As

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his body composition hardened, he took on the form of a beautiful red marble, the most incredibly sturdy, but heavy, form of Dormitus I'd seen.

"Aww, shit!"

"Good morning, ma'am. Looks like you could use some assistance. May I present you with my card?"

The short man was dressed in a security uniform and brandishing a flashlight. But the card he handed me was that black and white of the Gypsy Twin Irregulars, this one some German name that translated to Knight Rider. Lucy and Maurice's group. I would have to get them to tell me everything about this evening but only after we got Jesper back home. Something told me that this man knew exactly how to do that.

"And by the way, you dropped this," he held up the Kukri.

Jesper sat in a very pensive way but his eyes had been looking at me. I kneeled to him, caressing his marble cheek. "Getting to know me in a more personal way? Well, maybe I'll let you fire me after all."

My cell phone's message sound buzzed so I fished it out. One message from Morena. I pressed a button and listened to the message but it wasn't Morena, it was Nick.

"Uh, yeah, Sophie. This is Nick. We're all going to die now. Hope you and Jesper survived. Nice knowing ya."

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Epilogue: Prague – A Few Hours Later

Valerian awoke out of rigor dormitus, hands still frozen into claws around the bed posts. He had struggled against the dark for the first time in decades and the resulting form had left him half on and half off the bed. It took his body a whole ten minutes to completely convert back to flesh, during which he had the urge to gnaw his own hands off to get free of his granite limbs.

Which was patently ridiculous, he told himself. It would be so much easier to just tear bone and sinew, ripping his arms away from his frozen hands. He came close to screaming in rage to be freed but he forced himself to relax, realizing that having to explain why he was regenerating his hands would create doubt in Conclave that he could ill afford. On top of the fact that it was painful. And would do little to help what had already come to pass.

He closed his eyes and leaned his dark head against the post, waiting, trying not to think the worst. After becoming completely flesh and releasing his hands, he shoved the breath out of his lungs. It kept him from screaming. Instead he drew himself up to full height and drew his robe closed before shuffling towards his writing desk.

The pain all over his body was excruciating, unlike it had been in decades. He could imagine he heard the silver sizzling into his skin. He had to stop halfway to his desk at the arm chair arranged before the fireplace of his bedchamber. It took him a few moments before he realized he was panting with effort, his shoulders drawn down, his hands clutching the damask upholstery. His brow furrowed, not understanding why this night was so different than any other night.

And in the silence and darkness of his bedchamber, he began to imagine his worst fears. That he had not done enough. That Jesper had failed. That this lifetime's Darcie was dead and it was this absence that made his penance ignite into a hundred and twenty three hot silver flames. He shook his head slowly and lowered it to the chair back. He couldn't endure another lifetime waiting. He tried to adjust his robe but every movement seemed to chafe the pain to intolerable levels.

It was the only explanation for why his awareness had not picked up the intruder and left him so vulnerable.

"I'd expect you'd be toasting in celebration rather than striking such a mournful pose, Valerian."

Valerian exhaled, raising his head carefully. It was his just due after certain failure that the executor of his penance would return on this night to bring it all to an end. But he would not meet his end without dignity. He stood up tall, straightened his robes with just a tightening of his lips in complaint, and turned to face his enemy just as the heavy door to his chamber was pushed shut.

"And why would you, Emmerick, after all these years not allow me a moment to mourn the loss of our most dearest and special lady? Or do you still deny how much I care for her?"

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The man known as Emmerick, the feared vampire hunter, didn't look like much to be feared in his current form. A round face etched with lines, sandy blond hair receding back from his brow, wiry to the point of skinny at an advanced age of nearing fifty, he wore desert fatigues, a weathered brown leather armor-plated vest covered with various short knives, and combat boots. He leaned against the wall, one thumb hooked in an empty slot on his bandoleer, the other hand casually leaning a sawed-off shotgun against his shoulder. But his eyes, deep-set and suspicious, were what caught Valerian's attention. The vampire hunter's brows rose up in surprise.

"You don't know, do you?" Emmerick spoke, just a hint of his British accent coming through.

Valerian fought for his regal bearing and refused to be caught unawares in conversation. But he couldn't keep his shoulders from slumping for the barest moment. The image rose suddenly in his mind, as it always did whenever he and Emmerick met. Darcie's lifeless, headless form across his lap, her head rolling across the wooden floorboards.

He blinked away the tears, summoning the death, the preternatural state that would isolate him from all feeling. It only worked on him for moments but perhaps long enough to see him through this.

Emmerick smirked, shifting uncomfortably before pushing himself away from the wall to approach Valerian. The vampire let him amble about him, wondering whether he should suffer this indignity. But why not, he wondered. I've lost her, again. What else matters?

"Dear God, it's touching really. You still love her."

The accusation shattered the calm completely and he snarled fully fanged. "I will not be mocked by you! Nor let you mock her memory, at this dark hour."

"Relax, Vampire Lord," the sardonic words fell out of Emmerick's mouth. "Your golden boy did his job. She's still alive."

All Valerian could manage was to blink. Emmerick stepped to one of the damask covered chairs in front of the fireplace and draped himself in it, leg over the arm, shotgun grazing the floor. Valerian bent his eyes to the floor, stunned. But centuries of being hunted, tortured by the hunter did battle with his deepest desire and sparked his angry mistrust.

He was on Emmerick in a breath, clawed hand wrapped around his neck, choking him in the chair.

"Do NOT mock me...with your...lies!"

Instead of the battle Valerian expected in retaliation, Emmerick held up his hands, letting the shotgun fall to the floor. It caused him to loosen his grip but not move his hand.

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"She's alive and well, mate. And rid you of one of your own wastrel spawn. Not without quite a mess to clean up." When Valerian's hand loosened enough, Emmerick brushed it aside.

The relief in his voice went unchecked, "She lives."

Emmerick nodded. "She had a lot of help. A motley lot of it, in fact." Valerian showed no sign of listening as he walked over to the facing chair and sat, hands gripping the armrests. His face, still fanged, grimaced as the hiss and smell of burning flesh accosted him.

"Still, the simple fact of it is, she has the most to thank from your lackey, your scribe." Emmerick considered his words carefully, watching keenly as his accounting seemed to make the Vampire Lord more troubled than happy. "So I suppose in a very indirect but not so insignificant way, you saved her."

Valerian recovered his calm. The image of Darcie's head on the floor receded to be replaced with the oddest vision, a mimosa glass. He could almost taste the orange.

"You understand what that means?" Emmerick asked, almost accusing.

Valerian's head remained tilted to the floor as he settled ice blue eyes on his foe, "That you cannot blame me for her death again?"

Emmerick laughed, frustrated. "You're serious." Then he roused himself out of the chair, sweeping his leg back over the leg and leaning forward. "Your penance. It's over."

Valerian cocked his head to the side, fangs growing.

"God, you are daft. What, you think the talismans just started to hurt tonight for no specific reason?" Emmerick stood up, whipping one of the short knives from his vest with his right hand. Valerian stood as well, claws out ready to fight. "I'm not here to fight you, dammit! Drop the robe and see for yourself."

Valerian took a moment, his brows drawing low over his radiant eyes. But he unfastened the robe and let it fall away. His chest and back were covered in sizzling sores, silver pieces that looked like wheels that seemed to be pushing out from under his skin, some of them had already made it to the surface and fell from him as the robe fell away.

In a moment, all the silver wheels were falling to the rug, clattering over the stone floor. Emmerick stared in awe as in just a few moments, the hundred and twenty three silver wheels that he had personally buried under Valerian's skin as penance for the murder of his friend, one for every year he'd had to visit, had fallen away and the remaining sores smoked quietly.

Hands still outstretched, Valerian marveled at the results. The pain was gone. He felt years younger. It might take him time to regenerate but he would heal from the damage eventually. He could

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hardly believe that Emmerick would honor their ages old arrangement. His cynical eye challenged the vampire hunter.

"What? You think I'm going to try and kill you now after your greatest hour?" Emmerick shook his head. "Pathetic, really." He stuffed his knife back into his vest. "Guess I won't be needing to dig them out. Shame, really. I was kinda looking forward to that."

Valerian dropped his arms to his side, assessing the man that he had once called friend. "I guess I have that to be thankful for that as well. Would be a pity if your knife had slipped."

Emmerick shrugged and flipped his foot, sending the shotgun up and into his hand without having to lose eye contact with Valerian. "Yeah, pity. The life you saved today just might have been your own."

With that, Emmerick headed to the door without once seeming to blink or take his eyes off Valerian. He listened for a moment at the door before opening it.

"Emmerick."

His brows rose in response.

"Thank you. Thank you for watching over her."

"It's the least any of us can do. Not that she's ever made it easy."

Valerian nodded once in acknowledgement and let Emmerick, friend turned foe, who had killed more vampire kind than anything else had throughout all his lives, leave without issue. He was still reflecting on what this ending might mean to his horror, the bargain struck long ago protecting all his kind in retribution so long as he agreed to take his penance. He was still wondering if the silent war was over when a throng of his people, led by Aubry and Xi, stormed the room, looking for the intruder.



He knew he wouldn't have long to wait for her after he left Valerian's stronghold and she didn't disappoint him. After all these years, while he'd endured various incarnations, deaths and rebirths, she had remained timeless, ethereal, beautiful ...and deadly. He'd long ago lost the last of his illusions that she was anything but the most savage of their kind.

And yet, he still remembered back when he'd found her crouched behind the desk in the office, tremulous half-smile with large doe eyes. She'd been hiding from her father, wanting so much to be with him, to be part of all his business, to understand him, and yet deathly afraid of him.

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She'd been vampire made young, a product of an isolated and naïve youth. An orphan, desperate for a family, a victim of a wayward kindness. Technically, it wasn't Valerian who had made her but Valerian's spawn, a sloppy and unkind poet who thought more in concepts than in real people. He'd chafed under Valerian's leadership and eventually parted from the horror. His death had been a kindness to her as Valerian had sought her out, found her, rescued her from desolate abandonment, and brought her up as one of his own.

It was one of things that had stayed Emmerick's hand back when things had gone bad; Valerian's now predictable kindness, loyalty, and stewardship of his own. He may not have begun that way but he had gathered as many of them as he could find and brought them under his roof and his protection.

The figure, cloaked and hooded, stepped quietly along the cobblestones of the Charles Bridge. The summer sky was clear, the white electric lights along the bridge casting a bright blue hue to the roofs of the towers above. At least she'd done him the decency of not using her powers to appear out of nowhere, giving him ample time to quit his musings and adjust his thoughts.

He'd chosen the place carefully. He wanted to know where he stood now that one bitter story had folded to a peaceable end. This lifetime's body was a head shorter than the first time they'd met, the top of her hooded head about even with his chin. Even with the cloak, she cut a diminutive figure, the oval opening of her hood showing her perfectly heart-shaped lips above a sharp chin.

Her lips partly slowly, fangs peaking out, distracting him as she spoke.

"You left in quite the hurry." Her French accent was still intact.

He dreaded this. Had been dreading it for at least the last two years, when her true feelings had become increasingly clear. It was about the same time as he realized she'd been using him, that she thought of him only as a tool for exacting her own revenge. He didn't like to disappoint her. Things had just worked out that way.

"It's over. He paid his debt. He saved her." He shrugged. There really wasn't anything else to say. He didn't even feel a shred of anger anymore. He hadn't for a long time. And he hadn't felt anything since he realized what he meant to her. He'd have to find another salve for the emptiness of his own immortality.

Her head lifted enough so that the evening light grazed the bottom of her eyes, making the green of her eyes unnaturally bright in comparison. "But he has to be punished."

He turned to her, struggling not to reach out, instead stuffing his hands in his pockets. "But he has, Croix. You didn't see him tonight. I think he actually is jealous of his boy, the one that saved her. He can never go back and change the past. He knows that. But he regrets it."

She snarled, turning her head away. "They should be made to suffer for what they did."

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"Croix, luv, you told me yourself, she didn't want it and he overreacted. He was her guinea pig what with all those tonics; it's perfectly reasonable to think that played into it. But whatever. He's endured hundreds of years of torture by my own hands and borne it without a word, without a whimper."

Her head slowly swung back. He had a sense she wasn't listening.

"He did it for you."

She snorted, sarcastically. "He's never done anything but for himself."

"No, he struck our deal so that I wouldn't kill him and all the rest of his horror." He stared down at her, watching, waiting for a sign that she understood. "That includes you."

She tilted her head up to look at him. Her green eyes caught him off-guard, soft, glistening. "Even me? You wouldn't hurt me, Baka." She gripped his arm, beseeching. "I know you would never hurt me. You are good and true. You've always done right by me."

The man he had been, the one who had trusted those green eyes before, would've done...had done everything he could for her. But none of it had satisfied her. And now he wondered, with Valerian's reaction clear in his mind, if he hadn't indeed let her lead him in the wrong.

"Baka. Listen to me. He is a monster. He will continue to commit crimes. You cannot let that pass. You must do something!"

He shook his head. When he said nothing, she dropped her head and he could almost hear the tears falling. Soft tears trailing down ivory cheeks. He took in a quick breath, resisting her influence, and turned his head up to the statue above him. She could be subtle but he still didn't want to think she'd been twisting him on purpose. Not when she was so obviously upset.

"Do you know this effigy?" he asked her.

She raised her head, looking straight into his face. She was disappointed and it turned her heart-shaped mouth into a fierce line. He was completely immune now to her gaze, mostly immune to her voice. She thought that was all there had ever been between them, her vampiric powers as influence. As he waited patiently, he wondered how he in his male weakness had feed the creature she had become.

Her eyes narrowed. "Should I be?"

"St. Adalbart. You want to know what makes him so significant?"

Her hand slide away and she stepped back from him. "No, but I'm sure you are about to enlighten me."

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"He was the Bishop of Prague before circumstances forced him to flee. He then went on to become a missionary in Prussia where, as the story goes, he ran afoul of the pagan locals and was executed. He was canonized several years later." She shrugged, uninterested, so he continued. "Adalbart had reportedly offended the Prussians because it was tradition for missionaries to cut down trees, the very trees that the people held sacred. Oak trees."

"So?" her delicate shoulders shrugged but the tension there did not relent.

"He was participating in Iconoclasm. Like the Muslims scratching the eyes out of drawings in the rock churches of Gorem or the Reformation riots in the Seventeen Provinces burning other effigies in 1566. Ideological destruction of faith. But here's the really interesting part of the story, the part not revealed in dogma. Those forests were sacred, alright. For werewolves."

He stepped to her. "So you see, the Prussians were doing Adalbart a favor after they discovered that in his iconoclastic furor, he'd wound up being bitten by beasts he sought to deny and threatened to be turned into one himself, one so wholly contrary to everything he had been or done in his life."

She pursed her lips. "You're not going to kill him, are you?"

Emmerick sighed. "No." And he began to walk away. But as an afterthought, he threw her one more thought. "Better the Devil you know."

She cursed him under her breath. When she'd finally made up her mind to kill him, he'd vanished from all her senses. It was uncanny how he as a man, merely a human man, could do that. But it didn't matter. Things had already been set into motion. It really would've been better if Emmerick would've deigned to be the instrument of Valerian's death.

But she already had a workable back-up plan. She stared up at St. Adalbart. She had no idea if the story Emmerick had told her was true. Or even if it meant that he had finally deduced what had happened underneath the warehouse all those one hundred and twenty four years ago.

Darcie had left and Valerian had gone dead inside without her. And now they must both pay for the love that they both had let die. And for the daughter they had both denied.

"I will punish you, Sophie Quinn. And no South American vamp boy toy will save you this time."