

GUARDIAN OF ANTIQUITY

The Bloodstone Chronicles – Book Two

A novel by

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Special Dedication

First and foremost, God.

King Slush and Roscoe P. Dawg. The world may see you as fluffed fur babies, but you will always be our little angels.

Mont Blanc, France, 2014

The serpentine dance between light and dark is eternal. It ebbs and flows, always in a delicate balance of grace and chaos. Few men are privileged to witness the scale tip. Fewer still are cursed with the duty to center it back. Deep within Mont Blanc, overlooking the Aosta Valley of Italy, four men gathered in a circle. Ankle-length brown cassocks, tied around the waist with golden corded sashes, identified them as monks. Identical forearm tattoos of a flower, winding around a knife, confirmed their sect; the Order of the Blood Rose.

Brother Dominic LaMonde kissed the silver crucifix hanging from his neck. “The prophecy has begun,” he said, brown eyes regarding the other three with sadness. “The first piece of the bloodstone has been found.”

Staggered murmurs from the other men echoed around the stone chamber, stopping only when Dominic raised his hand. “I prayed that we would not be the ones to bear this burden, but...” Lowering his shaved head, he huddled within himself a moment, before casting his gaze to the sky. “His will be done.”

The others followed suit, raising their eyes to Heaven. “Amen.”

Brother Thomas Aquilla stepped forward. The youngest of the four, his green eyes held a mix of fear and determination. “We must alert the knights,” he said, knowing the four-hundred-mile journey to Perugia would be dangerous. “Allow me the honor.”

Dominic regarded the man carefully, before nodding. “Take the drawing. Show it only to a knight.” Clasping Thomas’s shoulders, he gave the man a weary smile. “God be with you, my brother.”

The Church of San Bevignate

Perugia, Italy

Arriving in the middle of the night, Thomas found the church locked. Built by The Knights Templar between 1256 and 1262, the structure had become non-secular, welcoming all. Exhausted from the journey, Thomas sighed and glanced up at the star-filled sky. “Forgive me,” he whispered, before expertly picking the simple deadbolt. Dipping his fingers into the holy water, he crossed himself, then quietly entered the old building. “Hello?” Only his echo answered, bouncing off the high-reaching vaulted ceiling. Carefully making his way to the pulpit, he marveled at the church’s sober interior, admiring the frescoes along the way.

Typical of Templar architecture, the structure was rectangular with a square apsidal chapel connected to the east side. One fresco, at the top of the altar wall, bore a large cross with two smaller crosses surrounded by nine stars, representing the founders of The Templar Order.

As he got to the altar, Thomas called out once more. “Hello?” Again, receiving no answer, a sigh escaped his lips. Turning around to leave, he found himself on the wrong end of a gleaming sword held at his chest. Falling to his knees, hands clasped together, his head lowered in supplication. “Bloodstone!”

Sir Francis de Molay's jaw dropped, his sword still trained on the cowering figure before him. Satan had many tricks up his unholy sleeve. "What did you say?"

"Bloodstone," Thomas repeated, raising his sleeve to identify himself.

Seeing the symbol, burned into the man's flesh, Sir Francis lowered his weapon. "Rise."

Summoning all his remaining strength, the monk pulled himself upright and smiled, seeing the pale face of his longtime friend. "Hello, Francis," he said before stumbling forward into the man's arms.

Catching him, Sir Francis turned the man's face to the light. "Thomas?" Brows narrowed over light blue eyes. "How did you get in here?"

Thomas winked. "You know I wasn't always a priest," he said, before passing out.

He woke on a straw mat, flickering torchlight dancing off weeping stone walls. At his side, a chalice of water, some dates, and a small loaf of bread. Sitting up, he gulped down the refreshing liquid, consumed a few dates and tore the loaf in half. After a few moments, his strength started to return enough to follow the hushed whispers. Sir Francis and three others, spoke in quiet tones, not noticing Thomas's presence.

"How can we be certain this is not a minion of Lucifer, sent to weed us out?"

"Yes, it wouldn't be the first time. I just heard from—"

"Enough," Francis said, holding up his hand. "I have known Thomas since we were both children, terrorizing fruit vendors in the streets of Turin. If he is here, and if what he said is true—"

"It is."

Turning, Francis hurried over to his friend. "Thomas, you shouldn't be up yet. You need rest, food, and—"

"There is no time, Francis." Leaning on him, the monk shuffled over to the others, eyeing each in turn. "I am no pawn of the devil," he began, supporting his weight on the rough table. "But his plan to destroy humanity has been set in motion. The first stone is found. The Order of the Blood Rose humbles itself before the warriors of God and asks that you gather your armies to stop the vile creature."

Francis closed his eyes. 800 years ago, The Knights Templar *were* an army. Fighters for a cause they found just, none could withstand their fierce determination and skills in battle. They amassed fortunes from plunder, developing the foundations of banking which serve the world to this day. Feared by King and Pope, their order was disavowed, their members scattered around the world, their fortunes depleted. Now, only a few hundred remained, their focus on keeping mankind ignorant of the supernatural forces at work in the modern world. Of all the formidable terrors foretold by prophets, from John and Revelations to Nostradamus and his vague quatrains, the only one truly feared among what remained of the knights, was the one most humans knew nothing about. The Bloodstone Prophecy.

Opening his eyes, Francis sighed, running a hand over his troubled face. "Where do we begin?"

Reaching into his robe, the monk removed a rolled-up drawing. Unfurling it, he laid it out for the men. "Our prophet, Brother Dominic, had a vision. In it, the beast called forth the first piece. He sketched his likeness on this paper."

Examining the drawing, Sir Francis pursed his lips. The unanticipated image staring back at him was not a hideous beast, but a man. "Your prophet is certain of this?"

Thomas nodded. "And there is more. The creature can walk in the light of God's glory."

Francis balked at that. Some 300 years ago, a small band of knights happened upon a burned-out home in Sussex, England. It had been rumored to house an ancient vampire, one of his children, and a mortal woman. They found nothing but charred bones and an ancient tome in a locked metal container. The astonishing book told fanciful tales of vampire lore, including a story of the stone Cain used to kill his brother. It went on to prophesize about a day when mankind would be destroyed, and vampires would rule the world. That text laid the foundation for how The Knights Templar came to possess such intimate knowledge of the supernatural world, and how it might be defeated. One of the rules concerning vampires was their inability to walk in the light of day. "That is not possible," Francis said, shaking his head. "They cannot withstand sunlight."

Thomas shrugged. "This one can."

Sir George, the eldest of the four, looked at Francis, his one good eye not yet clouded by glaucoma. "If one can, it is safe to assume others may, as well."

Francis nodded. "Agreed. To this point, light has been our only true ally in the war against the undead. Now, with this revelation, I fear we have lost any edge we may have had." Taking up a small cup, he drank from it, letting the water soothe him. "I had hoped to be old and gray, or dead when this came to pass." Setting the cup down, he turned to Thomas. "Please wait here." Exiting through a hidden passageway, he was gone only a short time. He returned, carrying an oblong gold box, a foot wide by three feet long and eight inches deep. Setting it on the table, he kissed the crucifix he was wearing then opened the container. Inside rested a piece of ancient bloodstained wood, just a few inches smaller than the beautiful box.

"Is that..." Thomas said, eyes wide as the knights bowed their heads.

"Crux Comissa," came the quiet reply. "The wood upon which our Lord hung in his final hour on Earth." Closing the box, Francis ran a hand over the shining surface. "The enemy of man shall be bound to the Lord's will, through the instrument of our salvation." Taking a moment to lead them in prayer, he ended it with a repeated, "Amen," then turned to Thomas. "Do you know where this creature is right now?"

Brother Thomas Aquilla smiled, reached into his robe once more, and handed Francis a map. "We do."

Flying 30,000 feet above the Atlantic, Jonas closed his eyes. Since meeting Seth at the coal mine, something scratched at his mind. The ancient seemed different than the last time they met. He couldn't put a finger on it but knew who could. The low hum of the jet's twin turbos faded, replaced by the sounds of a jungle.

Humidity crawled over his flesh, which was something he hadn't experienced since he was a boy, running through the hills in Toledo on a sweltering August day. It wasn't an unwelcome sensation. Opening his eyes, he was greeted with the lush green of trees and plants. Droplets of moisture from a recent rainstorm rolled slowly off wide leaves.

"Bacchus?" he called out, half expecting a monkey or some wild boar to come crashing through the dense foliage.

"Shh!" came the low voice from behind him. "You'll scare away my trophy." Dressed in hunter attire, down to the white pith helmet, Bacchus crouched low, motioning for Jonas to do the same. Pointing through a thicket of dense cover, the ancient vampire smiled. A panther, his ebony coat shining, stalked his unseen prey.

Ducking beside him, Jonas stifled a laugh, catching sight of the outfit. "I never took you for a hunter of animals. It's such a beautiful creature."

"Never assume." Shaking his head, Bacchus eased a large camera out of the satchel slung over his shoulder. Clicking off half a roll, he watched the big cat pounce into the brush, cutting off a muted scream. Standing, he placed the camera back in its case. "You're cutting into my Safari time. What do you want?"

"Something's troubling me," he said. "When I met Seth at the coal mine, he seemed... I don't know... *different*... in some way. I sensed a power that wasn't there when I put him in Torpor."

Bacchus frowned. "Before you partnered with Dusty, she was working on another missing person case, involving three teenage girls from Cider Lake. As it happened, they," pursing his lips, he shook his head. "It will be easier to show you." Motioning with his hand, the sweet aroma of the jungle fell away, replaced with the sterile scent of an airport bathroom.

...

Sunday, December 8, 2013

The life of the dead is placed in the memory of the living.

Marcus Tullius Cicero

Men plan. God laughs. Satan Schemes. Some of the greatest minds were planners. A few – like Benjamin Franklin – were also doers, making their ideas reality through sheer will. Some called it tunnel vision, but they all shared one mantra. "I will not be denied."

Eighteen years ago, in the small town of Cider Lake, Tennessee, a baby girl was born with those five words burned into her soul. Cynthia Ellen Kramer – Cindi to most, just Cin to her two closest friends – came into the world with a handbook. Unfortunately for her parents, it was written in a language only Cindi could understand. Always ahead, she skipped crawling and graduated to running. She used words most children her age couldn't pronounce, let alone spell. Cindi had to be the best, prettiest, most talented, and cleverest.

When the twelve-year-old ringleader of 'Tres Chicas' – Cindi's name for her, and her two besties – concocted the trip of a lifetime, a blood pact began. The three planned to visit their idol: Jim Morrison. Without fail, once a year, they honored that oath.

In an airport bathroom colder than Detroit in December, the girls – now grown women – hogged the mirror space as they readied for this year's journey.

Tennessee twang echoed off the bathroom's smoke-grey walls as Cindi spoke. "C'mon ladies. We don't have time for the full treatment. Y'all can fix your hair on the plane." Sky blue eyes stared as she blotted her lipstick, blowing a kiss at her reflection. "We're not gonna join the mile-high club."

Karla Young's face contorted into alien-like features as she applied mascara. "Hell Cin, half the battle's done. We snuck out in plenty of time, unlike last year where we barely made it for boarding." Poured into black leather pants, Karla slapped her right cheek. "As for the mile-high club, speak for yourself." Black knee-high leather boots added four inches to her usual five-three. The midnight blue, scooped neckline showed enough bosom to catch the male eye.

Cindi jerked her thumb backward. "Yeah... well... if *someone* would grow some balls, we wouldn't be in a tight time squeeze, year after God blamed year."

Shaking out ash brown hair, Tara Reynolds turned, sticking out her tongue. "Oh, sure! Big talk from you! Ya wanna unleash the Lord's wrath? I promise that'll happen if I sass daddy. I don't see *you* getting all high and mighty around him."

Karla batted her eyelashes before grabbing Cindi's lip gloss. "She's got ya there. Ain't none of us wanna piss off the Rev. I ain't going to hell."

Cindi rolled her eyes. "Pissing him off isn't a direct path to hell!"

Karla shook her head. "Damn close!"

Tara's black top – both shoulders cutout – flowed over light blue, rhinestone skinny jeans with sparkling gems trailing from the front pocket all the way down to her braided rhinestone wedges, showing off white, sparkling toenails. Batting her eyelashes, she mimicked Cindi in a falsetto voice. "Yes sir, Reverend. We'll get right on that, sir."

Cindi scoffed. "I do not sound like that!"

Laughing, Karla pointed. "Oh yes, the hell you do! You're *always* kissing ass!"

Snatching her lip gloss and purse, she huffed, quite insulted. "I've *never* been an ass kisser!"

"Tell that to someone who don't know!" Turning to the mirror, the reflection staring back made her amber eyes widen, and the giggle changed to a surprised gasp/restrained scream. Every once in a blue moon, Tara got premonitions; glimpses beyond the veil of space and time. This one was horrifying. A woman's face – one side nothing but bones, a hollowed-out eye socket – stared back in bliss. Blood poured from her strawberry blond hair turning it redder. An ominous dark shadow hovered, breathing down her neck, daring her to move, sending a shiver down her spine. Crossing herself, she turned. "Cin, maybe we should skip this year."

Cindi's eyes popped open. Grabbing Tara, she spun her around. "Now, look here, Missy! We've been doing this for seven years! I didn't bust my ass figuring out all this shit, jumping through hoops, for you to back out! Ya, hear me? Get your shit together!"

Tara jerked away, wide-eyed, and terrified. "You didn't see it! A vision! Some woman with half her face miss—"

“Hey, hey!” Cindi set a palm against Tara’s cheek, instantly reassuring, a smile gracing her beautiful face. “Calm down. Ya know how you get. Nerves all in a tither.”

Karla nodded, fluffing out her crimson locks. “Yep. Ya get *freeeeeaky* before getting on the plane. Last year ya swore we were gonna crash. We didn’t die then, and we won’t now.”

“Why am I seeing this?” Tara shook her head.

“Why?” Cindi spoke in baby-talk. “You’re nervous. It’s fucking with you. C’mon. Don’t get all weird. Nothing’s gonna happen.”

Sighing, Tara nodded. “You’re right… I guess. It just… scared me.”

“It would scare me too!” Turning, she fluffed her hair. “Okay, remember… we leave at ten. Takes nine and a half hours, but I gave us ten just in case. We’ll get in 7:40 our time.” Looking over at Karla, she nodded to her watch. “You keep Tennessee time, I’ll keep Paris. We’ll get there, pick up the… *you know what*… then race to the cemetery. Have a couple of drinks, pay our respects, ditch the unmentionable artifact and be on a plane before anyone knows we’re gone.”

Rolling her eyes, Karla gathered up her ‘face’, shoving everything in the carry-on bag. “We *knoooow*. We’ve been over it a *million* times!”

“So, make it a million and one.”

“Maybe we can have fun this year. Get something to eat. I’ve always wanted to try Paris food,” Tara said, fluffing her hair, trying to ignore the fear.

“No, because—”

“Flight one nine to Paris, France, now boarding at gate fifty-three,” the voice crooned over the P.A. system.

Karla tapped her watch. “Let’s go! Gotta stay on time!”

As they raced out the door, Tara could not shake the image from the mirror. Her desire to see Paris fought heavily with her deeply instilled faith – years of tutelage on the good book and the sins of lying. Desire won. Nothing was going to keep her from seeing her lover boy.

3

Cemeteries. Human beings have a deep-rooted love/hate relationship with them. No one is in a hurry to reside there, yet consistently visit those who also don’t want to be there. Père Lachaise was no different. The vast park in northeast Paris spread out over 109 acres with more than 6,000 trees. Paths encircled the entirety, jutting off in different avenues. It only left room for one person at a time due to so many sites. Prince and pauper rested within the gloomy confines if only to rub ghostly shoulders with Chopin, Edith Piaf, Molière, Bizet, and Oscar Wilde. The living visited on a regular basis, but none drew crowds like James Douglas Morrison, the ‘Lizard King’ himself.

A charter member of the ‘27 Club’ – the famous and infamous who died at age twenty-seven – Morrison had been a resident since 1971. His site drew stoner, psychic, mystic, nymphomaniac, and a trio of young girls from the good old U. S. A.

Starstruck as a whole, no one noticed how people shied away from Jim’s grave – even shoulder-to-shoulder crowded – when ‘Tres Chicas’ showed up. Most of the markers were defiled

with heartfelt notes. A few moss-covered stones, from decades of being ignored, gave no clue who rested beneath. Jim Morrison's site saw much graffiti and destruction. Visitors ruined two headstones, leaving scribbles on nearby graves. Fans put some 'good ole bud' on his stone. The caretaker loved the generosity of his followers. Due to such destruction, it almost cost Jim his burial plot – and the groundskeeper his job – as it was too much to deal with. The tenth anniversary of his death, the family paid for a commemorative bust, but vandals stole it in 1988. The latest flat headstone read:

JAMES DOUGLAS MORRISON

1943 – 1971

KATA TON DAIMONA EAYTOY

Beautiful flowers, burning sticks of incense, Jack Daniel's Black, and three adorable young girls stood watch over Jim's grave. Hands clasped, they sang along with the haunting melody 'Riders on the Storm', resonating from Tara's purple iPod. The 'Lizard King' would approve. The damp air destroyed hairdo's, as a fog slithered at their feet. Insect sounds bounced from stone to stone, as worms pushed through the soaked ground, to become a fly-by meal. The area reeked, but the girls were prepared; spraying their surroundings with 'Allure by Chanel', making it smell more like a French whorehouse.

Everyone has baggage, and 'Tres Chicas' was no exception. United by forces unexplained, the girls had no issue embracing sins, except for Sloth. Their presence for the last six years gave testament to that. They always got what they wanted. Even Tara used her wiles in ways papa would not approve. It got them labeled with all the usual comments. "Slut." "Whore." "Easy." Yet, they could only get so far where men were concerned. Something worked against them, always snatching the trophy away before they could cross the finish line. Lost in their mutual admiration, they didn't hear the footsteps.

Running her hands up and down her arms, Karla shivered. Pointing to the tombstone, her head dipped in a bewildered state. "What does that mean again?"

Cindi shrugged, looking lovingly at the inscription. "Against the devil himself... or within? Something like that."

"Very loose translation, my dear, Ahren. The original, however, appears to be lost." The voice behind them, hypnotic with a hint of Russian, grabbed their attention.

The girls screamed, and the rent-a-cops glanced over. With Morrison's pot smoking, beer guzzling, liquor toting fans, screaming and loud cursing was normal. Homegrown would fill the air, not that either minded the contact high. Before their shift was over, they would have to chase off two lovebirds from baptizing the site. Not seeing anything out of the ordinary, they went back to their conversation.

"Damn! Silent much?!" Cindi yelled. "My name *ain't* Erin."

The man laughed. "Ahren means angel in my native tongue. My apologies. I did not mean to frighten you."

Ready to give him what-for, angry thoughts diminished as a more-than-friendly gaze took over. Karla winked. "We need to put a bell on you."

Pointing at the inscription, he shrugged. “It actually means ‘faithful to his own spirit’. Which he certainly is, even now.”

Cindi couldn’t tear her eyes off the man. French men had that certain something, but this Russian guy took it to another level. A form-fitting light gray Armani suit peeked out from the open front of a black cashmere coat. The man’s brown eyes bore deep into the girl’s own. Regaining her composure, Cindi arched a brow. “He, who?”

“Jim, of course.”

Cindi blinked. “You one of those… mediums?”

Karla grabbed Tara’s arm. “Wouldn’t that be something?! *Two psychics in one week!*” Cindi made the girls see a psychic before leaving, due to some weird dream. Karla tried talking her out of it, but she was adamant. “Kinda makes sense now.”

Tara nodded, rubbing away Karla’s grip prints. “She did say, ‘we’d be the lucky ones’ if we came here today.”

Giving a slight shake of his head, he turned back to Cindi. “No. I am not a psychic. Jim told me what it means.”

Cindi looked at him, apprehensively. “Does the asylum know you escaped?”

He chuckled. “I am not insane. I know it sounds crazy.”

“Uh-huh.” Her eyes watched him, guardedly. This guy was kooky, but she wanted to know more. “Then how the hell are ya talking to the dead?”

He stared back, dark eyes filled with mirth. “Jim is not dead.”

Peeping from the tombstone to the sentry – still talking softly amongst themselves – back to the man again, it was obvious he piqued their interest. He looked in his late thirties with a full head of ebony hair, swept back in a wave over his forehead. Brown eyes regarded the three girls with a mix of humor and… hunger? Lust? They couldn’t be sure. Had they looked closely, they would have noticed something missing. The life lights, so difficult for artists to capture, were absent. Women found confident men sexy. This man, with his stature, trimmed goatee, and soothing voice, reeked of confidence and arrogance. That was not lost on the girls, young as they were.

Tara giggled, pushing lightly on his arm. “Get outta here. Ya almost had me fooled.”

“I am not making a joke. He is alive and well.” Turning to Cindi, he nodded in her direction. “You are not locals.”

“Gee, what gave us away?” Her eyes raked over his body, sending a nod back with a seductive grin. “You ain’t either.”

Tara nudged her. “Shh!”

“Whaaat? He ain’t!” Cindi’s eyes traveled over the man’s face. “Russian?”

“Close enough.” He studied her as well. “American?”

The corner of her lip raised in a lopsided grin. “Close enough.”

“Touché.” He bowed slightly. “Are you here on vacation with your family?”

Smiling, Karla shook her head. “Good heavens, no! They don’t cotton to none o—”

“We got each other’s backs. We don’t need nobody else,” Cindi interrupted, tossing golden strands over her shoulder.

“I see. Well, enjoy your stay in Paris. Might I suggest a bite at ‘Le Stella’? They have the best onion soup, escargots, sole meuniére, steak tartare, and roast lamb.” He kissed his fingers, saluting the heavens.

“Escargot?” Tara cringed. “Snails?”

“Yes. When in France, you must do as the French, so you get the full experience.” Bowing, he began walking away.

Cindi focused on his retreating backside. Before he was too far away, she asked the question repeating in her mind, giving her a headache. “What do ya mean, ‘he’s not dead’?”

Hook.

He stopped. Turning, he smiled. “Just what I said. Jim Morrison is *not* in that grave.”

Twisting around, Karla’s thin ginger brows crinkled. “You... you’re serious ‘bout that?”

“Deadly.”

“Dude, he’d be like,” pausing, her head slanted upward as lips moved with the slow calculations.

“Seventy, this day. Thank you for reminding me. I must get him a gift.”

“Yeah. That’s like... old. My gramma Jean’s only sixty-two and she’s,” hesitating, a constipated expression screwed up her face before shrugging. “She’s *definitely* looked younger.”

“It is a young seventy. He does not look a day over forty.”

“How?”

“He works out, eats right, leads a very easy-going life. The days of ‘sex, drugs, and rock and roll’ are well behind him. It is not unheard of to look younger than your age. You would be surprised to know mine, but that is a story for another time.”

Cindi arched a brow. “Prove it.”

Line.

He pursed his lips. “How old are you? Do not lie. I have a nose for falsehood.”

Cindi’s gaze touched each of the girls. All it took was a few blinks and an unspoken code was shared between them. Turning back, she offered her own enticing smile. “I’m twenty-two. They’re twenty-one.”

Nodding, the man smiled. “Close enough. I will ‘prove it’, as you say, but,” he loomed over her five-five with his six-three height, “you must never divulge what you witness. Do I have your word?”

She nodded in agreement. The other two couldn’t stop smiling. “Sure do!”

Sinker.

Raking his eyes over the girls, he finally nodded. Running a hand through damp hair, his gaze turned back to Cindi. "I will probably get in trouble for it. But there is just something about you three. Come with me."

Karla and Tara were ready to blindly follow him, but Cindi was hesitant. It seemed they forgot about the time restraints; luckily for them, Cindi hadn't and held up a hand. "Hold up! We can't. We don't have time. We gotta be at the airport within the hour so..."

Both girls whimpered, nodding in agreement.

He smiled. "Jim has a jet. I can call the pilot and have it on standby. It will cut off... half your flight time."

The other two excitedly jumped up and down, but Cindi wasn't easily swayed. "How can ya do that?"

"I am his manager. I have power of attorney. Everything he owns... everything he is... is all in my name." Taking out his cell phone, he dialed a number. "Make sure the jet is ready. We need to have three girls' home by," he turned to Cindi, "what time?"

Cindi still wasn't sure but wanted to believe. "We gotta be home no later than seven... Tennessee time."

He turned back to the phone. "Seven o'clock Tennessee time. Have the jet fueled and ready to go." He slipped the phone back into the case. "All set. You have a few hours to spare."

Unfastening her coat, Cindi flashed the twenty-two. "Don't get any freakoid ideas. I'm locked, loaded, and can shoot a sparrow off the side of a barn."

His eyes grew wide. "You have my word I will do you no harm." Holding a hand out, a smile danced across his face. "I am Kanis."

His reaction warranted a calm, easy feeling. "I'm Brenda." His grip was cold, but it was chilly standing in the rain.

Tara flashed an award-winning smile that cost her parents a second mortgage. "I'm Nancy."

Karla giggled before dipping into a slight curtsy. "I'm Lisa. Don't get us confused."

The three aliases kept them out of trouble with the sheriff and Tara's dad; who they feared more than the law.

Kanis continued toward the exit. "Shall we then? We should not keep Jim waiting."

Tara and Karla jumped up and down with hopeful giddiness. They begged Cindi before she nodded. "Yeah. Let's do this."

The eighteen-minute drive would have felt longer if they weren't in a limo! They had only been in one three times: wedding, prom (which they vowed never to talk about), and a funeral (animal attack). The ice rattled around in the glass like a windchime. Kanis fixed them a drink before handing them each a thick towel.

Smiling, Cindi brushed the softness against her face. The excitement oozing from Karla and Tara was infectious and Cindi felt it seeping through. Reaching up, she began drying her hair. "Drinking cures everything. Church forgives our sins... but... I have a feeling, there won't be enough forgiveness in the world after tonight!" Cindi laughed, fist-bumping Karla.

Karla giggled. "Oh yay, though I walk through the shadows of lust... please forgive me when I give this man *all* of my body!"

Tara joined in but couldn't shake that terrifying image. It materialized everywhere, screaming out a warning; 'iceberg ahead!' The chance to meet her idol shoved that image into an already crowded closet. Nothing was going to stop the greatest moment of her life. Not her faith, daddy, or a vague specter chick. No matter how damaged she was.

The girls bounced around like popping out in the club. They weren't shy about refilling their glasses. If things worked out, this would be their reality. They danced to the radio; The Doors: L.A. Woman.

"Are you a lucky lady in the City of Light... or just another lost angel... City of Night. City of Night. City of night, city of night, woo, see'mon! L.A. Woman. L.A. Woman."

They were belting out their hearts in a rather ear-splitting, tone-deaf, melancholy chorus when they pulled up to the hotel. The music ended abruptly, leaving them hanging for a note.

Kanis smiled. "We have arrived. Finish your drinks. I will return momentarily." He stepped out, closing the door. Immediately, two attendants, dressed head-to-toe in dark blue business suits with pinstriped ties, appeared out of thin air. Waving them from the car, he spoke to one of them.

The hotel was beyond magnificent! The front screamed out in glorious bold letters: Four Seasons George V. If Tara expected something like the five-and-dime motel-hotel like in Cider Lake, boy, was she surprised. "Look at this place! Holy Toledo! It's huge! Gorgeous! I've *never* stayed in a place like this! Now I know how Cinderella felt at the ball!"

Gripping the glass lovingly, her tongue teased the rim as she sipped. Curiously looking out the tinted window, Karla watched the exchange. "What's he doing?"

Looking between them, Cindi rolled her eyes. They were too small town. She was anything but. After making another drink, she climbed into Kanis's seat. "What else? Getting things ready. He's gotta warn Jim three hot babes are coming down! It's not a good idea to just show up with unwelcome guests." Glancing out, she noticed how unusually pale and thin the assistants were.

The rear door opened, and Kanis reached a hand in. "I have sent word to our host. Follow me."

Cindi looked up, thoroughly impressed. The large flower arrangements, stretching from the doors to the sidewalk, were superb. Twenty cut flowers filled the air with a garden variety of essence. Private terraces adorned each suite, overlooking Paris. "So, where's Jim?"

"I will take you to him. He is anxiously awaiting your arrival." Heading into the posh hotel, people moved out of the way, as if the prime minister just walked in.

The exclusive eight-story building dated back to 1928. Everything was top of the line. It was in the heart of Paris; the country of romance. One-hundred-eighty vases filled the lobby with assorted colors and types of flowers, their aromatic scent filling the air. The polished brass gleamed, reflecting their faces. The marble floors shimmered; clean enough to eat off the sparkling

white and black tiles. Beautiful antiques dated back as far as the eighteenth century, including tapestries from that era that added elegance and charm, setting it apart from others. A back door led them to a circular stairway going forty-six feet deep into a textured stone-walled area. ‘Le Cinq’, the wine cellar, was floor-to-ceiling shelves stocked with fifty-thousand bottles of wine. Numerous candles lit the way with an air of romance.

“The wine cellar. We should get a bottle for the trip. It *is* Jim’s birthday.” He disappeared for only a minute before returning with a bottle of Champagne Krug Vintage Brut and four glasses. “Virginal. Eighteen years.” Popping the cork, he smiled. “Excellent year. He will be impressed.”

“Ooh, I love champagne!” Karla nodded accepting the empty glass.

“I thought you might.” He poured a glass for each, the liquid sparkling through the expensive crystal. Taking a sip, he rolled it over his tongue, swirling it around before swallowing. “Nougat, caramel, roasted nuts, candied citrus zest, ginger, pastry, and a long lime finish. Rich and luxuriant with intriguing salinity. Deep gold color, unapologetic opulence.”

“Oh my God!” Karla nodded. “It tastes like liquid candy with bubbles!”

Tara giggled. “I could live off this!”

Inquisitively, Cindi looked at her own glass. “I thought this was for Jim?”

“He loves to share. If we save him a glass, he is happy. He will gain more pleasure from you enjoying this, so drink up.”

Sipping the liquid, a grin teased her lips. “Mm, it tastes sweet with just a hint of tart.”

“It is the finest.” He motioned to the end of the hall. “Shall we?” He led them through the shelves until they approached the elevator. The doors opened by some indiscernible command. Once inside, Kanis slipped an odd-shaped key into the matching slot, turning it halfway to the left. The buttons flickered twice, before adding the letter ‘B’. Pressing B-8, Kanis placed the key back into his pocket. “Drink up. I want you relaxed when you meet him. I must warn you... he is a bit of a sexual dynamo.”

Tara and Karla giggled, drinking rather quickly. This made those frustrated nights well worth all the cold showers. Cindi merely sipped. Being treated like royalty was seductive. She could live with it. Her brows creased, watching the numbers. “This place goes deeper? How’s that even possible?”

“The lower suites are for,” he hesitated, “the more eccentric clientele. They do not advertise.”

“A secret society.” Karla giggled. “For those who faked their death.”

He chuckled. “There are a few of those.”

Tara sucked in a breath. “Oh, my God!” Her ear-splitting screech sounded louder in the small confines of the elevator. “We might even find Elvis down there!”

“Elvis?” Kanis shook his head. “No. I believe he really died. I have yet to see him.”

Mystified, Tara looked at him. “Are ya sure? People swear they’ve seen him. One or two *might* be seeing things, but twenty?”

Karla shook her head. “If he’s all over Cider Lake, he can’t be in Paris, now can he?”

Tara sighed. “Guess not.”

It was a peaceful ride with a jerk at the end. The doors opened to a set of cold, musty caverns. A stark contrast to the upper floors. Kanis stepped out. "This way." He walked ahead. "Watch your step. It gets a little unsteady in certain areas."

There were a million and one things wrong with this picture, like the white van in front of the smelly tunnel promising top-shelf chocolate. Suddenly, that bloody image flashed through Tara's mind again. She staggered backward, finding it hard to breathe. "I saw her again, Cin. I got a bad feeling. None of this feels right!"

A sinkhole started in the pit of Karla's stomach, causing havoc on the rest of her body. A horde of spiders came alive under her skin as goose pimples rapidly multiplied. "Yeah. We should go back up. What the hell would he be doing down *here*?"

Both gripped her sides, clinging to her as if a lifeboat on the Titanic. Unclasping from the death grip, Cindi giggled. "Maybe because he faked his death."

"Yeah, but to live like *this*? Wouldn't he have enough money to live better?" Glancing around, Karla shivered. "It's freezing. Hell, he could buy a deserted island!"

"It's only freezing because we're wet," Cindi claimed, shaking out her damp hair.

Trembling, Tara glanced around. "It feels like death."

"Like you even know what *that* feels like! If he lived upstairs and looks the same, someone would recognize him!" Cindi patted the gun. "Besides, we're solid. I got ya."

Tara wrinkled her forehead, uneasiness churning in her gut. "I hope you're right."

Kanis arrived at an ornate set of thick, arched, mahogany, double doors inscribed with arcane symbols. "We need to pass through here. If someone accidentally came down – which is virtually impossible – they would see nothing but cavern walls and head back up. For safety purposes, he must live down here. If everyone knew of his existence, he would have *no* peace. Not to mention, go to prison for tax evasion. However, he is not without treasures." He opened the doors.

The strange symbols over the door called to Cindi's attention right away. They were oddly shaped like nothing ever seen before. Cindi poked the other two. "Told ya." Entering through ahead of him, Tara and Karla were cautious, but something told Cindi everything was fine. 'I will not be denied', rifled through her head on a loop. If only she knew the true meaning of that.

A few flickering torches lined the entrance of the doors, supplying the only light. Several tables and chairs scattered around the room resembled a storage area. The tall velvet chair, positioned behind one of the tables, looked like a king's throne. A man sat in it with his head down.

Entering, Cindi's glued-on smile slipped. Looking from the stranger back to Kanis, she still expected to see Jim. Surveying the room, her heart sank. The realization struck her to the core. No one could raise the dead, except God.

The stranger lifted his head. The torchlight pirouetted off the figure's unwashed, blond hair, gray skin, and skull-like face. Inhaling the pleasurable scent, he sneered. Opening his eyes, red twins glared at them. The three ran into each other as they turned back for the doors. Too late. The heavy doors clanged shut behind them.

Pulling her gun, Cindi aimed at Kanis. Desire flew under the door and out of the hotel. Bravery threatened to follow. ‘Retreat,’ boomed inside her head. “Joke’s over pal! That ain’t Jim Morrison. Unless ya want me to air condition your fucking skull, open the fucking door!”

The other man curved a brow at her outrage. “Who?”

Kanis waved off the question. “I will explain later.” Turning to Cindi, he smiled in the same seductive manner that swept her off her feet, enough to be there with a perfect stranger to do the unattainable. “By all means, do what you need to protect you and your friends. I must warn you,” his smile turned evil, “it will be all for naught.”

“We’ll see about that!” Training the gun on him, she motioned to the other two. “Unlock the door!”

Tara gripped the lock, prying and pushing at the large unyielding deadbolt. Tears filled her eyes, making it hard to see. “I can’t! It’s glued shut!”

The figure behind the desk rose, breathing in deeply. “Yum.”

The room grew icier. Prickles came alive on Cindi’s flesh. Alternating from Kanis to the stranger, she motioned her head. “Karla, help her!”

Kanis sneered. “You mean *Lisa*, correct?”

Rushing to help, tears streamed down her face, as Karla gripped the lock. The two pulled, pushed, kicked, and banged into it. “She’s right, Cin. It won’t budge!”

Kanis looked at Karla. “You mean,” he mocked her, “she’s right, *Bren*. It won’t budge!”

Cindi, angrier than a wet feline, glared. “Let us out!”

Kanis’s smile twisted. “You are not going to shoot your way out?”

“I will if I have to. I’ll start with that stupid look on your face!”

Tara pushed and tugged, praying at the same time. Desperation soon morphed into searing pain. She was yanked off her feet with such force that a well-manicured fingernail taunted her from its new home, stuck in the lock. Cold, stark fear tempered the deep-seated throb in her hand, as the stranger drew her close. Closing her eyes, she continued praying. “Please,” she begged through sobs, “don’t—”

The vision made sense. It was a warning of this very moment. Too late. There was a second of piercing pain before it all fell away as the man sank a pair of gleaming fangs deep into her jugular. No amount of pleasure – either from self-gratification, or the few times she had given in to desire with Bobby Taylor, dry humping on her bed fully clothed – compared to the bliss flowing through her. Porn-star worthy screams replaced frightened moans as she climaxed, shuddering in rapture. Every cell in her body came alive. The familiar world faded, replaced by a deep ocean of nothingness as life escaped. Hitting the floor with a sick thud, her eyes, once bright and filled with hope, shone hollow. Only the euphoric smile on colorless lips gave hint to her final moment.

The stranger moaned, his crimson eyes fixated on Karla. “Mm, eighteen. I tasted holiness. Preacher’s daughter. So sweet. Still perfect before age taints.”

Karla screamed enough to wake the dead. Rushing to Cindi, her feet barely touched the ground. “Tara!”

“No!” Cindi raged, emptying the chamber into Kanis until there was nothing left but clicking. “Die!”

With every shot, his body jerked but didn’t fall. Looking at her, he waggled his finger back and forth. The bullets soon fell to the floor. “Why do you Americans have to be so rude?”

“Y-ya said ya wouldn’t hurt us!” Quickly backpedaling, trying to hide behind Cindi, Karla’s vision blurred with tears.

“Indeed, I did.” Appalled, Kanis examined the holes in his coat, shaking his head. “Even though you lied to me, I am a man of my word. I will not harm a single hair on your sweet head.”

Stupefied, a clang resonated around the room as Cindi’s handgun hit the floor. Her eyes widened, alternating from the stranger – blood dripping from frightening fangs – to Kanis. “No way! You’re not real.” She backed to the far wall, clutching tightly to Karla.

Kanis smiled, giving a slow gesture of his hand. “I assure you, we are the genuine artifact.”

“Not possible!”

“Except in ‘Twilight’.” Flattening against the wall, Karla’s stomach reversed gears as breakfast began crawling its way back out.

Kanis laughed, shaking his head. “You should not believe everything you read. We are not brooding, sensual creatures, agonizing with regret about the loss of our humanity and we do *not* sparkle.”

Barely above a whisper, Cindi found her sarcastic voice again. “My childhood’s been ruined.”

“I am afraid so.” Kanis straightened his bullet-riddled coat. “Humanity. What good is it? Do you realize how inconvenient it is? Urinating, defecating, sleeping, getting sick from every little germ that floats and for what? To do it all over again, whining over what you do not have and never will. You mortals are weak. *We* are Gods with unbelievable power and you,” he disgustingly looked her over, “think for one moment we desire someone as pathetic as *you*?”

Sad eyes ran over Tara’s crumpled corpse. “If you’re gonna kill us, then do it. Spare us your boring ass speeches!”

The stranger grinned. “I like that one. She has fire. Gets me tingly in my nether regions.”

Kanis grimaced in disgust. “Your fear is an aphrodisiac. We smell it seeping out of your pores. It is equivalent to mortal men watching porn. The difference... draining you is our release. It is very intimate, but not the way you hope. Do you desire sex with a Whopper Jr before eating?”

“No, but I ain’t a hamburger,” the words barely squeaked out, as her body tried becoming part of the wall.

“You are to us.”

Karla looked from one to the other. “Please, I’ll do *anything*. Just let us go!”

“As I said, I am not going to hurt a single hair on your head. I am still a man of my word.” Kanis pointed to Karla’s side. “However, *he* is going to rip out your heart and eat it.”

Wide-eyed, Karla spun around as a hand plunged into her chest, draining her face of color. It was the most excruciating pain ever felt. As he bent down, she tilted her head, longing for that same feeling that overcame Tara. Icy needles dove deep. He was draining her of vitality, replacing

it with euphoria. Her legs wobbled as knees went limp. Ear-shattering, pleasurable screams echoed as she clutched at the stranger, violently shaking. In the throes of pleasure – cascading over the cliff to satisfaction – everything stopped. Her heart was ripped from her chest. Death claimed her, draping around her like a satin shroud. Had she been aware, the last sight would be the creature eating her still beating heart.

The vampire scowled. "Sour. Like a lemon. That would be an acquired taste."

Cindi tried blending with the wall, screaming. "Why?"

Kanis smiled, breathing in. "Some claim this is a curse, but we do not. The truth makes your blood race. I can smell the fear and it is," he closed his eyes, inhaling, "intoxicating."

Feeling strong arms pulling her tight, Cindi gasped. "I just wanted to see Jim Morrison," she squeaked before her pleasurable screams filled the small area.

"And you will, my dear. You will. Shortly."

It was the ultimate feeling. A million hands ran over her body, squeezing, teasing, lighting every nerve on fire. They filled her with so many wondrous sensations! She lived her life in a few seconds before thoughts became muddy as life faded. Suddenly, she was flying. Soaring high over an ocean with the feel of the wind through her hair and on her face.

Licking the blood from his lips, the creature's eyes shimmered like the setting sun. "Spicy. I haven't had that flavor for centuries." Dumping her lifeless body on the floor, he straightened as Cindi's blood fulfilled its purpose. Wrinkles smoothed, muscles strained against the pallor of white flesh, and his eyes smoldered. Glaring at Kanis, the old vampire cracked his neck. "While I appreciate the devotion, I have to ask... why?"

Looking over the girls, Kanis removed the tattered scroll from his coat. "Because it is time," handing it to him, lowering eyes to the ground, "my lord."

Unrolling the ancient writing, a sadistic grin formed. "The prophecy." Glancing at the dead girls, his brow creased. A faint blue orb slowly rose from each of the bodies. "What is –"

Kanis staggered back. His eyes swept over the area, watching the lights gather in a small, rotating sphere. Glowing brighter, they slammed into his master, pinning him against the cold stone wall.

All was revealed as he became one with the universe. That feeling of peace dissolved into agonizing torment, as the soul unleashed its fury within him. His clothing vaporized from heat pouring out of his body. No mortal – and few immortals – could withstand such an assault, but the vampire known as Seth was no ordinary immortal. Straining against the reaper's scythe, hemorrhaging from every orifice, he fought to live; to fulfill his destiny. Ageless powers surged through his body as he broke the supernatural bonds chaining him to the wall.

Standing naked, his body steamed as the damp cooled him. Seth inhaled deeply. Death, a familiar scent, took on a new, sweeter aroma. "I am reborn." His eyes took in his surroundings, landing on the girls. An outstretched palm set their bodies ablaze in a surreal green flame. In seconds, only light gray ash remained. "Collect the dust. Leave no trace."

Gathering the remnants, Kanis placed them in a small metal box, locked the clasp and set it aside. "I have prepared well for this day." He opened a small closet.

Seth sneered at the styles of clothing resting inside. "You expect me to wear these?" Running a hand through dirty blond locks, he closed the doors. "Leather pants. Boots. My coat."

"But my lord, you need to –"

"That *wasn't* a request."

Nodding, Kanis walked over to an old wooden trunk. "As you demand, sire."

Black leather pants slid easily over his legs, gathering a set of well-formed buttocks into a shape any woman would drool over. Blood-stained combat boots fit as if made for him. Removing the calf-length western-style duster, he admired it before slipping it on. Noting Kanis's disapproving look, he chuckled. "This coat belonged to John Henry Holliday." His voice imitated Kilmer's take on the famous man. Smoothing out the front, he shot Kanis a warning glare. "He would be offended that you don't approve. As am I."

Kanis's brows furrowed. "I have seen the film you have taken that voice from. How is it, asleep for the last fifty years, you know of it?"

Seth winked, giving him a hard slap on the back. "Magic. How on earth did you make certain those three spitfires stayed virgins?"

"Most challenging task. Their small town is overflowing with gender-confused young men, working hard to save enough money for re-assignment surgery."

Grimacing, Seth shook his head. "Make sure I have names. I have no desire to turn a bunch of make-up wearing, soprano lady-boys into my personal army." Cracking his neck, the ancient vampire inhaled deeply. "Now, what of the bloodstone?"

Kanis nodded. "You are the last of the ancients. Only you will be able to read the rune markings and claim the mother."

"Bacchus is dead?"

"Bacchus?" Kanis gave a dismissive wave. "In all my time, I have only heard his name. Never have I laid eyes on the man. He is a myth."

Tightening his lips, Seth pondered that. "And the council?"

"They are no more. An unfortunate series of events claimed them all in one terrible accident."

Seeing the prideful look in Kanis's eyes, Seth chuckled. "Well, that's just... tragic. Deva as well?"

"Deva?" Kanis's eyes burned at the memory of his humiliation at her hand. "She was not present at the time. *Unfortunately.*"

Laughing, Seth patted Kanis's cheek. "Oh, what she must have done to you. I'll have to pay her a visit soon. Talk about old times. Maybe throw a vase or two, just for shits and giggles." Looking around the dank room, his tone shifted. "What about Jonas?"

"I will take care of your jailer. Personally."

Seth's hand wrapped around Kanis's throat. "You'll do no such thing. You harm that boy, even a little, and you and I are gonna have a very unpleasant afternoon." Releasing him, he headed toward the door. "I'm done with this place. Let's go. I'll tell you exactly what you're gonna do about Jonas Sparx."

Papers the next day reported unusual seismic activity centered beneath the George V Hotel. A small earthquake destroyed many rare antiques.

...

As the scene faded, Bacchus whispered, "Buckle up, Jonas. You're about to land."

5

Egypt. A land of mystery and beauty, with a past shrouded in mythical legend. As the jet's pilot – on Deva's order – flew over Saqqara, Antoine looked out the window, motioning Jonas and Dusty over. Once all four – Hooch was curious about what was so interesting out the little window – squeezed their faces into the small space, he pointed to a structure. They were staring down at the central feature of a vast mortuary complex, in an enormous courtyard, surrounded by ceremonial structures and decoration. For an ancient relic, it was beautiful. There were signs that it was being restored. "The stepped pyramid of Djoser. The very first one ever built. It started as a traditional, flat-roofed Mastaba, but at the end of nineteen years, it had risen to six stepped layers." He was like a child who had met Santa, The Easter Bunny, and The Great Pumpkin, all at once. "As the story goes, the pyramid's architect was Imhotep."

Jonas chuckled, his voice going flat. "Ee Mo Tep... Ee Mo Tep... Ee Mo Tep." That earned him a scowl from Antoine and a confused look from Dusty. "What? It was a good movie."

Rolling her eyes, she looked back out the window. "It's a wonder ya ever got any work done as much as you watch movies."

He wiggled his iPhone, winking at her. "Netflix goes with me everywhere. It wouldn't hurt you to watch a few."

"Not happening. Your time could be spent better than watching a bunch of entitled people pretending to be something they're not. Live a life instead of watching pretend."

He was about to say something but then realized she was right. Quietly, he put his phone back in its case.

The professor rolled his eyes. "As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted by Roger Ebert over there... Imhotep was an architect in the third dynasty and built this for his King, Djoser. Along with his duties as an architect, Imhotep was also a priest and healer. He was actually a commoner, and one of the few ever to be granted divine status after his death."

She glanced over the structure. "So, where's Imhotep's tomb? Is it inside?"

"To this day, it's never been found, though most experts agree that it's somewhere in Saqqara."

"We'll be landing in Cairo in a few minutes," the pilot's voice sounded over the speaker. "Please make sure you're seated, and your safety belts are fastened."

"Thank you for flying LaDevia Air," Jonas cracked, buckling his seatbelt.

As the Gulfstream 650 landed, Jonas saw a Land Rover waiting to take them to their resort. Deva had set them up with a presidential suite in The Fairmont Cairo, one of Egypt's premier hotels.

Once they disembarked and were in the silver SUV, Antoine continued with his history lesson.

“Djoser reigned for around twenty-nine years – give or take – and in that time builders assembled six stepped layers of stone.”

Turning to look at Antoine with an expression of shock, she blinked. “Jumping snake-covered Pharaohs! Can ya imagine the insane amount of damage that could be done if presidents were allowed to reign that long?”

“No.” He shook his head, giving her a horrified expression before continuing. “Well, eventually they reached a height of two-hundred and four feet. The pyramid was surrounded by courtyards, temples, and shrines. All constructed so the king would enjoy his afterlife.”

Looking at Antoine curiously, Dusty tried controlling the overly excited Hooch. Bouncing around on the seats, his big head clocked each one of them with his excitement. The last time, she almost saw stars. One minute he had his head out the window – lapping up the arid breeze – and the next he was pouncing on each of their laps. “Hooch! Stop it.” When he landed in her lap, apologetically licking her, she laughed. “Behave, ya big goofball.” When he jumped over to assault Jonas, she looked at the professor. “So... what you’re saying if I heard ya correctly, is that the pyramid was built so the king could live out his afterlife in style?”

“If you look at the different pyramids, from the inside, certain ones were definite tombs, whereas others don’t look like tombs at all.”

“Then what were they used for?”

He shrugged. “That’s the big debate. The ones in Saqqara: Step Pyramid and the Flat-topped Mastabas are definitely tombs. Inside you find decorations along with the names of the people occupying them.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a tomb.”

“However, The Great Pyramid seems more functional and not decorative at all. Some people believe that they might even be an electrical conduit of a sort.”

She arched a brow. “What do ya mean?”

“They were all placed on certain lines that house electromagnetic energies. The Chinese called them dragon lines, Celts, lay lines. In fact, some people think that the pyramid is more like a dam than a tomb because of the way it was created. There are tunnels under the pyramid, and even the Sphinx, that have water running freely through them. That’s enough for Implosion technology.”

“What in the filtered dirty water is implosion technology?”

“It’s very simple. A beam of the sun on running water in a zigzag motion. When the sun reaches the water then you have the energy.”

Not exactly sure of his meaning, her left brow rose, quizzically. “Ya mean... like electricity?”

“Maybe, but I think it was more for emotional and spiritual wellbeing. It gave people a good feeling.”

“Ah. So, were these created *just* for the royals?”

“Well, after the first one was finished, it became the norm. After all, they couldn’t allow someone else to get what they felt they were entitled to as well, although none of *those* were completed.” He put his hand up to dodge the excited dog, laughing at him.

Scoffing, her eyes traveled quickly around the car, focusing once more on the professor. “That’s called having more money than ya know what to do with. I’ll bet the people building this were treated like slaves. Always making them build, never mind the sacrifice they made.”

“No, actually they were revered. Thought of with high esteem. It was a great honor. Many of them worked on this every day of their lives. Then again, they do say that love is the biggest sacrifice of all.”

“Did they get paid for it? I mean, if all they were doing is building this pyramid then how were they enjoying any rewards for their work?”

“They were fed like royalty, and even had their families living with them. Their families were the ones to enjoy the life of royalty. Now, the slaves of the kingdom were the ones who waited on them as if they were part of the royal family themselves. So, they were treasured for their sacrifice.”

“Huh... interesting.” Glancing over at Jonas, she pointed to Antoine. “Look at how much more ya learn from books... documentaries. Stop watching movies. No sense in spending wasted hours on pretend. It would be the same as observing children playing... what is that game they play often? I think it’s... ‘house’.”

Jonas turned to look out the window. “You get your education your way, I’ll get mine my way.” Turning back to them, his eyes landed on the professor. “No offense, Antoine, but what you just spouted is all pretty much conjecture. No one *really* knows why, or even how and by whom, the pyramids were built.” Letting out a laugh, he turned back to the window. “The way you talk about it makes it sound like you were there.”

Antoine’s brow creased, but he let the snide remark pass. “The earliest tomb constructed as a *true* pyramid was the Red Pyramid at Dahshur. One of three burial structures built by Sneferu, the first king of the fourth dynasty. Then we have the Bent Pyramid and the Medium Pyramid.”

“Wait. Let me make sure I understand you. The pyramids *and* surrounding area,” she moved her hand around in a large circle, “was just a royal burial ground? I mean, that’s what it sounds like to me.”

“That depends on who you believe. Most everything that I’ve researched says that is so, however...” he turned to look at Jonas. “Pay attention. You might be interested in this as well.” He turned back to the window. “If that was the case, they would’ve found mummies somewhere in the pyramid, but they didn’t.”

Jonas shrugged. “I thought I read something about grave robbers.”

“That’s what they say. However, there are those that believe Egypt is older than what people tend to think. The reason for the lower subterfuges has been questionable; the placement of the pyramids, just which are more dominant, and how it works.”

Jonas rolled his eyes. “Oh, *now* you’re going into hypotheses.”

“Yes, but how are we to determine what is fact or fiction based off of the word of others? Unless one of the kings actually comes up from somewhere and says, ‘Yo, guess what?’ then it’s all just a matter of speculation. Red granite was found around the edges of the pyramids and this was used for maintenance purposes.”

Dusty looked confused. “What do ya mean?”

“Like you would maintain your house against age. You might change out a few shingles that look worn, replace a few boards to renovate your house and keep it standing; it’s supposedly the same with the pyramids. If that’s true, then it’s *much* older than anyone believes.” He pointed out the window at the sight of the scaffold-like equipment against it. “They appear to be restoring it, but I think they’re damaging it.”

When Hooch pounced back in her lap, she tackled him in place, holding tightly to his collar. To keep him still, she gently stroked his ears – something that always calmed him down. Giving the professor a nod, she reached a hand over, snagging a Mountain Dew from the beverage assortment. After sucking down half, she slipped it back into the drink tray, wiping her mouth off with the back of her hand. “All these people thought when they died they would walk around... within the pyramid? Keywords there... *after* they died.”

“A lot of them weren’t right in the head, but that came from years of inbreeding.” He tapped his temple, chuckling. “In reality, they thought of themselves as divine, and the pyramids as channels for them to ascend back to heaven. I would love to see inside one.”

“That makes two of us. We’re definitely gonna have to check one out while we’re here.” Grabbing both sides of Hooch’s face, she kissed him on the muzzle. “After all, we can’t have you working the whole time, right?” He licked her face again, and she laughed. “I love you, Hooch.” As the Land Rover pulled up to the front door of the hotel, Dusty’s gaze locked on the magnificence of the building. “Whoa.”

Antoine’s jaw fell. “Day-um.”

Jonas chuckled, watching the two as they marveled at the towering palace rising from the sand in Nile City. Having spent time around Deva, he knew that a jet and chauffeured ride would not be the extent of it. Hell, for all he knew, she owned the place but put it in someone else’s name for secrecy.

6

“Welcome to The Fairmont Cairo,” the driver exclaimed.

The tall building had twenty-five floors and was built in 2007. The theme was gold, glass, lights, and beauty. It had a total of ten meeting rooms, which included a ballroom where weddings and receptions were held. There were five-hundred-forty guest rooms/suites with stylish art and contemporary décor. The combination of modern architecture and ancient mosques provided timeless elegance and refinement.

Security checkpoints ensured that all guests had an enjoyable time, not bothered by the political chaos going on around the world. The place was spotless with shining, bright, impressive columns with water features, panoramic lifts, and exquisite restaurants. For easy access, there was even a shopping mall in the building and for the top floors, there was a nightclub as well. It had everything a vacationer needed to not leave the safety of the hotel.

With sweeping views of the Nile River and scenes of the Pyramids in the distance, Cairo’s natural beauty and ancient history were always in sight. Added to that were special features such as culinary adventures at the city’s finest restaurants with eight food and beverage venues offered. The brochure boasted about how room service would happily deliver from all of them for a small fee. There was the once-in-a-lifetime chance to bask in the sunshine or under the stars at a unique

rooftop poolside sky bar or experience true pleasure with the full-service treatment at their Willow Stream Spa. The lobby was gloriously filled with splendor. There were gold statues in the center of the room, depicting the emotions of men. The white tiled flooring with black stencil decoration was sparkling clean and shined with the reflection of the lighting.

With just the mention of their names, they got the full V.I.P. treatment: baggage taken to their suite, complimentary champagne, and fresh chocolate-covered strawberries. On the way up to their suite, they stepped into the glass elevator that was lined in golden colors.

“Jumping pockets of gold!” Dusty exclaimed, staring out of the glass as the elevator began its ascent. “This place has got to be the finest hotel around!”

Antoine nodded. “I don’t think I have ever been in a glass elevator. I would imagine those afraid of heights wouldn’t like these very much!”

Jonas smirked at the two. “You’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.”

They were staying on the Gold Floor, which was rumored to be the best. Entering their presidential suite, Dusty’s eyes widened at the sight before her. It was a three-bedroom apartment crammed into a suite. In the center was a sitting room with a sectional couch and a few chairs. To the left of that was a bar/TV area. To the right was the dining room with a very long table. There was a small kitchenette and then the three bedrooms with double beds in each. The bathroom – with a shower/tub within a glass enclosure – was exquisitely lined with gold.

She was happy to see that smoking was allowed and the glass ashtrays with the golden base were fit for a king. The suite didn’t smell like cigarettes but that was thanks to the air fresheners that spurted a rainforest scent every half hour or so. All of the rooms looked similar. The walls were covered in deep brown wood and the bed had a large black leather headboard. There was a TV mounted on the wall, though it wouldn’t see much action.

Antoine picked one of the rooms. Setting his bags down on the bed, he started unpacking. “I think this one will do nicely for me.” Smiling, he looked out the big window that showed a beautiful view of the city. There was a small table with two chairs as well. He left the door open and Hooch wandered in, sniffing everything in sight. Smiling at him, he reached down and scratched behind his ears. “Hey there, Hooch. Do you like the suite?”

Hooch looked up, wagging his rear end, giving his answer in a series of barks. “Woof-woof-woof-woof.” He went back to his investigating.

Antoine chuckled. “My sentiments exactly.”

They decided that Dusty would take the room between them. She began to unpack her bags and set out Hooch’s bowls and toys. After all, he was very excited and investigating every corner and piece of furniture in the place. It was best to make sure he had his chew toys and bones to keep everything looking good.

Looking out his window at the beauty, Jonas understood Antoine’s dream of visiting and wondered why – in five-hundred years – he had never spent time in this enchanting land. Turning away from the window, he set about arranging his room when he noticed a note on the small freezer chest next to the dresser. Opening it, he chuckled.

Jonas, stay hydrated. Deva.

Smiling, he noticed several bags of vampire blood and a few pouches of the herbs and

Belladonna to make his ‘morning coffee’ with. It didn’t take long before Hooch was whining and pawing at the door. Closing the freezer, he walked over and opened the door, peering out. Hooch stood, wagging his tail, looking up at Jonas. It was a ritual that he checked out every inch of their rooms to make sure they were safe.

“Well, hi there, Hooch,” he said, inviting him in.

The Pitbull trotted in, sniffing out any scent of danger, and explored each crack and crevice in Jonas’s room. Giving the man a questioning look as he passed the freezer, he pressed his damp nose against the window. “Woof.” Satisfied, he headed back into Dusty’s room.

Following Hooch, he peeked in, watching her for a moment, before clearing his throat. “Not bad for a couple of gumshoes and a retired teacher, eh?” He had to keep up the appearance of how he was before; sarcastic, smart ass, annoying jerk that she couldn’t wait to be rid of.

After setting Hooch’s bowls down – his water bowl and a ball of the raw meat she mixed up for him – she turned, looking at him. Exiting her room, she moved to the dining room area. “Yeah, Sparx, this place is unbelievable.” Her tone did not match her words as she hung the leash on a door hook.

Antoine joined them, his eyes wide. “This is...” he paused, getting a little teary eyed then smiled. “Oh, my Lord. I wish Gabby could be here to see this. She would fall in *love* with this place!”

Dusty smiled. “She would’ve wanted you to move to Egypt and ya know it. Are ya getting anywhere with the translation?” Moving the plates, glasses, and silverware onto the counter in the kitchenette, she motioned to the table. “There. Now we have room.

Stepping back into his room, he gathered his books, notes, and the scrolls, bringing them to the dining room table. “It’s a slow process. I’m not sure if you’re aware of this, but there are four-thousand hieroglyphs and twenty-six letters.”

“Cranking freaky pictures! How are you gonna be able to figure that out without spending years on it?”

“Lucky for you, I *have* studied this for years. Many hieroglyphs work like an acronym in English.”

Jonas arched a brow. “I’m not following.”

“Back in World War Two, the Germans sent out messages using a code. They took letters and numbers and made them stand for another letter. They sent them out and each of the places had a special typewriter that would pull up the proper letter for the note. Computers use the same thing as cryptic messages. This is similar to that. Take the text chat lingo that the kids use nowadays. Just for shits and giggles, let’s say that the sign of a cat, for example, came out to BRB. Now, you wouldn’t try to sound that out and add words to it because it wouldn’t make sense. ‘Burb’. Once you figure out what each letter represents: Be Right Back, then you understand. Some of the hieroglyphs worked the same way. Each one wasn’t always just a letter, sometimes they were words.”

Dusty shook her head. “Oh, well there’s nothing like making *any* part of this easy!”

“Exactly. So, it’s going to take a little bit of trial and error for me to figure it out. It’s not impossible, but it *is* going to be tedious. I’m going to follow the Dogon cosmology and it should

help.” He positioned everything in order on the large table.

“Well that’s good to know,” Jonas said, quietly stepping back into his room, closing the door behind him.

Antoine pursed his lips as Jonas’s door clicked shut, then a brow rose when he heard the lock click. “Ok, Dusty. Come clean with me. Just what are we doing here?”

Nibbling on the inside of her cheek, she faced him. “Antoine, I’ve never lied to you,” *not telling him is not the same as lying*, “please don’t make me start now.”

Hooch walked over, headbutting his leg. Reaching down, he stroked him between the ears, before bending down to give him a belly rub. Looking up at her, he quirked a brow. “It means *that* much to you, but you can’t tell me anything?”

“The less you know… the better.”

“So… it’s dangerous?”

She sighed. “The *less* you know… the better for *you*.”

He nodded, looking down at Hooch. “You hear that boy? That’s her way of saying, ‘no more questions’. Should we listen?”

He sat up, barking once, before going off to investigate more and play with his toys.

The professor sat down. Looking back at her, he crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, I do have just one more question.”

“What’s that?”

“*When* do we eat? There are like eight different places in here to try the food and I’m ready to try something from them all!” He smiled. “I’m famished.”

Dusty laughed. “As long as it’s not fried scarabs, then I’m down for that. Let me see if Jonas will join us.” Walking to his door, she rapped on it lightly. “Sparx, ya decent?” With him, that was a double-edged sword.

Having just recharged his batteries with a few sips of Deva’s thoughtful gift, he capped the flask on his special mixture. He waited a moment before answering. While the short aftereffect was far less noticeable than what Hemosynth gave him, he needed Dusty to believe he was still taking them. Moving at lightspeed, he changed into a thin white shirt, tucked into Khaki Dockers, with a pair of sandals on his feet. Splashing on some Old Spice cologne, he gargled a capful of Scope, so Hooch would not smell the fresh blood on him.

“I didn’t order room service.” Winking, he stepped aside to let her in. “What’s on your mind?”

Still furious with him for everything he put her through, she had every intention to give him what for. But it wasn’t the time or the place. Entering the room, her eyes scanned the area, as if looking for something. “Are we doing room service? Antoine’s starving. I’m a little hungry too. I’m pretty sure you already ate, but…” Glaring, she threw a dig his way. “We thought ya might wanna join us. That way… you can stay informed of what *I* know.”

“You’re right. I took my pill so I’m fine, but I’ll join you. Just let me get some shoes on. I’ve never been big on sandals, but I thought I’d give them a shot.” Looking down at pale feet, he shook his head. “They don’t work.” Heading for his closet, he rummaged for his deck shoes. “Has he

made any prog-”

The window shattered in his room as the bullet embedded itself into the wall, directly behind Dusty, missing her head by a fraction of an inch.

7

Hooch had gone into ‘protect mode’ even before she hit the floor, bounding over, shielding her with his body. Standing over her, growling at dead air, it was more than training. It was the deep-rooted love and devotion between them that sent Hooch over her body. He would die to save her, and vice versa.

Acting on instinct, she dropped flat. “Antoine, get down!” Hollering between Hooch’s front legs, she squirmed trying to get him off her. “Hooch. Move. I can’t see now.”

Antoine slid out of the chair, going to the floor, covering his head with his hands. “What the hell?!”

When no more shots rang out, she slid out from under Hooch, though he continually tried standing over her. “It’s okay, boy. I’m okay. Everything’s fine.” He was like a mother hen when there was danger. Though it was sweet, it was definitely annoying.

He licked her face, neck, and ears, making sure she really *was* all right, and then stepped aside, still at attention.

Looking over at Jonas, a hand went to steady her breathing. In the past, she lived with dangerous missions and it was nothing for her to calmly sweat it out without even thinking about it. Times had changed. She hadn’t been that person in a long time. It was a little worrisome. “What the hell’s going on? Who is shooting at us? Better question... why?”

He was at the window, scanning the building across the street. Catching a glint of sunlight dancing off a small object, he pursed his lips and turned to Dusty. “I’ll be right back. Stay down.” In a blink, he was gone, just as he had vanished from her office when he went after Seth.

Glancing out the door, she noticed Antoine crawling on his belly toward her. If the situation wasn’t so frightening, it would be comical the way he moved. Silently, she prayed that Jonas hurried up. Otherwise, she might have to explain just what-

Jonas returned in the same place that he had left from, just as Antoine rounded the corner. “Hmm.”

Standing, Dusty reached down, helping the professor to his feet. “I think it’s safe now.”

“What the *hell*’s going on?” he asked, smoothing out his jeans. “I’m too damn old to be crawling around like some Boot Camp Marine.” Seeing the window, his jaw fell, and he looked over at Dusty. “Are you all right?”

Nodding, she smiled, while glancing over at Jonas. “I’m fine. Probably just an accident. Luckily, they missed.”

He was examining a small metal object held between his thumb and forefinger. “Hundred-fifty-five grain Lapua Scenar, three-zero-eight Winchester load.” He looked up at her, palming a small piece of paper.

Antoine's brow lifted. "Uh-huh. This is part of that *dangerous* you told me not to worry about, right? Well, I'm officially worried. I just want to put that on record."

"I'm fine. If someone wanted me dead, they wouldn't have missed." It wasn't a lie. Whoever shot at her meant to miss. It was a warning, but what about, she didn't have a clue. The professor didn't need to know that. He had one job during this and it wasn't to worry about her, it was the translation. "Jonas had a good idea though. We should order some room service and eat."

Jonas nodded, following Dusty's lead. "It isn't just a good idea, it's a great idea. I'm starving."

Not wanting to further worry the poor professor whose first night in Egypt was already a weird one, her eyes locked onto Jonas with a look he would understand. They needed to talk... alone. "Antoine, can ya do me a huge favor? While Jonas and I chitchat, could you call in the order? I glanced over the menu when we came in, didn't realize how hungry I was... I guess, but I saw this dreamy looking Caesar Salad with grilled chicken thighs. That has my name all over it! For dressing, see if they have Ranch... or something close. Definitely not anchovy though. Ew."

Antoine blinked. "Now just a minute here. We need to call the pol-"

"That isn't necessary, Antoine." Smiling, Jonas put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sure it's just as Dusty said. Some kid with a gun. An accident. Even though we're in a swank part of Egypt, there are still a *lot* of weapons around. We're all ok, so why don't you go and order us some food. It will be good. We'll all have a bite to eat, and then go over what you have so far on that scroll. You got Dusty's order, get whatever you want, and I'll have the fried calamari."

"Caesar salad with grilled chicken thighs. Fried calamari. Tajine Akkawi Bel Basal." Antoine nodded. Turning, he walked away.

Once he was out of earshot, Jonas looked at Dusty and shrugged. "No choice. He doesn't strike me as one to take no for an answer. I don't like doing that, but-"

"You *mind-fucked* him?" Angrily, she whispered, while slapping him in the arm.

Out in the dining room, Hooch growled from his bed while chewing on a raw bone. Even though Jonas was a good person, Hooch's mistress was very angry and that made him upset as well.

"I had to."

"You had to? Psh! He's gonna be okay, right?" Her eyes followed Antoine as he walked away. "He's not gonna be like some... walking zombie?" Spinning back around, the angry scowl stamped across her face.

Closing the door, he shook his head. "Yes, Dusty. He's going to shuffle around one of the finest hotels in the Middle East, mumbling, 'brains... brains... brains'!" He rolled his eyes. "Give me just a *little* credit, huh? I wouldn't hurt the *one* person who can help us figure out that scroll... but while he's gone," he held the bullet in his palm, showing it to her. "I think you have a problem."

The look on her face registered that he might've stepped in a big pile of it with that statement. Putting hands on hips, she tapped her right foot in annoyance. "Did... you just say to give you credit? Like that does a daggum thing! I gave credit. I trusted you! I *needed* you and you couldn't take the time to answer my *one* text or answer my-" she stopped talking. It wasn't worth it. "You've lost the right to ask me to trust you. I did. It led to disappointment."

Setting the bullet on the side table, he tilted his head. “You haven’t got a clue what I was going through. I suppose you think I was lounging around Deva’s pool, sipping B-positive all day, listening to Bob Marley.”

“Nope. No clue what you did or didn’t do. Why do you ask? Easy. Because you neglected to hold up your end of the bargain and tell me! I would’ve been fine with just one text, telling me you arrived. I mean, really, how hard is that? No, you were too busy doing only God knows what to think of me *one* time. I lost sleep worrying over your dumbass. Hell, I thought you were dead! Thought Deva was chowing down on your soul nightly! Not once in a week did you even bother to concern yourself with how I might be worried about you! Luckily, it only lasted for a few days.”

“This ‘cold shoulder’ bit is getting a touch old, and all because I didn’t call? I didn’t text? Well, excuuuuuse me, okay? I am sorry. I was a *little* busy learning how to save your kind from extinction, by risking my immortal life, so cut me a thread or two of slack!” He hadn’t lost his temper in a good fifty years, but he had enough. “Besides, you didn’t miss me. You had Tommy or Toby, or whatever his fucking name is.” He put his hands up, waving them. “Why the hell am I explaining shit to you? You’re just along for... whatever the hell the prophecy has you along for... Fuck, I don’t even know *that*!”

Arching a brow, the whole reference to ‘Travis’ was ignored... for the moment. “Oh, don’t you daaaaaare turn this thing around on me! *You* promised that I would know *everything*. What you really meant to say was, ‘I’m gonna lie my ass off’ because ya couldn’t even keep me informed to your well-being!”

“My well-being?” He laughed, shaking his head. “Hello. Vampire. We have two,” he held up his hand, grabbing his index and middle finger, “count ‘em. One... two. Two states of being. We’re either fine or dead. No in between.” It was not completely true, but that didn’t need to be included in this argument. “And yes, I promised you that I’d keep you in the loop, ok? I didn’t, ok? My bad, but shit happens, and plans change, alright? So, tell me something. If you’re so damn offended, why stay? Why not just walk right out that door, go back to your little hiding game, and forget all about vampires, and prophecies, Seth, Deva... and most of all, forget about *me*. Let’s face it. You didn’t want a partner. Hell, I didn’t want a partner, so what the hell are we doing here, screaming at each other like a married couple?”

Grimacing at him, she shook her head. “Married couple?! Ew!”

“By the way, I’d say someone found you.” He showed her the slip of paper with a handwritten message.

Next time, I won’t miss.

Snatching the note out of his hand, she crumpled it, tossing the wadded ball aside. “Walk away? *Walk away*?! Do you really think I could just run from something that’s gonna destroy humanity? And I thought you knew me at least a little bit! You don’t know me at all. Ya know what, Jonas? You can... you can... take a short walk off a long pier into shark-infested waters! The nerve! Better yet... you can fuck off as far as I’m concerned. I swear I’m more pissed off at myself for even caring a little bit about you! But you don’t have to worry about that. You ruined it. Then again, I think you’re used to that, aren’t you?”

“I can fuck off?! The last time I checked, you need me in this!”

Turning, she stomped to the door, tired of the conversation. Then, figuring she wasn’t done,

she whirled back around, steps taking her back to square off with him. “The reason I don’t run away is because, for whatever God-awful purpose, I’m *stuck* with you until this is *over*! So, I suggest we find the next stupid stone, get what we need to, and kill Seth. Then we can do what we want so badly... get the hell away from each other.” It had been a long time since Dusty was so angry. There was a fire burning inside her pupils. “If you want me away from you so flipping bad, get on your phone, and call your dang burn bankroll. Then she and the rest of the Vampire Squad can come and get the professor and me out of here. I’ll be damned if I’m leaving the man I care about like a father in the hands of someone who doesn’t give a shit about the living.”

“Say *what*?” He stared at her dumbfounded. “I don’t give a shit about the living? Oh, now that’s rich. If I don’t give a shit, then why the fuck did I just endure two weeks in hell. You don’t know it, but my nice tidy world flipped inside out too. People I trusted, people I looked to for guidance... people I called a *friend*. They all lied to my face, turned me into a dependent simpleton, so I know what it’s like to be—”

The door opened, and Antoine stood there, eyeing both of them. Hooch was by his side and quickly rushed over to Dusty, standing between them, growling low at Jonas. Antoine walked in, keeping an eye on Jonas. “I think we need to talk.”

8

Checking to make sure Dusty was okay – after all the angry tones – Hooch whined at her side until she bent down, kissing the top of his head, comforting him. Satisfied everything was fine, he went to check out the corner of the room. Doing a couple of spins in one direction, and then the next, his body plopped down, watching them.

Jonas’s eyes narrowed. “How long have you been standing there, Antoine?”

“Long enough to question my sanity.” He looked at Dusty. “I appreciate you having my back. I do... but please tell me I didn’t make this trip just to die.”

All the anger – as well as the desire to hide Jonas’s body in an unmarked grave – vanished as Dusty laid eyes on Antoine. Letting out a deep sigh, her eyes found Jonas again. “He needs to know what’s going on. It’s dangerous. Hell, *anyone* associated with us is in a world of danger. It’s only right that he knows everything if he’s gonna help us.”

He shrugged. “He’s *your* responsibility.”

“Good. I’ll fill him in, but don’t go anywhere in case he needs... what was it you called it?” Grinning deviously, she glanced at the ceiling before snapping her fingers, glaring back at him. “Oh yeah. *Irrefutable* proof.”

Antoine looked from one to the other. “Dusty, what are you talking about?”

Jonas looked between the two, knowing Dusty was about to spin a yarn the likes of which Antoine would have never believed possible. She was right, of course. He was another that had to be in the loop to figure out what was going on. “Go ahead, but I’m not *about* to blow my head half off again if he needs proof.”

“Nope, not your head. You need what few brains you have left. I’ll aim somewhere else.” She smirked. “I know that people aren’t supposed to be told, but we can trust Antoine. I trust him more than I trust *anyone* in this world.”

“You just can’t wait to shoot me. I knew it was coming. I suppose you’ll aim for the chest?” He shook his head, wandering over to the broken window. *Why me?*

Antoine looked at them. His black face had paled as if he had died. “Where... how... what... What are you talking about? You’re not *really* going to shoot him, right?”

Taking a deep breath, she walked over. “Antoine, do you trust me?”

He stared into her eyes, nodding slowly, swallowing hard. “Of course, my dear. You’re like my daughter... only the good one, not the bad one. Then again, you *can* be rebellious at times.”

Taking his hand, she walked him to the bed, sitting down with him. Hooch walked over, laying down at her feet, looking up at Jonas with puppy dog eyes. “Okay, well, listen to what I’m about to tell ya. Listen with an open mind, and don’t freak out on me, because... well, I need ya. We,” she pointed between her and Jonas, “*really* need ya on this.”

He looked from Jonas then back to Dusty. “Okay.”

Dusty started relaying every event that happened from the moment Jonas entered her office in Cider Lake until they were sitting in Egypt.

At first, he was quiet, just looking between the two of them.

When the narrative came full round to the two of them sitting there on that bed, reaching up, her hand lightly grazed his cheek in a loving daughter-like moment. “I know it sounds wacky as all get out. Trust me. I had a hard time believing myself. But it’s *extremely* important that we understand whatever’s on that quatrain.” It was hard to tell if he believed or not. His face held no emotions. “Antoine, are ya okay?”

He looked at Jonas before turning back to Dusty. “Vampires?” He laughed. Hooch perked his head, canting it to the side as he stared at the professor. “Ok, you two. Ya got me. Damn, that’s a good one. I bet Professor Henry put you up to this, didn’t he? That old son-of-a-coot. We were always playing tricks on each other. Pranking, I think they call it now or punking. Where’s the camera?” Standing, he looked around in the corners of the room. “Those things must be *minute*. I don’t see anything that looks like a camera in here. Ok, Donald. You win. No way can I *ever* top this. Come on out and-”

“Please, Antoine. I need ya to believe.” Sighing, it was obvious that Antoine didn’t believe a dang thing she said. Still pissy at Jonas, truth be told, it made her tingly inside that she got to possibly hurt him. Not that he would feel it anyway, but it would still make her feel better.

Jonas sighed and opened his shirt. “We don’t have time for this. Just shoot me already. I know you want to.”

Antoine looked at Jonas with wide eyes. “I don’t think she needs to-”

“Okay, you leave me no choice.” Reaching down, she pulled the knife out of the case, tucked away in her boot. Walking over to Jonas, not giving any warning, she slammed it into his gut, straight to the hilt, twisting it, glaring in his eyes.

Antoine jumped up, as did Hooch, rushing over. “Good heavens, girl! Have you lost your mind? Jonas, are you okay? I need to call an ambulance becau-”

He put up a hand to stop him. “It’s ok, Professor.” Looking down at the blade sticking out of his gut, he glanced up at Dusty. “Right in the liver. Nice.”

Shrugging, she too looked at it. "Not my best work, but... had to make it good."

Antoine blinked, as he watched Jonas pull the knife out of his stomach. His jaw fell when the wound closed almost immediately without a hint of blood anywhere. Looking at him, his eyes widened as he placed his hand on his own hip. "My... hip. That... was you?"

"Yep."

"I wondered how all the pain just disappeared. I haven't been able to move like this in years... way too many to count." He swallowed hard, still watching Jonas. "Now, it's like I'm in my youth again."

"You're welcome. Just don't tell anybody. My license to practice medicine expired... a few centuries ago." He handed Dusty back her knife. "Thanks for not shooting me. It's easier to remove a knife than it is a bullet, and the ones you have would've hurt... a lot."

Sliding the knife back into its case, she shrugged again. "Don't get all sentimental on me, Sparx. It's called *compassion*. Maybe ya remember what it's like. Then again, you haven't felt it in... too many years to count. It's probably tucked down deep... deeeeep... in your archived memories where things that don't matter stay."

The professor flopped down onto the bed. "This ain't real."

"I'm afraid it is, Antoine. Everything she told you down to the last detail."

"Now that you're up to speed," looking over at the bullet, she turned to Jonas, "who the hell is shooting at us... or rather shooting at *me* and why? Do ya think it's the C.I.A.? After all, I did go back into territory where I was supposedly dead. I had a feeling this would happen. Maybe they caught wind of it?"

Antoine looked over at her. Hooch head-butted his leg, and he reached down to give him a good pat. "What are you talking about? What does the C.I.A. have to do with any of this?"

"The reason I made myself *die* was, so I could quit the C.I.A., not because of a stalker. I knew too much about what they were doing for them to ever let me walk away."

"What exactly *are* they doing?"

A knock on the door saved that conversation for another time. "Room service." Hooch was the first one out, barking at the front door, trying to get through it.

When Dusty headed out to answer it, Jonas looked at the shattered window. "*Tuesre barut ketar.*" The glass repaired itself. Looking at Antoine, he shrugged. "I was also a handyman in another life."

Antoine's eyes grew wide as he stared at Jonas. "I bet you were, son. I bet you were."

Room service entered with the cart of great-smelling food. Jellybeans didn't last long. Her stomach grumbled in protest. The man stood at the cart, staring at Hooch. It took all Dusty had to keep Hooch locked in place, between her legs, with one hand clamped tightly onto his collar. It didn't stop him from snarling, gnashing at the guy, ready to take a chunk out of his hide if she let go. His behavior reminded her of the first meeting he had with Jonas. When the guy reached for the twenty, Dusty shoved her hand into his, shaking it. "I'm so sorry for the dog. I don't know what's gotten into him. Please, forgive him." Seeing no reaction, she handed him the bill.

The young man smiled, taking the bill. "Thank you, miss." His Arabic accent, though strong,

did not interfere with his English. As the two men joined them, he looked at Antoine, Hooch, then to Jonas, bowed slightly and left.

“Have a good one!” After closing the door, she released Hooch.

He first went to the door, giving a few growls and a bark before instantly heading for the food.

“Soup’s on.” Hooch moved between her legs like a cat, trying to get her attention, almost tripping her in the process. “Go get your bone!”

Each of the men took their dish of food off the cart before joining her at the dining room table. Hooch went huffing and snarling to his bed to chew on a ham bone.

Grabbing her plate, she started eating a piece of chicken off the top, glancing at Antoine’s meal. “What is that?”

“Oxtail. I’m anxious to try it.”

“Ox? I would think it would taste like beef. Somewhere down the line, the two have to be related.”

Jonas nodded. “They are cattle just bred for different purposes.”

“That’s like hearing someone say that something weird tastes like chicken.” She chuckled. “So, what’s our game plan now?”

Antoine shook his head as he set his plate in front of him. “I need to get busy on the translation.”

Walking over to Hooch’s bowl, she dropped most of the chicken pieces into it. “I’m not gonna just leave you here unprotected.” Hooch quickly walked over, wolfing down the pieces with a happy wagging of his tail.

Antoine waved a hand dismissing her thoughts. “You two do whatever it is you have to do. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.”

“The only thing I have to do is walk Hooch before bed, but Jonas will be here to watch out for ya.”

Jonas smiled. “We can go over the quatrain together.”

He scoffed. “I *don’t* need a babysitter!”

“Yes, you do. You’re *very* important to me... to us... and to this mission. We have to save humanity from extinction,” Dusty said.

“I realize that, but I have managed to stay alive long before you came along.”

Grinning at him, Jonas winked. “I keep saying the same thing.”

Taking a bite of her salad, she wiggled a fork at him. “I know, but you weren’t *ever* up against *these* particular... obstacles.”

He looked at her, arching a brow. “Besides... *I* wasn’t the one shot at. You were. Do you really think that’s safe?”

“What?”

“Leaving the hotel room by yourself to walk the dog?”

Watching Hooch wolfing down the chicken, happily, she nodded. “Oh yeah. I’ll have my guardian angel with me.”

“He’s not bulletproof.”

“If whoever shot at me wanted me dead... I would be. I’m not gonna hide around the corners, hoping I won’t get shot.” She motioned to his plate. “Now, eat your food before it gets cold.”

Rolling his eyes, he motioned to her plate. “I thought you were ready to try some Egyptian food?”

Digging her fork into the greens again, she paused, glancing up at him. “I thought about it... but then wondered if they were gonna put bugs or something in it. After all, over here it would be the norm, but not where I come from... so I went with what I know.” Looking over at Hooch, she arched a brow. “Ya know... he sure didn’t like that waiter. He passed the silver test, so... I dunno.”

Looking up from his plate, Jonas nodded. “I could’ve told you he wasn’t. Not sure why Hooch went crazy though. The guy probably thought you were sexy with... dirty thoughts. They creep out and the dog picks up on it.”

“Silver test?”

“I’ll explain later.”

Walking down the hall, the waiter pulled a cell phone from his white coat and punched a button. “The girl, dog, old man and the vile one are in the presidential suite on the gold floor.” Pausing, he nodded as orders came over the line. “Yes, sir.” Looking at the small bleeding rose tattoo on his wrist, he closed his eyes, disconnecting the call. Dropping the phone into a trash chute, he reached into his interior jacket pocket and took out a wooden spike, about seven inches long. Bringing it to his lips, he kissed it while closing his eyes. “God grant me victory against the agents of evil,” he whispered, slipping the piece back into his jacket.

9

A few hours later, Antoine came out of his room scratching his head. Looking over a piece of paper in his hand, he sat down by Dusty. Hearing Hooch snoring away, he glanced over and chuckled. “What a life that dog has.”

Glancing up from her laptop, she nodded. “He’s just lucky I had a soft spot for him. I couldn’t take the chance in someone killing him just because of his breed, ya know? It was my gain and truly someone else’s loss.”

“I think it was a gain for both of you.” Seeing Jonas’s door closed, the professor walked over and rapped on it. After a moment with no answer, he tried the knob, finding it locked. “Well, *that’s* not very neighborly.” Turning back to Dusty, he jerked his thumb at the door. “Where is he?”

Things still weren’t right between her and Jonas, especially after their argument. Even though they were stuck together in this, she really didn’t care how little they saw each other. He proved just how important his word was and it didn’t sit right with her. Shrugging, her eyes glanced back at the laptop as if it wasn’t a big deal. To her... it wasn’t. Right now, she did not care if he was out draining the whole population of Cairo. “I don’t know. He’s probably off doing some *vampire-y* shit.”

“That is not a word, young lady.”

Laughing, she clicked to the next page. Turning, her eyes focused on the paper in his hand. “Did ya figure it out?”

Rubbing the back of his neck, he slid the sheet over to her. “I don’t know. I’m sure I have the first line of this quatrain translated correctly, but I’ll be damned if it makes any sense. Now I’ve been pouring over every book I have about Egypt. First dynasty, second... Upper and Lower Egypt. I’m starting to feel like Brendan Fraser’s character in...” he looked at her and chuckled, seeing the blank expression on her face. “Never mind. Anyway, unless this makes sense to you or Count Sparky, I’d say we’re at a roadblock.”

“In quarters the Cardinal weapon lies...” reading it aloud did not help. She furrowed her brows, pointing to the stack of books. “Nothing in any of those?”

“Not a clue. I mean *cardinal* has so many meanings. A bird, a sports team... hell, it could refer to an actual Cardinal.”

With her mind still stuck on the bird, she shook her head, setting the paper down. “I’m not following.”

“You know... the *Catholic* Cardinal. Red robes, funny hats, lots of bling?”

Leaning back, she nodded. “Oh, *those* Cardinals. So, ya think this might be about a holy man?”

“Not so much the man as far as I can tell. It’s about a *weapon* the Cardinal has, but what kind? A holy cross?”

Canting her head to the side, she chewed on the inside of her cheek. “A holy cross wouldn’t bother him unless it was made of silver.”

His brow creased. “Silver? I think you’re mixing up the lore here.”

“No, it’s silver. Remember when I said that I did the silver test and the guy was unaffected, so I knew it wasn’t a vampire?” Lifting her hand, she showed him the ‘golden’ rings with the inside chipped away to reveal the silver. “Vampires can’t handle silver. When Sparx held one in his hand, it looked like a firecracker went off in it.” Sitting up, she started tapping on her laptop’s mouse. “I saw what a silver stake can do, and I also saw what a sword made of pure silver can do to one of ‘em.” Glancing at him, she shook her head. “It ain’t pretty.”

“But... I always thought silver was for werewolves...” blinking, he reached over, grabbing her arm. “Oh, *please* don’t tell me *they* exist, too.” Hooch caught the fearful tone in his voice, hopped off the bed and walked over, headbutting him in the leg with a slight whimper. Looking down, he smiled, bending over to scratch his ears. “I’m okay, boy. You’re such a good dog.” He straightened. Rubbing his chin, he looked back at Dusty. “Well? Do they?”

She shrugged. “I dunno. At this point, I don’t know *what* to believe. So, how long will it take you to translate more of the quatrain?”

Watching Hooch go back to his bed, he grew envious. “Not sure. It took me five hours just to get that little bit.” His shoulders slumped. “I’m so tired. I need coffee.”

Seeing the toll it was taking on him, she clapped her hands together. “I got a better idea. Go get some sleep. I’ll be here. Just leave the door open so I know you’re okay.”

His bleary eyes narrowed. “You’re really worried about me.”

“Yes. We can’t let anyone know you’re helping us... or you could be in even more danger.”

A gentle smile crossed his face. Reaching over, he patted her hand. “Honey, I’m an old man. I’ve lived past my prime. I’ll be fine, no matter what happens. You know, I’m not really a religious man. That was my Gabby’s thing, but I believe there is... something... more to life than what we can see. I used to be a cautious man, Dusty. Since I lost her... well, let’s just say... I know she’s waiting for me somewhere, so I’m good with whatever comes my way.”

Putting a loving hand over his, she smiled up at him in understanding. “I’m sure you are. However, you need some sleep. We need to keep this ‘old man’ around for as long as possible. Not just for this quatrain, but... for me. You’re like family to me. I don’t wanna lose you. It will all still be here when ya get up.”

Laughing, he stood and shuffled back to his room. “Yes, *daughter*. Whatever you say.”

“Thank you, *Father*.”

Fifteen minutes later, she stood in the doorway, watching him sleep. He looked peaceful in his dream-like state, probably spending time with Gabby. Blowing a kiss, she turned back to the dining room. After grabbing a cup of coffee, she figured it was time to solve this thing. Once more, Sparx was off doing something and not there to help. This was why she didn’t keep partners. They were useless. Oh well, she chastised herself for even giving him a moment of her thoughts. It was time to figure this thing out.

Snatching a piece of paper and a pen, she sat back down at her laptop. The only sleep she had since this whole thing started was on the jet. Yawning, she looked at the piece of paper, sipping the strong java, hoping to wake up her brain. After all, there was too much to do to sleep. Saving the world topped a cat nap.

Now, just what the hell does this first bit mean? Her mind rifled through the different meanings. Quarters, could mean a special room? Cardinal... possibly even a weapon? Was there such a thing? Not until the prophecy had run its course. Much like a virus – from what Sparx said – it had to happen. Leaning over, she rested her chin on her palms, staring at the screen, eyes heavy. Each time her head would fall to the side, she kept waking herself up. They had to figure out what ‘Cardinal’ this thing was talking about.

Snapping her eyes open, though she didn’t remember falling asleep, there was a YouTube video playing. When did she open YouTube? And for what purpose? Wasn’t she looking up web pages? Regardless, she was drawn to watch. It was a woman, rocking in a chair. It made a creaking noise as she slowly rocked back and forth. It was hypnotizing. Drawing her in. Making her become one with the old woman. There was a mirror on the wall, but she couldn’t make out the image. Creak. Creak. Creak. Back and forth, like a stopwatch swinging, making her more tired than she was. Dusty felt dragged down as if being forced to watch.

Suddenly, the mirror blew up to full-screen size – as did her laptop view – and it was Tammy Barker’s face, screaming at her, reaching for her, coming out of the screen. She was bleeding from every puncture wound and only had half of a face. The sound was like a screaming banshee, so loud it gave her an instant headache. “*It’s all your fault*,” she screamed, as the picture went black.

Instantly awake, lifting her head, Dusty slammed down the screen on her laptop. “Oh, hell no! Talk about lathering me up in creeped the hell out! What the...?” She had drifted off to sleep and had a nightmare or, so she thought that was what happened. That was the only *logical* explanation.

Hooch popped up, looking at her, quirking his head to the side, whining slightly.
“I’m okay, boy. Lay back down. I just need some coffee... and a damn cigarette.”

10

Wandering through one of the many shopping bazaars in Cairo, Jonas replayed the fight earlier. Dusty was right. It was thoughtless of him not to at least let her know he arrived at Deva’s safely, especially after he told her how powerful she was and how he could be walking into a trap set up to make him a seven-course meal for her.

There was just one thing wrong about what Dusty said earlier. A visual of her stayed within his thoughts the whole time. Keeping her safe was his main goal. Hell, he could’ve easily just gone back to Kanis and enjoyed the good life, but that would’ve meant her demise. Not acceptable. Of course, wild dogs wouldn’t drag that out of him.

If only there was a time machine, so he could retrace his steps and send out just one text, she wouldn’t be so rightfully angry. However, the main concern was the training. It took everything he had to focus on the vampires trying to kill him. Well, that and how Deva called him weak and stated that Dusty was the main core of it. If he had sent off a quick text before moving to the arena, it would’ve looked bad. He would’ve *looked* weak.

The chosen one cannot allow anything to stand in the way of the mission. Not even a fiery partner with eyes that haunt him. No. All emotions had to be put aside. Everyone looked at him to see if there was a chance. Was he strong enough? Could he really do it? A vampire crying over a mortal... not a great start to that road.

No. It was necessary. Something else she said actually made him feel bad. She lost sleep over him? Dusty? That was surprising. It screamed of her feelings for him... even if she didn’t realize they were there. It made him smile but frown at the same time. There was something there... but now what was left? Did it really matter?

Scanning the many tables in the bazaar, he chuckled seeing small plastic pyramids, snatched up by tourists who had more money than sense. One hawker hollered louder than the rest. “Sphinx! Personal Sphinx! Take home good luck, yes!” He was selling blocks of soap, poorly carved in the shape of The Great Sphinx. Tourists would buy anything.

Jonas felt a twinge. Would street vendors sell the world he knew one day? He closed his eyes, the possibility haunting him. *Blood! Fresh human blood! The real thing, not synthetic. Take home a taste of the old world!*

“A rose for your heart, sir?”

His daydream broken, Jonas looked upon a woman selling flowers and smiled.

She held out a single flame tipped bloom. “Sir, a beautiful flower. It will mend any offense, yes?” She was striking in an odd sort of way. Her eyes, lighter than most Egyptian women, held wisdom beyond her youth. She was dressed in a traditional Melaya Leff, the black cotton fabric wrapped around her slender body like a second skin. Only those haunting eyes showed as a white burka covered the rest of her face.

“I don’t think she’s exactly the flowers and candy type.”

Looking up at him, she nodded, her eyes tracing his face. "Sir, you have to try. All women love flowers. Especially from one as handsome as yourself. She still may have anger, but healing must begin, yes? Only eight pounds. None more beautiful in all of Cairo. I promise you."

Smiling, he nodded, handing her ten pounds, taking the flower. A thorn caught him, though the wound healed instantly. "Have you ever considered a career in car sales?"

She blinked, taking the money from him. "I... I do not understand."

"Ignore me, miss. I'm having a bad day." Taking the flower from her, their hands brushed, and Jonas got a brief vision of five female faces. The three young ones he recognized in the visual from Bacchus. The ones that made Seth more powerful. That obviously meant something, but what? Now, the other two... "Have we met before?"

The woman stared at him before looking away, shaking her head.

"I didn't mean to embarrass you. Forgive me. Thank you for the flower, and please keep the change." *Man, Sparx, you really have a way with the women, don't cha?*

Heading up to their floor, he was armed with a rose and a nice basket of fruit purchased from one of the louder vendors, promising paradise with his forbidden treasures. Antoine would love them if nothing else. Entering the suite, there were books on the dining room table along with a few slips of paper – signs that they were busy working – but no one was in sight. His steps took him to Dusty's closed door.

Rehearsing what to say, he stood there, unsure of what to do. A blind date probably had more courage. He could hear her inside tapping on the laptop. Always working. The woman needed to seriously take a break. If they survived this, maybe he would take her on a vacation. Then again, he still had to calm the storm before that ship could be sailed in *any* direction. Right now, it would capsize and sink into the bottomless depths of the ocean. As he raised his hand to knock, her phone went off.

Usually, he wouldn't listen or eavesdrop on her private conversation. Privacy was one of the things he held a deep respect for and usually willed his supernatural hearing to ignore things like phone conversations. However, this call was intruding on his apology tour and unacceptable. Turnabout was fair play.

11

Still visibly shaken from the image in her dream, nightmare, visual, whatever the hell that thing was, Dusty was leaning back against the pillows on her bed. It was creepy. In her mind, Tammy kept jumping off her computer screen, trying to grab her. When her phone went off, it scared her enough to make her jump. "Get a grip, Dusty," she said, chastising herself. Taking a deep drag off her cigarette, she clicked the Bluetooth. "Garner."

A familiar drawl came over the line, singing an old Conway Twitty song. "*Hello, darlin'. Nice to see you. It's been a long time. You're just as lovely, as you used to be.*"

Exhaling, the gray smoke gathered at the ceiling before dispersing. Grinning, she shook her head. Travis. He always brought a smile to her lips. "You're such a goofball." That was her favorite pet name for everyone. Then again, it was nicer than annoying pain-in-the-ass. "What are you up to?" Leaning over, she flicked the cigarette in the ashtray. "Got any mad cases that need my *expert*

opinion?"

"Oh, I got me a dandy! Missing person's case of all the dang burn things. Woman, 'bout twenty-six-years-old, long brown hair, eyes like those sweet caramel candies. Last anybody saw her, she was headed off to... Lord knows where... with some bumpkin, she don't even know all that well. Any idea where a fella might start looking?"

Chuckling, she took another drag off the cigarette. "Damn. That does sound like a dandy of a case. Then again," she exhaled while talking, "that description could be damn near anyone. Who filed the missing person's report? Maybe this missing person skipped outta town with the bumpkin? It could be that she just didn't like where she was in life, or who she was stuck with... just decided to take a dose of Fuckitol and hopped on the bumpkin express."

There was a drawn-out pause and his voice took on a more serious tone. "I hope she didn't. If she did, well there's a big ol' boy looking for her, and I'd hate to think what he might do if she run out on him."

Laughing, she shook her head. "Oh please. That big ol' boy has many women, lining up for him to send those bedroom eyes in their direction. You're taking up my time, darling, so what are you *really* up to?"

"Missin' you. What about you?"

Ignoring the feel-good part of his statement, she squashed out her cigarette. It had not escaped her memory that they took their on-again, off-again relationship to the next level. The 'L' word. The dreaded feelings that leave a person paralyzed. It was better to ignore the 'heartburn' with Tums than to give it one minute of serious consideration. It would never work. Having never experienced 'love', she wasn't sure what she felt. There was a strong longing to be with him, but that could be lust. The man was good in bed. "Just working on this mind-numbing case. We've got a lead, but so far, it's leading me nowhere but a daggum brick wall. As much as I keep running into the blamed thing, I'm giving myself one helluva headache. Gonna give me a concussion. Other than your non-missing-missing person... how are things there?"

"Lonely. Say, I was thinking... yeah, I know, full-time job. If ya tell me where ya are, I could come and help. Maybe meet that *partner* of yours. Ya know three expert sets of eyes just might help."

"I wish we could. We're chasing one wild goose after another. You'd be bored to tears with all the research and dead ends. I'd spend more time filling you in on what we already know when we could be solving the case." The world depended on her having a clear head and a strong heart. Travis had this habit of making her weak in the knees.

"Now, I might get *aggravated*, working with ya and all, but I don't think I'd *ever* get bored. What'd ya say? C'mon, you know ya want me there."

Truth was, she did, but then he would be another *mortal* who had to be told that vampires exist, and she didn't trust him with that valuable information. "Even though I would love your company, it's just not a good time right now."

"Dusty Garner, you are by far the most stubborn, aggravating female I've ever known. You're also the onliest one I ever gave a damn about."

"Onliest isn't a word."

“Remember how we used to lay there after a bit of afternoon delight? I’d be rubbing your shoulders and kissing on ya. ‘Specially that there sweet spot just below your cute lil’ belly button? We could do that again and it might help with the stress of banging that pretty little head into brick walls.”

“That’s not gonna work... no matter how sweet. Sorry sweet *thang*... I have to concentrate on this case. You would just be a distraction. Besides... ya know me when I’m working a case. No time for distractions... of *any* kind.”

“I do at that, my sweet woman. I do at that.” A sigh came across the speaker. “Dusty, you be careful darlin’. I don’t know whatcha got yourself into, but... well, I got your partner’s name, Jonas Sparx, and started checking around. Now before ya get madder than a swatted hornet and hang up, listen to me. I didn’t come up with a dang burn thing. Dusty, I mean nada. A man like that... able to keep himself hid that way... you just watch your back, and if ya need me, I’m a phone call away.”

Her jaw tensed. That was another reason he couldn’t join them. Travis was just too nosey for his own good. “Travis, darling, he’s a private investigator, *honey*. We hide our information quite well. You should know that. Ya wouldn’t be able to find shit on me either.” One good thing about being a hacker.

“He’s more than just some private eye, darlin’. I ain’t seen a man what ain’t got no past since... look, I got your back if ya need it, that’s all. I’ll let ya get back to your case. Be safe and come home in one piece, ya hear me?”

“I appreciate that. I really do. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. If I get into a jam that we can’t handle, you’ll be the first person I call. Okay?” Using her best hot southern belle voice, she tried to lighten the moment. “Does ‘at make my big strong man feel bettah?”

“Mmm... makes my flagpole twitch like I’m on the dance floor and what-not. Suppose it’s another lonely night with images of you dancing naked in my mind while I tend to Rosy and her five sisters, but damn they’s gettin’ tired.”

Groaning, she laughed out loud before stifling it to a giggle. “Travis Knight! You just *had* to go there, didn’t ya? You took a perfectly innocent conversation, rolled it in mud, and threw it right in the gutter!”

“Yeah, ya know me. Always in the dang burn gutter. I’ll check in on ya from time to time like every other day. Good night, Dusty. Guess I’ll hit the hay.” He sighed. “I love ya, Dusty Garner. I know ya don’t wanna hear that, but ya need to and I need to say it. I truly love you with all my heart.”

Ignoring the mushy part, though it did pull on her heartstrings, her laughter turned into a heavy sigh. “Yeah, yeah. Back at ya. Sweet dreams, Travis. I’ll talk to you the day after tomorrow.”

Jonas looked at the rose in his hand and smiled. Travis was smooth, but he heard the sincerity in the man’s voice. He loved her, and while her tone did not carry the same weight, it was clear there was the seed of an attraction. Moreover, where there was a seed, a tree could grow, and he wasn’t sure he liked that. It was just as well, for he knew humans and vampires never worked out. At least he could apologize for being a jerk. After waiting a few minutes – no sense raising her suspicions about how long he had been standing there – he rapped on her door.

Once more, she jumped, practically falling off the bed. *Good Lord! Get a hold of yourself,*

Garner: Knowing Antoine was still asleep, she glanced over at Hooch. He laid there, head resting on his extended legs. If there was trouble, he would've barked at the door, so it wasn't a threat. Standing, she opened the door, peeking out.

Jonas stood there, his face serene, his eyes flecks of green and gold, holding out the rose. "Forgive me if you can, hate me if you must, but don't shut me out of your life. I don't have an answer for why we've been tossed together in this, but we have." His eyes searched hers for a brief moment. "We can't afford to fight anymore, and we sure as hell can't work like this. I don't like the things I said or the things I *didn't*, and I'm sorry for them all."

After staring at him briefly, she realized one thing. He was right. The two of them needed to be able to work together, without killing each other, if there was any chance of saving the world. Nodding, she opened the door. "Come on in." Accepting the rose, she brought it to her nose, inhaling the rich fragrance. It was sweet, in an odd sort of way. It calmed her instantly, until the thorn embedded itself in her thumb, causing her to wince. "Thanks, Sparx. It's a very nice gesture. It would've been nicer without the thorns." Sucking on the spot, she set the rose down on the table.

He walked in, setting the fruit basket aside. "For a snack, later."

"Thanks. We'll put it in the dining room, so we can nibble while working. You're right. Our petty argument doesn't mean a hill of beans to make sure that Seth and his gory goons aren't successful. The world is riding on our victory. We can't do that if we can't stand each other. So," holding out her hand, she winked, "how about we just erase the slate and go on from here?"

He started to reach for her hand when a familiar voice crept into his mind.

'No. Do not shake her hand. She deserves more from you. She needs more. You need to steer that boat with the winds of change.'

His eyes rose from her hand to her face. Taking her wrist, he pulled her into a deep kiss.

12

Watching the two, Hooch canted his head from one side to the other. He was getting a mixture of vibes from Dusty but none of them were enough to spark his radar. Snorting, he curled back up with his head away from the action.

Stunned. At first, it stunned her that he just yanked her against him and laid a lip lock the likes she had never experienced. Travis? Travis who? Jonas now stole the best kisser award. Every nerve in her body set on fire, blazing a trail straight to her fun zone. Her mind drifted into the 'what else is he good at?' area.

Fire and ice. The man was cold to the touch – like pressing against a block of ice – but Dusty was like a heater set too high. It was definitely enough to keep even his cold heart warm. Thinking wasn't part of the equation as bodies were set on autopilot, reacting of their own accord. Arms intertwined as forms pressed tightly together. Once the shock wore off, Dusty returned his kiss with just as much fire. The imprisoned heart – locked and chained in her chest – beat on overdrive as the combination spun out of control, hacking to find the correct number. Her mind – usually sharp as a tack – suddenly filled with wanton images of her and Jonas. It was confusing yet enticing. Trembling in his arms, her nerves rapidly fired off in all different directions; lust filling every nook and cranny.

Jonas heard the siren call of her blood – the begging plea from her mortal heart – and felt the ancient need surge through his body. It was something he hadn't felt in centuries. Not even his wife – who he had loved dearly – could do this to him. His own nerves were firing off lustful urges to every fiber of his being. Without thought, he gripped a handful of silken brown hair, lifting her up easily with the other. As her legs wrapped around his waist, he twisted, lying them both down on the bed's firm surface. Breaking the kiss, he moved his mouth to the hollow of her throat. The erratic heartbeat thrummed against his tongue as he trailed over her jugular. While that was going on, his hands traveled up her sexy form to those perky breasts, gripping a hold of them, squeezing before releasing. Feeling her nipples come to life under the fabric, he began to moan, grinding against her. Pushing her shirt and bra up, he lowered his head, sucking the exposed flesh into his mouth. First one, teasing the throbbing bud with his tongue, flicking back and forth, before moving to the other. Pushing both together, he tormented them at the same time.

Multiple feelings rushed through her like an overdrive of emotions. All of them were harnessed by lust and the urgent need to be satisfied. What he did to her set her soul on fire. She wanted more. There was little oxygen as she panted like Hooch on a hot day. Her mouth was dry. Tilting her head back, a guttural moan escaped as hands moved through his hair, pulling, gripping, keeping him locked in place. For the first time in her life, she felt more than alive.

"Oh, that was a much-needed rest," Antoine said from his room, sitting up in bed.

Hearing Antoine, Hooch jumped up, running full steam from the room. Instinct told him that his mistress needed a little time to get unhooked from Jonas. Racing at Antoine, he jumped on him, swirling around his feet. Head-butting the professor, he blocked his advance into Dusty's room by turning over onto his back.

It might as well have been a splash of cold water. Hearing Antoine's voice brought her back to reality and to her overloaded senses. What the hell was she doing? They didn't have time for this! Pushing Jonas off, she immediately ran into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. Leaning against it, breathing hard, she stared into the mirror at her shocked expression. *What the hell's bells are you doing?!* Pushing off the door, she splashed her face with cold water. Deep within was a longing that begged for much-needed satisfaction. *Stop it! It's not happening*, she argued with her body.

Tripping into the wall, Antoine walked in, trying to avoid the overly excited dog at his feet. "What is wrong with you, boy? Where's Dusty? I think Hooch needs to go out or something. He tripped me a few times. I swear he's like a cat." Bending down, he scratched his belly again. "I see you, silly. *What is going on with you?*" Standing, he looked at Jonas.

Hooch, seeing Dusty had made a successful escape, went back to his bed and his bone.

"I have a feeling I'm going to get a lot more done on that parchment. I don't know why, but I really feel as if I'm on the right path!" Antoine was excited, and it showed. "I'm starving. Someone needs to order some room service or something."

Hooch sat in the corner. His eyes moved from the bathroom to Jonas. He gave him that dog's look of knowing, before looking back at Antoine. Huffing and chewing on his bone, he seemed to be thinking of how complicated humans were. If only they were like dogs. Sniff butt, hop on, git-r-done, and then take a nap. Simple.

"She's in the bathroom," Jonas said, his back turned to Antoine. His fangs had begun to descend from the excitement, and that was not something he cared to have the old man see. Once

they had receded, he turned around, holding the fruit basket out. “Fig? Date? Pomegranate?” Antoine’s timing was both a curse and a blessing. Though he was not using any of his powers, he had been around long enough to know that his kind, when aroused, was damn near irresistible to mortals, but that didn’t explain the pull she had over him. The professor’s interruption was probably fate shoving its grubby hand between them saying, *ok you two. Break it up.* “When she comes back out, we’ll order up some more room service.”

Smiling, he nodded. “That sounds wonderful.” He took a date from the basket, biting into it. “Mmm... delicious.” His eyes went to the rose then back to Jonas. Raising a brow, he inclined his head to the beautiful flower. “Should I even ask?”

Chuckling, he shook his head. “That’s between her, me, and Hooch.” He winked at the dog.

Hooch snorted, walked in a circle a few times, then curled up.

“...or not.”

Dusty took a few deep breaths, brushed her hair, cracked her neck, and slowly exited the bathroom after flushing the toilet. Seeing the professor, she smiled. “Antoine, I take it ya slept well?”

“I did, actually. I slept so well, I *almost* didn’t want to get up.”

Her eyes drifted to the bed where the imprint of what just happened still clung to the sheets. Boy, she was ever so thankful that he got up when he did. A few more minutes later and... “I know. These beds are so comfortable.”

Not taking his eyes off her, Jonas smiled. “Why don’t we go downstairs and have a proper meal? I’m buying.” Picking a fig from the basket, he popped it into his mouth.

Barely affording a glance at him, she nodded in return. The splash of cold water did nothing to calm the desirous tidal waves rushing through her. Her body wanted to hit play on the paused scene and finish it, but she did not. Food. That could help. It definitely couldn’t hurt. “That is a wonderful idea! Yes! I’m starving! I think we should leave the stuffiness of this room. So, what do you think is on the menu this morning? Eggs? Bacon? Sausage? Actually, anything would be good as long as it’s not ox... or bugs... or anchovies.” Okay, there was a lot she wouldn’t eat, but leaving that room was a must.

Rubbing his hands together, Antoine grinned. “Now you’re talking my language. Let’s go!”

Jonas nodded, then paused, tilting his head as his eyes glittered at Dusty. “Wait.” Taking the rose from the table, he broke the stem. Sliding it into her hair, his fingers gently grazed her cheek.

She had just started to ease those waves into an eddy when he touched her. Would Antoine wonder why she strangled him? It would probably be too much to explain. Just his touch was enough to start the storms rolling around and send crashing waves of lust into those frayed nerves, threatening to snap them. His fingers in her hair, caused her breathing to quicken, heartbeat pounding a warning that the savages were attacking. Nibbling on her bottom lip, she shook her head at him. “Don’t,” she whispered, barely loud enough for anyone to hear save him. One word. He knew what she meant. Don’t start something that they neither had the time or the ability to finish.

Narrowing his eyes, he pondered a moment before removing the flower, setting it aside. “You don’t need anything. You’re beautiful just as you are.”

Antoine looked at him curiously, ignoring the bit of B-movie romantic dialogue. Remembering that he hadn't seen Jonas touch the calamari he had ordered before, he tilted his head. "Can you actually *eat* food?"

His eyes lingered on hers a bit before turning back to Antoine. "I don't really hunger... for food... but I can enjoy it." Turning back to her, he smiled. "Shall we?"

Darting from her spot, she was already moving out the door. "Oh yeah! Feel like I haven't eaten in days. That reminds me, I need to pick up some Jellybeans. I'm starving! Let's go get some grub! Hooch, guard the place while we're gone. When I get back, I'll take you for a walk." Opening the door, she hollered back to the men. "Let's go. Don't keep a lady waiting. I'm not holding the elevator."

Hooch pulled his head from the resting position, giving a playful growl. He knew what she meant.

Antoine walked beside Jonas, as Dusty led the way a few feet ahead. He leaned in, whispering, "Son, you have some serious moves. A little *Barry White* and you might have had her."

He laughed. Shaking his head, he clapped the old man on the shoulder. "I'll remember that. Now you said you had something?"

He nodded, his hands moving quickly. "I do. I do! It took me a while, but once I was able to put the right symbols in place..." He filled him in on what he missed earlier.

They spoke a bit more before that talk was set aside and they ordered breakfast.

Jonas laughed, seeing Dusty had set Antoine between them, leaving an empty chair between her and him.

Antoine smiled at them. "I want to say thank you... to both of you... for making an old man's dream come true."

Shrugging, Jonas smiled. "I've been alive for five hundred years, Antoine. In that time, I have known thousands of people, mortal and otherwise. I've made friends, enemies, I've loved and lost." He glanced at Dusty. "Sometimes I've turned a friend into an enemy just by my actions... or *in*-actions, but I've never been an evil man. If I can help someone, I do my best."

"Is that your way of saying *you're welcome*?"

He laughed, opening an area for his plate, as their breakfast came. "I suppose it is."

When they set her eggs and sausage down, she pushed a little bit off to the side for Hooch. It would be his reward for guarding the room. He didn't get a lot of people food, it wasn't good for him, but he did get eggs and a few pieces of the sausage. After the waiter left, Dusty leaned over, kissing Antoine on the cheek. "You are very welcome. I'm so excited that you were able to come with us. It just wouldn't be the same without you. To be honest, I thought of you for two reasons."

"Oh? What were they?"

Cutting up her eggs, she took a bite, talking while chewing. "One, you always spoke of how it was your dream to go to Egypt. What kinda friend would I be if I didn't help you make that come true?" Picking up her coffee, she took a drink. "Two, you're the only one I knew of that could *begin* to decipher the language and get a kick out of doing it." Setting her cup down, she took another bite, winking at him. "And, I missed you."

Antoine winked back. "That's *three* reasons and don't talk with your mouth full."

She chuckled. "I never was good at Math."

As the trio ate, they joked, having a good time. Jonas told them a few old stories that never would've surfaced otherwise. None of them noticed a man in a corner booth watching them through dark aviator sunglasses. An English version of a local newspaper provided cover. He sipped black coffee while snapping pictures with a small camera posing as a lapel pin.

It was in the middle of one of his stories that Jonas noticed something out of place on his plate. His brow furrowed. "Since when do they serve fortune cookies in Egypt?" Seeing he was the only one who had one, he picked it up. Cracking it open, he slid the thin strip of paper out. His smile faded as he read the words, eyes darting around the dining room.

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"Problem?" Antoine asked, following his gaze after seeing the expression on his face.

Glancing at him, Jonas nodded. "Might be." He handed the slip to Dusty. It read, *she's lookin' better every time I see her. I do hope you're breakin' her in for me.*

After reading it, she shrugged, passing it to Antoine. "Naw. Ya know how fortune cookies are." Her eyes shifted to Jonas. "Do ya have any idea on who might've sent it? Seth, by chance?" After glancing around the restaurant, she turned back to Jonas. "Do you think he's here?"

Antoine read the paper, looking from one to the other. "You think this is from the... refresh my memory. I'm an old man. It's hard to keep up with... what I would've called a fairytale before this trip."

Holding her cup in both hands, Dusty eyed Jonas. "I'll let you do the honors." After taking a quick sip, she set the cup back down on the table. "After all, he was your best friend before he was my... *boyfriend*."

Antoine's eyes just about popped out of his head. "Wait, he was your," he pointed at Jonas, "best friend and now your," he pointed at Dusty, "*boyfriend*? I need a new script. Mine seems to have changed from the norm."

Jonas rose a brow, shaking his head at her before turning to Antoine. "Seth and I were never *friends*, much less besties. As for him being your *boyfriend*," he looked at Dusty, "well that'd be just another good reason for me to kill him."

Antoine looked concerned. "Do you think it's from him?"

Jonas let his gaze linger on Dusty for a moment, before turning to Antoine, nodding. "I guarantee it's from Seth. He's the one who murdered those people in Cider Lake, kickstarting the prophecy into gear. He wants to father a new race of vampires. As for the *boyfriend* bit," he shrugged. "I've been told that he's taken an intense liking to Dusty... for some reason... but believe me when I say, Seth loves no one, save himself."

Dusty shrugged. It was a little concerning that a supernatural being had taken a shine to her, but it wasn't going to disrupt her A-game. "Meh. He'll find someone else to torture when he can't get in my head."

Reaching over, Antoine gave Dusty a worried pat on the hand. "I always said you'd have an

exciting life, but this,” he shook his head, turning back to Jonas. “She said something about him being a... what... an ancient? How old *is* he? Is he the oldest?”

“Once there were a few dozen powerful vampires. Your literature and films call them *Masters*. Now there are only three... well, two chronologically, but power wise, three. As for Seth, I don’t know for certain, but he’s over three-thousand.”

Antoine blinked. “Three... good God! Think of what he could teach us about the past. Things we only assume. Things we got dead wrong.”

Picking up her cup, Dusty smirked. “Leave it to Antoine to think of the learning curve when dealing with an ancient being.” Taking another sip, she alternated watching between them. “Seth has no interest in teaching anyone anything, Antoine. *That*, I can promise you.”

Shaking his head, Antoine took a bite of his bacon. “That is a shame. It could be a learning experience unlike any. If he isn’t the oldest, who *is*? ”

“That would be me,” a man’s voice drifted across the front of their table. Dressed in a white leisure suit, and open powder blue dress shirt, he smiled at Jonas. “You’re just spilling your guts about us everywhere, aren’t you? Kanis and the Faction are going to be livid.” He laughed. “I *love* it!”

Looking up at the man in surprise, Jonas blinked. “Bacchus? What are you doing here?”

“I came to check on things.” Glancing at Dusty, he touched her cheek as silver eyes bore into her. “Wow. Excuse me for being blunt, but you are absolutely beautiful. I understand why Seth is attracted to you.” Bowing slightly, he took her hand, gently kissing the back of it. “Forgive me. I am Bacchus.”

Whistles blew, bells rang, and flags went off in her mind. Bacchus. The ‘myth’ Jonas spoke of in the same breath as Deva. Well, for a myth, he sure did look pretty real to her. The oldest living vampire. The man was gorgeous. Bacchus had the same appearance as Jonas, except for his eyes, but he was *very* attractive. Smiling, she swallowed hard. “Thank you, Bacchus. It’s nice to finally meet you.” Pulling back her hand, she pointed to Antoine. “Excuse my manners. This is a close personal friend of mine, Professor Antoine Dubois. Antoine,” she pointed back at Bacchus. “This is Bacchus.” Then she whispered. “The *oldest* vampire in existence.” Turning back to Bacchus, she motioned to the empty chair. “Please, join us.”

“Thank you, my dear.” Grabbing the chair, he sat down, extending a hand to Antoine. “A pleasure, sir.”

Looking at the offered hand, he slowly clasped it. “Well... you’re cold.”

“Occupational hazard, I’m afraid.”

Withdrawing his hand, Antoine nodded. “I have... *so* many questions. How old are you?”

“Almost as old as dirt.” Smiling, he looked to Jonas. “And how is my favorite?”

Jonas looked at him curiously. “Favorite what?”

“Why, hero, of course. Find that second stone yet? Clock’s ticking.”

Jonas narrowed his eyes. “There isn’t a time limit.”

Rolling his eyes, Bacchus looked back to Dusty. “Slow, isn’t he?”

Jonas arched a brow at the flamboyant behavior of Bacchus. "Enough already. Why are you here – in broad daylight – where everybody can see you... wearing a Travolta toss away?"

Looking down at his clothing, Bacchus turned the lapel over a few times, taking an offended tone. "What's wrong with my outfit? I think it's quite dashing."

Leaning over, she whispered to Bacchus. "I think you're dressed eloquently."

Grinning, Bacchus slid his chair closer to Dusty while sticking his tongue out at Jonas. "At least *someone* appreciates fashion." He turned, winking at her. "That kind of talk can get you into a lot of trouble."

Arching a brow, Jonas found his patience wearing thin. "Reason for your visit, please."

"No need to be rude." Bacchus sighed. Picking up Dusty's juice, he took a sip. "Mmm... delightful. Now then... I've picked up a very nasty vibe around the three of you." Looking between them, his eyes stopped on Antoine. "Not you, but definitely," he pointed between Dusty and Jonas, "you two. You are both giving off a bit of a black aura. Someone has put a spell on you."

Dusty looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "A spell? Who would have done that?"

"Possibly a witch," Bacchus told her in a matter of fact tone.

"A witch?" Her eyes widened, glancing at Antoine, before traveling back to Bacchus. "I haven't left the hotel room. This is the first time I've been out except walking Hooch. Even then, I didn't see anyone."

Antoine nodded, taking a bite of his crepes. "I can verify that. I was in the room trying to decipher the Quatrain."

That left only one person. All three turned to look at Jonas.

The accusatory glance glared as Dusty pointed at him. "Jonas, you went out. Where did you go this morning?"

Leaning back, Bacchus clasped his hands behind his head, nodding to Jonas. "Well?"

Even though he hadn't known him for very long, Jonas thought Bacchus was acting differently. Curiously, he stared at him. It was as if he had taken a batch of Hemosynth. "I went to the marketplace. I bought a basket of fruit, and a beautiful rose from an enchanting woman."

Interested, Bacchus sat up, looking between Jonas and Dusty. "A rose?"

"Yes. An apology for some... things."

Bacchus nodded. "Did anything strange happen?"

Arching a brow, Jonas canted his head to the side. "What do you mean by *strange*?"

Feeling a heat rise up to her cheeks, Dusty cleared her throat. "Strange? I wouldn't call it strange. All we were doing was clearing up a few things and then it just turned-"

"He means with the rose," Jonas interrupted her. "He's not interested in other... things."

More than curious about what that topic referred to, Bacchus shook his head, glaring between the two. "Let's hope those... things... don't interfere with the mission at hand. There is nothing more important than finding that stone. Jonas, the woman who sold it to you, what was she like? Was there anything different about her?"

“Now that you mention it... when I touched her... I had a vision.”

“A vision? Of what?” Bacchus sounded surprised.

Shrugging, Jonas took a sip of his coffee. “To be honest... I’m not sure if it was a vision, or if I accidentally crossed into her mind.”

Blinking, canting his head to the side, Antoine stared at Jonas with wide eyes. “You can do that?”

Leaning over, Dusty gently touched Antoine’s arm. “Yes, but I’ll explain that later.”

Bacchus motioned to Jonas. “What did you see?”

“Five girls. Three young girls, and,” his eyes found Dusty’s, “remember the old gypsy at Tammy Barker’s crime scene, and the witness Carly Roberts?”

Thinking back, Dusty nodded. “Oh yeah. The pop-eyed lady about the festering foot. What about them?”

“They were in my vision. I could only assume it was a vision because how would that Egyptian girl know anything about them? It was brief, just a flash, but-”

“I need to see the rose,” Bacchus said, pursing his lips. “It sounds bewitched.”

Confused, Antoine looked from one to the other. “Can someone give me the footnotes? I got lost in the beginning.”

Dusty nodded. “Me too. You’re saying the rose he put in my hair earlier is bewitched. What exactly does that mean?”

Turning to Dusty, Bacchus arched a brow. “He placed it... in your hair?”

Feeling oddly defensive, she nodded. “Yes, right above my ear.”

“That explains it.” Bacchus looked at Jonas. “You don’t yet have the ability to see the energy that flows around all of us. Mortal and immortal alike. Let me show you what I’m talking about. Everyone hold hands.”

When everyone had formed a circle, looking like they were ready to partake in a séance in the middle of the restaurant, Dusty felt a zap of electrical shock. It was like running across a shag carpet and touching something... just a spark, more or less. Then, it happened.

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When all four were joined, Jonas closed his eyes. An intense power like nothing he ever felt before coursed through his body. Every fiber in his brain woke up, yelling about the undesirable intrusion. Glancing over at Dusty, the energy field looked as if she had been doused in charcoal dust. Purest black. Evil. Turning to Antoine, the professor’s aura was a brilliant white. Holy. Looking down at his own hand, he saw the same raven color that surrounded Dusty. Yet, when he looked at Bacchus, it was a shimmer of energy, with an appearance of a star field. It was like looking through a telescope on a clear night.

Dusty felt... *something*... peculiar. The current entered through one arm, inspecting every inch of her insides, before shooting back out the other. It wasn’t painful. Interesting, almost erotic.

In this state, she couldn't help but be aware of how attractive Bacchus was. Traveling over the rest of them, she hoped no one thought this was weird behavior. Even though she was sure it looked odd.

"You both have been marked," Bacchus said, releasing his hold on them. "For what purpose, I don't know, but the rose... and possibly the woman who sold it to you... is the source of that marking." He looked at Antoine. "You're untouched."

Dusty felt her throat go dry. "Marked? What the hell does that mean? Is that why I was shot at yesterday?"

"Shot at?" Frowning, Bacchus turned to Jonas.

Surprised that Bacchus didn't know, when he seemed to know everything else, Jonas arched a brow. "You mean you didn't know? Well, how about that?"

"I'm a vampire, not God," he snapped.

Jonas winced. Not many could set him in his place, but with a simple phrase and tone, Bacchus had. "Yes. Someone shot at her yesterday." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the bullet, setting it on the table. "And they weren't messing around."

Picking up the small projectile, Bacchus closed his hand around it. After a moment, his brow furrowed. Looking at Dusty, he tilted his head. "An attractive man. Tall. Light brown hair. Hazel-green eyes. Well built. Ring any bells?"

"That doesn't really narrow it down. It could be anyone. CIA. Feds. Maybe even a mistake. A misfire." Swallowing hard, she looked at each of the men before sighing. "But," she began, looking like she just lost her best friend, "it does sound a little like Travis, but maybe Seth is playing one of his games. Travis would never shoot at me. Not in a million years. But if he did, he wouldn't miss."

Bacchus shook his head, rolling the bullet between his fingers. "Seth's messages are... as you well know... more creative than this. Who is this Travis person?"

Feeling suddenly drained, Antoine's arms dropped to his side. "I've lost my appetite. Very tired. After all, I am still an old man. If you don't mind, I'm going to go back to the room."

Concerned, Dusty grabbed the waiter's attention. "Let's get a doggie bag then." Turning back to Bacchus, she handed him the fortune. "Travis. Now, that's a touchy story there. He's... well... a friend with... benefits... to be honest."

Each of the men looked at her in shock.

"What? That's acceptable nowadays. Maybe not in your time, but in mine, it is. Besides, I don't see Travis trying to shoot me. He's good enough, he wouldn't have missed. Whoever this was... and we're pretty sure it's Seth... sent Jonas a message about me."

Frowning, Bacchus looked at Jonas. "A message? In a fortune cookie? Was there a head attached to it?" Turning the small slip of paper over, he chuckled after reading. "He gets more creative every century... and more lethal."

Hearing the tone in his voice, Dusty's eyes narrowed. "Is that... admiration? If ya know this guy as well as ya claim, then ya know there's nothing admirable about him. He's about as fruit loop as they come. Creative? He's not creative. He's a damn ticking bomb just waiting to go off,

getting his jollies off on torturing people. I'm gonna yank out his black heart and shove it down his throat... after I torment him. It gets me all tingly just thinking about it. Turning his worthless hide into ashes."

The ancient vampires silver eyes glared for a second before he shrugged. "Mozart was a buffoon, reviled by most who met him. Should his music also be loathed?" A grin creased his face. "I don't expect you to understand. Your ways are not our ways, but I'm sure Seth looks forward to... testing your resolve."

Before Dusty could respond Antoine rose, followed by Jonas. "I'll take you to your room professor." He looked at Bacchus. "I guess we'll see each other again?"

Nodding, Bacchus laughed. "I'll be with you to the bitter end, Jonas. I promise you that." Smiling at Antoine, he nodded. "A pleasure to meet you, Professor Dubois."

Nodding, Antoine's tone didn't match his words. "Likewise."

"I'll see you back upstairs, Dusty." Taking Antoine's arm, Jonas helped him out and they disappeared around the corner.

Sighing, Bacchus looked back to Dusty. "Tell me, is this... Travis going to be a problem?"

Shaking her head, she offered a slight grin. "Travis? No. He's like a puppy dog. As far as Seth goes? I'm no princess. I can handle just about anything tossed my way. Doing pretty damn good so far."

His lips pursed. "Anything? That remains to be seen, my dear. You have a long road ahead. What Seth did, in your quiet little town, was just the appetizer." Folding his hands on the table, he smiled. "But I'm sure you and Jonas will be able to handle him in the long run. At least... that is the hope."

"I've gotten into some tight situations and managed to get out unscathed. My training started at a very young age. I'll be fine. The key... most people care if they live or die... I don't. If Seth feeds off fear... he'll starve to death with me."

His eyes rested on her a moment, trailing over every curve in her face. "Yes. I sense no fear in you for your own wellbeing. You truly don't care if *you* live or die, but you do care if other people do. Seth doesn't. He will look into your soul, find the one thing you care about more than anything else... and destroy it. He won't negotiate. He won't make a deal, and he won't hesitate."

"Two things. One, he can't get into my mind, much less my soul. Since childhood, I have built up a strong enough wall that no one can get into it. Two, I don't care about many things. If he killed one of them, rest assured, power or not, ancient or not, I *will* destroy him."

Leaning back, he smiled at her. "Do you know he was born a prince?"

Arching a brow, she sneered. "You're telling me about his childhood... why would I care?"

"It's best to know your enemy at times. I thought maybe you would like a bit of insight into him."

Even though there was a big part of her that didn't want to know anything about Seth, the CIA agent wanted to know everything. "A prince? Which one? I don't remember history dictating there was a vampiric prince before dirt was made." Teasing, she winked.

Folding his hands behind his back, he continued smiling. "Your history leaves out a great

many... inconvenient truths. Seth was a prince who dabbled in the black arts.”

“So, he was magically evil. That fits.”

“Yes. It was rumored that his mother was a succubus who cast her spells on the Pharaoh to become Queen. After giving birth to Seth, she drained the King of his life-force, using it to suckle the child, and assumed the throne.”

Cringing, Dusty sipped on the remainder of her cold coffee. “His own mother fed him the soul of his father? Gross.”

“In a manner of speaking. Once there, if any opposed her reign, they were publicly skinned alive, crucified, and their entrails exposed for the Pharaoh's chickens,” he eyed Dusty, making sure she hadn't become bored, “vultures. For days the air echoed with the screams of the guilty as they were slowly consumed by hordes of those creatures.”

“Sounds like his mother made him evil.”

He nodded. “As Seth grew, his mother's cruel grip on the land only intensified, until the people amassed and set upon the palace. They managed to corner the Queen, beating her without mercy until she was retrieved by Sokar himself and taken back to the underworld.”

“What happened to Seth?”

“The prince, not yet twenty years old, was exiled into the desert, where he wandered for ten years, existing on scarabs, scorpions, and anything else he could find. He became consumed by thoughts of revenge, not only against his own people but against all humanity. One night, at the end of his sanity, he cried out to Ra, cursing him for the life he now was burdened with. He prayed to Sokar, offering his soul in exchange for the power to wreak vengeance on mankind. It was then, in the despair of hate, that one of us happened across him.”

“One of us? A vampire?”

Once more, he nodded. “Believing the vampire had been sent by Sokar to grant his wish, he begged to be turned.” Bacchus leaned forward, his voice quiet. “Now, usually we don't turn those that beg. It's a sign of weakness, but I guess this particular vampire saw something in Seth and granted his wish.”

“How kind of him.” Picking up a piece of bacon, she chewed on it, watching him.

“Armed with his newfound power, he avenged his mother, laying waste to the entire kingdom. Man, woman, child, royal, and slave alike, he spared no one. When it was over, he set his sights on the rest of mankind, moving through the ages until he happened upon the bloodstone prophecy. That brings us pretty much to the here and now.” Tilting his head, his eyes regarded her for a reaction. “Of course, that's all just legend and myth, as far as your history goes. That time was erased from memory, all mention of it removed from the minds of men. Now that you know, I hope my little story has given you some useful insight.”

“Hm, interesting. Make those who had nothing to do with a past life suffer for his mother's treatment. That's like someone trying to make other's pay for something that happened to their great-great-great grandparents. Ridiculous. Then again, I can see why everyone keeps calling it a myth. I didn't have a great childhood either. Similar. Minus being nursed by the blood of my parents. At least... I don't think. No need to make others suffer for the cruelty of something that happened long ago. I'm not out to seek vengeance on *all* vampires because I'm thrust into this

nightmare prophecy... where it's uncertain what happens to me. However, the good in me dictates there's goodness in everyone. Even the deranged, warped, psychotic one named Seth who is still bitching a fit about the cruelty of fate. Rest assured, Bacchus... Seth *will* get his for killing the innocent. If I'm not the one to do it, I *will* be there to watch."

Staring into her eyes, he smiled. "I believe you will. For now, why don't we get that rose? I may not be able to reverse its power, but I do know someone who can." Looking at the table, he laughed. "It would seem that our dear Jonas has stuck you with the bill."

Standing, she reached into her back pocket, pulling out a roll of bills. Rifling through, she yanked out a twenty. "We're guests. We eat free. Instead, I'll leave a tip." Leaving it under the glass, she picked up the doggy bag for Hooch. Nodding to Bacchus, she motioned towards the elevator. "Shall we?"

"You're still hungry?" he asked, motioning to the napkin she had in her hands.

Shaking her head, she pushed in the recently vacated chair. "No. It's for my dog. About this rose. You say we're marked, so does that mean when ya take it away, whatever that power is... that it's holding over us... will be gone as well?"

"Unfortunately, no. You can destroy the instrument of charm, but not the charm itself. Only a very powerful witch can end both, and I have just the one to do it." Holding his arm out for her, he smiled. "Indulge me?"

Slipping her hand into the crook of his arm, she walked with him toward the elevator. After entering, she pushed the button to go up. "This witch ya mentioned... are ya bringing her here?"

Patting her hand, he shook his head. "No, I'll have to take the flower to her. She's a bit of a recluse, you see. Doesn't really get out much, but once she's taken care of this, I'll let you and Jonas know. In the meantime, however, you should... how do you say, lay low?" He laughed as the elevator stopped on her floor and they exited the car. "Concentrate on getting that scroll translated so Jonas can find the next stone before Seth does. If we can get just *one* piece and hide it away, we can all go back to our regularly scheduled lives." They stopped in front of the suite. "I believe we're here?"

"Yes. Home away from home for the moment." She could hear Hooch barking up a storm on the other side of the door. He sounded like he was trying to come through it. "One moment, please." Putting the keycard in the slot, she inched the door open enough to slide through. "Hooch! Get down! Stop it!" Reaching down, she grabbed a hold of his collar, pulling him back, opening the door further. "I don't know what's wrong with him. Maybe your cologne. Please, come in." Turning back, she admonished Hooch again. His ears were plastered against his head, fangs bared, snarling with drool. His eyes were locked on Bacchus. "Stand down! Stop it!" Setting down the 'doggy bag', she kept a tight grip on his collar. "Something has gotten into him. I'm sorry."

Silver eyes lowered to her guardian. "It's alright. He's probably just upset from all the recent changes. In addition, he knows what I am. I'm sure he reacted similarly when he first met Jonas. Hand me the rose, and I'll leave, then he'll be fine... just fine."

"True, but he stopped after sniffing him. Hooch! Stop it!" Walking back to her room, she held tightly to the collar. Grabbing the rose off the dresser, she closed the door, leaving Hooch on the other side. Scratching, howling, trying to break through the door told of his not liking that. Not one bit. She rushed it back to Bacchus. "Here ya go." Those irritating bells and flashing lights went

off in her head again. She didn't trust this ancient one. Nor did she like him. If her dog didn't like someone, there was a reason behind it. "Well, we don't wanna keep you. Pleasure meeting you."

Taking the flower, he smiled, inhaling its scent. "It was a pleasure to finally meet you as well. Please, tell Jonas, I'll visit him again, soon." Bowing, he backed out the door, closing it as he went.

Making her way back to her room, she quickly opened the door, leaning down to comfort him. "It's okay, baby boy. What in the world has gotten into you? He's gone!"

Hooch didn't wait one second, bolting past her. Snarling, barking, he jumped on the front door.

Rushing behind him, this place was too expensive for him to be ruining all the doors, she tried grabbing him. "Hooch! Stand down! Knock it off! C'mere. It's okay! Look what mommy brought you back! Yummy."

Outside the door, Bacchus looked up and down the hall before pinching off the rosebud. Biting into the stem, his eyes closed as he drained her blood from it. "Mm. Tasty. Soon, my love, you will be mine." Shaking his head, the form of Bacchus dissolved, leaving Seth standing there. Realizing the still-barking Hooch would be a problem – should he need to use this little trick again – he slid a spectral hand through the door and whispered, "*Cruxem entu'es lo suren deta.*" Hearing a painful yelp, followed by a loud crack, he grinned. "Bad doggie." Laughing, he dissolved into nothingness, leaving only the bud of the rose behind on the gray carpet.

15

Behind the professor's closed door, the hushed conversation took on a serious tone. "Are you sure Bacchus is on *our* side?" Antoine asked.

"I'd stake my life on it. Why?"

"Just something about him. A vibe. He seems–"

"To be honest... I felt a different vibe on him as well." He pursed his lips. "The Bacchus I know doesn't run around in some ill-fitting disco suit with some weird down-home manner. He wasn't his usual stoic self. If I didn't know better, I'd swear Bacchus was on drugs. He–"

The mournful wail shattered through the door as they heard Dusty's grief-stricken scream. Both of them went flying out of the room. What they found was incomprehensible. Dusty, laid over the limp body of her beloved Hooch, sobbing in a tone, which broke Antoine's heart. "What happened? Are you hurt?"

When he tried pulling her into his arms, Dusty pushed him away. Trembling fingers continued stroking the dog's ear as she held him clutched to her body. The lifeless head hung over her arm, tongue sticking out of his mouth. "My poor baby. He's dead. That bastard killed him."

Glancing down to Hooch's still form, Antoine started to reach out for the dog, but then pulled his hand back. "Who? Who killed Hooch?"

Unable to stop sobbing, she looked up at him. There was a fire in her eyes. Angry. Full of vengeance. Her mouth pulled down in a frown as she heatedly whispered. "Bacchus!"

"What?!" Confused, Jonas blinked. "Are you sure?"

"After you guys left, he fed me some song and dance about Seth being some succubus's prince.

After that, he came up to get the rose," the emotion broke through her words. Sobbing, she continued to lightly stroke his ears. It was the thing that calmed him when he was upset. "Hooch went nuts when we got up here and he wouldn't stop. I thought he was going to destroy all the doors. I had to lock him in my room to take care of business with Bacchus. After he left, I let Hooch out and it was as if he didn't even know who I was. He raced to the front door. Just as I was about to grab his collar," she sobbed again as the memory struck her to the core. Heart-wrenching moans forced their way out of her throat. "This... ghost-like hand come through the door and," she started crying again. "I heard him mumble some bullshit and Hooch howled and dropped *deeeead*."

Closing his eyes, visibly affected, Antoine lovingly patted her back. "Oh, my dear child. I'm so sorry." Turning his face from the poor animal, his eyes began to fill.

Jumping up, she thrust her hands into Jonas, knocking him back a few steps. "This is all your fault!"

Antoine blinked. "Dusty, he didn't-"

"You brought this bullshit to my door!" Balling up her fist, she punched him in the face, making him stagger back again. "If you hadn't come into my life, I'd still have Hooch!" Reaching down, she pulled out the knife, plunging it straight into his gut. "You might as well have killed him with your own damn hands, Sparx. I will *never* forgive you."

He let her vent, knowing what she said was true. Even though it wasn't his fault, it was due to his kind. "I'm so sorry, Dusty. I would've never wished this on you or Hooch. You know how I feel about him." He didn't say the rest of that. *And you*. It would stay silent. The platitude rang hollow, even to his ears, but it was all he could muster. None of this made any sense.

"Save it! This is strike two. There better not be a strike three!" Turning back to Hooch, she snatched him to her chest, crying against his fur. "The only thing I had left in this world was my dog. He was the only one who loved me, and I so loved him. I'm gonna kill Bacchus then I'm going after Seth. Get in my way," she growled, glaring at Jonas, "and *you're* next."

Before, when she threatened him, he wasn't worried about it. Seeing the look in her eyes, had he been mortal, he would've felt a stab of fear. This woman knew how to kill vampires and they were now her sworn enemy. He was. They all were. Looking down at Hooch, his jaw tightened. Something within told him that Bacchus would never have killed the dog, but the facts were undeniable. Opening the door, he paused, seeing the rosebud. Bending down, he picked it up. Inhaling, there wasn't a trace of another vampire. Narrowing his eyes, he walked back in. Unless he wanted to get knocked out of the hotel room, he knew better than to touch her. "I'm sorry Dusty, but I don't th-"

"No!" Her phone went off. Grabbing it, she chucked it across the room. "Don't you dare defend that asshole!" Looking at Hooch, she leaned down, kissing him on the muzzle. Closing his eyes, she sniffled. "I *will* kill him and anyone who gets in my fucking way." Getting up, she stormed into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her. The shower running at full blast could not hide the sound of her crying.

Her phone rang again, but both men ignored it.

"Can't you do *anything*?" Antoine asked. "Aren't there some... I don't know... *vampire* powers you could use to heal him. That poor girl is shattered about this."

Sighing, Jonas shook his head. "We can heal, but we can't restore life. That power is above all supernatural creatures." Kneeling down, he ran a hand over Hooch, caressing his soft skin. "I'm so sorry, big guy. If I could bring you back, I would." A blood tear rolled down his cheek as he looked up at the ceiling. "Bacchus, if you did this, I will find a way to bind you while Dusty takes her anger out on your uncaring hide."

Fifteen minutes later, she emerged from the bathroom fully dressed, with wet hair. Not saying a word to anyone, she walked over and picked up her phone. Even though the last thing she wanted to do was talk to anyone, it was Travis. She needed to make sure he was okay. Something told her that he wasn't safe after going with her to the crime scene. It took three rings before the call connected.

A deep southern drawl came through, but not the one she expected. "Why hello darlin'. So good of ya to call. I understand y'all are havin' a bit of an... animal *control* issue."

Confused, she looked at the phone again, making sure she had called the right number. "Who the hell is this?"

Silence. "I'm truly hurt ya had to go and ask that question after all we shared. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were seein' another man, and that would grieve me to *no* end."

Rage ran hot through her nervous system like some disease on steroids, filling her with hatred. Her eyes instantly glared at Jonas, voice dropping to that of a deadly whisper. "Of course. It was you. Not Bacchus. I thought Jonas said your kind didn't stoop to stupid parlor tricks."

Antoine looked over concerned. "What's going on, Dusty?"

She continued into the phone. "You son-of-a-bitch. I'm gonna kill you and have fun doing it. Where's Travis?" Her depression over her dog was replaced for the moment with worry for Travis.

"Stupid parlor tricks? That cuts me deeply. I thought my performance was truly Oscar-worthy. Y'all are so easy to fool. It's a wonder ya can dress yourselves in the mornin'." Ignoring her threat, he continued. "As for your 'meat in the sheets' friend... well... it just wouldn't make good business sense to cause dear Travis any grievous injuries... yet. So, here's my proposal. Y'all get crackin' on findin' that second stone... no more leisurely breakfasts on the Queen's dime. Once ya got it, gimme a call and we'll do a little bartering. Be quick cuz... as ya well know... my little family is a bit anxious. It's hard, so hard, ta keep them from takin' just a small bite outta your friend. Are we understandin' one another, my sweet?"

"I wondered why Bacchus would bore me with the details of your sordid past. As if I gave a flying rat's ass about your misfortunes. You're just some royal punk who didn't get his way. Now trying to make everyone else suffer." Her voice changed to that of a child. "Ooh, look at me. I'm gonna hold my breath till I get my way." Then back to normal. "Now, understand me... if you allow anyone to harm *one* hair on his head... you'll find out *why* I'm involved. Unlike you, I'm not a demented psychopath. I'm an intelligent, well-trained assassin with the information necessary to dissolve your little family. Now... are we understandin' one another, my sweet? Put Travis on the phone."

"Ooooh... scary. I see we have a trust issue, darlin'." He sighed. "Very well, you shall have your *proof of life*, as it were."

After a moment, another southern drawl came over the phone. "Baby? What's goin' on?"

At his voice, the butterflies in her stomach started flying around causing that nasty heartburn again. It sounded like him, but she'd been fooled once... and it cost her dearly. She wouldn't make that mistake again. "If this is Travis, what was our first date?"

"Is this really the time to talk about?"

"Answer the question, Travis."

"It wasn't a date. Not official like. We were working a case... got to joking... then we kissed, and well... one thing led to another. Please tell me this is some kinda elaborate prank."

"Oh, my God! It's really you! Are you okay? Where are you? Travis, look around and tell me something that will give me an idea."

"I... I dunno. I'm hog-tied to a chair in some basement, I think. I went to bed and woke up here. Wherever *here* is."

"Anything! Do you hear any sounds outside? Something that might help us pinpoint your location? I'll get to checking for your phone's ping."

"Dusty, I love-"

"Well, now my tender ears can't take no more of this. Now darlin', I want you, that there old man, and mister *Hero* to get real busy. Find me what's mine, and then we can have a friendly exchange."

"Damn. It must suck to have to rely on those that you think are far below you to do something simple that you cannot. Does it sting, knowing in this situation, it doesn't matter how old you are, you're an incompetent buffoon? You made one mistake thinking that I have more than one weakness. You killed him."

"Sticks and stones, darling. Sticks and stones. You are a feisty one, but in case you haven't got it through your pretty little head yet, here's a newsflash concerning vampires... we lie."

"Go figure. The spawn of the devil lies? No! Say it ain't so! And I used to think so highly of you! My give a damn got up and walked out. Hurt Travis and you'll find out what I can do... and will."

"Now I want ya to picture this... poor old Travis, strung up on your ceiling, major organs fallin' outta his wide-open belly. His throat tore practically outta his neck, both of them green eyes danglin' outta their sockets. His heart nailed to his crotch, just for giggles. Now, every time one of those *rescue* Travis thoughts pops into that purty lil head of yours, I want you to think about that picture."

"Seth... go fuck yourself. Test me. I dare you."

"I am, darling. I am."

16

Hearing the line go dead, Seth chuckled, tossing the phone back to Travis. "That is one spitfire feline, I must say."

Catching it, he slipped it back into his pocket. "You killed *Hooch*?" he asked, shaking his head. "Why?"

“I’m a cat man, myself.” He leaned forward in his chair. “Just to be clear that we’re on the same program here, Mister Knight. I get the stone, you get a point-blank shot at the love of your life, right?”

“That’s the deal, yes.”

Shaking his head, Seth laughed. “And Y’all say *we’re* cold-hearted animals.”

Pulling his Glock, Travis slid the clip out, making sure it was full. Slammering it back into the gun, he lifted his hazel-green eyes to the creature. “We all have our orders. Our *destiny*, if you will.”

Tilting his head, Seth nodded. “That’s a very astute observation, Mister Knight, but make no mistake. If that little gal tries to pull a fast one on me... well, you heard what I told her... and I *am* a man of my word.”

After Seth vanished, Travis frowned. “So am I, you, Godless prick... so am I.”

17

Ending the call, she tossed the phone aside. Turning to Jonas and Antoine – ignoring her dead dog, lest she started bawling again – she shook her head. “More bad news, as if we don’t have enough. Seth has Travis. He’s pretty adamant he wants that stone... soon... or he’s gonna kill him.”

Walking over, Antoine pulled Dusty into a hug. “Don’t worry, honey. We’ll find your... umm... friend. Let me go gather up what I have on that scroll. We’ll put our heads together and I’m sure we can find out where the damn thing is.”

Returning the hug, she held him tightly until the urge to bawl passed. “Sounds like a plan,” she whispered into his shoulder. At this point, as far as she was concerned, everyone – save Antoine and Travis – could fuck off. The Scroll... vampires... the whole kit-and-kaboodle about this prophecy could go to hell. She wanted to curl up in a ball and weep for the loss of her dog. That wouldn’t work. The world depended on her shelving those feelings and doing what she did best; the impossible.

Watching them, Jonas felt a pang that he couldn’t comfort her. She wanted nothing to do with him right now. Maybe never would. “Antoine, earlier you said you were tired. Get some rest first. After you wake up, we’ll get back to work.”

Waving him off, he kissed Dusty’s forehead. “I’ll be fine. All that matters now is that stone. If we’re able to somehow nab this... *Seth* character, I’d like to punch him a good one myself, before you rip his heart out.” Giving her another hug, he started for his room.

Not before Dusty reached out to him. “Antoine, Sparx is right. I’m not gonna lie. I’m extremely upset about Hooch. I wanna shout to God Almighty about why he allowed this to happen! But God didn’t do it. Seth did. I wanna kill Seth as much, if not *more* than you. You mean more to me than Travis ever will. You’re tired. Sleep. I mean it. You won’t be any good to us if you’re tired and making mistakes on the scroll. Plus... I’d like to keep you around for a lot longer. I’ve lost enough. Go lay down. Sleep.”

“I’m glad you don’t blame God. Too many people do that these days and it’s getting on my nerves. But Dusty, we need to-”

“Don’t make me knock you out,” she winked, “because I will.”

“I remember that temper of yours. When you’ve set your mind on something, it’s set.” Chuckling, he shook his head before nodding. “Okay. I’ll catch a couple of hours sleep. After all, tired minds make mistakes. So, after a nap, I’ll get back on it.” He hugged her again. “I’m so sorry for the loss of Hooch. He was a good dog.”

As he hugged her, she held him tightly. “He was.” Releasing him, she wiped her eyes. “Sweet dreams.” Looking over at Jonas, she snarled. “Look, Sparx… I know that you were thrust into this just as much as I was, but you’re the rep to the agency I’m livid with.” That was the only apology he was getting. For this ‘save the world’ mission, she was the only one making sacrifices. It pissed her off.

Kneeling at Hooch’s side, he ran a hand over the dog’s soft fur. “Everything I am, everything I was… I would give it all up to be able to bring him back. I know what it’s like to lose the only thing you care about in life.”

Unaffected by his words, she nodded. “Being five-hundred-years old, I’m sure you do.”

“In the beginning, until I learned how to control my emotions, it was the same as the feelings you’re going through right now. It was devastating.”

“Yep.”

“Right now, you want to cry yourself to sleep in a tight ball, right?”

“Stop psychoanalyzing me.”

“You know you want to but can’t. You have a stronger will than I’ve known any mortal to have. It’s the same with vampires. We just know that we have to go on. Many of us shut off our humanity, and that’s when we really become monsters like Seth.”

“I’m gonna use that sword and kill him. He will pay a thousand times for what he did.”

“But not yet.” Patting Hooch’s side, he glanced up at her. “Tell me what you want to do with him.”

Looking down at Hooch, she sadly smiled. Tears dribbled down her face as she sniffed. “I’m gonna take him home.”

“You don’t think that’s going to be hard?”

“What do ya mean?”

“Seeing the constant reminder of your loss in your backyard.”

“It’s his home, Sparx.”

“Okay. I’ll call Deva, tell her we need the jet for a round trip. Once we’ve taken care of Hooch, we’ll come back here and find that stone.”

“What if Seth gets tired of waiting and kills Travis?” Antoine hollered from the other room.

“He won’t. It’s his only leverage with me.” Something changed in Dusty. The death of her dog made her harder, colder, not as caring as before. “I thought you were supposed to be sleeping?”

“Hell no. I can sleep on the jet.” He pointed to the dog. “How are we going to carry him back?”

Sighing, she pointed at the suitcase. “It’s big enough. The only way to take him, without drawing a lot of attention. Tell her we need to go tonight. We can finish this up at my house. Figure out what the hell it is and then go from there.”

Jonas nodded, pulling out his phone. It would do them good to see Hooch off properly.

“That isn’t necessary, Jonas.”

Darting in front of Antoine, Dusty pulled her gun with the wooden bullets, aiming it at Bacchus. “Stay behind me, Antoine.”

Antoine blinked. “Is that… that Seth fella?”

The hell if she knew, but she wasn’t taking any chances. “We don’t know.”

Jonas spun around, his eyes narrowing. “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice…”

18

Bacchus held up his hand as Jonas advanced. He was dressed in his usual gray robe, his face framed by the hood. He looked at Hooch’s still form, then over at Dusty. “You will have your pound of vampire flesh for the grievous injury Seth has caused you, but every moment wasted is another that brings him closer to finding the stone.”

“Excuse me? My dog was just murdered! Now, I realize that mankind is counting on us finding the stone, but I am taking time out of this wild goose chase and burying my dog! I don’t care who doesn’t like it! By the way… how do we know you aren’t that sick demented bastard who did this? I’m armed with silver and an itchy trigger finger.”

Bacchus pursed his lips, silver eyes regarding her with curiosity. “I understand your need to see to Hooch’s eternal rest and I sympathize. However, this may not be the right time for that. This may be exactly why Seth did what he did. He knows your search would stop, giving him the advantage.” Turning, he addressed Jonas. “I am certain I don’t need to remind you, of all people, just how devious and cruel he can be. As for proof that I am who I say I am,” he said, turning back to Dusty, “how would you have me do that?”

Glaring at him, her nostrils flared, and her lips flatlined in anger. “You sympathize? Oh, how endearing that is to my shredded heart. The great Bacchus… if that is who you are… is sympathetic to this human’s sadness. I am not worthy of such attention.” Her words were rich with sarcasm, and emotion. “Before you vampiric evil psychopaths invaded my world, I was happy. I had a beautiful dog who worshiped me just like I did him. Now… I have nothing. You have taken everything from me that means a fucking thing. I don’t care if this is the time or not, I am burying my dog, and no one is stopping me. No one! If he gets the stone, big fucking deal! Then I guess we’ll just have to beat him to the next one. Don’t push it. I’m not in the mood. Right now, *all* you vamps are the same to me. You’re cold-blooded, non-compassionate, wasted shells of a life form.”

Turning to Antoine, Bacchus shook his head. “Apparently, you no longer mean a thing to her. How sad.” His head rotated back to Dusty. “Since I am, as you so eloquently put it, a cold-blooded, non-compassionate life form, I couldn’t care less if you are in the mood or not. Finding these stones takes precedence over anything else you may believe is important. Therefore—”

“All right, stop,” Jonas said, stepping between them, “before this escalates into something neither of you can fix. We are going to bury Hooch, and we are going to do so in her backyard. You can either help us, or get the hell out of the way, but you’re sure as fuck aren’t going to stop us.”

Glaring at Jonas, the ancient vampire raised a finger.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” Antoine’s voice held a touch of dread.

Both immortals looked at the professor.

“Just sayin’.”

Shifting so that she blocked Antoine from their vision, she pointed at Bacchus. “Leave Antoine out of this. The less you evil sons-a-bitches know about him... the better. Wait. You make it sound like this is something I’m forced to do. Last time I checked, God gave me freedom of choice for a reason. ‘I’ make my own decisions. But please... feel free to find someone else to do this. I will not be brokenhearted one bit at being replaced.” Arching a brow, she canted her head to the side. “Oh wait. You can’t. Jonas and I both were chosen for this daggum thing... as he keeps drilling into my head.” While he pondered that, she pointed to her dead dog. “Now, you can help us figure out a solution to this or get the fuck out and leave us alone. My dog is getting buried. However, until you prove to me that you’re not the worthless jerk who did it, who I am going to get an unbelievable amount of pleasure killing, I’m not listening to any of your... suggestions.”

Watching her protect the professor, Bacchus allowed himself a small grin. “Very well. One crisis at a time, then. Firstly, my identity.” Moving Jonas away, he stood before Dusty, his hands clasped behind his back. “Shoot me. I will make no effort to stop you. If I am Seth, the illusion will dissipate, and you will have a golden opportunity to release your anger on the one it truly needs to be directed at.”

“Whoa, wait a minute here,” Jonas protested, raising a hand. “We can’t be sure what those—”

“Déjà vu.” Just in case he wasn’t Seth, she didn’t aim for his heart but did aim for the chest. There was no need to piss off an ancient. One – two if she counted Deva – vampires angry with her was enough.

Slowly the flesh turned gray as if his body just lost all moisture. Starting from the point of entry and spreading outward until he resembled a marble statue, his appearance remained as it was.

Dusty looked at Jonas and then Antoine – who was peeking from behind her – as she stammered. “So... *this* is the real Bacchus. Sparx, did I just kill the oldest vampire in the world?”

Looking just as stunned, Jonas glanced from her to him and back again. He had no answers. “Uh.”

Furrowing her brows, she surveyed the gun in her hand. “Good Lord! What the *hell* did Cletus put in these bullets?”

Jonas touched Bacchus’s face, not exactly sure what to do at this point. “Umm... well, *that’s* not in the manual.”

“What do you mean *that’s* not in the manual?”

“I mean, I’ve never seen that happen before.”

“Oh. Is it *that* easy to kill Seth?”

Looking at Dusty, Jonas shook his head. “I don’t think you killed him, actually. Just turned him to stone, but how do I-” *Pleased to meet you, hope you guessed my name.* Fishing his phone out of his pocket, he saw a new text message from an *unknown user* and brought it up on his screen.

“If that’s Seth...”

Smirking at her, Jonas read the text out loud. “Remove the bullet, please. Thank you.”

Looking from Jonas to Bacchus, Dusty cringed. “Glad *I* don’t have that text.”

From behind her, Antoine gripped her shoulders, staring, staying in place. “Just surreal.”

Frowning, Jonas found the small hole in Bacchus’s robe. Reaching inside, he grabbed the bullet, pulling it out. Setting it aside, he stood back as Bacchus slowly returned to normal.

Shaking his head, Bacchus nodded at Dusty. “I’m glad you did not shoot me in the head. That would have been messy. *I do* hope you are satisfied.”

“For the moment. If I shoot Seth with a wooden bullet, will he also turn to stone?” Arching a brow, Dusty had a pensive expression on her face, probably thinking of what to do with that statue involving too much dynamite to be legal.

“I do not know. In all my years, *you* are the first one to hit me with a wooden bullet. I imagine it might affect each of us differently.” Bacchus stepped aside, smiling. “Why don’t you shoot Jonas with one and we’ll find out.”

Though it was tempting, Dusty shook her head. “We don’t have time for games like you said earlier. I can guess. You’re the most powerful vampire on the face of the Earth – and I can’t tell you how odd it is to hear that come from my mouth,” shaking her head, she continued, “and it turned you to stone.” She put her gun away.

Bacchus pursed his lips. “Too bad. I was hoping to learn something.” He walked towards her, pulling the hood off his head. “I know my help is not something you wish for, but I can get you and your companion back home faster than Deva’s jet.”

“Seth is gonna know what happens when you piss off a Jardner.” Turning to Bacchus, she motioned to Hooch. “How can you take us back to my house and back again faster than a jet? You have a magic carpet on you?”

Bacchus raised a brow. “Hm. You might say that.” Smiling, he looked at Jonas and Antoine. “You two have work to finish. Please do so while we’re gone.”

Jonas blinked, as Bacchus, Dusty and Hooch vanished from the room.

“Damn, I wish I could do that,” Antoine said. “Save a whole lot on car insurance.”

“That’s true.”

“Yep, it only takes fifteen minutes to get screwed over. Well, you heard the man. We better get cracking.”

All it took was a blink and she was at home waiting for her stomach to catch up. Never having traveled so fast in her life, her eyes widened seeing she was in her backyard. “Hooch, that was the fastest we’ve ever traveled,” then sighed, remembering he would never hear her again. “Oh, Hooch.”

Sighing, Bacchus glanced over at Dusty’s lifeless companion. “I *truly* am sorry. I understand losing family.”

“You didn’t do this. The one who did... he will pay. If it’s the last-” suddenly, the world dipped as did her stomach. Tightening an arm around her gut, she tried to get a grip on reality. Her belly just caught up with her and was angry about the solo trip.

Bacchus watched her curiously. “Are you okay?”

Looking around, the world was spinning, and no one would stop it. Her stomach was doing flips, dips, and turns while her head swam as if she were underwater, trying to get to the surface. She tried shaking it off. “Sure.”

He arched a brow. “You do not look well.”

“That must be what Jonas meant by *warp nine*.”

Watching her with concern, he nodded. “Yes, that is actually something similar to that feeling.”

“It isn’t pleasant.” Bending down, she rested on the balls of her feet, running her hands through her hair, trying to steady herself. “Whoa... that was some ride.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

“No, I don’t think so. I still have fully functioning organs that don’t do well with time travel... or whatever the hell that was.” At that very moment, all that delicious food she ate earlier about-faced. “I don’t think-” standing, she raced into the house and to the bathroom. Slamming the door behind her, the only sound heard was retching.

While she was losing a few ounces, Bacchus looked around the small house. It was neat, well cared for, spotless, but not in a cold, sterile way. It held a warmth that made him smile, with pictures of her and Hooch hanging on the walls. Feeling a small nudge at his leg, he looked down. A shimmering apparition tried headbutting him but wasn’t solid enough to make a difference. Bacchus reached down. “Well, hello there. You must be Hooch. I hoped you would find your way back to her.” A pair of sad eyes looked up to him. Kneeling to his level, he smiled. “Don’t be sad. You will always be with her now. Once she accepts that, she will see you.”

Hooch gave a mournful whine, sitting back on his hind legs.

“Ah, that I could. I cannot bring you back, my friend. I am *truly* sorry. One day you will be reunited. In the meantime, stay at her side. Warn her of dangers only you can see and if she seems like she cannot feel you, go to Jonas.”

The dog’s ears perked up at the mention of Jonas’s name and Bacchus nodded.

“Yes, he will see you.”

The dog looked to the bathroom door then back at him.

"I am afraid the trip was a bit more than her mortal stomach could take, but she will be fine. She has a strength of will," he glanced at the closed door, "and a power I have never sensed in another mortal." He looked at Hooch. "She is almost done. Soon, she will see you, but not until she has mourned. The heart will mend, and the mind will clear, but only after healing has begun."

Exiting the bathroom, Dusty took a deep breath. "Warp nine is too fast. I think warp one is more for the beginners." A hand lightly patted her stomach. "Ugh. I don't think there's anything left, but my stomach is still not happy with that trip. Must've been the missing turbulence from most flights." Stopping in front of one of the pictures on the wall of her and Hooch, she trailed a finger over it, eyes instantly tearing up. "This place isn't gonna to be the same without you, boy."

Bacchus smiled. "This place will still hold the spirit of your beloved pet."

"It's not the same." Sniffling, she tried hard not to break down again, looking back at Bacchus. "I'm sorry you never got to meet him."

"Did you have him long?"

Shaking her head, she showed him the picture of the day he came into her life. "Not long enough. Almost a year."

"Sometimes it is not the quantity of your time spent together, but the quality that counts," he said, nodding.

Grabbing a tissue, she blew her nose. "From the moment our eyes met, it was like he was sent from God to me. Meant to be mine."

"Why do you say that?"

"A couple of my neighbors called to tell me about a dog terrorizing the neighborhood. Anytime they had a problem, they called me. Big spider. Weird noises around their house. Anything. I went and tracked him down. He was so lovable. Friendliest damn dog. I kept thinking I had the wrong one. He hopped in my car like he belonged and kept showering my face with kisses. My intentions were to take him to the pound, but," she shrugged, "he grew on me, so I made him a home here."

"He kept you safe?"

"He was my bodyguard. The first day he met Jonas, I thought he was gonna rip off his head. It didn't last long." Her finger brushed at the tear. "Earlier, when Seth came up for the rose," her voice choked with emotion. Stopping, she breathed in and out, trying to keep composure. "He went hog wild. I had never seen him like that. It was ten times worse than his meeting with Jonas. I knew something was wrong but couldn't figure it out. Jonas spoke highly of you, so I didn't understand why Hooch was acting that way."

"He knew."

The tears trailed down her face faster than she could wipe them. "He was such a good dog. I'm gonna... miss him so much." Turning to Bacchus, she cried softly. "Do I have to say goodbye to him? This mission into hell to save the world has been nothing but sacrifices for me. I can give up everything else... my car... my house... my life, but not my dog. He was my best friend. Please... don't make me give him up. Without him, I have no one else. Sure, I have friends that mean a lot to me, but no one can replace Hooch." Her tears fell as she tried swatting them away, but it was a losing battle.

“If I had the power to return him to life, I would. Only God can do that. Death is never goodbye, Dusty. It is always *until we meet again.*” There was no need to elaborate. The question of an afterlife for mortals was one hotly debated even within the supernatural community. He knew the truth, but also knew it was as much a personal belief as it was any resemblance to a reality.

“It feels a lot like goodbye.”

Still, her tears touched him, and he drew her into his arms. “The soul is real, Dusty. It is not, as many believe, a *gift* from God. It is a *piece* of him. In each living being rests the capacity for good and the capacity for evil. No matter which the body chooses, the soul will always return home. Where it goes after that depends on how many marks it bears.”

His words, though comforting did not stop the tears. When he pulled her into his arms, she cried on his shoulder. The woman was broken. Her heart shattered. A huge chunk of her soul died with her dog. “Hooch was smarter than most people,” she sobbed. “He had his way of showing me things. I used to come home every night and talk to him about my cases. He gave me his opinions.”

He arched a brow. “He... spoke to you?”

Shaking her head, she pulled away, smiling at one of the pictures. “Not like that. He had his own way of letting me know what he wanted to say.”

“How?”

“I took him on a few of my stakeouts. When I fell asleep, he continued watching the house and woke me if anything happened. He wasn’t trained to do that. It was embedded within him.”

“Smart dog.”

“He was my very own guardian angel.”

“Well, now he really can be.” He glanced down and saw Hooch’s spirit at her side.

“That doesn’t help, Bacchus.” The waterworks started again. Racking sobs took over her body as it shook with every tear. “He’s gone forever.” As much as she tried, she couldn’t stop crying.

Of course, she was right. Nothing would help but Hooch bounding in through the back door, tail wagging, slobbering kisses all over her after a hard day and that was never going to happen again. Sometimes it was best to just remain silent and allow someone to grieve. As her body shook, he looked down.

Hooch hung his head and slowly vanished.

It wasn’t time for her to see him, but Bacchus knew the dog would never leave her. Her heart was still in too many pieces to allow her mind to see him. “He will always be with you.” It was a human platitude, offered in times of intense grief, but it was also true in cases where the bond of love was stronger than death. “Do you want help laying him to rest?”

After a good cry, though it felt like she had been crying her whole life, she was mentally exhausted. When he offered to help bury her best friend, there were no words spoken. Tears streamed down her face. Looking up through drenched eyelashes, she nodded.

He understood. There would be no tricks, no spells created to make a place for him. Bacchus took her by the hand, leading her back outside to where Hooch’s body lay. “Stay with him. Talk to him. Tell him how much he meant to you.” He looked around, seeing a beautiful spot beneath the large willow tree in her backyard. To the right, sat a small tool shed. “I’ll dig. You cry.” He

kissed her forehead and went to the shed. Finding a shovel, he walked to a smooth spot beneath the tree.

Sitting down on the bench, caused her to cry even louder. Hooch was gone, never to return. He would never again play in this backyard, fetching sticks for her to throw. Never run around the yard like his butt was on fire with pent-up energy. He would never again lick her face when she returned, making sure that she was okay from being gone for so long. Never again. It felt as if her heart were shattering into a million pieces, leaving sharp shards laying around her soul. With soulful mourns, she poured her love out, reminding him of what a good boy he was, telling him to be a good dog to God.

A soft breeze blew, creating a whistle as it flowed through the thin branches. The call went out and the yard began to fill with all manner of small animals and birds. Bacchus smiled at them as they assembled in a circle around him.

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Dusty looked around as animals and birds of all kinds gathered in a circle around the body of her beloved dog. Some of them were mortal enemies but none of them tried attacking the others, just stood around the body, crying in their own mournful ways. She blinked. It was something she had never seen before and doubted she would ever see again.

From the edge, a gray squirrel came over to Dusty and stood on its hind legs. For the last few months, Hooch and he played a game of tag in the backyard, taking turns being *it*.

Brushing back another tear, she turned her head to look at Bacchus. “I’ve never seen anything like this. What is happening? Did you do this?”

Bacchus paused in his labor. “No. Apparently, he had many friends. They have come to say goodbye as well.”

Looking down at the squirrel caused a few more tears to flow. Memories flooded her mind of the game of tag he used to play with Hooch. “Hey, you. You’re a quick little bugger. A few times, I thought for sure he was gonna getcha.” Putting her hand down, she waited for the squirrel to sniff before petting him. Dusty was amazed that this wild animal was so gentle. It brought a new set of tears as she stroked his soft fur.

The squirrel looked at the dog’s body. Walking over, he set a small paw on his face, resting it there a moment, then hopped back to his place in the circle.

Watching the tender scene, she started crying again. Having never gone to a funeral, it was definitely a tear-jerker. “Oh, Hooch, I’m gonna miss you so much. You were the other part of me. You were my only family. How can I go on without you? What am I gonna do without you around to protect me?” She put her face in her hands sobbing. “How can I go on?”

The animals looked up at her, and they too were whimpering, whining in their grief.

Her words were breaking up as the emotion bled through everything she said. Sniffing, she blew her nose many times on the Kleenexes snagged from the kitchen. “It’s *never* gonna be the same. I don’t wanna be here without you. You weren’t just my dog. You were my best friend, but most of all you were my family. Rest in peace, my good boy. Trust me when I say, I will avenge your death... even if it means my own.” With that said, she cried again.

Finishing the small site, Bacchus looked to her. "It's time, Dusty." The animals opened the circle to allow her through with Hooch's body as a rainbow crossed the sky overhead.

Hearing that made more tears fall, but she managed not to sob. Bending down, she picked up her dog, holding him close to her chest, crying on his fur as she kissed him again. "I love you, boy. I'll always love you. Be good."

The animals parted for her but continued to stay close, all whining and crying over the loss of their friend.

With baby steps, she continued to the hole. Every inch forward meant forever saying goodbye to him. She could feel her heart shattering, falling into the bottomless pit of her tortured soul, piece by piece until nothing remained. Kissing him one last time, she bent down, placing him into the ground. "I'd give anything to trade places with you. You don't belong there. You belong by my side." That said, she stood tall, before collapsing back down on her knees, bending at the waist, covering her face, weeping again.

The animals surrounded her as Bacchus filled in the site, each one bearing its own degree of sadness. As they began to file away, they stopped at a certain area, just to the right of where Dusty had dropped, and let out a small noise. To Dusty, it was their way of verbalizing their loss, but Bacchus knew better. They could see Hooch and were telling him goodbye. The last to leave was the gray squirrel, and he appeared to reach out and touch the air. Bacchus smiled as Hooch's spirit lowered its head, and then the small critter scurried away. Patting the dirt with the back of the shovel, Bacchus knelt down and set his hand over the ground. "*No lentre ese kai epsipas.*" A soft glow came from his palm, seeping into the ground, and he looked at Dusty. "Nothing will disturb his rest now." Standing, he put the shovel away. He walked back over to her and set his hands on her shoulders. "I am sorry, but we need to return."

Return? She didn't want to do anything but ball up in a fetal position and say piss on the world. Really, what had it done for her? Everything she had, meant spilling blood, sweat, and tears; nothing was ever given to her. Now... it took her dog. Even though she wanted to tell him and the world to fuck off, she couldn't do it. It wasn't in her. Instead, she looked up with a tear-stained face and nodded. "Thank you. I really appreciate you doing this. I'm sorry I thought you could do something this horrible. I was wrong."

"I am a vampire. It is understandable you would think me capable of such a thing."

"You might be a vampire, but you're *still* a good man." Reaching up, she touched his cold cheek with her warm hand. "I will never be able to thank you enough for making sure," her voice broke as she sniffed, "that Hooch had a very nice memorial. Thank you." Leaning up on her tiptoes, Dusty pecked him on the lips. After all that, kissing his cheek was just not sufficient.

The kiss was unexpected but welcomed and he smiled, lowering his head. "Thank you. That is the most gracious compliment anyone has paid me in a long time." He seemed to huddle within himself a moment, then looked at her. "Before we return, I must ask you. Back at the hotel, you called yourself *Jardner*, not Garner. Is there anything you would like to share with me – in confidence – before we return?"

Telling anyone her real secret could mean the difference in life or death. No one knew her real name, save God, and she was pretty sure he wouldn't divulge it to another living soul. However, after everything he did for her and Hooch, she owed it to him. "My last name isn't Garner, it's Jardner, with a soft 'g', but I hardened the G for stealth purposes."

“I see. How did you *legally* get that last name?”

“I’m a damn good hacker. I was born Dustina Elizabeth Jardner.” She motioned over to the bench. “Please have a seat and I’ll explain.” Sitting, she glanced down. Telling this felt like breaking a cardinal sin. It was something she kept protected. It was hard letting it go, even if it was just to one person. “I was once an agent for the Central Intelligence Agency. I was one of the best.” Taking a deep breath, she slowly exhaled. “My boss gave me my assignments, I carried them out. People begged for their lives, telling me they were innocent. Many ranted about how I was being lied to and they didn’t commit the crimes they were accused of and if so, why didn’t they get a court case about it.”

“Did you believe them?”

Shaking her head, she glanced over to the fresh grave, before focusing on her shoe. “No. Not at first. I was one of the best. They didn’t send me out for nickel and dime stuff, I got the top-secret jobs. The hush-hush ones titled national security. When too many people kept ranting and raving about the same thing, that little voice in my head started telling me to research. I think that was when I actually started listening to it. I found out they were right. I was executing innocent people for my government for... God only knows what reason. I was murdering them.”

Pursing his lips, he nodded as the mystery clouding Dusty Garner began to lift slowly. “I understand. Murder, justified or not, is a heavy burden to carry.”

“And that was how I became a Garner... instead of Jardner.”

“What about your physical appearance, didn’t you have to change that as well.”

“Yes. There was a plastic surgeon the CIA used often. The man could work miracles. He and I were close, not to mention the massive amount of money I paid to him. He gave me a new face. I fixed the rest. Some of the things I did to pull this off are grotesque and not worth mentioning. God knows my crime. The devil probably has a room ready for me. I do not know. When I killed Dustina Jardner, I really killed her. May God have mercy on my soul. She now exists in the stranger’s body in my grave... but enough about that. It’s the nightmare and unforgiving mark against my soul.”

Smiling a bit, his silver eyes regarded her. “If you had been one of us, you could’ve easily pulled that off without surgery, as Jonas did in the diner. Speaking of which, does he know about all this?”

Never mind how he had any notion about what happened in the diner, she overlooked that for now. Maybe another time she would inquire about his crystal ball. “Become one of you? Sorry. I’m not evil enough. No offense. Does Jonas know? Well, yes and no. He knows the menial stuff. The fact that I went into hiding, changed my appearance, and am running from some seriously screwed up people, and why. Who I really am? No. He believes I am Dusty Eliza Garner. *You’re* the only person who knows that. Well, and God.”

“And my lips are sealed,” winking, he drew his finger across his lips. It seemed to be an innocent, irrelevant fact, but he knew better. “When you are ready, we’ll return.”

Would she be ready to leave her home and precious boy behind? Probably never, but it didn’t mean a hill of beans to anyone. There was a lot still left to do and no one had the time to wait while she wallowed at a grave site about how life had been cruel. If there was a time machine, she would gladly go back and leave Hooch with Travis when he offered. Travis. Seth had Travis. Taking a

deep breath, she slowly exhaled. And people wondered why she was so hardcore emotionless. It didn't pay to get invested in people or things when they were constantly ripped from her. Standing, she glanced over at the grave site, blowing a kiss. "Till we meet again, my sweet boy." Nodding over at Bacchus, she sighed again. The world was on her shoulders and she didn't know if they could withstand the force this time. "Let's do this. Even though I'm sure as hell not looking forward to the aftereffects of this ride, I'm ready."

He looked around, then down at her feet and smiled. "We are *all* ready."

21

Once more 'Warp Nine' wreaked havoc on her tender insides. Before Dusty could question the meaning of his words, her system was sky-rocketed again with something that mortals had no business doing. Within a blink, she went from looking at her backyard – knowing it no longer held the same sentiment it always had – to stare at the beautiful décor of the hotel room. It was like catching a mad case of vertigo. The world literally did a 360-spin with her in it, like clothes in a dryer. As she landed, she put her hands out to the sides, trying to steady herself before she hit the floor. "Thankfully, my stomach is empty this time."

Jonas walked in examining a yellow legal pad, followed close behind by Antoine.

"Aaagh!" the professor said, as Dusty appeared out of thin air. "Way to give an old man a heart attack!"

Startled by the yelp, Dusty jumped. "Whoa. Back at ya. Why ya screaming like that? Don't people just pop in and out of existence where you come from?" Putting a hand to her chest, she tried slowing her accelerated heart. "Man, first I have to take a ride on the Warp Nine express," glancing at Jonas she shook her head, "and my driving is nothing like that... thank you very much." Glancing back to Antoine, she sighed. "Then I have people scaring the daylights out of me on my return trip. It's enough to give me premature grays."

Antoine immediately went to Dusty, hugging her. "My darling girl, are you okay? You look so pale. What happened?"

Nodding, she touched her hand to Antoine's cheek. It was a tender moment that a daughter would give to her father, only Dusty never experienced it. It just came naturally with Antoine. "I will be. It takes my stomach a few minutes to catch up to the rest of me... for my body to readjust."

Seeing Hooch at Dusty's feet, Jonas arched a brow.

"*Say nothing.*" came Bacchus's voice in his head.

"*Great. Something else I have to keep from her. She's going to kill me, you know.*" As Hooch's spirit waggled over to Jonas, rolled onto his back and gazed up with pleading eyes, he gave an apologetic shrug and mouthed, "Later."

"Well, we have some good news," releasing her, Antoine smiled.

Pulling back, Dusty breathed a heavy sigh. All this was a lot for her and it was starting to tax her body. Little sleep. Little food. Now the devastation of losing her last family member. However, she had to push on. Shaking off the depression, she ran a hand through her hair. "That's something we're shy of around here. It will be nice to break the status quo." Famished, she went to her jacket

pocket. "So, what's the good news? Hopefully, it's something that's easier than what we've already had to go through." Grabbing out a handful of Jellybeans, she scarfed them down, feeling as if she hadn't eaten in days. "Anyone else starving?"

"Lord have mercy, girl, you're speaking my language now. I think we should get food soon, but for now... I'm worried about your," he paused remembering what she called him, "friend in the hands of that bloodthirsty killer." Walking over to the table, it was obvious that he and Jonas were working in her absence. Unrolling a large map, he pointed. "Now, if you look at the—"

Jonas made a small circle with his hand, freezing everything in the room then slipped over to Bacchus.

Glancing around, Bacchus gave an approving nod of his head. "Very nice. I see your time at Deva's was well spent. I take it you acquired this spell during your training?"

He nodded. "Yes, but I try not to overuse it. I understand it really plays hell with things. Now I—" looking down, he saw Hooch at his feet, belly up, staring at Bacchus.

"Doesn't work on the dead. To them, time is meaningless."

Leaning down, Jonas gave the pup a belly rub. Poor thing probably didn't understand why Dusty didn't acknowledge him. Glancing up, he continued. "How is that Seth was able to become you? I know we can alter appearances, I've done it myself, but actually becoming another? I wasn't aware *that* kind of power existed."

He nodded, reaching down, scratching Hooch's chin. The dog's leg kicked wildly, and his tongue hung out the side of his mouth. "It is not something he got from being a vampire."

Jonas blinked. "Pardon?"

"Seth was born with it. He – and his mother before him – are changelings."

Shaking his head, Jonas gave him a deadpan stare. "And you didn't share this information with me... why, exactly?"

"I did not think it would be necessary."

"Didn't think it... We need to work on our communication skills."

As the two rose, Hooch, no longer being petted, rolled back over and sauntered to his bowls. At first, he tried dipping down to eat from the food that was still there from the night before. Eggs with just a hint of sausage teased him from the confines of the big bowls. It was no use. He couldn't bite into them, kept going through them. Whimpering, he turned to his water. Nothing. Once more he whined, turning to the men, questioningly.

"Sorry boy," Bacchus said. "There are some disadvantages to being dead, and that's one of them."

Hooch growled, made a few circles and laid down, his head resting on his paw.

"Any other things about Seth that... slipped your mind?"

"Well his history is..." He looked at Jonas, shrugging. "Colorful."

"I'm listening."

“We don’t have time right now. *You* need to set time back in motion, or you are going to piss someone off, and you will *not* like the results.”

Jonas was about to set things right when he felt Bacchus’s hand on his shoulder. Sighing, he turned. “Yes?”

“I will give you one bit of information about Seth.” He leaned close and whispered. “He sired Kanis.”

Then he was gone, leaving Jonas standing there with his mouth open. Blinking, he rotated his hand in the opposite direction.

“-ese marks.” Antoine looked around. “Where did Bacchus go?”

“He had a... previous engagement.” Walking over to the map, he steered the conversation back to it. “Now, as you were saying?”

“Rude. He didn’t even say goodbye. It’s polite, you know.” Shrugging, Antoine pointed to an area on the map. “Okay, when you left, we were trying to figure out just what it means. In quarters, the cardinal weapon lies. We racked our brains on that, but Jonas figured it out,” pointing to him, he nodded. “You can take it from here. You explain it better than I can.”

Nodding, Jonas pointed to the first line. “Cardinal can mean primary... or first. It makes sense here because the first weapon would be the rock used to murder Abel. It was broken into four pieces, so that would be the quarters.”

Dusty blinked. “Oh! Yes, that does make sense now that you put it like that.”

Shaking his head, Jonas shrugged. “They word these things like this on purpose. Like Nostradamus and his quatrains. He had to hide his messages because he feared arrest – or worse – if someone found out what he was really trying to say. It’s basically talking about the stones we’re looking for. Now, the first part of this quatrain is finished. It was easy enough to figure out, but now the second bit. Where *this* stone is. *That’s* the part we need to work on, agreed?”

Grabbing another handful of Jellybeans, Dusty nodded. “Ah. Okay, I can understand that. As I said, someone giving us a cheat sheet would make this go a lot faster, but I get it.”

Pursing his lips, Antoine looked at the symbols again. “If I’m right in which symbol represents which word, then,” picking up the scroll, he headed back to his room. “Give me one minute. I want to make sure I have the right sequences. I don’t want to mess up and have us looking in the wrong area.”

Chewing, she looked over, nodding. “Yes. Definitely don’t have us searching the sands of the desert for this thing. That could take more time than we have. But, it sounds like you guys were definitely busy working while I was gone. It sounds like you’re on the right track. Then again, I knew if anyone could do it, you could.”

Placing a hand on Dusty’s shoulder, Jonas nodded down at her. “Are you okay to continue?”

Nodding, she went to get a cup of coffee. “Yes. It’s not like we really have a choice though, right? At least he’s given me something to look forward to. Ripping his black, icy heart out of his chest.”

Smiling, Antoine reemerged. "Yes. I am right. Now, it's gibberish as far as I can see, but maybe *you*," he nodded at Jonas, "can make something out of it." Handing the paper to Jonas, he too went for a cup of coffee. "Good idea, my girl."

As Jonas read the translation, his brows furrowed. "It deafens the terrifying one who stands watch over its creator?" Sighing, he rolled his eyes. "That doesn't really help much. I mean there are a lot of landmarks and tourist attractions that could be it. I got nothing." Turning, he looked at Dusty. "Ideas? Suggestions?"

After doctoring her coffee, her steps took her back over to the laptop. Sitting, she set her cup down as her fingers moved over the keyboard. "Well, let's see what pulls up on *Bing*." As the search engine came up, she read them off. "Skynet. World of Warcraft. Now that might be," then rolled her eyes at the mention it was a game.

"It's a game," the three said in unison.

She continued. "Scientology. 3-D printing gun. Paranoid Androids. The Stand. Something to do with making glasses. Something to do with football." Groaning, she shook her head. "I got nothing. Unless... I wonder if the bible says anything?" After reading over a few more searches, she shook her head. "Obama mocking Jesus Christ. Witchcraft in the church. Pope Francis has destroyed Catholicism. Forgiveness. A full armor of God."

Antoine pointed. "Hmm, let's check out what *that* says."

"Okay." Clicking on the link, she skimmed over a few lines, shaking her head. "I don't think any of that is it either." Turning, she looked at them. "Yeah, I still got nothing. Is there something in Egypt that is," turning, she tapped on the computer. After a quick search, she hung her head, shaking it slowly. "Yeah, I still got nothing."

Jonas looked at Antoine. "Do you have the next line? Maybe it'll help figure out the first."

Looking at his scribbling, Antoine handed it to Jonas. "I just translate it son. What it all means is way over my head."

Accepting the page, he read it out loud. "In the heart of the oppressive blasphemers. Yeah. That helps."

Sliding the sheer drape aside, Antoine looked out the window. "Now, we're in Egypt, right? Therefore, I gotta believe that *the heart of the oppressive blasphemers* is a reference to Egypt, somehow. Maybe," he pondered a moment, tapping his chin with a finger. "Look, when the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, they looked at the people as wicked idol worshippers. Put those two things together, and I suppose you could call the Egyptians of the time, oppressive blasphemers. So, in the heart of Egypt is where we'll find the stone. We just gotta figure out what they meant by *the heart*."

Jonas nodded, grinning at him. "You're good. I think we'll keep you around."

She chuckled. "I told you."

"OK, so we know we're on the right track, but this is a big country and there are dangerous places here. Places where Americans – mortal or otherwise – aren't exactly welcome. We need to narrow it down." Hearing a low grunt, Jonas looked to where Hooch was resting.

He had woken from his nap and dream and sat with his front legs stretched out in front of him, head held high.

Jonas winked at him and then turned back to Dusty. "I don't suppose you..." His eyes narrowed, turning back to Hooch. Tilting his head, he snapped his fingers. "I'll be a son of a..."

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When he stopped mid-sentence, Dusty looked over to the empty corner, curious about what was engaging about it. "What is it? Something in that corner?"

Giving Jonas a worried look, Antoine leaned over, whispering to Dusty, "Is he alright? I hope he's not having some breakdown."

Looking back at them, Jonas shook his head. "Who me? I'm fine. It's just the way my brain works. It happens to vampires. We've learned so much that sometimes... it takes a visual to get the gears working, searching through all the memory banks. It's technical. Hard to explain." Joining Antoine at the window, he looked out into the distance, smiling. "While we're here, I think we should do some sightseeing. Who's up for it? We can get something to eat while we're out. Coffee and Jellybeans aren't a nutritious meal for either of you."

Blinking, Dusty looked at him. He was acting weirder than usual. "Sightseeing? Do we really have time for that?"

Antoine stared at Jonas as if he had grown two extra heads. "I think you're suffering from some vampire dementia. We have to figure out this translation. Somebody shot at Dusty. This... this *Seth* maniac has her friend – threatening to remodel wherever he is with his blood. Not to mention, he's also searching for the stone. Knowing all that, you want to go see the wonders of the ancient world?"

"Exactly! It would do us good to get out, breathe some fresh desert air, and take in the sights. You know this is *my* first time here too." Glancing at them, seeing neither were convinced, he chuckled. "Fine! We need to go and check out an idea I have. However, before I say anything about it – get everyone's hopes up – I have to make sure. That means going to Giza. It's what... a thirty-minute drive?"

Looking at him curiously, Dusty shook her head. "You're acting weird. What idea? Why not tell us before we leave?"

Antoine nodded. "We promise not to get our hopes up high."

Looking between them, noticing the wary expressions shared between the two, he grinned. "Trust me. Besides, you're both hungry and have to eat. C'mon. What could it hurt? If I'm correct, we'll be in the right location."

"Hang on. Give me a moment to change then." Antoine went to his room, grabbing a light jacket, hat and changed his shoes to a suitable pair of hiking boots.

Shrugging, Dusty rolled her eyes. "Whatever. I guess the man has a plan. Let's go sightseeing," grabbing her jacket, she munched on a few more Jellybeans. Picking up hers and Antoine's cups, she put them in the sink.

As Antoine exited his room, Jonas chuckled. "You look like Indiana Jones. Only darker."

Antoine's brow rose. "Stick with being a vampire, you're a lousy comedian."

"Just telling it like I see it." Taking out his phone, Jonas informed Deva of what was happening. One thing about her paying for everything, she wanted progress reports.

A silver Land Rover – complete with driver – was waiting for them. "Miss Deva tells me to take you wherever you wish to go. I am Ahmes." Bowing, he opened the back door. Looking down at Jonas's feet, he grinned. "And just who is–"

"Thank you, Ahmes. We appreciate the expert help." Cutting him off, Jonas shook his head, shooting a glance to Dusty and back.

The man understood. "Of course, it is no problem. Anything for Miss Deva." He winked.

"I have to admit, it's nice having someone with a lot of connections on our side," Dusty said, climbing in, looking out the window.

"You are going to Giza, yes?" Ahmes asked, turning his head as he pulled away from the hotel.

"Yes. To the Great Pyramid," Jonas said, nodding. As far as anyone was concerned, they were just taking in a little sightseeing. "I want to see what is so fascinating about that place."

While driving there, Ahmes spoke of how the great monuments took thousands of men, toiling around the clock, to provide the pharaohs with a proper place to enter the afterlife. Antoine rolled his eyes, looking out the window, as he had already told them all this and then some.

As they arrived at the tourist drop-off point, Ahmes parked the Land Rover. Once out, he opened their doors. "Take your time, please. I have orders to wait for you. No matter how long. Enjoy the tour!"

Climbing out, Dusty looked up at the pyramid in awe, already grabbing some Jellybeans. The promise of food wasn't met yet. "Wow! That sucker is *huge!* You see them in pictures, but it does nothing to show you just how *enormous* they are!"

Reaching into her pocket, Antoine grabbed a handful of candy as well. Looking up to the sky, he winked. "Gabby, I know you're with me and you see this too. Isn't it beautiful?" Turning back to Jonas, he popped a few into his mouth. "So... do we get to actually go inside?"

Jonas pursed his lips. "This was short notice, so, I might have to work some magic. They only sell three-hundred per day, and we're late." Looking around, seeing no one was paying any attention to them, he winked at Dusty. "Don't go anywhere." After nodding to Ahmes, he vanished around the corner.

Motioning over his shoulder to the disappearing act, Antoine looked at Dusty curiously. "What's that all about?"

"Um," she said, shrugging. "I have no clue. I would think to get our tickets?"

"Didn't he just say they're probably sold out for the day?"

"Yes. Well, Jonas has a way with words. Sometimes... he can persuade people – without violence – to see things his way... which is our way."

Furrowing his brows, Antoine stared hard. "Do I even want to know?"

Shaking her head, she winked. "Not really. Just go with it."

“As long as we get to see this thing from the inside, I don’t care what he has to do. You did say without violence?”

Jonas reappeared with three tickets, handing them each theirs, putting the last one in his pocket. Motioning to them, they walked to the end of the line. “Luckily, we got here when we did. These were the last three tickets.”

Up ahead, there were three irate people in line. “I tell you we had three tickets. They were right here! Now they’re gone. I have my receipt right here!” She shoved a slip of paper in the man’s face. “Now, I *demand* we be admitted inside!”

Apologizing, the man shrugged. “I am so sorry, but without ticket, I am afraid you cannot go inside. There will be another tour tomorrow.”

“We won’t be here tomorrow! Our flight leaves out tonight!”

“I am so sorry. If you like, I can see that you are put on the reserve list as those people were.” He motioned to Jonas, Dusty, and Antoine.

As all eyes turned in their direction, Antoine looked at Jonas. “Well, I guess you were right about reserving them ahead of time. Whew!” Shaking his head, Antoine held onto his ticket. “I’d be upset if I wasn’t able to get in.”

Livid, the woman stormed up to Jonas. Her attire screamed of her love of the color lavender. The smell – a bath of cheap perfume – hit them before she did. Leaning in, she waved her finger in Jonas’s face. “Young man, I demand to see your ticket.”

They were numbered, and Jonas knew that the number would be the same on her receipt. “Of course.” Pulling out his ticket, he handed it to her, leaning in close, smiling. “As you can see, my number doesn’t match any on your receipt.”

Seeing he was right, the woman blinked, stammering with embarrassment. “I... I’m so sorry.”

He waved a hand. “Think nothing of it. I am just sorry that you are unable to get in.”

Slowly, she walked back to her companions, each of them searching the ground and demanding to see the tickets of those around them.

Antoine blinked, sliding closer to Jonas. “Seriously? You stole their tickets?”

“I was a great pickpocket for fifteen years. Made a lot of money. Lived off the land. Had everything at my fingertips... until I went after the wrong coin pouch.” Turning, he saw that both of them eyed him with annoyance. “It couldn’t be helped. We need to get in. Remember, we’re here to save the world. It’s not like we can schedule things in advance. It had to be done.” Putting his hands behind his back, they moved forward with the line of people.

Though she felt instantly sorry for the sobbing woman who was leaving in her car with two angry passengers, Jonas was right. They had to get inside and seek out this hunch of his. The woman was sacrificing a small amount compared to what they had. “You’re right. At least we get to see inside.”

Shaking his head, Antoine sighed. “That poor woman. I feel so sorry for her. But as the Good Book says, ‘the Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away. I’m pretty sure it goes the opposite way as well.’ As they got closer, the excitement bug bit him. “But... like you said... we have to get in here.”

As the tour guide stopped them at the entrance, he rattled off the pyramid's exterior measurements, telling them the same thing that Antoine and the driver had. By now, it was embedded in Dusty's mind. "I feel like we've heard this before."

Antoine nodded. "A few times."

"Built during the fourth dynasty," the tour guide began, "The Great Pyramid once stood four-hundred-eighty-feet tall, but time and erosion – plus the fact that it is missing the capstone – have reduced its height to around four-hundred-fifty-five feet. It took twenty years to build, and it is thirteen acres in area, at its base. There are more than two and a half million blocks in it, some weighing as much as seventy tons." He described more of the great building's past. "You will notice the floor's texture, which is something you see in all the pyramids." He went on to explain the story of Isis, Horus, and Osiris.

Antoine bent down, feeling along the texture. "It's quartz crystal. They must have had an abundant amount back in the day for so many structures to be created out of this."

Dusty looked around. "I can see why. It's pretty."

Smiling, Jonas glanced at Antoine who nodded in agreement with their tour guide. "Are you waiting for him to make a mistake?"

"I'm ready if he does! I've studied this from the comfort of my home and office since I was a child, but I never thought I'd actually be about to go inside." An ear-to-ear grin was painted on his face. "There is no comparison."

Glancing over at Dusty, Jonas winked. "Not bad for a first date, eh?"

Shaking her head, she grimaced. "Nope. No first date. One, you don't have third wheels. Two... ew. Not happening."

Looking around, Antoine shrugged. "If I'm in the way, I can go up there with the tour guide and help him out. I mean... just in case he makes a mistake."

Grinning, Dusty poked him. "I know you were a teacher, but do you really think you could deal with the tourists and be a tour guide?"

Antoine pointed off in a direction. "Like plateaus at the base of the largest obelisk in Egypt. The platform of the crystal altar is quartz crystal. Nine stone basins look like the biggest bowls in history. I believe – as some others do – that it was where they sacrificed animals and the hole was where the blood seeped through."

Glancing that way, Dusty shrugged. "A big bowl with a hole? Are they sure it wasn't used for catching water, or maybe even a bathtub?"

"I guess we'll never know, but I can always make myself scarce if you two want to be alone."

Shaking her head, Dusty cringed again. "Ew. Stop encouraging him. That's not happening. He's just being a royal smart ass because I said I would never, *ever* go on a date with him."

"You know you want to," Jonas told her, wiggling his brows.

Looking between the two, Antoine lifted one shoulder. "The offer is there."

"No thanks," Dusty told him, rolling her eyes.

“You will notice the three chambers. That is the hospital. They used to heal people with sound.” The tour guide began, pointing off to another of the buildings. “The doctor would put his head in the niche and look through to see what was wrong with his patient laying on the table. He could tell by the sound of the running water underneath.”

Dusty looked at Antoine and then Jonas. “That doesn’t make any sense. I mean if it was something like a cough, okay you hear that, but what if it was a rash?”

“The pyramids are all based on a sophisticated, harmonic structure. Not only did they mirror positioning of the stars, but they were designed to replicate the harmonic cavities of the human body.” Antoine told her. “The pyramid is tuned to a harmonic frequency or tone. They used the sound to bring the patient’s body back to the harmonic frequency, thus curing the illness.”

“Huh, I wonder why they did that.”

“There’s one thing I forgot to mention. When I spoke of Sneferu earlier, I didn’t tell you the meaning of that name. Sen means double, Nefer means harmony, so, it’s double harmony. It’s not so much a name, but it’s the name of the construction of the pyramid.”

Laughing, Dusty nudged him. “You’re right. You really *could* be a tour guide!”

“Now, let us step back in time, yes?” The tour guide said as the line began moving forward. “Imagine you are one of the pharaoh’s priests. Entering his tomb, readying it to receive his body, making sure his ascension to the heavens goes smoothly.”

Jonas wiggled his brows at Dusty. “Got your handy flashlight?”

Rolling her eyes at Jonas, she turned her attention back to the tour guide. “Do you *ever* come prepared for *anything*?” Taking out her mini Maglite, she handed it over.

As they entered the tomb, Jonas’s brow furrowed as he looked around. “There’s something *here*.”

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Jonas’s remark could mean anything from a frightening monster to an Earth-shattering clue, Dusty needed just a little bit more to go on to get excited. “*Something*... is a little vague. Could you be more specific?”

Looking over, Antoine nodded in agreement. “Took the words right out of my mouth. *What is here?*”

Instinctively, Jonas protectively stood in front of the others, just in case *something* tried to harm them. The hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up, and that was never a good sign. Hooch stood at attention at his side, also on high alert. As the tour guide continued forward, Jonas held out a hand stopping their progress. “Just hang back a moment.” What he saw next brought up a mixture of awe and sadness.

The spirits of the pharaoh’s priests walked out of the wall in solemn procession, carrying small, smoking urns. Raising and lowering them, they recited prayers in their native tongue. Two rows of ten passed by, followed by a single spectral figure adorned in fine linen, wearing a golden headdress. Stopping in front of Jonas, he slowly turned, facing him. Smiling wistfully, the figure reached out for his hand.

Glancing awkwardly at Antoine and Dusty, he shot them a smile then met the offered spectral hand. When they connected, he heard the voice of the Pharaoh, in his mind.

Hidden within the Queen's chamber is the key you are looking for. Find it, save your people and release us from our torment. The Pharaoh looked down at Jonas's feet. Seeing Hooch, he smiled. Breaking the handshake, he bent down to pet Dusty's spirit companion. After a moment of head rubbing, he stood again. Looking at Jonas, he bowed then moved to rejoin the eternal procession.

Meanwhile, Dusty and Antoine watched Jonas touching and smiling at the air and gave wary side glances to each other.

Clearing his throat, Antoine whispered to Dusty. "Should we be worried about him?"

Watching, she didn't understand any of it. Wonder filled her mind if Seth did something to him. Shaking her head, she whispered back. "I'm... not sure. I know they don't get sick and they can't-"

"Excuse me! *Excuse me*, but you must keep up. You must not wander off on your own, no. Please hurry." The tour guide motioned for Antoine, Jonas, and Dusty to follow.

His voice brought Jonas back to reality. "Sorry about that. I was just... sightseeing, I suppose."

Arching a brow, Dusty slowly nodded. "Yeah, the... walls... are just... wow... worth a closer look." Smiling at the tour guide, she wasn't sure what else to say.

"Do not get lost from the group. You do not wish to be lost in here." Turning, he moved back to the front of the tour.

Leaning closer to Jonas, she whispered, "Are you okay? You're acting kinda... strange. I mean stranger than usual."

He nodded. "Don't worry about me. I'm fine."

"*That* remains to be seen." Rolling her eyes, she turned back, listening to the tour guide. Things still weren't right between them. It was obvious that he was still keeping things from her – when she was supposedly his partner in crime through this process – and she didn't like it.

Antoine also looked ahead. "I think he got the date wrong on that one. It's hard to hear back here."

Giggling softly, Dusty nudged him. "Are you telling me that you want to take time out of your busy schedule and give tours in the pyramid?"

"I dunno. It might become a new gig for me."

"A new *gig*?" That made her laugh. "Who *are* you?"

The line stopped as the tour guide began rattling off more facts, and Jonas winked at Dusty. "Watch this!" Leaning over, he began humming a low tone.

The guide spoke about how the dead were expected to rise. Suddenly, the small enclosed area filled with the sounds of sorrowful moans. It vibrated through to the soul, causing a multitude of goose bumps to appear. Some screamed. Others cried. Many ducked, falling over each other – in a human domino game – to get away from the terrifying sound. It felt like the dead were surrounding them, coming in for the kill.

As the tour guide tried to get control of everyone, Dusty and Antoine laughed hysterically at the end of the line. “Sir… Sir, please stop that. You are scaring people.”

“The pyramid sites along the band of peace are sophisticated harmonic structures, just like the hospital. The chambers in the pyramids are harmonically tuned to different frequencies or musical tones,” Antoine said loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Whoa!” Dusty looked at him. “Was it just *this* one?”

As the tour guide took over, reiterating what he just said, Antoine leaned down, whispering to Dusty. “The Bent Pyramid – covered in white Tura limestone – has two chambers for two different sounds. Each chamber in each pyramid could be exemplifying sound technology with distinct tones, creating huge fields of harmonic resonance.”

As the people got back in line, glaring at Jonas, the tour guide explained how the vibrations worked, though not as thorough as Antoine did. He assured them there were not any dead people wandering the corridors of the Great Pyramid. “Please, please. There are no such things as ghosts.”

Jonas laughed at the air at his feet. “You tell him, boy. Go bite his big toe.”

Furrowing her brows again, Dusty looked down at Jonas’s feet, seeing nothing. She really was worried about him. Maybe he was getting some vampire illness? Did they get those? She wasn’t sure, but he was definitely acting odd. “Who are you talking to?”

Not realizing Dusty heard, he winced, before ignoring her and calling out to the guide. “Where’s the King’s Chamber?” It was the best way to steer any conversation back to the tour at hand.

“Yes, we will get to there soon, soon. Now come, come. Let us see first, the entrance to the Queen’s Chamber. It is closed, too bad, and I am sorry, but we cannot go in there.”

Jonas pursed his lips. “Well… *that* isn’t good.”

Antoine groaned. “It figures. I *really* wanted to see that too.”

“Why? Isn’t it the same as the king’s?” Dusty asked, looking away from Jonas, slightly concerned.

“No,” Antoine answered. “They say the Queen’s Chamber wasn’t really for *his* queen. It’s supposed to be just a statue with a… to be blunt… hard on.”

“He died with a boner?” She exclaimed a little too loudly.

One woman in front of them turned, looking at her sharply, covering her daughter’s ears. “Do you mind?”

Arching a brow, Dusty glared back. “Woman! This ain’t the kiddie show. Do you see a sign outside saying they were going to have clowns in here?” Shocked, the woman just stared, with her mouth agape. Dusty motioned to her. “Turn around. There’s nothing to see back here.”

Antoine chuckled. “I have forgotten just how outspoken you can be.”

The guide explained how – when the King’s Chamber was found – there were no riches, no gold, and no body. Tomb robbers – who left nothing behind – had cleaned it out over the centuries.

“We need to drop off the radar here, guys,” Jonas said.

Dusty looked around. "Why? What's up?"

Antoine followed suit. "Is it that Seth character again?"

He would explain in time. "Walk slow." He watched as the distance between them and the group widened. "It's not Seth. Not this time. I have it on... good authority... that there's a hidden room somewhere off the Queen's Chamber, and it holds a key to our search."

Antoine gave him a puzzled look. "But the guide said the entrance to the Queen's Chamber is sealed off. How do you propose that we," chuckling, he cut himself off, shaking his head. "Never mind. I don't really wanna know. Following advice from *good* authority is always better than following bad advice."

Dusty shrugged. "Could be worse."

Rubbing his chin, Jonas saw the gated, locked piece of fencing over the first passage to the Queen's Chamber. Bending, he looked into the dark pathway, before righting himself. "Well I can get the barrier open, no sweat, but that tunnel is only about four feet high and three and a half feet wide." He looked at Dusty, shaking his head. "Not even *you* can squeeze into that."

Turning, she glared at him. "Are you calling me fat?"

His eyes sparkled in the dim light as they roamed over her body. "No. Not even a little. If it was a clear path, you'd make it with room to spare, but it looks like there are some obstructions in there that narrow it down even further."

Antoine nodded. "Ah, that could be why it's closed."

"I can still fit!" Grabbing her cell phone, she pulled up the flashlight app, moving past him to peer through the entrance way. "Well... if I didn't like my layers of skin. I've grown quite attached to them." Looking about, the light shone around the area, and back to the two Jolly Green Giants with her. In the lighting, they all looked a little green. "What's the other option?"

Antoine piped up. "Well can't you just... you know, vanish or something? Maybe turn into a rat and crawl through."

Jonas rolled his eyes. "Seriously, Antoine? A rat?"

"A snake?" Dusty teased.

Antoine shrugged. "I'm just throwing out suggestions." Looking at Dusty, he smiled. "That's an even better idea. Then you could—"

"That's *quite* enough out of both of you." Jonas shook his head. "The insults I have to endure to save the world. I swear." Stopping short, he looked down. A huge grin appeared on his face before nodding, leaning against the railing, crossing his arms over his chest, like they had all the time in the world. "So... what should we do after we're done here?"

"I would say food, but..." Arching a brow, Antoine looked at him, before leaning to talk softly to Dusty. "Are we *sure* he's okay? We're not even though this obstacle course and he's talking like we did something."

Shrugging, she leaned over whispering back, knowing full well Jonas could hear. "Not sure. He's definitely acting weird. Laughing at air. Nodding at air. Shaking hands with air. I think we should be worried."

Antoine nodded. "Is there like a Vampire's Anonymous we should send him to." Before he could say any more, Dusty busted out with laughter. "I mean I'm just—" pausing, he watched as she fell to the ground, laughing, holding her stomach in hysteria. Looking down at her, he glanced back up at the walls. "Is it something in this pyramid? Wait... do I feel funny?" Glancing up, he looked around, sniffing the air. "No... I don't think so." Furrowing his brows, he wondered why she laughed even harder. "Lack of nourishment. You're not eating enough and it's affecting your brain cells. What few you have left." He looked at Jonas. "Am I missing something, or just immune to whatever has her carrying on and you having a party with air?"

Jonas shrugged. "She's on a roll. Back in Cider Lake, I mentioned starting up a Vampires Anonymous, and apparently, your comment triggered a bout of hysteria. I don't suppose you have any cards on you? I could show you a few tricks while we wait."

Sitting up, still laughing, she wiped the tears from her eyes, breathing slowly in and out, trying to get composed. "I think there might be something in the air." Each word peppered with a giggle.

He blinked, looking from Jonas back to Dusty and back again. "You're as off the rails as she is. Wait for what, exactly?"

Standing, she dusted off her jeans. "Sorry, Jonas. I'm a detective. Cards aren't part of the whole 'being prepared for' that I thought of."

He was about to answer then looked down. Grinning, Jonas turned back to them, motioning his hand. "This way."

Taking out her cell phone, she turned on the flashlight. Once more shining it around the area. "Which way? Back to the tour. Well, this was a nice pit stop. Too bad there wasn't a bathroom over here then it would've made sense."

Antoine shook his head. "Yes. There are a *few* things that aren't making sense." He looked from Dusty to Jonas, falling in behind him. "Mhm."

"Just a *few*? You're doing better at understanding than I am then." Being in the back of the train, Dusty flashed the light behind them, just to make sure no one was following. "This place is actually kinda creepy. I feel like there are ghosts all around just watching." Turning, she rushed to keep up with the other two.

Jonas lifted a brow. "Ghosts? C'mon now, Miss logical. You know there are no such things. You were the one who told me about the squirrels in your grandmother's attic, right?"

Even as he spoke, the specters of long-dead priests wandered past them again, raising and lowering their incense lamps, humming the same eerie notes. He watched as they vanished into the wall before them, followed by the Pharaoh.

Again, he stopped before Jonas, nodding, pointing to one small block about a foot above his transparent head. It was out of place, but not so much that it would be noticed as anything other than perhaps a bit of stone, added there for support. Bowing again, the form moved into the wall and vanished.

"True. I never *used* to believe in ghosts." She waited until he looked at her. "Then again, I never believed in vampires either, and look at me now."

"Touché!" Jonas pointed to the same spot. "I think this is the place."

Antoine looked at the spot curiously, before turning back to Jonas. “Place for *what*, exactly?”

Dusty focused her light on the wall. “Yeah, I’ll bite. Am I looking for anything in particular?” She moved her light up and down the wall, barely a hair’s length from her nose as she inspected the surface. “Because I don’t see anything but a wall. No pretty pictures, no hi-ro-thingies... nothing but a wall.”

“Hieroglyphics,” Antoine said.

She pointed at Antoine. “What he said.”

“Yep.” Jonas set his palm over the larger stone, moving it slowly left and right.

Gasping, she looked around in shock. “Lord, please tell me that we don’t have to take this place apart... brick by ever-loving brick.”

“Amen to that. Over two and half million bricks could take a little while.” He nodded to Jonas. “Even *with* your special powers.”

The smaller piece protruded from the larger, just barely, and he rested his hand there for a moment. “Well, let’s see if we win a prize.” He pushed on the stone and it recessed about a half an inch.

“Good thing we’re like... not on a deadline or anything,” she said sarcastically, watching how slow his progress was.

Antoine nodded. “You mean like saving the world... or your friend?” He shook his head. “Naw, I’m sure Seth will afford us *all* the time we need.”

“From your mouth to God’s ears.” She looked back around where the tour had gone off; checking to make sure no one came upon them in the middle of this. “Just as long as we’re done before the procession comes back. I don’t feel like getting lost in here.”

Nothing happened at first, then Jonas stepped back as several of the larger stones moved back into the wall, then off to the side. A musty odor came from the opening, along with some dust.

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As the collected dust from centuries filled the area, Antoine drew back, holding his shirt over his nose. “You did hear about the infection that actually killed the people who opened King Tut’s tomb, right? It wasn’t a curse. It was from them prying open a tomb that had been closed forever.”

Dusty mimicked his actions, covering her own nose. “Yeah, *you* may not be able to die, but *we* sure as hell can!”

Once it had stopped, Jonas stuck his head inside. He hoped it wasn’t some elaborate trap set for robbers, cutting off his head. When nothing happened, he blew a relieved breath. What he saw was another passageway, a bit larger than the last and completely clear, though even with *his* sight, he could not see where – or *if* – it ended. Withdrawing his head, he looked at Dusty. “Well, *this* one you can navigate. I think we all could, actually, but we’ll have to crawl.”

She glared at him. “I’m loaded with silver and wood. You know that, right? Keep calling me fat.”

Looking at Antoine, he put a hand on his shoulder. “It won’t be easy.”

He chuckled, turning a teasing glare at Jonas; imitating Dusty, even putting a hand on his hip. “You calling me old?”

Jonas chuckled. “Nope. Just didn’t want to make a decision for you. That’s all.” He looked inside the opening again. “I’ll go first.” He turned, looking at Dusty and Antoine. “Dusty, I think Antoine should be between us, so if he needs a breather, we can-”

“Son, *one* more crack like that, and I’m gonna smack you upside that all too handsome face of yours, vampire or *not*!”

Laughing, Jonas raised his hands, defensively. “OK, OK, you win. I still think you should be in the middle, but you two can argue that out between yourselves.” He winked, pulling himself into the opening. “Oh... and watch out for Scarabs and spiders.”

Antoine turned around to look at her. “Did he just say-”

“Spiders and scarabs.” Nodding, she reached down to her boot, pulling out the blade. “He sure as hell did. Now, you take this,” hilt first, she handed over her knife, “just in case something is inside the tunnel with us.”

“No. What about you?”

Lifting up both sides of her jacket, she flashed a grin. “Silver and wooden bullets will kill, and if not, the butt of my guns will.”

“Good point.” Taking a deep breath, he followed Jonas. “The things I do for you kids. I swear.”

Looking back through the tunnel they just crawled through, she noticed the gaping hole of an entrance remaining in the pyramid. “Yeah, let’s hope no one sees a door in the wall where one shouldn’t be. It’ll get people all in a tizzy with a lot of questions and then some doo-gooder’s bound to interrupt our tour.” Turning back around, she took out her phone, flipping the flashlight on, placing it between her teeth, before climbing in after them. From her position, it offered light in the tunnel.

Once Dusty was a few feet in, the sound of rock-on-rock started again as the opening sealed itself shut. Jonas stopped, looking back to Antoine. Seeing his eyes widen, he shook his head. “It’ll be alright. Just breathe slowly. I’m sure this leads somewhere.” Turning around, he continued on, crawling through the passage.

Going pale, Antoine turned to look at Dusty with sweat beginning to form on his brow. “I’m claustrophobic,” he said before putting the blade back between his teeth.

The sound of the bricks shifting grabbed Dusty and she quickly looked back to watch it closing tightly behind them. Swallowing hard, she pulled the phone from her mouth as her eyes found Antoine’s. “Well... *that* would’ve been good to know going in this. There’s nothing I can do about it now,” she said, motioning him forward. “It’s like Jonas said, there’s got to be a way out ahead,” muttering under her breath, “at least I hope to God there is.”

Jonas chuckled, looking back at Antoine. “With that knife between your teeth you *really* look like Indiana Jones now.”

Giving him an odd look, he removed the blade. “What?”

“You heard me. You always wanted to come to Egypt for a reason. So, tell yourself this is why. Besides, how many of your friends can say that they’ve done this.”

“I wanted to come and see the *beauty* of Egypt!”

“And you’re seeing things they don’t show on the tour.”

Realizing he was right, Antoine quickly shuffled forward. “If I get stuck in here-”

“You’re not gonna get stuck. I’m sure Jonas has a plan for this,” she whispered softly. “*I hope.*” Glancing up at the walls, a shiver ran down her spine. “Make sure to keep an eye out for spiders... and scarabs... and any other creepy things that might try to stop us.” Putting the phone back between her teeth, she once more followed Antoine.

Jonas came to a dead stop. “Uh-oh.”

“What do you mean *uh-oh?*” he said as he almost ran into Jonas’s butt.

Groaning, Dusty took the phone out of her mouth. “Ain’t nobody got time for *uh-oh*, Jonas.”

Reaching out, he swore as his hand hit a single granite block. “Dusty... shine your light up here for a minute. I can’t reach your flashlight in my pocket.”

Moving the phone from her mouth to her hand, she rolled her eyes. “I see how someone as prepared as you are – for *all* situations – has survived for five-hundred years... it amazes me.” Shining the light in his direction, she lit up the area in front of him.

When she did, he saw the face of the stone. Polished glass smooth, it had several hieroglyphs carved into it. One set enclosed in an oval with a horizontal line at one end. Rolling onto his side, Jonas looked back to Antoine. “I hope you can read this.”

The sharp intake of Dusty’s gasp filled the closed area. “Lord, please help us. Tell me you have the key to that because the way we came in is locked up... tight.”

Antoine looked at the carvings. They were pristine as if just cut into the polished stone. “Well, let’s see.” He moved his lips, yet no sounds came forth as his mind worked to decipher the ancient symbols. “This isn’t easy without my notes, but I *think* I have the upper portion translated.”

Jonas waited. “Any time.”

“Oh, umm, it reads *Beyond lies truth. The Pharaoh and his priests wait for you.*”

“Oh, well, that makes me feel *so* much better. What about the rest?”

“It doesn’t do my heart good.” Glancing behind her, she kept the light on the door. “I can’t help but feel that someone – or something – is behind me... like breathing down my neck.” Turning back to face them, a shiver of ice ran through her. “It’s creepy.”

Antoine pursed his lips, looking over the cartouche, and then his jaw fell open. “My God! If I’m reading this right, the reason there was nothing in the king’s chamber when they got to it, wasn’t because of tomb robbers. It was because they didn’t bury him in it. The cartouche reads, *Within rests Khufu, God of all the world. May he remain so for all time.*”

“So, wait a minute. You’re telling us that there’s some old guy buried behind this wall, and now we’re gonna be here for all times too?” She glared at Jonas. “How many silver and wooden bullets did I bring? I might just need to use them. I’m going to haunt you for an eternity.”

Looking back to Antoine, Jonas shook his head. “And that’s it? Nothing about how to get past this large stone?”

“Wait, there’s some more down in the corner.” Antoine craned his neck to see. “*Only he who walks between the veils will pass.*”

Feeling the ghosts of a thousand bugs crawl along her flesh, Dusty quickly moved her hand, shining the light along her skin, twilight engulfing the front of the train. “What the fuck?”

Submerged in darkness, Antoine cleared his throat. “Hey!”

Turning back around, once more light spread out around them. “Sorry, I thought a bug was on me.”

Using all of his supernatural might, Jonas tried moving the stone. It just sat there. “Oh, joy.”

Looking up at him, Dusty motioned to the wall. “Why don’t you just try going through it. Hell, you have all those other parlor tricks. It does say that he who walks between the veils. The only thing I can think of is *you* because you walk *between* both worlds. Both veils... sort of.”

Chuckles, he stared down at her. “Of course, why didn’t I think of that? I’ll just waltz right through it because I’m sure the handle is on the other side.” He hit the stone a few times with his hand. “I don’t think I’m a ghost who can walk through walls, my dear.”

“Well, it can’t be either of us!” she argued with him. “We’re mortals. We walk on *one* side of the veil. You are not alive, and you are not dead. You walk between them.”

Slapping at the stone once more out of frustration, he narrowed his eyes as a memory came back to him. In Deva’s dungeon, he had tried to manhandle a small cornerstone, but it too resisted until he calmed down. He turned back to Dusty and Antoine. “I need you two to put your heads down, put your hands over them and close your eyes.”

She blinked. “Why? What are you about to do?”

Antoine nodded. “Yeah, I’d kinda like to know that myself.”

Jonas looked between them. “Save our asses, I hope.”

“You *hope*?” Glaring, she picked up her necklace, kissing it, before resting it in her shirt again. Dropping her head into the fold of her arms, she kept her hands up, so they didn’t lose the light. “You wait till we get out of here, Sparx.”

Antoine crossed himself as he got in a similar position with his arms covering his head. “Please, dear God, let me get out of this alive.”

Placing both hands on the block, Jonas went through the process of calming his mind. At first, nothing happened, but then a vibration began in the block. It grew more severe as he pushed against it. The entire chamber started to drone, just as the tourist wall did when he hummed against it.

Hearing what sounded like him humming again, she groaned. “Not funny, Jonas, just get it done.”

“I’m with her. I’m an old man, as you continue to say. I can’t stay in this position long. I’ll get stuck.”

He glanced at Antoine and Dusty. They were covered as well as they could be. Turning back to the stone, he closed his eyes and gave one final push. The granite exploded with a roar, sending small pieces all around them.

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Feeling as if the sky was falling – or there was a cave in happening around her – Dusty quickly looked up, blinking from all the dust and debris floating in the air. Once more she covered her nose. “Jonas! Antoine!” Because of the deafening sound, she had to scream. Lifting her head, she held her phone high to see what that was all about. “Is everyone okay?”

“I’m an old man. I shouldn’t be crawling around pyramids. There’s a reason I never mimicked Indian Jones, you know. As for the vampire, what could happen to him?”

Once the dust settled, Dusty was able to see Jonas smiling in front of them. “Oh, thank God.”

Jonas gave her a thumb’s up. “Men... we get shit done.”

Hearing his voice, Antoine lifted his head, looking forward. “Oh, praise be the Lord.”

“More shenanigans like that, Sparx, and I’m gonna deck you.”

He shrugged. “You’re due. It’s been a while since the last one. I almost forgot what they feel like.”

“Keep being a smart ass and it’ll be sooner rather than later,” she grumbled, annoyed. “Can we get on with this, already?”

Winking at Antoine, Jonas crawled forward, sticking his head into the opening. What light from the passage they were in, illuminated the chamber enough so Jonas could see that there was more than enough room within for the three of them. “Well, I don’t know what’s in here, but we’ll be able to stand up. Wait here while I make sure it’s safe.” Slipping forward, he disappeared from view.

“You still have my flashlight! Use it!” Dusty yelled. “Make sure there aren’t any spiders... or scarabs... or snakes!”

Jonas hollered back. “I know that.”

Antoine nodded. “Hell yeah! It’s what we Indiana Jones explorers call the Triple-S threat.”

Arching a brow, Dusty pointed at Antoine. “Keep it up, old man.”

He smirked. “Alright, fatty.” Turning to look for Jonas, he started singing. “We’re men... we’re manly men... we’re men in tights... we-”

“Don’t give up your day job,” Dusty said, rolling her eyes.

“Everyone is a critic. That is a great song. Funny movie too.” Sticking out his tongue, he nodded.

“Uh-huh. You say *I’m* off the rails, yet you’re the one running around in manly men tights.”

Pulling Dusty’s Maglite from his pocket, Jonas clicked it on, looking around. Shining the bright light, his eyes widened. “Oh my...” The room was immense. It was fifty feet square, and the ceiling was a good fifteen feet high. Plenty of room for all of them. A quick bug and critter

sweep turned up nothing. “Ok, it’s safe to come in, and you two are not gonna *believe* what’s in here.”

Smirking back at Dusty, Antoine climbed out. “As long as you don’t see snakes then I can handle pretty much anything else.” Scooting out, he accepted Jonas’s help. Once he was standing on the ground, dusting himself off, he turned and looked around in awe. “My word. They should definitely have this on the tour.”

Shuffling forward, Dusty climbed out accepting Jonas’s help as well, after pocketing her phone. “Men in tights. Unless you’re on a stage, catching flying women, that’s just wrong on *many* levels.” Once down, she dusted off her jeans, hair, and shirt. Looking around in shock, she blinked. “Oh wow.”

Torches lined the walls, causing Jonas to smile. “Let’s conserve battery power, shall we?” Clicking off the Maglite, he waved his hand. “*Ex inflamis cortem*,” he said, watching each torch spring to life. Seeing the room’s treasures, he whistled. “Damn.”

Glancing around at the treasure, Dusty’s eyes opened wide. “Guess this is *one* way to take it with you when you go.”

Khufu’s sarcophagus, no doubt containing his mummified body, rested in the middle of the room, surrounded by smaller burial boxes. Lining the walls were all the trappings that the ancient Egyptians buried with their Pharaoh’s for the trip to the afterlife. Golden statues of Anubis, Lord of the Underworld, stood guard at each corner of the room. Offerings and what must have been the personal wealth of Khufu, all in pure gold, were neatly arranged along the floor. Rubies, Jade, and other gemstones rested in gold trays on ornately carved tables, and the walls were covered in ancient writings.

Antoine was like a little kid in a candy store as he looked at all of it. “I have waited my lifetime to see something like this! It’s magnificent! I know a few museums that would love to study this.”

Dusty looked over shocked. “You would steal from-”

“No! I didn’t say I approve of them thinking they can just take the dead’s treasures mainly because they deem themselves worthy enough. Let the man keep his treasures. He earned them.”

She nodded. “That… and I don’t feel like being chased down by a vengeful spirit.”

“Yes, there is that too,” Antoine said, smirking.

Jonas looked over at Antoine, seeing he was already hard at work on the translations. “See if there’s a ‘get out of jail free card’ written there anywhere.” Remembering what the Pharaoh told him, he too scanned the walls.

Antoine stood in front of a particularly ornate set of hieroglyphics, shaking his head. “How sad. I wonder why they did that.”

“Did what?” Jonas asked, walking over to him.

He pointed to the shapes. “It says here that they surrounded this chamber with a powerful spell, holding the spirits of Khufu and his priests trapped inside the pyramid.”

Playing the part of the tourist admiring treasures, Dusty winced. “That sounds like something a vindictive woman would do.” When they stopped talking, staring at her with arched brows, she

looked over, shaking her head. “Not me, but it *does* sound like it had a woman all over it. Who else? That’s a harsh punishment. Only women can be that mean... or so Travis says.”

Jonas looked at Antoine. “Damn, that’s cold. Anything there about a counterspell?”

He shook his head. “Not right here, but then there’s a lot on these walls. It’ll take me a week at least to get through it all.”

“Well, sorry Antoine, but we don’t have a week. In fact,” Jonas looked around. “I’m not sure how much air there is in here. That isn’t a problem for me, but...”

Taking out her phone, she took pictures of the hieroglyphics. “That’s one thing I have to do. Breathe. Regularly. Antoine and I can’t stop breathing. I’d say with two of us,” she looked around, “we might have twenty-four hours... tops.” Turning, she continued taking pictures of the treasures and the writing. Even though they couldn’t tell anyone where it is, they might need it.

Jonas glanced at his watch. “I’d say we have about six to eight hours to explore this, and then we need to figure a way out, so work fast Antoine.”

The professor went back to his translations, mumbling. “It took them twenty years to build this, and five-thousand before someone found this room, and they expect me to translate a full book in eight hours. I want a raise!”

“You really think that one of his two wives did this?” Jonas asked, shaking his head.

Glancing over at Jonas between shots, she shrugged. “Women are the most jealous creatures in the world. Again, that’s not me talking about myself, that’s experience. Every time there is a crime that involves a woman, it was sheer jealousy that set her off. I can tell ya this much, *whoever* did it, surely had a lot of time to write... or was a supernatural being.”

“Well, there is that.” Walking over to one of the walls, Jonas blinked. “Antoine, could I borrow you for a second.”

“Of course, it’s not like I’m busy or anything,” Antoine said, walking over, shaking his head. Standing beside Jonas, he too stared at the wall, looking over the rim of his glasses. It looked more like a drawing. “Unless I’m off base, this isn’t writing. It’s a pictograph of a story. Not hieroglyphics, to be sure. That’s one wall I don’t have to worry about.” Turning, he went back to work, leaving Jonas to his thoughts.

The drawing on the wall depicted two men. One stood over the other with a bloody stone in his hand. The next scene showed the stone-bearer attacking several men at once, bleeding them dry. There followed various images of the man, surrounded by others with what seemed to be blood covering their mouths. Toward the end, were two women facing each other, appearing to be holding a bright red stone. They looked identical, but then every painting he had ever seen from ancient Egypt – in both museums and here – the faces of the people all looked the same; black hair, kohl-lined eyes and very linear. Only when he reached the end did he see a difference. The last drawing showed a man and a woman. She was lying on a stone altar, and he was holding in his hand, the same stone Jonas had seen in the first painting. The man had light hair and his face was frontal, unlike the rest of them which were side views.

Jonas felt his blood burn. The man staring back at him, from a painting done over five thousand years ago, was Seth. The woman, obviously, represented *mother*. “Fuck.”

Antoine cleared his throat. "Language. We are in the presence of the dead. Respect that, please."

Not included in the original powwow, Dusty sauntered over to see what was more fascinating than the way out. "What is it now? Hopefully a cheat sheet." Glancing over the drawing, she followed the same path, slowly. "Okay, what am I looking at? The first part looks like Cain and Abel."

"It is. It's our entire history in pictures... and the prophecy," Jonas said, pointing to the first one. "The first part is Cain killing Abel. Then, Cain, now a vampire, feeding, creating more vampires. Now, this part back here... I believe this is the future. Two women. I'm not sure who they are, but they're holding a gem... or one is handing it to the other but look closely."

Dusty followed his finger, watching the crude portrayal come to life on the wall. "A gem? What gem are they holding and why?"

He pointed to the last one. "Egyptians painted their people all the same. Dark hair, dark eyes, they looked like they were all the same, except for this one."

"Lots of women have dark hair and eyes." Popping in front of his face, she held her hair out for him to see. "See me. Dark hair. Dark eyes."

Furrowing his brows, confusion laced his features until he realized that she had never encountered Seth before. "Oh right. You've never seen what he looks like."

"Who?"

Pointing to the end, his finger tapped on the light-haired man with the stone. "That, Dusty, is Seth and he's holding the completed stone. I imagine the woman laid out before him is 'mother' or the one who *will* be the mother of the new race."

Staring at the picture, the color drained from Dusty's face. "Uh... Jonas..."

Looking up, he blinked, surprised by how pale she was. "Are you okay?"

Hearing the concern in his tone, Antoine rushed over, putting a hand up to steady Dusty. "My God, child. What has you looking like you're ready to keel over dead in front of us?"

Pointing at the painting, it was as if she forgot how to speak. "That." Touching the picture, she pulled out her necklace from inside of her shirt. "Is it just me or does that look like this?"

Turning, Antoine reached up, holding her necklace, looking it over before turning back to the wall. "Well, it's a crude drawing, but it is a damn good depiction of it."

Feeling her throat go dry, Dusty stared a hole in Jonas. "Sparx, why is my family heirloom on your wall of vampire history?"

Once more he looked at her, wondering why it was vitally important that she be in this thing. One thing Bacchus kept stressing to him was that she was chosen for a reason. Why? Was it something to do with her family? That necklace? Glancing from it, back to the wall, he reached up, scratching at his head. "Good question. Unfortunately, I do not have the answer. That would be something for your family to explain, and... well..." Pointing back to the wall, once more he

arched a brow. "I don't know. I also don't know why there's a picture of a man on this wall, who wouldn't even be born for another two thousand years. I don't think you have anything to worry about. We already ruled you out as mother. You were born on the wrong day." Nodding, he clicked his tongue on the roof of his mouth. "Tell me something... what do you know about this necklace, other than it's a family heirloom?"

Shrugging, she shook her head, looking down at it. "Just what I told you. It's a family heirloom. I'm not supposed to ever take it off. No matter what happens. I'm supposed to guard it with my life. When I have a daughter," sighing, she shook her head, "not like *that's* ever gonna happen. I'm supposed to pass it on to her. Other than that, it's just a family heirloom of an eccentric family." Pulling it out, she showed it to him. "It's not really something that would become a success in the jewelry department. Bulky. It took years before I got used to the weight."

He sensed it right away. Silver. The neatly designed cross was bathed in it surrounding a small hint of a well-cut ruby, sparkling in the room's torchlight. He stored all this information away to bring up to Bacchus later. Many questions needed answering and he had a feeling that Bacchus was the only one to be able to do so. "Well, once we save Travis, you better get busy making babies, or you won't have anyone to pass it down to."

Rolling her eyes, she glanced at Antoine, the same time Jonas did as they both asked the same thing. "Are you getting anywhere on that thing?"

"Not yet. You gave me six hours, so leave me alone to do my thing. You two just," he waved his hand to the opposite wall, "I dunno. Do something else."

Shrugging, she went back to taking pictures, now of the diagram on the wall. It was more than a little curious to her about how her family heirloom was tied into this wall and vampires. Was that why she had to be a part of this stupid thing? Looking at the two women, she canted her head to the side. It looked as if she was handing the gem over. Was she supposed to help mother? Who was mother? Was she a relative? Why was she told to protect the necklace, never take it off, and guard it with her life? It was all too confusing. "I'm kinda digging this whole picture-taking gig. I might have to change jobs when we get out of here. Maybe taking pictures of babies is more my thing. A lot less dangerous as well."

Antoine shook his head. "You have never been around an angry, screaming baby."

Walking over to one of the trays, containing precious gems, Jonas picked up a few, holding them to the torchlight. "I'll just take a look at-"

His words were cut off as the room began to vibrate, emitting a low hum. Turning around, once more the eternal funeral procession entered from the south wall. This time, instead of walking through, they formed a circle around the Pharaoh's sarcophagus. Lowering their heads, chanting, they raised their incense holders. Khufu appeared. Two of the priests stepped aside as he walked to his burial casket. Setting his hands on the golden lid, he murmured something, looked at Jonas, and inclined his head to Antoine.

Nodding, he turned to the Professor. "Antoine, I need you to translate something for me. Something that isn't written. Can you do that?"

Furrowing her brows in confusion, Dusty shrugged at Antoine. "I'll bet you never expected anyone to ask you *that* before, eh?"

Shaking his head, Antoine blinked at Dusty. “I think he’s lost his mind.” Turning back to Jonas, he tilted his head. “It’s one thing to translate the symbols. It’s another thing altogether to understand the spoken language.”

“I need you to try,” Jonas told him.

Sighing, Antoine shrugged. “I’ll give a shot.”

Nodding, Jonas tried remembering the words, but they were so foreign they might as well have been alien. Looking at Khufu, he held open his hands. “I don’t re-” Words stuck in his throat as the Pharaoh’s spirit moved inside of Jonas.

Watching Jonas talking to the air, Dusty shivered, feeling a cold blast surround them. “Does anyone else feel like it’s really cold in here?”

Antoine nodded. “Yeah, it’s like someone just turned on the AC.”

Jonas slowly turned to Antoine, his face expressionless and eyes shining silver. “*Yara pat Haty-ka. Sab ad-mr. Spa wti ty Khufu. Yatuway mryf. Shemn su Ahenten ma k ndf.*”

Blinking, Dusty took a giant step backward, toward Antoine. “Okay, that’s just creepy, Sparx.” Lifting her camera, she started taking pictures of everything. The torches offered plenty of light, so there was no need for the flash. The sound on her phone was muted so no one could hear the steady clicking. It was too surreal, but something felt... weird. More so than being stuck in a room that had not seen the light of day for eons, so it was all par for the course, she figured. Slowly making her way to Antoine – not trying to take any sudden movements – warily she watched them.

Taking out his phone, he flipped to the memo pad and wrote down the sounds phonetically. Looking back up, Antoine shook his head as Jonas’s eyes slowly returned to their normal green. “Son... you were just possessed, by the spirit of Khufu.”

Protectively, Dusty made it to Antoine’s side. “I told you there were ghosts all around us. No one ever believes me. I’m always right.”

Cracking his neck, Jonas looked over at the Pharaoh’s ghost. “Little warning next time, ok chief?” Glancing back to Antoine, he ran a hand over the back of his neck. It almost felt as if someone still crawled along his flesh. “I hope he said something useful.”

Antoine was busy on his phone. “If I translated it right – never did this by hearing alone – he introduced himself and said that as a reward for freeing him, and his priests, we can have anything from here that we can carry. He also said the way in, is the way out.”

Looking around at all the gems, Dusty shook her head. “Thanks, but just getting out with my life is good enough for me.” The only gem she had ever been concerned with was the one around her neck. Kissing her necklace, she sent it back between her breasts. “That means that we go back through the tunnel we crawled in through to the wall that closed in on us? How is that gonna work? Are they gonna open it for us if we knock?” Dusty looked from Jonas to Antoine.

“Maybe the same key exists on this inside that existed on the outside,” Jonas said, keeping an eye on the spectral figures. One by one, the priests moved to their respective caskets, standing at attention. Khufu turned and bowed to each one, and they returned the gesture. Finally, he faced Jonas, smiled and bowed deeply. Raising his hands to the sky, he uttered a short phrase and Jonas

watched as the forms grew more transparent, eventually fading out altogether. "Well, one good deed done."

"Better than a bad deed." Dusty finished with the last of the pictures. "You know, we can't be showing these pictures to anyone. If people knew this was here... they would break down the pyramid to get to it."

Walking over to one of the trays, Antoine grabbed handfuls, shoving them into his pockets. "I'm not going to turn a blind eye to a gift. I have grandkids."

Shaking his head, Jonas chuckled. "Well, at least we won't be cursed. Are you almost done there?"

"Yes, yes. Give me ten more minutes, and we can be on our way."

"Good, because I don't really want to be stuck here for eternity."

"I second that. I kinda like breathing in oxygen. It helps." Positioning herself so that the three of them were in the shot, she took a picture. "Just so we knew we were here."

Jonas looked up at the opening they came out of. "The way in is the way back. Well, looks like we go crawling again." Turning, he pointed to the wall painting. "I'm still puzzled as to how a depiction of a Judeo-Christian story, ended up on a wall built by people who – at the time – had never even heard of Hebrews... and how they knew about Seth." He looked around, half expecting Bacchus to show up and tell them.

"I've given up trying to understand anything that happens. Myths are truths, just a lot of people who don't believe have called them myths so..." She shrugged. "Maybe they had their own fortune tellers."

He nodded. "Maybe so, but I still would—" Stopping short, he looked down and smiled.

"Well," Antoine said, closing his phone app, joining them. "I've done about all I can do without referencing my texts back at the hotel. With the pictures that Dusty took, I'd say we have quite a bit to go over."

Jonas looked up. "Anything helpful with the scroll?"

He nodded. "I think so. What do you say we get out of here?"

"I'm down with that," Jonas said, making some finger sign.

Antoine frowned. "Jonas, don't try to be *gangsta*. It doesn't work with you."

Jonas glanced up at the opening. It would be no problem for him and Dusty to get up there. They had enough upper body strength to pull up, but Antoine might be a different story. "Ok, I'll go first, since I think I may be the only one who can reopen that outer door. Antoine, I'll help you from my end, and Dusty will help you from hers. Once we get you in, Dusty, you hop up and then I'll turn the lights off."

Antoine nodded, not even arguing. "I'm down with that."

Dusty couldn't help but laugh. "Oh yeah. You sounding 'gangsta' sounds soooo much better." Nodding at Jonas, she took one last look around, making sure she didn't miss anything. "You got it. Once you get through, I'll hook my hands together and provide him with a step up and then I'll follow."

“I’ll stick my feet out, Antoine you grab onto them and Dusty will hoist you up.” With no effort at all, Jonas leaped through the opening, dangling his feet. “Grab hold of my ankles.”

After buttoning and zipping his pockets, Antoine winked to Dusty. “Don’t wanna lose my bounty.” Latching on to Jonas’s ankles, he raised a foot into Dusty’s cradled hands and hopped up, as Jonas moved forward, pulling him in.

Once Antoine was out of her way, Dusty reached up, grabbing a hold of the edge, and pulled up into the tunnel. “Okay, I’m in.” Taking out her phone, she once more flipped on the app, giving them light, placing the phone between her teeth.

“*Eregret volumen te’rda.*” The torches extinguished, leaving the chamber once more bathed in darkness.

Crawling back the way they came, it wasn’t long before the solid wall stopped them. Shining Dusty’s Maglite around, Jonas felt for a similar protruding bit of stone, just like the one he used to open it the first time. Finding it at the top edge, he hesitated and looked back at Dusty. “You know, if that tour is filing out of here right now, this is gonna be really hard to explain.”

“Ya think? Let’s hope not then. Too many to make forget, and we have a lot of work ahead of us.” She turned the light around behind her. “I just don’t want something to fall on me. I’m not like most girls... but I won’t hesitate to scream.”

“Can we *please* get out of here?” Antoine said. “This really isn’t the time or place for idle chit-chat.”

“Well, here goes nothing.” Pushing in on the small bit of stone, it recessed just like the other one. This time, instead of a hesitation, the wall opened up as if it were a well-greased machine. Jonas poked his head out, looking both ways. Seeing nothing, he pocketed the Maglite and slipped out. Reaching in, he helped Antoine and then held his hand out for Dusty. “Don’t say I don’t know how to show a lady a good time.”

“Uh-huh. Your idea of fun and mine are two totally different views... apparently.” She headed in the direction of the exit. “Let’s hurry.”

Antoine was right behind her. “Let’s hope no one sees me leaving this place with my pockets full. I can see trying to explain that too.”

After the trio emerged, the wall closed again as if it had never been disturbed. All of the stones put back without any infractions.

Shaking her head, Dusty looked over at him. “So, you’re a professor, intelligent, but you don’t like banks and don’t trust safes. No biggie. We’ll just say you’re an eccentric old man. After all, there is no place to get those inside the tour.”

Nodding, he winked at her. “Yep. And you are my fat daughter... we are surprised you can even fit through doors.”

Jonas blinked, heading for the exit. “I’m not *even* going to be part of that discussion.”

Once they stepped out into the midday sun, the tour guide rushed over to them. “Oh, thank the Gods, yes. I was afraid we had lost you. What happened? Where did you wander off to?”

Antoine slipped behind Jonas, so the guide wouldn’t notice his bulging pockets.

“Sorry about that,” Jonas said, setting a hand on the man’s shoulder. “We got so caught up in everything, I suppose we lagged behind, but everything is ok now, isn’t it?”

The man nodded slowly. “Yes. OK. All is well.”

“Good, good. Excellent job by the way. I intend to write a very nice letter to your bosses, praising your patience, and knowledge.”

“Oh, thank you. Yes, sir. It is much appreciated.” Smiling, the man turned, walking away.

Jonas located their driver standing by the Land Rover. As they made their way over, they passed a man dressed in tourist’s garb, camera strapped around his neck, cellphone to his ear.

Once the trio was on their way back, he spoke into it. “Yes sir, I have them...Yes sir, she’s there... copy that, will do.”

27

Dead tired and ready to drop at any moment, the trio made their way back to the suite. Noticing that Jonas looked a bit ragged around the edges, Dusty gave him a questioning look. “Are you okay? Ya don’t look so hot.”

“Just need my medicine. No worries.”

Hitting the door, Antoine turned into a speeding bullet, zipping through them, making a beeline to the closest bathroom. “I know I can. Almost there. Just a bit further.”

Barely able to function, running on fumes, Dusty yawned. “I didn’t think we were *ever* gonna get outta there.”

“Oh, I know!” Antoine called out. “I wondered if anyone would even know the three saviors of the world were missing in action.”

“Trust me. They would’ve noticed. And if by some strange coincidence no one did... Seth would,” Jonas called out loud enough that Antoine could hear behind the door.

“Good to know.” Looking down, Dusty saw a shimmering outline of... Hooch? Her heart lurched almost out of her chest as tears filled her eyes. Closing them tightly, she slowly breathed in and out, gaining control over her emotions. Taking a deep breath, she opened them to see it was all her imagination. “Ya know, I could’ve sworn I just saw Hoo-” Cutting herself off, she shook her head. “Huge particles of dust, gleaming from the light through the window. Ridiculous. I’m tired. I’m gonna go collapse in my bed before I hit the floor. My brain is too tired to think.” Turning, she went to her room. It didn’t stop those horribly vivid images replaying in her mind of Seth taunting Travis, painting the walls with his blood, but it would have to wait. “Just a catnap. When I wake up, we better get some damn food... or else.” Kicking off her boots, she crawled on top of the covers. Curling up into a fetal position, she closed her eyes. “Just a little nap,” she said, yawning again.

Walking out, Antoine headed to his room. “Whew! I thought for sure I was going to have an accident. Let me go lighten my load and I’ll be ready to get back on this.” Popping his head into Dusty’s room, Antoine smiled seeing she was already fast asleep. “Aw. Poor thing. She rarely sleeps.” Sighing, he disappeared into his room.

Jonas followed closely behind. "Yes, and when our very own perpetual motion machine in there is passed out like a sailor back from shore leave, it tells me that you need a nap too."

"Yes, but we have-"

"No buts. That was a lot of work. Stressful. You're just as exhausted. Sleep. We'll get food when you wake up."

"Well... to be honest... I *could* snooze... just a little." After emptying his pockets – getting the jewels separated into small bags – he locked them in his small room safe. Cracking his neck, he laid down. "Just a little one. No more than fifteen minutes... half hour *tops*!"

Nodding, Jonas smiled. "See both of you when you wake-"

The sound of the professor's snoring cut him off. Closing the door behind him, he headed to his room. He was feeling a bit drained as well and mixed up a vamp cocktail, swallowing it down. That high-grade effect was immediate, and unlike the Hemosynth, gave him no high-giddy feeling. He was rejuvenated. Too bad the other two didn't have a quick fix. "Thanks, Deva," he said to the air. Putting everything away, he walked back to check on Dusty. Opening the door, he peeked in.

Hooch was curled up at her backside and Jonas could feel his sadness. Regardless of how much it broke his little heart, he was always there. Watching her. Protecting her as much as he could as a ghost. Lifting his head, the dog let out a whimper.

"I know, boy," Jonas whispered. "It's no fun being a ghost, is it? You're more in tune to things around you. You miss being alive, but more importantly, you see the sorrow in her heart, don't you? I see it too. As hard as she tries to hide it."

Hopping off the bed, Hooch trotted over, headbutting him.

Kneeling down, Jonas patted his large head. "Give it time. She started to see you, but you know how she is. Everything has to have a logical explanation and she chalked it up to being exhausted... particles of dust. Don't feel bad. She thought I was a mosquito. The love she has for you is very strong and she will see you, probably sooner than you think."

After getting a good petting – from one supernatural to another – he licked his hand, wagging his nub of a tail. After the loving was complete, he hopped back up on the bed, curling into Dusty's side just like he did when he was alive.

"Keep working on your powers, boy. You have more than you know and can still protect her." Straightening, Jonas walked over to the bed, watching Dusty breathing. Leaning down, he lightly kissed her cheek. "Dusty, you are like no other mortal I've ever met before. Hardass. Always pushing people away. I can see right through you. You care more than you let on. Love is the most powerful of all magic," he whispered to her subconscious, gently running his hand through her hair. "With it, you'll be able to see things you thought were gone forever. The bond you have with Hooch is strong. Once you accept the possibility, you'll understand."

While sleeping, she muttered something inaudible.

As he turned for the door, her cell phone went off. Snatching it off the table, he silenced it before rushing out. She and Antoine needed uninterrupted rest. Walking into his room, he was about to ignore the call then thought better of it. "Hello?"

There was a brief silence before that familiar voice rang out in his ear. “Not exactly the sexy voice I was anticipatin’ but you’ll do.”

Taking a deep breath, he slowly exhaled. “What do you want Seth?”

“How rude. Not even a hello? I’m hurt.”

“You’ll get over it.”

“Indeed. Y’all makin’ any progress on findin’ that second stone? Dusty’s lover boy is startin’ to bore me, and you *know* what happens when I get bored. People tend to... well, die.”

Having nothing else to say – and bored of his threats – Jonas ended the call. For now, they had to play Seth’s game. With just one stone, he could feel the dark power emitting off Seth. It made Jonas question *what* gifts Seth would gain with the next one. And the next. How was he going to stop the most powerful creature on the planet? Why him? Why her? Why them?

In her dreams, Seth had pushed her off a rooftop and she felt herself falling. Yelping, with opened eyes and arms extended, Dusty found herself face down on the floor. Sitting up, she looked around because it felt like someone pushed her out of bed. She was alone. Groaning, she pushed off the floor. Figuring her inner alarm clock had a new way of waking her, she snatched up her bag, pulling out a change of clothes; stepping into the bathroom for a quick shower.

A half hour later, she emerged towel-drying her hair. Antoine was already busy working at the table. Lighting a cigarette, she grabbed a chair, flipping it around, while plopping down into it, exhaling smoke to the ceiling. “Whatcha doing?”

“You didn’t quit those nasty things yet?” he asked, cringing.

Rolling her eyes, she took another drag. “No. I enjoy them.”

“Good Lord, *why*?”

Taking a drag, her jaw cracked with smoke rings flowing towards the ceiling. “I know it’s not good for me, but there’s just something relaxing about toxic poison entering my body. It allows me to handle the end of the world without going on a killing spree.” Reaching over, she flicked the ashes into the ashtray. “Are ya figuring out what all that stuff meant?”

“Yeah. I think I have the first verse. So now, what we have is, ‘in quarters the cardinal weapon lies. In repose among wonders true and false. The first, in kingless land found, will to the fair-headed beast show the brother.’ Though I’m not sure what it means.”

Listening, her brows furrowed in confusion. “Ditto. Maybe Sparx can figure it out.”

“Only two more verses and we’ll know where we’re off to next.”

“Good. I’m ready to get outta here.” Turning her head, she eyed her room before finding his gaze again. “Antoine, do you believe in ghosts?”

“Yes, of course. Some of them have unfinished business. I know that’s cliché, but sometimes... facts are.” Pausing, he watched her. “Why do you ask?”

Shrugging, she rested her chin on her arm. “Earlier... I could’ve sworn I saw Hooch. Just now, while sleeping, I felt him kicking me... right before I literally got shoved out of bed.”

“Do you believe in ghosts?”

For a moment, she stared at him as if thinking over the possibility. “A month ago, I would’ve adamantly denied their existence. But now... I have a more open mind about... well... everything.”

“Do you believe it was Hooch?”

“Is it selfish to wanna keep him around? I could live in misery as long as Hooch is resting peacefully.”

“I sense a ‘but’ coming.”

“But... I kinda hope it’s him. Why else would I be having all these phantom ‘Hooch’ things happening? I said goodbye to him.” Flicking the ashes, she rested the cigarette between her lips. Standing, she flipped the chair around right before plopping back down, putting her feet on the table. Removing the cigarette with a drag, she shrugged. “But God help me, I *feel* him here. He used to kick me outta bed... damn near every morning... my own friggin’ alarm clock... because he took up the whole dang burn thing.”

Shrugging, Antoine went back to flipping pages, trying to decipher more of the quatrain. “It too will soon come to pass. Could be your subconscious, reliving your time with Hooch, trying to appease your sadness.”

Nodding, she smiled. “Always the teacher.”

Smirking, he waved a hand dismissively at her. “Hush you. Acting like a careless iceberg isn’t working. I see to your core, Missy. Now... how about ordering us some food. No wonder you’re so skinny. You never eat.”

Sticking out her tongue, she took a last drag before squashing the butt in the ashtray, moving it to the counter. “Thought I was fat.”

“Not even a little bit. See if Jonas wants something. Better to order for three as opposed to just two.” Turning, he started writing in the notebook. “Otherwise, people might question *why*.”

“Good point.” Standing, she walked to Jonas’s door, lightly rapping on it. “Hey, you in there? Antoine and I are gonna call down for food. He said it might be better if the *three* of us order something... as opposed to just two.”

Opening the door, Jonas handed over her phone. “True. The world is a nosy lot. Here, I took this off your nightstand, so you could get a decent, undisturbed sleep.” Smiling, he looked at her. “You look refreshed... instead of the walking dead. The nap helped.”

Nodding, she tucked the phone back into its case. “Thanks.”

Slipping past Dusty, he joined Antoine at the table. “Any luck?”

“I’m missing some letters here and there, but,” opening the scroll, he flipped his pad to the translations. “It’s sort of like Hangman. See what I mean?”

Walking over to check out the ‘hangman’ game, her brows furrowed. “Yep, it’s just like that numbers to words game. It was one of the training courses the CIA taught me for figuring out codes.”

“They taught you by using a number to word game?” Antoine glanced up, a bit surprised.

“Yep, but they used codes for us to figure out.” Taking out her phone, she called the front desk. “Hi, I need to place an order for room service. One cheeseburger with those onion straw things you guys make. I think they’re called onion straws? And sweet tea, please.” She covered the phone. “What do you guys want?” Then she listened to the caller. “Oh, well done – damn near burned – onions, lettuce, tomato, ketchup and mayonnaise and a huge pickle on the side.”

Both men looked at her like she just grew a second head.

“Sweetie,” Antoine said with a smile. “This is Egypt, not America.”

She shrugged. “They asked how I wanted it done.”

Antoine blinked. “Really? Well then, get me a double with Muenster, provolone, lettuce, tomato and a fried egg on top. Oh, and ask them to put peanut butter on the top bun... crunchy. The smooth stuff gives me gas.”

She returned his double-headed look. “Ew,” but repeated his order to the guy. She chuckled, shaking her head. “Um, yes, I’ll tell her.”

Jonas looked at both of them. “If you both keep eating like that, I’ll have to take you home in boxes. Do you have any idea what that does to your heart?”

“This from a bloodsucker,” Antoine said, jerking his thumb at Jonas.

She nodded. “Right?”

Jonas looked at Dusty. “I’ll have an order of Fattah. Lamb for the meat.”

Huffing, she gave his order before ending the call. “Guy over the phone said the pregnant woman will love the burgers... and peanut butter.”

Looking back to the puzzle, Jonas smiled. “So, you can put together the rest of that?”

“Not on an empty stomach.” Antoine leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. “Unlike *you*, Dusty and I *have* to eat.”

He chuckled. “I eat. In fact, while you two were asleep, I–”

“Nope!” Stopping him with a raised hand, Antoine shook his head. “I don’t wanna hear about your... rituals.”

Leaning over, stifling a giggle, Dusty placed her hand on Antoine’s arm. “He takes a pill to suppress his... *hunger*.”

Antoine looked at Jonas. “No shit? A pill? Here I thought *Viagra* was cutting edge.”

“Yep. Just a pill. One every twenty-four hours and I’m good to go.” It was good that Dusty had no idea of his new concoction.

Smiling, she nodded at Antoine. “Yeah, he told me about that right after convincing me he was a vampire. He... blew his brains out... in a manner of speaking.”

Looking over at Dusty, Jonas watched as Hooch nudged her, sitting on his hind legs, raising a paw up to her, practically begging to be seen. It broke his heart. Poor thing.

Feeling a nudge, she nonchalantly draped her hand down to pet... air. Looking down, she sighed when there was nothing there. Glancing over at Jonas, she appeared close to tears. “I really

think I'm losing my fucking mind!" Running a hand through her hair, she leaned back in the chair, looking up at the ceiling.

"Language," Antoine chastised.

Watching her, Jonas shook his head. When she was settled, he walked over. Kneeling down before her, he took her hands. "Your mind is one I have never encountered before, but you're not losing it. If that was going to happen, it would've a long time ago. You've overcome so much. What you're feeling is... well, it isn't wrong. When we met, you didn't believe that vampires existed. You thought we were mosquitoes, remember?"

"Vampires being mosquitoes? Now that would be something to see," Antoine said, shaking his head. "It would make Twilight a little more interesting too."

"And it took me blowing half my head off to convince you." Looking down at Hooch, Jonas glanced back up, meeting her confused gaze. "Hooch is here."

Feeling her mouth go dry, her heart trying to beat out of her chest, she sat taller. "What? That's not possible." The anticipation and hope sprung into her body like a spring morning after a horrible blizzard. "How?"

"He's been here since Seth killed him. The bond between you two is strong enough to allow him to stay at your side, and I think he will *always* be there for you."

"Why can't I see him?"

"Because you still don't *believe* in ghosts. You just *have* to believe it, and you'll see him. Not all the time, but enough... and you'll always know he's with you."

"Vampires. Ghosts. Things I thought of... for the longest time... as fiction. If I can't see it, I can't believe."

"You believe in God," Jonas told her. "And you don't see him."

Antoine glanced over. "Well, he's got a point there."

Shaking her head, she glanced from one to the other and back again. "That's different. There's a voice in my head that isn't me. Who else would that be but God? People hear him all the time, but they refuse to believe or zone out that voice. I believe... though God gave us freedom of choice... he's always with us, trying to goad us in the right direction. If we go too far off the right path, ignoring him, that's when he stops talking... but he's always with us."

"That's one way to look at it," Antoine said, nodding. "But some things exist without reason. They just do. There's always a bigger plan for every action. For every deed, there is a purpose, even if it doesn't seem like it at the time. Your house catches fire and you have to move. Possibly, it was the only way to get you to meet someone who will have a great impact on your life."

Nodding, Dusty looked down at her feet. "I wanna believe." Tears welled in her eyes. "Don't you think I wanna see my sweet boy again? I just don't want him to stick around if it's gonna hurt him to stay. I couldn't handle that. I would die a million painful deaths to make sure he didn't suffer."

Smiling, Jonas gently touched the side of her face. "There's no place in this crazy, mixed up universe where he'd rather be than by your side." Gazing into her moist eyes, he felt a tug at his

heart. "And more and more... I'm beginning to understand why." Looking down, he motioned to Hooch. "C'mon boy. You can do it. Just like I trained you. Show her how much you love her."

Hooch didn't move, but Jonas could tell that he was willing Dusty to see him. Slowly he became less and less transparent.

28

They say believing in something made it tangible, but did it really? Vampires were real, so she was pretty sure that it could be the same for ghosts. After all, spirits made sense. Staring, soon she started to see those particles of dust until her dog formed around them. "Oh my God! Hooch?" He wasn't a solid form – she could see through him – but it was still her dog. Falling off the chair in shock, tears sprang from her eyes as she touched him. A giggle burst through, like a little girl at Christmas time, as she ran a hand down his back. Pulling him to her, she hugged him – even though he wriggled all over the place – crying against his transparent fur as he licked her face, dancing across her lap, nub just a wagging. "Antoine? Do you see him too?"

His eyes wide, mouth agape, Antoine nodded in shock. "Lord, have mercy! I do!" Bending down, he joined her, giving the dog loving. "Good to see you, boy!"

Rubbing his fur, Dusty giggled like a little girl. "Thank you both for not allowing me to give up! Praise the Lord for giving me back my dog!"

"You're welcome," Antoine told her. "You just have to believe."

Laughing, she tried holding onto the squirming dog before setting him free, watching him scamper all around the room, coming back for a run-by licking, attacking the other two as well. "It's so good to see you! I missed you."

Sitting back, Jonas smiled, watching the happy reunion. For all her hardness, all her steely-eyed determination – there beat in her a heart of gold; at least where her dog and Antoine were concerned. "No one will ever be able to hurt him again. Not even one of us. Until the day you join him, he'll never leave you."

Glancing back up at him, tears slid down her cheeks. "Can he eat or drink? Should I set out his toys, bone, and bowls?" Laughing again, she kissed Hooch on the side of his muzzle. "I've never had a ghost dog before. I'm a little outta my element here. And I can't believe I just said that... out loud... with all sincerity."

Shaking his head, Jonas laughed. "No, he doesn't eat or drink, though he really misses it. He's been learning how to harness his powers and he can play with his toys. Hell, he can even chew on his bone. Bacchus and I have been working with him so that he can realize his full potential. Ghosts can do more than you think. Hell, they don't realize it themselves. We never would've found the King's Chamber if it hadn't been for Hooch. He also helped to get us out."

"So that's why you kept looking down," Dusty said, shaking her head. "We thought you lost your mind."

"That we did. You looked quite cuckoo... smiling at your feet." While Dusty got up to get his toys and bone, Antoine continued stroking Hooch's belly and back. "We really missed you, boy. Glad you came back!" Kissing the dog's head, he stood, moving back to his writing. "I feel like I've been put in the *Twilight Zone*, to be honest. Vampires. Ghosts. Egyptian kings being set free

from a curse from so long ago. I can't wait to see what's next. If I see a burning bush... well... I'm outta here."

"You and me both, professor," Jonas said, glancing up at the ceiling.

Hooch wagged his tail, unable to keep his happiness in check, still bouncing around the room.

"You spend time with Hooch, Dusty. Antoine and I will go over what we have." Jonas rose, walking over to where Antoine had the puzzle laid out. "All right. Let's get to the bottom of this and go rescue Travis."

Taking out his toys and bone, she set them and his bed back down in the spot where they were before. Picking up his squeaky ball, she raised it over his head. It was his favorite thing to do. "Do you want this?"

Hooch bounced around, barking and growling softly, hunching down on his front paws, wiggling his butt in the air.

She tossed it. "Go get it!"

Turning, he bounded for the ball, fading out of her sight.

Confused, she looked over at Jonas. "Where did he go?"

Before he could answer, Hooch was back in her face with the ball, jumping up on her legs, barking happily.

Laughing, she hugged him close. "What's up with that? You sneak! So not fair! I guess I won't be able to fool you with a fake throw anymore, huh? Oh, Hooch. I love you so much."

Smiling over at her, Jonas shook his head. "As I said, he's been discovering what he can do. You were right about him being a quick learner. You'll have to get used to that, I'm afraid." He watched them play for another moment, then turned back to the problem at hand. "Ok, professor, what do we have?"

"Well, as I said, this is like a game of hangman. Most of the letters are here, we just need to put the pieces in place by finding the missing ones." His stomach grumbled. "Man, I wish—"

A knock on the door brought Hooch to attention and he vanished.

"Don't worry," Jonas said, looking at Dusty. "Safety measures while in protect mode."

Antoine covered up what they were working on, making it look more like they were tourists planning out their trip.

Nodding, she walked to the front door, opening it a crack. Seeing it was just room service, she opened it wide, allowing him to push the cart in. "I can smell that burger from here! I was worried sick you guys didn't have cheeseburgers."

Though he thought it was odd, Jonas watched as Hooch pinned his ears back, growling low at the man. Jonas made a mental note that there was something about the man that Hooch didn't like.

Entering the room, the man was dressed in all white. Smiling, he wheeled the cart in close to the table. "Believe it or not, many Americans like yourself ask for... ah... cheeseboigahs. I haf eaten one. I understand the joy it brings."

"Oh yes. I love me a big, ol' juicy cheeseburger." She laughed softly. "It's very filling."

“How you say... yummy to the tummy? It is gud... very gud.” His eyes widened as she handed him a twenty, smiling softly, bowing. “Thank you, miss. May good fortunes shine down on you.” Looking over at Antoine and Jonas, he nodded.

“Thank you, and you as well! You are very welcome!” Closing the door, she looked at the others. “Food’s here! I hope you guys can work and eat.” Taking her plate to the table, she sat down.

Once the food had been delivered, paid for, and the man was gone, Hooch reappeared and went back to playing with his toys.

Reaching down she picked up her burger – that made three *Whoppers* – and took a bite. “Oh, my God. This is good!”

Antoine bit into his cheeseburger, closing his eyes. Wiping a bit of peanut butter from the corner of his mouth, he smiled. “Heaven. Absolute heaven.”

Reaching for the pickle, she took a bite, crinkling her nose seeing the peanut butter. “Those people are gonna think I’m pregnant.”

Jonas wiped a bit of lamb sauce from his mouth. Turning to Antoine, he inclined his head to the scroll. “Ok. Professor, let’s get cracking. Oh... by the way. Antoine, since you know so much about Egyptian culture, then you know that they hold cows and cattle with high esteem, right?”

Antoine nodded. “Yes.” Smiling, he looked at his burger. “And this is the best lamb burger I’ve ever tasted. I just didn’t think they ground up the lamb for a burger.”

Arching a brow, Dusty looked over at them both before eyeing her burger. “Wait,” she said with her mouth full. “This is a *lamb* cheeseburger?”

They both nodded as Antoine took another bite. “Yes. They would never think of chopping up a cow to make food. They deify them as replicas of the Gods on Earth.” He shrugged. “It’s still very good. I think it’s better than a cow burger myself.”

Shrugging, Dusty took another bite. “It is very good actually. You can’t taste much difference in a real burger and this.”

Jonas smirked. “Meat is meat.”

Setting the burger down, she walked back to the tray. There was a pitcher of tea with sugar and Sweet-N-Lo packets. “Ah man. I’ll bet I have to sweeten it my damn self.” Looking over to the men, she motioned to the tea. “Does anyone else want a drink? They brought three glasses, so...”

“Yes please,” Antoine said, setting his burger aside. “All right. I’ve made a few copies for each of us. I figure more eyes, more chances of getting this right.” He passed out small cards with what he was able to decipher of the quatrain printed out on them, and the missing letters underlined.

Onl- the land will be re-ealed to him.

Its rest -ro-er unknown to all sa-e the intended,

It deafens the terrif-ing one who stands watch o-er its creator,

In the heart of the o- -resive blas-hemers.

Bringing back a glass for each of them, she put the sugar and packets on the table beside the pitcher and sat down to fix hers. To say she liked sugar was an understatement. She put ten sugar packets in her eight-ounce glass of tea. “So, we just have to figure out the missing letters?”

Looking down at it, Jonas nodded, tilting his head to the right. “I got the first word. Only. The second... *resealed*? That makes no sense. Only the land will be resealed to him?”

Dusty looked it over as she stirred the tea with her spoon. “Well, go through the list. Repealed. Resealed. Revealed. Those are the only words that might fit. Which one sounds better?” Taking a sip, she cringed, grabbing two more packets of sugar. “My vote is revealed.”

Both men stared at her. “Ok,” Jonas said. “*That* is excessive. You smoke. You eat all the wrong things. You have a sugar addiction that makes a heroin junkie look like a disciple of Jesus. I pity the man you marry.”

His words made her chuckle. “Good one. Marriage. No. The man hasn’t been found that can tame this wild heart. You should do standup comedy. You’d definitely get a laugh or two.”

Shaking his head, Jonas smiled. “I’ve been around long enough to have learned, never say never. Besides, who will you pass that beautiful necklace down to? Aren’t you supposed to do that?”

Smirking, Antoine took another bite. Swallowing, he dabbed at his mouth. “This is a new day. Woman don’t need a man to have a baby. Where you been, Jonas?”

Jonas rolled his eyes. “Can we get back to work, please? Okay. So as far as I can see, the only word that fits and makes any sense at all is revealed.”

Filling in the missing letter, Antoine looked it over, nodding. “Yes, that does fit. Only the land will be revealed to him. It still doesn’t make a bit of sense.”

“Well,” Jonas replied. “If we put it together with the first part, the first stone will only show Seth – the fair-headed beast – the country, or land, the second stone is located in. That’s why he’s in Egypt, but he doesn’t know the exact location of the stone.”

Antoine studied the entire quatrain for a moment. “So... the word *brother* means the next stone? Ah. Now... this next bit gets interesting.” He pointed to the next line. “Any ideas?”

Taking another bite, she looked over the word. “Hmm. The two letters are the same from the identical symbols. So... proper? That’s the only word I can come up with that might make sense, unless they were talking in code again.” Nodding, she took a sip of her tea. Picking up her phone, she hit a button. “I’m going to make sure Travis is still alive.”

Travis’s phone rang twice, then connected. “Why darlin’, I was beginnin’ to think ya didn’t love me no more. What can I do for ya?”

Cringing, Dusty rolled her eyes. “Ya know... I never knew I hated someone’s voice as much as yours. It’s almost like nails on a chalkboard just grinding away on my spine. Cut with the sweet small talk that neither of us means. Seth, you hate me. Me? I would just as soon see you turned to a block of wood and set on fire. Ya know what I mean? I’m calling for one reason. I want proof of life.”

“Aww. Now ya know... I love it when ya talk dirty. And as for proof, you had all you’re gonna git. Y’all may hate me and that’s fine. Won’t be the first time I been hated, won’t be the last. How’s that brain of a professor you had tag along doin’ on findin’ my stone?”

“Oh no,” she said, shaking her head. “That’s not how this works, *honey*. There’s only one reason I’d be calling your annoying ass and it ain’t to whisper sweet nothing’s in your ear. We’re almost finished with this dang burn thing. Before we finish filling in the final words needed... you put Travis on the phone, or I’ll burn it. Then you can find the cockamamie thing yourself.”

“Oh, sweet cheeks. I’m a whole lot smarter than your kind ever gave me credit for. That’s why there aren’t gonna be many of you left once I’m done. But there’s no reason to get hostile. Tell ya what... I’m feelin’ generous today, so I’ll let ya talk to that dumb ass hick. Hold please.” Seth hit the mute button, handing the phone to Travis.

“Dusty?”

Seth rolled his eyes. “No. It’s the fucking Virgin Mary. Yes, it’s Dusty. Moron.”

Clearing his throat, Travis bit back the retort before unmuting the phone. “Baby? Is that you?”

Breathing a sigh of relief, she smiled, happy to hear he was still alive. “Oh, thank God. Don’t worry, baby. We’ve almost got it figured out. How’s he treating you?”

“Well as can be ‘spected, I suppose. How much sooner? I swear he’s gettin’ antsy. Keeps looking at me and then the walls, tapping on his watch.”

“Real close now. We had to go through some serious shit to get the information, but we’re on the right path. Once I get you out of there, you run far away. Because I’m gonna make that sorry son-of-a-bitch pay for this shit. I’m gonna drive a stake so far up his ass, he’s gonna be spitting out toothpicks for the rest of his undead life... which won’t be long at all.”

His voice shook. “Baby, how’d you get messed up with all this?”

Seth grabbed the phone back. “Now, I didn’t say Y’all could carry on a conversation. Happy now? He’s still alive and well... for the moment.”

“There’s only one thing that will make me happy. That’s when you no longer cease to exist. Next time I call it will be with a meeting place, so you know where to go to get the next stone. If there’s one hair harmed on his head... any mark on him at all... you’ll be finding the next ones on your own.” Hanging up the phone, she shook her head, looking at Jonas. “How the hell did that man live so many years without someone killing his stupid ass?”

With a serious expression, he shrugged. “He killed them *first*.”

Rolling her eyes, she stretched out her arms and shoulders. “That makes *them* really stupid then. You’ve been dealing with for *how* many years?”

Jonas looked at her, his face serious. “I never met him until I was given the job of placing him in Torpor, some fifty years ago. He didn’t go by *Seth* at the time. Long story, but basically, he fancied himself a Mafia Boss for a while. Started filleting his rivals and those who wouldn’t pay him the proper respect. Drew a lot of unwanted attention, so...”

Her head snapped in his direction, confusion written on her features. “He was a,” her brow arched in disbelief, “mob boss? Is that what you said?”

“Yep. Sort of a pre-Don Corleone, without the charm.” Noting her expression, Jonas turned to

her. "Why do you ask?"

"Well, I think we have it... for what it's worth," Antoine interrupted. "I don't get any of it, but then I don't get Nostradamus either." Sitting back, Antoine folded his hands behind his head.

Mentally shelving the conversation, Dusty nodded. "That makes two of us. Just sounds like a bunch of mumbo-jumbo to me."

Jonas turned back to Antoine. "Don't feel bad. I don't get Nostradamus, and I lived in his time. Let's see what we have." Taking the paper, he looked it over and felt something stir within him as the words read like a child's textbook. "It deafens the terrifying one, who stands watch over its creator, in the heart of the oppressive blasphemers. Well, if that don't beat all," he said, using one of Dusty's phrases, glancing over with a big grin.

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Being around Dusty, they were all picking up her odd sayings, but as Jonas spouted one, Antoine arched a brow. "Care to let us in on the big reveal?"

Dusty blinked. "Yeah, cause you don't usually look so... excited. What gives?"

Jonas looked between them as he spoke. "Okay, think about everything that we know so far. We know it's here in Egypt. Now, 'in the heart of the oppressive blasphemers' is actually very simple to figure out. The Jews were made slaves of the Pharaohs. That's oppression for sure... and *blasphemers*? The ancient Egyptians worshipped many gods. That's about as blasphemous as you can get."

"Ok," Antoine said, nodding. "That makes sense, but what in God's name is the terrifying one? I'd say your pal Seth is pretty scary, but I don't think it's pointing to him."

He laughed. "No, no. Do you speak Arabic, Antoine?"

Arching a brow, Antoine gave a slow nod of his head. "I can get by, yeah."

"Okay. Translate *Abu al Hul*."

Pursing his lips, Antoine blinked. "The terrifying one. But what's that got to do-"

"In modern Egyptian Arabic, that is the name of the Great Sphinx. Get it?" He looked between Antoine and Dusty. "It deafens the terrifying one who stands watch over its creator. The Sphinx was believed to have been built to guard the tomb of Khufu."

Snapping her fingers, Dusty nodded. "Oh! Okay! Now we're getting somewhere. What could deafen the Sphinx though?"

Jonas chuckled. "The stone. It's in one of the Sphinx's ears. Probably the right one."

Laughing, Dusty clapped her hands. "Well, I'll be. They could've just said that. Now that we know where the hell it is, let's go get it and set Travis free so he can get outta this shit."

Shaking his head, Antoine motioned for her to calm down. "Hold your britches, girl. Not just yet. There's still the matter of this last section."

Jonas agreed. "Yes, this is a warning. The intended, that's me, should be vigilant for many will come to bar his path. That's pretty self-explanatory. He must care for his heart lest it stray."

Glancing at Dusty and back to Antoine, he shook his head. "That... no clue. This next part, though. Worrisome. And be wary of His legion. Anybody have anything on that?"

"Letting your heart stray would mean that you have one, Sparx, and the jury's still out whether you do." Possibly, she was still a little bitter toward him. "Legion. Isn't that an army?"

Antoine pondered a moment. "Normally, yes, but notice the upper case 'H' in the word 'His'. Usually, that's done when referring to God. So, God's army?" Shooting Jonas a worried glance, his shoulders slumped. "Please don't tell me we're going to have to fight angels."

"A couple of days ago, I'd have said no. Now?" His lips tightened. "Nothing's off the table. It could also just mean soldiers of God. Those who do battle in His name."

Arching a brow, Dusty glanced at Jonas. "Are you telling us... we might have to fight God's army... that could be anything from angels to men? Why in God's name," crossing herself, fingers gripped the necklace, kissing it before resting it back in her shirt again, "would the light fight us when we're trying to stop the dark?"

The thought of having to do battle with angels, made Jonas groan. "Well whatever it means, it's going to have to wait. We have a stone to find and a dumb hick to rescue. I thought you'd have better taste in lovers." Rolling his eyes, he headed for his room. "You two finish your meals. I need to grab a few things from my room."

"Whatever you say." Flipping him off, she took a bite out of her lamb burger, offering a half smile at his retreating figure, just in case he turned around.

"I heard that finger raise," he said, closing the door behind him.

Antoine waited until Jonas was out of the room before whispering in Dusty's direction. "Are you serious right now? We might have to fight angels? I don't know about you but that might be above my pay grade. Besides, I've seen this movie before, and the black guy *always* ends up dead!"

Looking over, she shook her head. "You aren't gonna end up dead. Not on my watch." Her words were just as low. "Yeah. I didn't sign up to battle God's warriors. You'd think they'd be on our side and not fighting against us. It's kinda ironic that we're teaming up with vampires, so we can fight *angels* to save the world."

"I know you don't watch TV, but I do. Sam and Dean were badasses and they had a hard time fighting angels. They got knocked all around the room. Both of them knew some warding to make angels, demons, and gods disappear. We don't know any."

Looking over with a bewildered expression, she arched one brow. "Who are they and why were they fighting angels?"

"Oh! Man, it's getting really good! Right now, we're in Season Ten, and Metatron convinces Gadreel to—" it didn't take a rocket scientist to see that the woman had no clue about any of it. Sighing, he shelved that critique for another time. "It's not important. Just know the boys were badasses but the angels treated them like crash test dummies. And don't even get me started on the power of the devil. Especially, when he's pissed off at God!"

Jonas had mentioned the devil, angels, demons, and unicorns, but she didn't remember anything about a Gadreel. Whatever that was. Satan could probably make one or all of them explode, so that was a scary thought. Hell, she saw what Seth did to her dog with just a twist of his hand, so why the hell was she still sticking around? Anyone else would have packed up their

things and beat a hasty retreat. Good thing for the world, she and Antoine weren't average people. "I would imagine angels would be more powerful than Seth and—" her words were cut off by the knock at the door.

"Room service. I'm here for the tray."

"Just a moment," Dusty called to the door. Her eyes shot down to the table. The quatrains were out in the open, looking older than dirt. Books were scattered on the table showing their research of Hieroglyphics and Egypt. Granted, those could be something that a tourist might read, but there was no reason to take that chance. Then there were the many different papers with their odd scratching as they tried to figure out the code. All of Antoine's research which gave too much away to the trained eye. Standing, she began gathering the books and papers. "Come on. Let's get this stuff in the safe. We need to hide it."

Now, it was his turn to be confused. His brows danced across his temple, furrowing deep enough to almost touch each other. Even though it didn't make sense to him – then again, there wasn't much about this mission that did – he still gathered up his things. "Hide it? From room service?"

"We can't take the chance. You know how much Seth loves playing games. What if he pretends to be someone else? Then we've shot our only chance to save Travis." Taking the things in the other room, she shoved everything – that would fit – into the safe.

Antoine picked up his suitcase, cramming the bigger things in there. "Good point."

Once everything was put away, Antoine took his place at the table while Dusty went to the door. Hooch had already gone into hiding, but not before growling. That wasn't a good sign, then again, for some reason, that dog hated the room service crew. Shaking her head, as if gearing up for a long walk, the door was opened. "Sorry about the—"

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The room filled as a group of men rushed in, pushing her into the wall. Some had guns, others had swords. Those who weren't dressed like hotel workers looked like stragglers from the Shriner's convention being held on the third floor. Probably how they were able to wander around without causing any alarm. The jeans and T-shirts were normal enough, but with their flowing capes dusting the floor, they could have been extras in a recent 'Three Musketeers' movie. Embroidered on the back of each cape – and the end of the round pommels of each sword – was a blood-red cross. It might have been some elaborate prank, were it not for Dusty's knowledge of firearms. These were not props and the swords looked as sharp as the one Jonas used to cleave Donnie in half. The last man in closed the door, as Dusty and Antoine were shoved roughly, landing on one of the couches in the sitting room. They clung to each other in apparent fright.

The waiter stood before them, gun positioned between Dusty's eyes, hammer pulled back, "locked and loaded."

"Stand down," Dusty said.

Sir Francis de Molay strode over to the woman, arching a blonde brow. "Stand down? Why do you think my men will listen to the likes of you who prefer the company of vile creatures?"

Her words were meant for Hooch. Looking rattled, she swallowed the lump in her throat. "Vile creatures? I-I wasn't... I thought in America it meant that we surrender?" Seeing their waiter, the sarcasm escaped. "You know, if you wanted a bigger tip, all ya had to do was ask."

That bought her a pistol whipping across the forehead. "We do not have time for jokes."

"Ow!" Wincing, her hand instantly went to her head, rubbing it, gripping tighter to Antoine. "Please, don't hurt us. Just take our money."

Shoving the waiter back, Sir Francis put himself between Dusty and the man. "Halt! There is no need for violence and you will control your actions. Did you not consider that she might be a victim? We are speaking of a demon who can twist reality. Calm yourself."

The waiter bowed, instantly showing remorse. "Forgive me. I was simply making sure we were understood."

"We will speak of this behavior later." Turning to Dusty, he bent low at the waist. "My apologies. That was uncalled for and you should not have been made to suffer. He will be punished for his arrogance." Extending his hand, he smiled. "I am Sir Francis de Molay."

Not trying to be rude, Dusty extended her hand, but was surprised when he brought it to his lips, kissing the tops of her knuckles. Appearing a little shy and flustered, she quickly pulled it back. Hollywood missed their calling with that one. "I am Dusty, and this is Antoine." Looking around at all the men, though she was counting weapons, her worried expression turned back up to Sir Francis, working a few tears into her eyes. "Please, what is going on here? We are on vacation and... if this is some room package, I don't think we ordered it." Dusty always had time for sarcasm.

"The pleasure is mine, though I wish it were not under such odious circumstances. In another world, I do believe we could be... close friends," his eyes took on a smoldering haze.

Interrogation 101 told her to keep the witness or criminal calm and extend an olive branch of trust. The man oozed with charm and was using her own techniques on her. Well, far be it from her to give the man any clue that she was onto that form of questioning. Lips stretched into a grin, as she turned slightly to the side with slight embarrassment. "I'm sure that we can," then quickly corrected herself, eyes casting down from his, "could."

Then he extended a hand to Antoine. "And you as well, sir."

Antoine glared up at him. "What is this about?"

Standing tall, Francis surveyed the room. "Presidential suite. It seems someone here is, how do you Americans say... rolling deep pockets?" Turning back to the pair, hands clasped behind his back, his voice took on a sense of urgency. "This is about survival, my friend. Survival of the human race. That is all you need concern yourself with. As you can see, we are all prepared to die for the cause. We are also ready to kill if need be. However, with your cooperation, neither will be necessary. Now, where is the unholy abomination?"

Looking over at the guy, Dusty wondered, *Who the hell are you?*! It wasn't like there was an ad in the paper about Jonas and his true identity and yet this guy – dressed in the funny clothes – knew all about him? There was something about the red cross with intersected swords – worn like Travis's sheriff's badge – nagging at her mind. It was like hearing her aunt telling her cousins to clean their room for the tenth time in one day. It meant something, but what? Having done all that

research, it could've been a symbol that she noticed before, but that same tormented voice – as if tortured souls tried warning her – said it was a lot more than that. “I don’t know what ‘unholy abomination’ you’re talking about. I think you have us mistaken for someone else.”

“His powers are formidable, and I see that he has used them to bend your will.” Contemplating a moment, he argued within himself before his lips pursed. “We know you are traveling with the beast. You have no idea what he plans to do. If you did, you would surely aid us in our mission. As it is, I will pray that once he is removed from your presence, his hold over you both will wane, and your eyes will be opened. Please... he must be stopped.”

Honesty. It seemed that the man lived and breathed it, but would he believe her if the truth was revealed? Doubt crept into her mind in answer. Ignorance bled through her features as her head shook in disbelief. “Jonas? Are we talking about the same smooth-talking, good-looking man who could charm a snake out of its rattle? This is a joke, right? That’s why you’re in the funny outfits? Is this some initiation into your club?”

Antoine’s eyes widened. “Now wait just one damn minute! I grew up in the deep south. I *know* what happens to people like me when folks come a-calling dressed in costumes. And it ain’t pretty.” Now, these men may not have been wearing sheets, carrying ropes, but they had crosses, guns, and swords. Then he got the idea that this may all be some twisted joke. Maybe Seth’s idea of a laugh at their expense and his brow narrowed. “Are we being ‘punked’ right now?”

Not accustomed to American slang, his head tilted a bit. “I do not-”

Jonas opened the door. Stepping in, he appeared oblivious to the drama unfolding before him, as his eyes were trained on a paper he held. “Well, I think we can-” Raising his head, he stopped short. “Did I miss a meeting? Is it someone’s birthday?” Noticing the hardware, a brow rose. “Or not.”

Francis turned with a hard expression. “Do not attempt to fight or flee. With all your abilities, you cannot save them both, and mark my word... at least one will die.”

Jonas narrowed his eyes, and then looked to Dusty. “Are you all right?”

When he came walking out like it was another day – and they weren’t sitting there with guns trained on their every move – her brows shot up almost out of her head. *Say what?* She wanted to scream, ‘Kill them!’ but that wouldn’t go over too well. Her innocence would be lost – even though she kissed that goodbye long ago – if following through with those desires. Then again, didn’t he hear what was going on out there before exiting his room? It wasn’t like they were trying to be quiet. Hell, she talked louder than she normally did, trying to give him a heads up so he could bail. After all, these men didn’t want her or Antoine. They wanted Jonas. Did he do that? *Noooo.* He had to walk out of his room, eyes glued to some paper in his hand, like this was any other day! What was wrong with him? Did he want to get caught? It sure looked like it to her. However, not trying to give away their relationship – Lord help her if they even got an idea that they shared a kiss – she merely nodded. “A knock to the head, but I’ll survive. Jonas, what the hell is going on here? These men have said some awful things about you that can’t be true. They just can’t!”

He looked over at Antoine. *‘Play the game. We need to know who these people are, and why they are after me.’*

The mental message was loud and clear. Antoine gave him the slightest nod. “I’m fine... so far.”

Turning back to the man, he advanced a step toward him, stopping with the click of safeties. “What do you want?”

Francis’s hand rested on the hilt of his sword. “You. Come with us peacefully, and these two may be on their way. However, if you resist, it’s usually the virtuous who suffer the most.”

An unseen motion with his hand stopped time. He could have easily removed Dusty and Antoine from harm’s way, then took out these men, but he wanted information. Scribbling a note for Dusty, he folded it, placing the paper between her breasts. Careful not to touch that necklace, his lips brushed her cheek. “If only we had met in some other time.” Returning to where he had been, his hand circled once more. Dropping the paper behind him, an unusual gust of air carried it under the door, into his room. “What could you possibly want with a private investigator from-”

“Please spare us your well-oiled lies,” Francis said, none the wiser as time resumed. “You might be able to fool these good people, but we know you are a vampire. We also know why you have traveled to this land.”

There was this odd feeling between her breasts that wasn’t there before. She could feel it. It was a folded piece of paper. Even though it was driving her insane – like a wedgie straight up the butt crack – and she was dying to yank it out, she ignored it... as much as she could, anyway. Back into her bewildered frame of mind, she blinked a few times, looking from one to the other. It wasn’t a hard sell considering this ‘reject from another era Prince Charming’ just claimed to know *why* they were there. Then again, if he *truly* knew as much as he thought he did, he wouldn’t be fooled by her ‘Sleeping Beauty-like charade’. Asleep. Stupid. Fooled. She howled with nervous laughter. “Sir, I don’t mean to interrupt you when you’re on a roll here, but you’re mistaken. You think Jonas is... a vampire?” Dusty couldn’t help but shake her head and drop her eyes as if shocked, amused, and thinking he was the biggest idiot in the world for believing such fairy tales. “Those don’t exist. I should know what this man is. He’s an animal investigator and my partner. If he was a vampire, I think I would be able to tell.”

Antoine agreed. “I’ve spent many hours with this man, both night *and* day. If he were a vampire, how come the sun don’t turn him to ash?”

Shaking his head, Francis looked at them, his eyes saddened. “There is much you do not know of the undead. While true that most cannot withstand the light of God’s glory, some, like the creature here,” he nodded at Jonas, “have developed ways around that.”

Jonas grinned. “Well, aren’t you just a walking Wikipedia of supernatural knowledge. Since you’re so clever, you must realize that once my friends are safe, I’ll rip your hearts from your chests and devour them.” Sneering, his voice lowered. “So, you gotta ask yourself... do I feel lucky?” Knowing Dusty would never understand the line, he hoped Antoine would not lose it and burst into laughter. “Well... do ya, punk?”

He was high. There was no other explanation for the bullshit that spewed from his mouth. Did he not see the weapons? Did he feel lucky?! What the hell was that? However, staying in character, she gasped, looking shocked. “What? Jonas! Say it isn’t so! Oh my God! How did we not know? We spent so many hours investigating,” her voice broke off. “I’m stunned... and a little frightened.”

Playing along, Antoine clutched her protectively. “You... you mean this man is telling the truth?” His eyes widened, looking at Francis. “Please help us! God forgive us!”

Francis turned to Jonas, offering a bit of a snicker. "Your friends know the truth. Your evil powers are of no use now. And as for eating our hearts..." Turning, he gave a nod to one of the men behind him.

The man nodded in return, firing a shot into Jonas's leg.

Jonas chuckled, not even flinching. "My leg? You shot me in the leg? I think you need to br—" His expression went flat, and his eyes turned silver.

A satisfied smile graced DeMolay's face. "There. Now we won't have to be concerned," motioning to Jonas, "with him getting out of hand. Take him to the car."

Two men got on either side of Jonas, placing a cloth over his head, grabbing his elbows, leading him out of the room.

Francis motioned to the men. "At ease." Turning back to Dusty and Antoine as they lowered their weapons, he crossed himself. "I am deeply saddened for the events you have been unfortunate enough to be part of. If it is any consolation, I will pray for your souls."

Trying to remember how it felt when she first found out that Jonas was a vampire, her hands gripped onto Antoine's arms, head shaking back and forth. "No, no, no, no. That's not true. It can't be. It's a joke. It's got to be! I need a stiff drink about now. Maybe the whole fucking bottle!" Looking at Francis, there were tears in her eyes. "Should we... what should we do? Maybe fill every room with garlic and mirrors? Hang crucifixes all over the house?" All that research actually did come in handy. Even though it was all fictional, it would make for petrified doublespeak. "Would you happen to have some Vervain seeds or plants?" Whimpering softly, she whispered. "What do we do? Is he going to kill us?" It looked as if the reaper was standing in front of her, telling her that he was going to reboot her life, and it would be the same. That was more than horrifying and it helped keep up the appearance as if her life was about to end.

Garlic, mirrors, and crucifixes. Those were things Francis knew had no effect on these creatures yet were still in the public belief as shields against the undead. The vampires had their teeth in all manner of popular culture – books, television shows, movies – to perpetuate those myths. It was a matter of self-preservation. Vervain, however, was not as well known, and this caused him a moment's pause as he examined Dusty's face. Either she was an excellent liar, or she watched a lot of TV. Something he doubted, but he found no evidence of subterfuge within her eyes. "You may do what gives you peace, but know this," he stepped toward them, "this creature will never bother you again."

Dusty appeared relieved. "What are you gonna do with him?"

"Many things." Giving a bow, he motioned the others out. "Forgive me for interrupting your vacation." With a spin of his body, he was out the door, his cape billowing behind him.

No sooner did the door close, she was on her feet. What the hell was she going to do now? Hooch! Maybe... it was worth a shot. After all, it was all she had at the time. "Hooch. Come." When he appeared, she took to a knee, pointing to the door. "Follow, then return. You got that boy? Follow Jonas, then return." Rubbing his head, she kissed him, pointing to the door again. "Follow!" He disappeared. For a split second, she almost hoped he would play fetch and bring Jonas back, but that would be a piece of cake and nothing about this case was that damn easy. Remembering that scratchy feeling, she dug between her breasts for the paper.

Antoine shot her a puzzled look. "What was that all about?" Seeing her hand dive into her shirt, he rose. "Sand fleas?"

Quickly, she unfolded the paper. "I don't know. I have no clue who those men were but—"

"I meant what was all that with Hooch. How is he going to know what you're talking about? Do you honestly think he's following them right now?"

Reading Jonas's chicken scratch, she could barely make out the words. One would think – in five-hundred-years – that he'd have beautiful penmanship. They would be totally wrong where he was concerned. His squiggly letters barely made sense. It took a few minutes, but she finally figured it out.

'Call Deva. My phone is on the dresser.'

Dusty looked over, nodding at Antoine, shoving the paper in her front pocket. Taking out her gun, she checked the bullets before snapping the magazine in place, rushing around the room, collecting their things. "Pack up. We need to leave now so we can head out once we get Jonas. Leave nothing behind." With his questioning Hooch, turning, she offered a big smile. "Yes, because he was my partner. A couple of times I had him tailing people for me. That's the smartest dog I've ever seen in my life. Besides, what else do we have right now? If he can get us in the general vicinity of Jonas without being seen, all the better for us."

"I hope you're right." Walking into Jonas's room, he returned holding a piece of paper. "This fell out of Jonas's hand and blew under the door. I think he must have done that on purpose."

Not really waiting to see what it said, she nodded. "Knowing him, it was probably something to do with the stone then. Get it and pack it up with the rest of his things. We have to get outta here," she rushed past him, heading into the room he just vacated, motioning to the living room with her other hand. "Make sure all your stuff is packed. I don't wanna have to come back here for shit."

He stood there, holding the paper she'd just told him to get. "Yeah. That would be this paper right here. I'll just pack it with the rest of my... shit." She was on a roll, apparently, so Antoine knew better than to argue a silly point.

Anyone who knew Dusty would tell you that she was the most levelheaded person in the game. There wasn't much that set her off the rails. However, rushing into Jonas's room, one would think the hotel was on fire. Her eyes quickly scanned the place in search of the dresser. Darting over, she snatched the phone up. Pulling up the recent list of calls, the last one was chosen before placing it to her ear. This wasn't something she was looking forward to. Not even a little bit.

"Jonas, my sweet, sweet boy," Deva's sarcasm began after answering on the second ring. "You know, my day is never complete until I get a call from you begging for my jet or more cash to feed that endless money pit of a mission."

Awkward. So *that* was how she spoke to Jonas? Interesting. "Oh. It's not Jonas. It's Dusty. There's been a slight wrinkle in our plans." It sounded as if she was running a marathon while packing up his things.

"Wrinkle? Are you telling me that you need an iron sent up?"

Shaking her head, Dusty went around the room, searching behind furniture. It wouldn't do for them to leave behind a valuable clue and she wasn't sure what he was working on half the time in

that room. However, when she tried to open the freezer – not sure why he had one in his room – finding it locked, there was a slight arch of her brow. Well, that was going to have to stay. “I wish it were that easy. What the hell is up with this freezer? It’s locked. Why does he need his own locked freezer?”

Deva cleared her throat. How to explain that without telling too much. “It is mine. Jonas is holding it for me. Now, back to what you were saying. What is this *wrinkle* you speak of?”

“Jonas was vamp-napped.”

“For future references, you should start with that.” A long drawn out breath was taken and exhaled. “I’m not sure I heard you correctly. You said that Jonas was vamp napped?”

“Yes.” For some reason, her eyes refused to leave that damn freezer alone. She was dying to see what was inside. Jonas was keeping things from her and it was a bad time – when she needed to rescue him – to learn of his deceit.

“What exactly does that mean?”

“It means, that these guys rushed into the hotel wearing funky clothes with red crosses and swords and took him outta here. The only reason Antoine and I were left behind is because we played dumb and they thought that Jonas *mind fucked* us into doing whatever he needed. Good thing they didn’t know that he can’t get into my head. So, you guys need to get on your brooms, or whatever the hell you fly around in, and rescue him.”

Even though Dusty couldn’t see it, Deva arched a brow at her words. “I believe those are witches. I usually use my jet, but it’s on loan right now. Have you got the stone?”

Dusty blinked. Pulling the phone away from her ear, she glared at it as if it bit her. “What?! I told you that Jonas has been kidnapped by some freaky guys, though very charming with a sexy accent, and all you wanna know about is that frickin’ stone?”

“What did they do when they came in? Jonas didn’t blink out of existence? He is not without magical attributes. If he was ‘vamp-napped’ as you say, then he wanted to be.”

“Regardless! He didn’t have a choice!” Unbelievable! This was the person who had helped them so much who now sounded like she was giving out a recipe over the phone to her great aunt? “They shot him in the leg and he just went numb!”

“Red crosses? The only symbol I know with a red cross is Red Cross and The Knights Templar. I seriously doubt they came to collect because he didn’t sign up with Obamacare. If it was The Knights Templar then your mission just went to impossible status. As if the odds weren’t stacked against you already.” Deva groaned.

“The Knights Templar?” Dusty glanced off to the side. There was something vaguely familiar about them that the annoying voice in her head warned her about *again*. This time it was in regard to some impending danger but what? “Okay, so you need to rescue him, so we can go and get the stone.”

“I am not able to rescue Jonas.”

A deep breath was taken and slowly exhaled. “Why not? Surely, this mission overrides everything else.”

“No. We all have our own parts to play and I am currently unable to tear away from,” Deva paused for a split second, “my part.”

“Are you serious right now? What the hell am I supposed to do about Jonas?”

“Rescue him.”

It was stated as easily as telling her an item she wanted her to pick up at the grocery store. Just nonchalantly stated as a fact. “Oh! Is that all? Just go up against that whole gang of men and rescue him, when he’s out cold?! How the dang-diggy do you propose I do that?!”

“You mortals always get upset over the slightest things. You rescue him carefully.”

Dusty didn’t care if the woman was a powerful vampire or not. She was ready to stake her, rip out her heart, cut off her head, and burn everything! Talk about being Captain Obvious! Rescue him. “Slightest things?! Gee, why didn’t I think of that?! Well, there is one thing you can do... get the jet ready because after I get him, we’ll be ready to head out and get the irritating-end-all dang burn stone. You know, for all-powerful magical-beyond-belief vampires, you people are worthless!” Ending the call, she went back to gathering things together.

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Looking at the phone, Deva sighed before glancing at the man standing beside her. “Well now. Things just went terribly wrong for our chosen trio. You should probably go and check it out. That was Dusty. The Templar Knights have taken Jonas.”

...

Hooch reemerged, and they were ready to go. Seeing the dog, she motioned to Antoine. “Let’s go. I do believe we’ve got everything.”

Grabbing his things, he started for the door. “I’m ready. I take it after we break Jonas out, we’re headed to trade off with Seth?”

She gave a slight shrug as a deep breath was exhaled. “That’s the hope.” Bending down, her hand touched Hooch. “You can show me where he is?” Hooch placed his paw on her arm, barking twice. God had to have brought him to her. “Good boy! Let’s go find Jonas.” Kissing him, she motioned to Antoine. “Let’s go.” Standing, she turned to the door.

Bacchus barred her way. “Problem?”

Stopping short, she still ran straight into him, bouncing off like hitting a brick wall. Reflexes on overload, she screamed, pulling her gun in defense. Placing a hand to her heart, returning her piece to the holster, eyes glared at him. “Must you do that?!”

“When necessary.” His arms folded over his chest. “I repeat... problem?” He didn’t seem at all like the caring person who had taken such care when laying Hooch to rest.

Turning, her eyes took on a more dangerous gleam. Where was the sweetheart of a guy who helped her with her dog when he was killed by ‘his’ boy? Where was that guy? This asshole was already pissing her off. “Yes. Jonas has been vamp napped and you need to go do your magical hoopla and rescue him. Hurry up about it. We have to take the stone to Seth and get Travis and then go to the next place,” she said, waving her hand as if sending him on his way.

“Your anger clouds your judgment,” he said, sounding like some Tibetan monk. “Handing the stone over to Seth is like rewarding a child for bad behavior. As for me rescuing Jonas, no. It is not my place, nor Deva’s to do your work for you.”

“I beg your pardon?!” What did he just say to her? There was a slight arch in her brow. Before this whole thing started, she was very content to just sit around and find missing persons, dogs, and battling spouses. At no point in time did she request from anyone that she be dragged into this nightmare. The way he spoke to a *chosen one* just pissed her off to no end. “Repeat that *one* more time.” Her eyes provoked him. “I dare you.” She was ready to take Antoine and say the hell with this shit and ‘they’ could figure out how to rescue everyone. They say that God doesn’t put more on your plate than you can handle. He was overestimating her and that platter-sized portion!

Fiery. She reminded him of someone else, and that brought a smile to his face. “Forgetting that I could end you both without breaking a sweat, what do you think will stop Seth from snapping your friend’s neck, once he has what he wants?”

His words were just adding fuel to the fire. Who the fuck did he think he was? She couldn’t raise her brows any higher at his brassiness. Stepping forward, getting all up in his personal bubble space, her head tilted upward, glaring him in the eyes. Big talk. She wanted to see him follow through with his humbug. “Then do it.” She glowered, daring him to *end* her. “Find someone else to do this with Jonas. I’ll gladly take my place in heaven and watch with a bowl of popcorn on cloud nine.” She called him on his bluff. If that wasn’t what he was after, he failed. Then she raised a hand before he could comment. It reminded her of the conversation with Jonas the first time, ‘we could throw barbs at each other...’ and knew it wasn’t the time or place for that. “We don’t have time for this shit. You need to go and rescue Jonas because you can do it much easier than I can. All you have to do is think of him being here, wiggle your nose, or fingers, or something and he’s here. I have to actually go in and fight about twenty men. That’s not high on my ‘to do’ list right now.”

“Twenty-six, actually. But who’s counting?” As close as she was, he inched ever closer. “No. You want him back, you fight for him.” Before she could react, he was gone in a wink.

“And I thought Seth was a dick,” Antoine said.

Looking up to the heavens, she screamed, “*Bacchus! You dick!*” It gave her a sense of accomplishment since she ‘knew’ he got the message. “Gosh-blame bullshit is what it is. They have all this untapped power – apparently – and yet it’s up to us... the *mortals*... who could die and have ‘no’ real strength to go in and fight,” she blinked, just catching onto what Bacchus said, “*twenty-six mother fucking trained swordsmen!* Son-of-a-biscuit-eater! I’m going to do everything in my power to get Jonas back from those religious freaks that took him. Then ‘we’ have to do everything in ‘our’ power to get Travis, but I have a strange feeling, that will be on me too.” Slowly shaking her head, grabbing hers and Jonas’s bags, she motioned to Antoine to follow. “Let’s go. Team rescue, times two, is our new mission.” She walked out the door not affected in the slightest, carrying all that weight. Hooch was ahead of her, waiting until she caught up, not ever getting too far ahead.

returned, and he found himself in an old stone circular chamber, surrounded by twelve doors. A single torch lit the room, but it gave off enough light for him to see that he was alone. His arms – outstretched and bound by steel wrappings at each wrist to a seven-foot-long timber, suspended from the ceiling by iron tow chains – felt heavy; as if he had labored for days on end. He looked down, seeing his ankles wrapped in silver chains anchored into the concrete floor. Summoning all the strength he could muster proved useless, and only served to weaken him further.

As the door directly opposite him creaked open on rusted hinges, his head rose. A man entered, dressed in the same D'Artagnan costume he saw back at the hotel. Jonas frowned as the man crossed himself. "Who are you?"

"Ah, I see you are awake. Excellent. We may begin, then." Smiling, he approached Jonas. "Excuse us for the manner in which you were brought here, but I do not believe you would have come willingly."

"Who... are... you?"

He chuckled and shook his head. "Where are my manners? I am Francis De Molay." A man of fifty-seven years, Molay's face reminded Jonas of his grandfather. Serene and kind, with a pair of sea green eyes that regarded him in a mix of awe and pity.

Jonas's brow rose. "Is that supposed to mean something to me?" Coughing produced a metallic taste in his mouth. Blood. His blood.

Francis waved a hand and laughed. "Of course not, and please forgive my demeanor. It has been many years since I've been in the presence of one such as yourself. We have no real use for ceremony in this sacred place. Here," he motioned around the chamber, "we are all simple men. Servants of God." Tilting his head, he once again regarded Jonas. "All except for you, that is."

"What do you know about me?"

"Please, Mister Sparx. There is no need for subterfuge here." Removing a leather pouch from the inside of his cape, he opened it, setting it on a small table to Jonas's right side. "You are Jonas Sparx... or at least that is what you call yourself now. Born in Toledo, Spain, in the year Fourteen-seventy-nine as Diego Ramirez. Your beloved mother – a loving God-fearing woman – was lost to a raid when you were sixteen. The famous Spanish nobleman, known for committing many scandalous affairs – otherwise known as your father – abandoned you after that. Forced to take to the streets as a vagabond and thief until you were thirty-five, you lived a fairly decent life... until you became an enemy of God. A vampire."

Whoever these men were, they knew more than any mortal should. He could play dumb, but the facts were undeniable. In his weakened state, there was little fight left. "So, tell me, Francis De Molay," he spit blood onto the floor, "how it is that a mortal knows... not only of us... but how to render us helpless."

Removing a small vial of red liquid from the pouch, Francis held it up to him. "As you walk among us, so we walk among you."

Narrowing his eyes, Jonas gave a broken laugh. "Right. Mortals walking among us without us having a clue? I'm not buying what you're selling, sorry."

Setting the vial down on the table, Francis continued as Jonas's eyes zeroed in on the red liquid within it. "Eight hundred years ago, at the apex of our power and influence, a small number of us

realized that the true enemy of God and man was not, as we thought, the Muslim world, but the world of the undead. The Vampire. We also learned, at great cost, that we could not defeat your kind using normal strategies. We needed to infiltrate you. Find your weaknesses. To that end, some of us sacrificed our humanity, for the good of all. They opened themselves up to the more... ravenous of your race."

It all fit now; the symbols, the capes, the fervor. They were The Knights Templar.... or what remained of them. Still, Jonas found his tale of vampire espionage too farfetched. "Bullshit," he coughed out. "You couldn't have maintained loyalty to mankind, once you were turned. The thirst is too strong." His eyes roamed back to the vial. "Trust me."

Giving a deep sigh, Francis agreed. "True enough. Many did succumb to the evil within, but a few, those whose faith was strongest, managed to persevere. They blend into your world to this day and provide us with enlightening information. It is how we know of you, and your prophecy. So, you see, Jonas Sparx, we cannot allow you to complete the unholy rite. The first weapon must never be reassembled, lest we all perish in blood."

Realizing now why they captured him, Jonas sighed as the other doors opened and more men entered. "You got the wrong bloodsucker."

"I think not. We know you have the first piece of the Bloodstone. Our seer, Brother Medici, saw you summon it from a watery grave." Holding out his hand, one of the other men handed him a rolled-up parchment. "Brother Medici is a gifted man. An artist of great skill." Unrolling the vellum, he smiled, showing it to Jonas. "An uncanny likeness, no?"

He had to admit, the face staring back at him was an exact likeness. "I prefer Picasso."

Rolling the paper back up and handing it back, Francis laughed. "I am more of a Monet fan, personally. So, tell me, Jonas... may I call you Jonas? Where are the other pieces of the Bloodstone?"

"Someone didn't pay attention in class." Weak as he was, Jonas still excelled in smart ass, level expert.

The man's smile evaporated. "Your humor has grown tiresome. Here is my bargain with you." Stepping up, he punched Jonas in the side, breaking a rib. "You are going to die here. How quickly and painlessly is up to you. Tell me what I wish to know, and I will be merciful." Reaching up, he grabbed Jonas's chin, snapping his head to the side. "Even though I should not be." Stepping back, he cracked his knuckles. "Or, if you wish to continue in this manner... you can choose to remain silent... for as long as you can... but I'm quite sure that you will tell me what I wish to know. Willingly, or otherwise."

"Go fuck yourself," he spit out, blood pouring from his mouth.

"I see you have made your choice. Very well then." Francis motioned to the others, and they backed out of the room. Picking up the vial, he looked it over, then set it back on the table, turning to Jonas. "I am going to enjoy our conversations, Mister Sparx. Indeed I am." Turning on his heel, he left Jonas to his thoughts.

He felt pain – real pain – for the first time since he had been turned. His side was on fire and showed no sign of letting up. *I'm not healing. Bacchus, where are you?*

Outside, the driver was waiting for them in the Land Rover. “I’ve been instructed to take you where you need to go.”

Barely glancing in his direction, she put the luggage in the back, taking Antoine’s as well. It wasn’t like the baggage wanted to fit comfortably, she had to kick a few pieces. Once she was finally able to close the door, he was acknowledged. “For now, you and Antoine follow behind me. I’m going on foot.” Turning, she bent down once more to Hooch. “Okay, boy, lead the way. Just make sure I can see a shimmer of you to follow where you’re going. Find Jonas.”

As Hooch took off like a bat out of hell, Dusty raced behind him. Keeping up with the dog wasn’t hard and her breathing stayed easy. Hooch changed directions twice, pausing for a brief moment each time. Those were the only times they veered from the road. It was a good thing they had a Land Rover, which drove slowly behind them. It took almost three hours.

The old church was in an isolated place. The long dirt road led straight to the front doors. Raising her hands, she motioned for the truck to stop. Rushing over to the car, she reached in for her water, taking a long swallow from it, finally getting a moment to catch her breath. “Okay, this seems to be the place. Go figure. An old church. You two stay out here outta sight. That’s all we need is for them to see the car. Drive around the corner or something.” Taking another long swig from the bottle, she recapped it, plopping it back on the seat. “Hooch and I are going in. I need you to stay out here.” She looked in the back. “Antoine, I don’t want you in any danger, so don’t argue.”

“I couldn’t agree more. My driver’s license doesn’t say anything about being a *hero!*” Hunkering down in the back, he pulled his arms around his chest. “Vampires. End of time prophecies. The Knights Templar! I did *not* sign up for this. There better be some damn hazard pay in an envelope, at the end of this. Just don’t hurt them. They are just men. They mean well.”

If things weren’t so serious, she would crack up at his words. “Antoine DuBois! Neither I – nor Hooch – is evil. I will not hurt them. Well, actually, only the one who hit me might have to worry. For the most part, I don’t think these men are evil, so I won’t treat them as such. However, accidents do happen. Back soon.” With that, she disappeared down the dirt road, running through the brush. At the church, she snuck around to the back of the building, gun in hand. Opening the door, she slipped inside.

Walking through the church, Hooch led the way, checking for any sign of people. Creeping along the side of the wall, she could hear talking on the other side of the corner. There were twenty-six men in there from what Bacchus told her. They were all Knights Templar. That meant they were trained in sword and probably guns too. She was good, but she didn’t know if she was that good. How the fuck was she going to get Jonas out of this mess and survive?

...

Bacchus knew that Dusty, for all her skills, would be hard-pressed to take on twenty-six well-trained men. He also knew that he could not help her. That didn’t mean she *couldn’t* be helped, and he knew just the person to lend a much-needed hand. “Hello, Deva.”

Walking through the hallway, her mind was a million miles away. Even though this whole prophecy thing was very important, she still had her own demons to battle. There were vampires out there that wanted her blood for killing Drake, and she had yet to find all of them. The search

was narrowing down. Rounding the corner, hearing his voice, she rolled her eyes. "Fancy meeting you here. I wondered when you would return. What did you learn?"

Looking around, his lips pursed. "You don't happen to have any tea, do you?"

Glaring, she motioned for him to continue. "Get on with it and then you and Chey can share a cup of tea. What is so important?"

"Business as always. One of your many charms, my dear. Very well." Turning, he motioned his hand and the image of Dusty, huddled at the entrance to the old abandoned church, appeared before them.

As the visual of Dusty appeared in midair, she watched with pursed lips. The woman stood behind one corner with the ghost dog leading the way. There were four men waiting for her around the bend. Wincing, she shook her head. "That doesn't look good."

"There are twenty-six, well-armed, trained men of God inside that crumbling place. Now, Dusty is good, but she's also mortal. You know as well as I do that she doesn't stand a chance of getting to Jonas by herself. She's going to need help." Raising a hand to stop her before she began, he shook his head. "I already refused. I know you sure aren't going to do any more than you already are. However," folding his hands behind his back, the image dissipated as he rocked on his heels. "Someone *else* might. Someone with a, shall we say, vested interest in moving this play along? Someone who would probably relish the thought of disabling some Knights Templar?"

"No. Not a good idea. I know he would love getting some payback. Now, the big question is, why are you telling me? Tell him to help them."

His brow rose. "Not acceptable. You need to call and persuade him with that same charm that trapped him before."

"Yes. You still owe me for that too."

Rolling his eyes, he nodded. "I have not forgotten. You do understand why I cannot do this."

"What makes you think he's going to listen to me?"

"He'll listen to you. Remember, you have as much at stake as I do. This little detour has come at a very bad time. You *do* have his number?"

Nodding, she groaned, taking out her phone. "Of course." Pulling up her contacts, she went straight to the 'Spawn of the Devil' and hit send. "You owe me."

...

She was a long cool woman in a black dress, the ringtone sounded from Seth's pocket. "Scuse me, boy, I need ta take this here call." Smiling, he brought the phone to his ear. "Why if it isn't Deva LaDevia herself. To what do I owe this completely unexpected, but not at all unwelcome surprise."

"Seth. Always a pleasure." Glaring at Bacchus, she rolled her eyes. "I hope you are keeping well."

"Darlin', please don't smooth talk me. It ain't a good fit for you. I happen to know that Y'all wouldn't piss on me if I was on fire. What do ya want?" Travis started to speak but found himself frozen with a small wave of Seth's hand.

“Straight to the point. Quick. Unaffected. Just like in bed.” Before he could respond, she chuckled. “I’m calling to tell you about a little… wrinkle… in the plans. Our dynamic trio has run into some resistance and is going to be delayed in searching for the stone.” Clicking her tooth with her fingernail, she hummed for a moment. “Well, come to think of it, I really don’t think either of them is going to make it out of this alive, unless….” Pausing for a moment, she shook her head, clearing her throat. “That’s too preposterous for words. So, you might have to continue on your own.”

“While I am thankful for the opinion of my prowess in the sack, I am on somewhat of a deadline here. So ya need to be just a tiny bit clearer on just what it is that Y’all want from me. What happened ta the three stooges this time? Lions? Tigers? Bears? *OH MY!*” It was clear that Seth had taken a liking to pop culture since being awoken, using every reference to movies, television, and videos, he could squeeze in.

“Well, I hate to ask you to do anything that’s against your nature, but if you go and give them a hand, it could kill two birds with one stone. Three if you actually count the stone.”

A deep sigh came over the line. “Darlin’, while you know I enjoy word games as much as the next vampire, get to the fuckin’ point. You are about to exceed the limits of my medication.”

“Well, that’s true. You never learned what patience means.” Sighing long and hard, a bit dramatically, she clicked her tongue against the top of her teeth. “The Knights Templar have vamp napped – as Dusty put it – Jonas. She has found him, but… she’s about to rush in for a rescue. There are twenty-six well-trained men standing in her way. I don’t foresee either of them coming out of this alive.” Then… as if a thought suddenly hit her. “Unless… a certain powerful vampire went to help. Haven’t you always wanted to get even with the Knights after that one fiasco?”

Silence greeted Deva for a moment. “Temptin’. However, ya don’t need me for something like this. I’m sure one of your highly trained goons could pull this off, without so much as getting a hair outta place.” Another stretch of silence shrouded the line. “I gotta say that little spitfire has guts. Brains, well that remains ta be seen, but guts count for somethin’. By the way, how in fucks creation did Jonas allow himself to be taken? I know he spent some time under your wise tutelage. Sounds like he needs a refresher… or ya ain’t as good a teacher as ya think.”

“Jonas was the worst student ever. I finally gave up on trying to teach him anything. Poor Dusty. She will never live through this battle. Ooh, she is almost at them too. Those Knights don’t play around. It sounds like you’re busy. I was right in the middle of something. Since you’re not going to help them, you might as well kiss your stones goodbye.” It took all she had not to laugh on the phone. “Good day.”

“Now hold your horses, woman.” Seth knew this game well. He and Deva had played it many times before. “I didn’t say I *wouldn’t* help. Just wanted to see how far Y’all would go. While we’re on the subject of being busy… I have, what you might call a counterproposal. And unlike you, I’ll lay it all out for those pretty little eyes ta see.” A smile broke as he remembered how Deva’s eyes turned when she was livid… or aroused. “I’ll help out the bumbleblin’ buttheads. This *one* time. And for good faith, I’ll even throw some information your way. Information you’ve been wanting for a *long* time. In return, our slate is clean. I owe you nothin’. You owe me nothin’. We got a deal?” Truth was, he owed her a great deal and Seth loathed owing anyone – especially her – anything.

“Not that you’ve given me any choice in this… we have a deal. What information are you talking about?”

“I know where the rest of Drake’s children are. And please don’t tell me that ya already have that info. If you did, they’d be dead. And they ain’t. So?”

Now, he had her attention. “Okay. You help Dusty and Jonas. Now, that other bit, how do you know of such information?”

“Let’s just say that we, you and I, are... shall we say... third cousins?” While that answer would go over most people’s heads, Deva was not most people.

“Interesting. Are you telling me that you were Merlin’s sire?”

Bacchus had been silent during all this, occupying his time, thumbing through the recent issue of Rolling Stone, when his brow lifted at the mention of Merlin’s sire. This conversation was treading dangerously close to opening a can of worms which *none* of them wanted. “Enough. Finish your pillow talk when I’m not in the same room. Boring. Dusty is about to have her ass handed to her, and Jonas is going to leave the *undead* ranks to join the *permanently* dead. Tick-Tock!”

Waving a hand in annoyance, she groaned, rolling her eyes. “Okay, you can fill me in on that bit of news... and I am going to hold you to it.” After giving him the location, she sighed. “The slate will be cleaned when I get that information. But, for now, get to the old abandoned church and save Dusty so she can get Jonas.”

After getting the location of the old Church, Seth sent Deva a PDF file with the exact location where the rest of Drake’s children were holed up. “It was very nice doin’ business with you, my dear. I hope that next time we meet, it’ll be under more... pleasant circumstances. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a rescue to perform.” The line went dead.

After the call ended, Deva’s phone sounded. “There you go. He’s off to rescue Dusty and help Jonas.” Looking at the list, she smiled. “You and I have unfinished business that will have to wait. I need to go and kill me some vamps and collect more power. Yum.”

“Well you go do whatever it is you need to, and I’ll,” clearing his throat, he smiled. “I’ll just stay out of every bodies way.” With that, he was gone.

33

Before letting Dusty know that he was going to help, Seth paid Jonas a social call. Seeing his plight, the ancient vampire circled a few times, shaking his head, before stopping in front of him.

On the brink of losing the battle, Jonas’s eyes slowly opened. “You gotta be shitting me. The last face I see before I die is yours?”

“Why, Jonas Sparx. You hurt my delicate feelings. And here I am, putting my very *important* life on the line, just so your little lady don’t go and get herself killed. A person might show some gratitude.” Grinning, Seth pulled Jonas’s head up by his hair. “You’re not looking well at all. No sir.” Glancing down at the restraints, he clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Silver. I cannot believe that after all of Deva’s training, you still can’t resist it. What are we gonna do with you.” Releasing his head, Seth glanced around the room. “You know, there’s about two dozen or so of those nasty men out there just waiting to make poor Dusty’s life complicated. She’s here to rescue you. Can you believe that? You!” Letting out an overdramatic sigh, his shoulders rose a bit. “Well, I suppose there’s no accounting for taste.”

Spitting up more blood, Jonas's voice came out hollow. "Don't let her die. My life doesn't matter anymore, but she didn't ask for any of this. If there's a shred of decency left in you," choking on a pool of his own life force, his body shook.

Seth's laugh echoed in the chamber. "Decency? You are delusional. Jonas, you know me better than that. What I do, I do for myself. Always been that way. Always will be. However, in the course of my long life, I have found myself indebted to... certain people. I despise that, so what I'm about to do now, clears one of those longstanding debts." Grabbing his head again, he jerked it back. "But understand this, my quickly fading friend, *you* now owe *me*. And I *will* collect on this debt somewhere along the line here."

Jonas narrowed his eyes. "How are you going to collect from a dead man?"

"Whether you live or die depends on just what that little lady's willing to sacrifice. My job here is to see that she makes it to you intact. The rest is, shall we say, up to fate? Now if you'll excuse me, I have a few caped crusaders to render inoperative." Heading to the center door, he stopped, turning to look over his shoulder. "I trust she'll make the human choice. Be seeing you soon, Jonas Sparx."

...

Leaning down, Dusty kissed Hooch on the crown of his head. "Find Jonas." Thinking about the command, Hooch dropped his head, sniffing the ground. "Good boy." Slowly, he wandered toward the intersection, her right on his rear. Even though she had the gun in her hands, it was only for an emergency. If at all possible, she would not use it. There were critical shots and wounds that grazed the skin. It bled a lot but didn't really do any damage. Turning around the corner, she noticed one of the Knights Templar. Hooch blinked out of existence as she stepped toward him, treading lightly as if walking on air.

The knight was standing guard outside one of the many doors in the labyrinth of the church. He must've felt her presence because soon enough, he eased the sword from his scabbard. Spinning around, he hefted it in the attack position. Seeing Dusty, his eyes narrowed. "You should have gone home!"

Stepping forward, she fired sarcasm back at him. "It was your sexy accent. Couldn't resist. Had to come and see you one more time."

"And this is the last face you will ever see." Taking a step toward her, blade gleaming, he stopped, as if paralyzed by some unseen force.

Noticing that he just froze, she stopped moving as well. "Okay, is this some new game? Some weird Knights Templar action?" Glancing around, she moved ever closer, in very slow, jerky-like motions. "Is this a trick? I will shoot you." When he still didn't move, her hand gingerly reached up, touching his face. The man didn't even blink. He was a statue. "Bacchus? Is that you?"

"I'm afraid that question is incorrect, and you're gonna be fined ten seconds. Would you care to poll the audience?"

That voice. It was him. The one that plagued her nightmares. His southern accent never seemed right. Spinning around, her gun now trained on him, she blinked. "Seth. I'd recognize that fake-ass drawl anywhere. So, this is what you really look like. What are you doing here?" If he was there, it meant someone was going to die.

Hooch growled from behind her.

“Stand down.” Not that Seth could hurt him, but she didn’t want to take that chance.

Looking down at the growl, Seth chuckled. “Well, I do declare. Dead dog walking.” Looking back up to Dusty, he smiled. “You must have someone at the highest level on your side.” Then, he bowed. “Yes, it is I. At your service, darlin’. I understand that you and mister pretty boy got yourselves in a right pickle.” Tsk-tsking, he glanced over at the knight. “Now, these boys here don’t play games, ya see. They are very firm in their beliefs. Mark my words. This one here? He’d have taken your pretty lil head clean off, had I not stopped him.” Giving her a wink, he leaned against the cold stone wall. “Ya can thank me later.”

Growling herself, she pulled the hammer back on the gun. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t send a wooden bullet through your brain. Just one. I’ve handled my fair share of ‘impossible missions’ and done just fine without any help from a vampire. No, Seth, when you come around, people get dead. I don’t want any of them killed, just incapacitated long enough for me to get Jonas out of here. Thanks, but I can handle this. If not... well... so much for your prophecy.”

Placing a hand over his heart, Seth pouted. “Why darlin’, I do believe you are racially profiling me. I’m not as bad as all those waggin’ tongues make me out ta be. I’m just misunderstood, is all.”

“Yeah. Right. You forget. I’ve been cleaning up your misunderstood trail of dead bodies.”

“As for puttin’ a bullet in my head, why on earth would you do that? Y’all can’t deny that this is more excitement than you’ve had in a long time.”

“I did just fine before you came along. That level was perfect for me.”

“Well, okay then. One good reason? I’m the only one that knows where your other pretty boy is... and... if I do say so... he’s not gonna make it for long. If I don’t help ya, he’s gonna be sent back to ya... piece by bloody piece. Now, I’d love ta stand here all day, goin’ round and round, but we’re on a bit of a tight deadline. Ya see... I got a stone ta find . . . that is you all have a stone ta find and hand over to me . . . and Jonas is very swiftly losing his life. Now we can toss insults back and forth, but that ain’t gonna get either of us what we really want, is it now?”

The air in the room felt thin like someone sucked the oxygen out through a vacuum hose. Gulping it in, filling up her reserves, she blinked. “What did you do to him?!” She steadied her aim, closing one eye. “Talk fast, because me rescuing him is the ‘only’ way you’re gonna get that stone.”

Raising his hands in protest, the ancient vampire shook his head. “What did *I* do to him? My dear sweet woman, *I* haven’t laid a hand on that stubborn son-of-a-bitch. What he’s goin’ through now, all these little soldiers of God are puttin’ him through. Now mind ya, I ain’t here to rescue him, but ta make sure that *you* at least have a fighting chance to try. Good as I’m sure you are, in the art of takin’ folks out, you don’t stand much of a chance against these fine boys. Not even *with* the help of Underdog there.”

“So,” her brow arched, not believing what he just said. “You’re here to *help* us? What kind of trickery is this? What do you gain from all of this?”

His eyes turned blood red. “I have my own score ta settle with this self-righteous bunch of ingrates.”

Gasping, she shook her head. "Oh, hell no! I knew it! Anytime you come around, *someone* dies because of it. I will *not* be the reason that one of these men lose their life. I'm not gonna let you harm one hair on any of their heads. I just need them to stay frozen, so I can get Jonas outta here. That's all. No more bloodshed. If that's not acceptable, I can do it myself."

"I like your confidence, truly I do, however it may well prove to be your undoing and I can't allow anything to happen to you... yet. Now, I have made sure that all of these fine men won't bother you for," glancing at the Rolex on his wrist, he smiled. "Say... an hour? I should think that'd be plenty of time for ya to do your thing. As for not *letting* me have my pound of flesh..." Faster than Dusty could even think, Seth had taken the knight's sword and cleaved his head off.

As fast as he moved, it was as if everything slowed down. She could almost see trails in front of her eyes as he moved from one side to the other. When the sword sliced into the man's neck, there was a 'squishing' sound as blood sprayed out like water through a hose. It hit her, the wall, and the floor as his body dropped straight down. The blood pooled out of him, it didn't just sprinkle. There was a puddle that flowed from the headless corpse to the center of the room. It made her cry out. "What the... You... I can't believe... Why?!"

Standing before her, blood pooling on the floor beneath the severed head, Seth grinned. "Sorry, darlin'. That didn't concern you. It was personal. You now have fifty-nine minutes. If I have to return, I'll kill them all." He was gone before she could utter a sound.

As he disappeared, she struggled with her own emotions while yanking out her phone. Opening the alarm, she put 50 minutes on the timer. That gave her an extra five minutes, technically nine, before things started back up. Closing her eyes for a split second, she crossed herself, kissing her necklace before bending down to Hooch. "Find Jonas."

Once more the dog headed off with her right behind him. Men were in mid-action as she passed, avoiding touching them at all cost. Hooch continued through the building, his nose to the floor until he brought her to a thick wooden door. Slowly, she pulled it open, looking around. It was dark, but it didn't stop Hooch. He barreled down the stairs, and she moved in after him. Rounding the corner, her steps halted, seeing Jonas dangling limp like some wilting plant. "Jonas!"

While hanging like some rejected rag doll, his mind drifted in and out of consciousness, unable to tell reality from hallucination. Kanis, Garrick, and Amelia poked him with burning irons. Bacchus told him he failed at everything but being a pawn in Seth's game. Deva floated above him, laughing, taunting him.

No words. The man looked worse than death. A shell of the man he once was. Her heart sank as tears threatened to well up. There wasn't time for this. Pushing the emotions away, she rushed forward with lockpick in hand. "Damn, Sparx. You look like shit. Don't worry. Hooch and I are here to rescue you. Just need to get you loose." Bending down, the pick was shoved into the lock, wiggling until there was a click. One down, three to go. Removing the first one, her attention focused on the second one. "Sparx, can you hear me? Come on now. It's not time to take a nap. Wake up, Sparx! Sparx! Sparx! Sparx!"

Seth was always in his mind, grinning in that twisted way he had with one arm around Dusty. That vision was so intense, he actually thought he could smell her scent, hear her sweet voice teasing him. *Sparx! Sparx! Sparx! Smiling through bloodstained lips, his eyes slowly opened.* "Why aren't you naked?"

Looking up, she shook her head. "Odd thing to ask your rescuer."

Laughing, he choked as more blood dripped from his mouth. As gravity tried forcing him to the floor, his smile dissolved. "Wait. This isn't a dream, is it?"

"If it is... you have some real doozies where I'm concerned. Geez. Tell me how you really feel, why don't you."

Feeling the burning sting of that broken rib, he fought against passing out. "What are you doing here? These idiots will kill you if..." Once more his words became garbled, as a flood of red liquid streamed from his mouth and nose, and he struggled to be free.

With his actions, it was making it harder to line up the tumblers inside the shackle lock. "Quit moving. Seth actually froze everyone and gave us an hour. That was over a half hour ago," she thought about that statement, "I think." Hearing the click, her fingers opened the trap-like steel, carefully removing it off his ankle.

Through the blistering haze of pain – something he hadn't experienced in far too long – he tried to make sense of her words. "Seth?"

"Yeah, I know, shocker, huh? Tell me there was a reason that you allowed yourself to get caught." Jumping up, she worked on one of the wrist shackles, shoving the pick inside the opening, working on releasing it. "Deva kept saying you had to have been captured for a reason. Please tell me you found out something. I can't believe the only vamp to help was Seth. If that don't beat all, I don't know what does."

"Seth stopped time? Deva?" The only part that made sense to him was her question about *why* he allowed himself to be taken. "If I had fought," he said, gazing at her face. "They would have killed you. I can't ever let that happen. Not now that I've..." The loss of blood took over, and his head slumped against his chest.

Her heart tightened as he just slumped over. Was he dead-dead? It was hard to tell, but one good thing about it, his actions stopped. It was easier to work the other one loose. When both were free, with an arm wrapped around his side, she hobbled him over to the bench. Setting him down, all it took was a firm slap across the face... a few times... but still nothing. "Man, you look absolutely horrible! How the hell am I gonna get you outta here when you can't even walk on your own?" Looking around, she spied the vial on the table. Grabbing it and a handful of hair, she held his head back, holding it in front of his face. "Is that enough?" As he toppled from one side to the other, it was necessary to anchor him in one spot with a hand to the chest. "C'mon now. Wake up!"

As he struggled with consciousness, his eyes slowly opened, looking at the vial. It wouldn't be near enough, but it might be just the thing to provide a small surge. At least until he could get his teeth into one of those assholes. It didn't matter which one. Hands shook like a junkie as fingers grabbed at the lifeline. Uncorking it, he brought it to his lips before dropping it to the floor, spitting it back out. "Ink. Fucking bastards. I'm gonna..." Unable to complete the thought, let alone the action, he squinted at Dusty. "I'm done. Get your beautiful ass out of here. Go. You and Antoine save Travis." Raising a bloody palm to her face, he smiled gently. "He's one lucky son of a..." His eyelids fluttered as the descent into the dark void all vampires feared – yet, he secretly wished for – enveloped him.

Glancing at her phone, it showed thirteen minutes left on the timer. "Oh, hell no!" Holding him in place with her knees between his legs, she yanked up her jacket sleeve, holding her wrist to his nose. "I don't leave people behind. We have steps to climb to get outta here. The Land Rover

is waiting for us. You're gonna have to take my blood. Either you do it nice and neat, or I'll cut my wrist and *make* you feed. Choose."

Was it always this way for his kind, when they were near final death? A last temptation from whatever cruel Gods put them on such a dark path? His eyes half opened. "No. You don't know what you're saying," he managed, through the haze. "If I start, I may not be able to stop until you're drained. I haven't the strength of will left to go only so far." While his mind said no, the creature within him screamed out to live and his eyes fell to her arm. He could see the blood coursing through her body, hear the pounding of her heart, and smell the sweet scent of temptation. Taking her arm, he slowly brought it to his lips. Try as he might, he could not fight the beast any longer. Glancing up, his eyes ran red with thirst and desire. "Forgive me," he whispered before his fangs descended and gently slipped into the soft flesh of her wrist.

Wincing from the pain at first, she watched him, before desire washed over like a tidal wave, buckling her knees. It was the most intense feeling. It was like nothing else. Lust was one thing, but this was different as her moans of pleasure filled the cold cellar. Hands traveled up his leg in a seductive manner with one destination in mind. The only thought, pounding against her temples, was how much she wanted Jonas to take her right then and there. It was nothing like the hotel. That was child's play compared to this. Every nerve fired rapidly, her body was instantly heated to the point that cold water would steam off. Images – that would have a seasoned porn star blush – of the two of them, wrapped in a lover's tryst, filled her mind. "Mm, Jonas," the moan was more a pleading.

As her blood began to replenish him, images flashed in his mind. A vision of a young girl, no more than six years old, engaged in game of hide and seek with a friend, began playing like some ancient home movie. The smell of fresh-cut grass and honeysuckle filled his senses, along with the sweet sound of children playing.

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"You'll never find me!" A young boy – dressed in a striped shirt and torn overalls – called out from behind a large Oak tree. The weather was gorgeous with a slight breeze blowing. It was late summer or early fall. The old pair of sneakers appeared too small as a toe looked on the verge of busting through the seams. He was in serious need of a bath wearing more dirt than was on the ground. Without a care in the world, a blond head peeked out from the tree as a smile lit up his face. Watching the young girl searching for him, he stifled a giggle as she posed with a hand on her hip, tapping her foot in anger.

"You come out right this minute!" she hollered. "Or so help me, I'm gonna whip you good when I find you."

"Dusty, it's time to come in for supper."

Slipping from behind the tree, the boy's face fell. "Aww, Missus Jardner. Can't she stay out just a little longer? Please?"

The little girl, seeing her friend, sprang into action. "Aha! *There* you are." Running over, she knocked him down, straddling his arms. "Now I'm gonna wallop you!"

"Dustina Elizabeth Jardner! You'll do no such thing. You're a lady, and ladies don't act like–"

“Witch!” Another woman came out of nowhere, knocking Dusty off the boy. Looking up at the woman on the porch, she snatched the boy’s arm, yanking him up. “I *told* you to keep that... that *creature* away from my boy,” she screamed, wagging a finger at her.

“Oh, for the love of God, Joanne. They’re just kids.”

“Don’t you even *speak* the name of the Lord! That girl of yours is tainted! I got a nose for these things. You’re *all* gonna burn in hell one day for pushing that demon out of your womb! Mark my words.”

The little boy looked up at her. “But mama! Damn it! I wasn’t-”

His head snapped to the side from the force of her backhand. “Shut that filthy mouth! I’ll deal with you when we get home. Your daddy will add to it when he gets done with his sermon. Now git on home, boy.” She let go of his hand, giving him a swift kick in the ass.

“That’s not nice!” The little girl yelled, scowling at the woman, showing tremendous bravery.

“Don’t you try any of your little hoo-doo tricks on *me*, you... vulgar heathen! I am *right with God!*”

Turning, she watched her friend run home, hands rubbing his backside. Once he was out of striking distance, he turned, smiling and blew a kiss before taking off.

“Go home, Joanne,” Dusty’s mother said. “And don’t you *ever* threaten me or my little girl again.”

Smirking, Joanne tossed her head to the side. “We’ll just *see* who has the last say in this, Julianna.” Turning, she too stormed off, knocking the little girl aside as she passed her.

Standing, Dusty watched her for a minute, before rushing up onto the porch, hugging her mother. “Mama... why do people have to be so mean?”

Looking down, she smiled softly before kissing the top of her head. “I don’t know sweetie. One day, that woman will be sorry when she’s old and alone, wondering why her son never calls, or visits.”

Dusty looked up, her brown eyes moist. “Can’t we help him, Mama? Can’t we take him away from those people?”

Kneeling down, Julianna smiled, drying the tears from her baby girl’s eyes. “Dusty, everybody has to make their own way in this world. We all have to find the right road and stay on it. Now... your road may differ from mine, just like mine is different from yours and your daddy’s.” Looking off in the direction Joanne had gone, she sighed. Standing, she took Dusty by the hand. “I’m afraid Travis Knight’s road is gonna be a hard one. I just pray he’s able to get through it.” Looking down, she smiled. “Now, come on inside, let’s get you washed up for dinner. I baked your favorite pie for dessert!”

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Jonas groaned, feeling Dusty’s hand on his groin. As her blood coursed through him like liquid lava, rejuvenating his body, he responded to her sensual touch in kind. Finding the will to draw his fangs from her wrist, he moved over her slowly, hands roaming up her sides. Placing himself between her legs, he began to move as she arched her back.

The fact that they were on borrowed time did little to dissuade him. Her blood was some of the sweetest he had ever tasted, and now he wanted something else. It was apparent she was more than willing to give it to him. Parting her lips with his, he slipped his moist tongue deep into her hungry mouth. Both of them yearned for something deeper than they understood. Slipping his hand under her shirt, he felt the rise of her nipple, squeezing it gently, listening to her moan, arching against him. He moved his knee between her legs, massaging where it mattered most. Once more she moaned out, desperately clawing at him.

That vision eased back into his mind. Drinking from her was enough that he crept in past her mind's security. It was in blotches though, like a bad VHS tape, worn in small spots. He saw enough to piece it together, but something important was missing. A word. Turn of a phrase. Action. He wasn't sure. Even though he wanted her... more than he had ever wanted another living soul... he pulled away. They didn't have time. Besides, it would be like taking advantage of a drunken date.

Feeling his body pull away, still reeling from the euphoria, Dusty felt like someone tossed her into icy water. Gasping, she struggled for breath. "What the...?" Looking around, unsure of her exact location, her brows furrowed. Then again, that mind – usually sharper than a serpent's tooth – was a mixture of clouds and words. None of it made sense. "Where..."

First things first... Pulling her hand to his mouth, he had to close the wound. Doing a doubletake, his eyes widened in shock. "What the...?" Maybe he already closed it? He didn't think so, then again, he was still a little fuzzy in the mind. "Dusty? Listen to me. We have to go. Now." He helped her stand. "Come on. We need to get out of here. Are you with me?"

When he pulled her up, she was still under the vampire aphrodisiac, dreamily looking up into his eyes, pushing up against him. "Mm. That was... deeeelicious. Can I have more? Was it enough? You need just a little bit more, right? Maybe something else I can do for you? Just say the word and I'm there. *All* over. *Anything*."

It was like Jennie Francis all over again. Only this time, he wanted to take Dusty up on *her* offer. That seductive tone pulled him in. Had they not been in the middle of a life or death situation... "Dusty. Snap out of it! Let's go."

Lust filled her smoldering look as she teased his chest. "Mm, that was so intense. So... *hot*!"

Smiling, he kissed her wrist. "As much as I'd love to take you right here... and I *really* do... you'd kill me when you came to your senses. Also, you have a dear friend to rescue. Not to mention we have an apocalypse to try and stop. I think we're running out of time. The Musketeers are going to rejoin the present sooner rather than later. We need to be well on our way when they do."

Still in that amorous mood, she tried fighting it as he reminded her of everything they still had to do. Travis? *Travis*! That was enough. "Jonas? What happened? Who are 'The Musketeers'? Deva said they were Knights Templar. I think I would've remembered Musketeers. That's a candy bar."

Realizing they were on borrowed time – and with Seth as the banker, there would be interest due – he slid a hand to her waist, snatching her phone. Knowing how prepared she was... sure enough; she set the timer. Good! Five minutes left. *Not* good. Putting the phone back in her case, he took her hand and headed for the door. Seeing Hooch, he motioned him to follow. "Come on, Hooch. Let's get out of here and I'll give you a good scratch." Realizing he had no idea which way

to go, a chuckle escaped his still blood-stained lips. Looking to Dusty, he motioned ahead of them. “Lead the way. I’m lost.”

Her brain was still in the clouds. Glancing around, she shrugged. “Like I know? Hooch, find Antoine.” As the dog ran up the stairs, she staggered up after him. “This way!” As her mind started to clear out the cobwebs and clouds, she was close to being back to her usual self again. Once upstairs, they ran into the frozen knight statues. Racing down the hall, her steps stopped short. The dead knight still lay headless. “Seth took his head!” Picking up the necklace again, she kissed it before dropping it back down in her shirt. A chime sounded from her phone, signaling that time was up. “We have eight minutes-ish before they all wake up,” she told him, silencing the ringer.

His brow narrowed. “Your phone showed five. Are you telling me I had three minutes to cop a feel?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. When I freed you, you did ask why I wasn’t naked. Nothing happened, Sparx. It was all in your head.” Following Hooch out the door, she motioned him to speed it up. “Let’s go.” Turning, she raced to the front door. “Poor Antoine probably thinks we all got captured.”

Running after her, he couldn’t help but notice how her rear swayed, even when she was hauling ass. “You’re in denial. However, I promise not to say anything to your cowboy when we rescue him.”

“I don’t have a cowboy. You keep telling yourself that. We might be in Egypt,” pushing open the doors, she hauled ass down the steps, racing toward the Land Rover, “but I am *not* Cleopatra.”

As they reached the Land Rover, Ahmes threw open the doors. Antoine still huddled in the back, sat up with his face twisted into a scowl. “It’s about time! I was about to come in and start a rescue of my own!” Shaking his head, he opened the door, sliding over into the middle. “I could’ve been attacked by terrorists. Eaten by vultures! Speaking of eating, when do we? I’m starving.” Making room, he motioned for Dusty to get in the back with him. “You sit back here with me.”

Ahmes turned to Jonas, jerking his thumb backward. “For all this time, I have had to listen to him whining back there about how a brother always gets killed. Whose brother is he, anyway? I don’t understand.”

Dusty climbed in the back, confused. “No such luck, but let’s go! Seth helped us. Showed up and stopped time.”

Antoine shook his head. “Stopped time? For how long? I don’t remember being affected by time stopping.”

“You wouldn’t know a thing happened. If you were in mid-sentence, you would finish what you were saying after the hour was up.”

“He gave you a whole hour?”

She nodded. “Yes, good thing too. No one else was gonna help us. Bet me I won’t bring that up next time we all have a meeting. Ridiculous.”

Antoine’s shoulders fell as he mumbled. “I guess I’m gonna have to clean up that mess too.”

Looking over, Dusty arched a brow. “What are you yammering on about?”

Blinking, he waved a hand, hugging Dusty. “I’m just glad you’re safe. One more thing to check off the bucket list, I guess. Experiencing time freeze, though I didn’t ‘experience’ it.”

“Let’s get out of here before they wake up,” Jonas said. “Let’s get food to go and head back to work.” Turning to Dusty, a smile lit up his face. “Hungry?”

After returning the hug, she nodded at Antoine, before looking at Jonas. “Starving.”

Glancing over to the speedometer, Jonas sighed. “Well, Ahmes here has it floored. I don’t want to owe Deva a Land Rover. We’re on a pretty tight schedule. Time for some drive-thru.”

The professor’s eyes narrowed a bit. “Drive-thru? In Egypt?”

Ahmes piped up. “There is a McDonald’s not five kilometers from here. I myself eat there from time to time. The McScarab with cheese is to die for!”

Antoine grimaced. “I am not eating anything with scarab.”

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After convincing Antoine that McD’s wasn’t hiding ‘scarab’ in any of the menus, they were back on the road again, everyone with their favorite meals. Sticking with the script, Jonas reached into his pocket for the small bottle. Thankfully, the knights didn’t search him. They might’ve questioned his need for placebos. “Now,” he said, swallowing the fake Hemosynth, “let’s head to the Sphinx. We need to get -” his words were cut off by his ringtone. *Pleased to meet you, hope you guessed my name.* Glancing back at Dusty, he smirked. “I should really get a new ringtone.” Putting the phone to his ear, he glanced out the window. “Sparx Investigations.”

“Jonas,” Kanis said. “So good to hear you. How are you, my friend?”

“Oh, I’m just great, Kanis,” he said, rolling his eyes. “What can I do for you?”

“You can start by telling me where you are.”

“Egypt. Trying to stop Seth from wiping out our food source. You *do* want me to stop him, don’t you... Kanis?”

“Oh... of course I do. How can we survive in a world of just vampires? I take it then you’ve found the second stone?” Kanis asked.

“You know about that?”

“Of course. Seth bragged about his plans, which means it’s vital that you stop him at all cost.”

“About the stone... we’re close. Real close. How are Garrick and Amelia? I never got a chance to thank him for getting the Hemosynth shipment out so fast. I really owe him.”

“They are both well. I assume you have taken your... *partner*... into your confidence.”

“Had to. It was the only way for us to work efficiently. She’s very resourceful... and Kanis... she is *hot*. I mean, Amelia is pretty but Dusty? Hubba-hubba.”

“I’ll be sure to... pass that bit of information along. I’m sure Amelia will be... *overjoyed*. You’re certain she will not tell anyone else? That would not be good for any of us... or her.”

“She won’t tell a soul. I made sure of it.”

“Good. Any idea when you’ll be back to the states?”

Jonas clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “Hard to say. Probably a while yet. By the way, I met Deva. She’s quite the lady, Kanis. Not at *all* how you painted her.”

There was a minute of silence. “We all have different opinions, don’t we? Was she able to teach you anything that would help?”

“Not a thing. Sad to say, I was an awful student. Poor Deva got so frustrated with me that she went on a killing spree. She tried to be nice. So, I’m really busy right now... you know... trying to save the world. Anything else on your mind?”

“No. Just hadn’t heard from you. Wanted to make sure you were... safe.”

“Aww... I appreciate your concern. We’re all just peachy. Don’t worry. I’m sure we’ll see each other when the time is right. Gotta run now.” Ending the call, he tossed the phone on the dashboard. “Dead vampire walking.”

“What?” Dusty asked, arching a brow. “I thought ya had some weird bond thing with him because he’s your sire?”

Turning, Jonas smiled. “There is one. It’s a strong connection that stops the ‘child’ from disobeying. It’s kind of like ‘Directive four’ in Robocop.”

Confused, she tilted her head. “The who?”

Antoine nodded. “Oh! Okay, I got you.” Turning to Dusty, he smirked. “It means he’s not allowed to harm his... sire... in any way or he shuts down.”

Rolling her eyes, she sighed. “Why did... directive four... change?”

Jonas smiled. “Oh, because one of the IT people in the squad found out and-”

“I think she means with *you*,” Antoine said, interrupting him, trying to stifle a chuckle.

“Oh. Of course,” Jonas said, nodding. “As far as Kanis and the rest of them know, I was a horrible student. The worst. Didn’t learn a thing. The truth is something totally different. I learned a lot of things from Deva. One of them was how to ignore that link. It only took a couple of days before I was the one stalking and killing off the vampires Kanis sent to snoop on us. Also, a bit of a secret you didn’t know... Kanis was sired by Seth.”

Almost choking on her Big Mac, Dusty stared at him bug-eyed. “So then... you weren’t imprisoned?”

He shook his head. “No. Only for a couple of days until I had the bloodlust under control.”

Nodding, she glowered at him. “I see.” *So, he was allowed free reign of the place... and still didn’t call.* “Seth sired Kanis who sired you and the three of you are all mixed into this prophecy. So, how the hell did I get mixed up in it? I know how Antoine did... me. Also, if Seth is Kanis’s sire, does he really want you to kill him, or is this some made up honkey-donkey he fed you?”

“Probably some made up... ah... honkey-donkey, as you put it. Kanis wants to be in charge. It wouldn’t surprise me if he started all this just to kill off Seth, so *he* could take total control. I’ve been stupidly trusting my sire for five hundred years. Well, there’s no need for him to think anything is any different. Kanis still trusts I’m here doing what he commanded of me, just tweaking my mission to get the necessary results. I want him to keep believing that I’m still his little Jonas.”

Doing everything he asks. Stupid. Pet. Weak. Truth is, I'm not sure what Kanis's endgame is, but it doesn't really matter anymore." Turning, he faced the front with a steely-eyed expression. "Not to me," he said emotionless.

Dusty noticed Antoine's worried look. It didn't change as she patted his arm in comfort. Looking at Jonas, she shook her head. "Woo-doggy. That's a *long* time. I can't see you being stupid, Sparx. Hell, next to Antoine here – and probably Bacchus, even if he's on my naughty list – you're one of the smartest men I know. So, what made ya stupid? I'm guessing it involves Kanis?"

"He lied to me about something very important. When this is over and done with, I'll tell you all about it. Right now, we need to get Travis away from Seth. That means he'll have two pieces of the stone and be even more powerful. Soon, he won't need us. It will be more of a race for us to get it first. I gotta believe somewhere along the line, he'll mess up. But, if he doesn't, and we have to see this through to the end," turning, he let his eyes rest on her face, "I wouldn't want anyone else by my side but you two. I mean that."

At his compliment, she rolled her eyes. "Stop trying to butter me up after what you did." She eyed him up and down but before she could say another word, her phone rang. *Asshole calling! Asshole calling! There is an asshole calling!* Furrowing her brows, she stared at the screen. "Interesting. Bob. Kanis calls you and not five minutes later Bob calls me? Think I should ignore it?"

Antoine huffed. "My ringtone better be better than that."

"Hm. You're right. That is odd." Turning to face her, their eyes locked, sharing a secret 'that never happened'. Jonas nodded. "Take it. Play the part. Just like I did. I smell something rotten in Denmark." *What happens in Egypt, stays in Egypt.*

Allowing it to ring a few more times, she connected the call, out of breath. "What do ya want, Bob? I'm a little," she made a gasping sound, ducking her head down, weaving back and forth, grunting out the rest of the sentence, "busy right now."

"Well now, that's no way to talk to your boss."

"Well," she sounded as if she was trying to jump – as if onto another building – as she grunted, "like I said, I'm busy. What do ya want?" Covering the phone, she yelled. "You call that shooting? I'll bet ya couldn't shoot the red off a fucking barn?!" Then she gasped as she 'jumped' again. "Closer!" Placing the phone back to her mouth, she huffed a few times. "Make it fast. What's so important?"

His voice was all wrong. Flat, as if he were not there mentally. "I have a case for you. The mail is stacking up. No one is going into the office. We have a missing person I need you to handle."

"Sorry, no can do. I'm on a," grunting, "case right now."

"What case? I didn't give you a case. Are you moonlighting?"

Rolling her eyes, she grunted, groaned, winced and then started whispering. "Don't worry about it. Consider me out of action, away from the office, and not available until further notice."

"Then consider yourself unemployed. By the way, have you heard from Travis?"

“Ooh! Thank you! I hear unemployment pays out the ass!” With another gasping sound and the rough grunt of another ‘jump’ she shouted. “Fuck you! My grandmother runs faster than that!” Then into the phone. “Gotta go. Oh, wait. I no longer answer to you.” With that, she ended the call. “He fired me.”

Jonas took an instant dislike to Bob. “You can always come and work for me,” he joked, then glanced at her wrist. “Bosses suck, don’t they? Well not as good as I do, but...”

“Wait a minute.” Antoine looked from one then the other. “Did something happen when you went in and-”

“NO!” they replied in unison.

Putting up his hands, he huffed. “Fine! Keep the old guy in the dark. No problem.”

Rolling her eyes, she turned, glaring at him. “Antoine, you’re a smart man. Jonas was near death so what do you think happened? What would he need to revive him?” Absently, she rubbed her wrist.

Antoine considered for a moment, before shaking his head. “I’m sorry I asked. From now on, if I get nosy, just tell me to mind my own damn business. Hell, I can’t believe I’m traveling the world with a vampire.” Noting the sky, his lips pursed. “It’s getting dark. Tours should be over. That’ll help, but there will still be guards, plus the head of that colossus is sixty-five feet high. I don’t suppose anyone here has a ladder?” Then, looking to Jonas, he tapped his shoulder. “Am I asking too much to hope you can fly?”

“I can’t fly... yet,” Jonas said, as Ahmes made the turn onto the road leading to the Sphinx. He glanced at Dusty and grinned. “If we need a distraction, can you provide one?”

Dusty just stared at him. “Uh... sure. I guess. I could figure out something to do. Yeah.”

Antoine looked hurt. “Hello? Old man here. Heart problems. Overactive bladder. Low blood sugar. You name it... I can pull it off.”

Jonas raised a brow. “I don’t want to take the chance of you ending up in the hospital. Once we get the stone, we have to contact Seth and arrange the exchange.”

“I can do this,” Antoine told him. “Took drama in high school. Would’ve made a great Morgan Freeman, don’t you think?” He showed them his profile shot. “Missed my calling.”

“Oh yes, father, you were born to be a star,” Dusty said, laughing, kissing his cheek.

“Thanks, daughter.” Antoine nudged her. “Never could’ve done it without you.”

“Long as one of you can.” Jonas gave a wistful smile. For all the insanity going on, they still had the human connection. He missed that. Family. That gave him an idea that he would bring up later.

“I wonder where we’re gonna end up next?” Antoine said, smiling ear to ear.

Jonas shook his head. “Not a clue. Once the second stone is released, the next scroll will reveal where we go. The stone will give Seth an idea where it is, but just like here, he won’t know where to start looking. These were placed in certain areas for reasons unknown to us. Maybe God put them there.”

Antoine sighed. “A lot of the world has stopped believing in God. Horrible. Just horrible.”

Dusty nodded. "I agree. Sorry if you already explained this but I don't recall... if Seth had the Quatrains, would he be able to find the stones or is there some failsafe about that? It seems everything associated with these damn stones has some crip-crap involved. Can anyone find them or is it just us three no matter what? Is that what's stopping him from just taking 'em from us?"

"Just as the stones won't reveal their secret to me," Jonas replied with a nod, "the scrolls won't show their words to Seth. I guess you could call it a failsafe, of a sort."

"Ah. So, all of us really do have a part to play. Tell me," she said, looking at Jonas. "How did *I* become such a key player in this mess?"

"No clue. People used to accuse the Gods of playing chess, using them as their pieces. Sometimes that's how I feel. I want to just walk off the board but can't." Glancing out the side window, he noticed a few guards motioning toward the Land Rover. "This conversation's going to have to wait 'til later. We're about to have company."

Looking over at Antoine, she winked. Opening the door, she stepped out, just in time to catch him in her arms. "Can I get some help over here?" She shouted at the top of her lungs. "Please! I think my daddy's hurt."

The guards stopped in their tracks, exchanging curious glances and a few words in Arabic. One of them approached Dusty, waving his hands in the air. "Miss, I am ever so apologizing, but you cannot have your fits of hissy here. The great Sphinx is not having tours now, it is night."

Jonas almost split himself, trying to hold in the laughter. Obviously, this guard was the only one who spoke any English, and he sounded like one of those Nigerian Prince phishing e-mails people got.

With tears streaking down her face, sobs broke up her words as she shouted. "What?! Do you think he can just hold his breath and feel better until we get to a place that might be having tours? No! For all I know he's dying! We need your help. You really don't want an international fiasco happening in your country when the great Antoine Dubois dies on your watch, now do you? Our president will blow this country to kingdom come if that happens!"

Having seen enough of the bad soap opera, Jonas chuckled, got out of the car and strolled over to the guards. Seeing him approach, they leveled their weapons at him. "Stopping you must, please, thank you." the one said, sounding more like Yoda now.

Raising his hands in the air, Jonas smiled but kept walking toward them. "You gentlemen look tired," he whispered. "You should rest. No one will know. Just a small nap is what you need, isn't it?"

The men blinked in unison. All of them yawned, stretched, then set their rifles down against the Sphinx. Moving to a small area off to one side of the tourist path, each of them laid down in the warm sand, closing their eyes.

Walking back to Dusty and Antoine, Jonas laughed. "You two can stop now. I think the Sphinx is getting ill from watching your performance." Turning, he approached the great Guardian of Antiquity, his hands outstretched in greeting.

As the men put down their weapons and then went to take naps like preschool students, she looked fit to be tied. Growling, she stood up, dusting the dirt off the butt of her jeans. "I'm gonna kill him. I need to remind him about my silver-coated gloves he promised."

“What the...? That... that... asshole!” Antoine grumbled. “I’m gonna poison his next meal, that’s what I’m gonna do. I bet he got a huge laugh out of watching an old man make a fool of himself in the desert.” Looking up at Dusty, he held a hand to her. “Lil help here?”

“You tell him, Antoine!” Reaching a hand down, she slapped her hand in his, yanking him to his feet, albeit gently. “I swear he does that crap to make us look stupid. You should’ve seen it when he made me seduce a youngling vampire out in the alley. It was horrible.”

Rising quickly, Antoine felt one of his vertebrae protest. “He had you do *what*?” Dusting the sand from his khakis, he glared in Jonas’s direction. Watching him stand before the great Sphinx with his hands open, Antoine sighed. “Just what the hell *is* he doing?”

Turning, she watched as well, shaking her head. “I have no clue. He does his vampirey thing and I just stand back.”

Trying to recall the words he used to summon the first stone from Cider Lake, Jonas heard Bacchus’s words echo in his mind.

When you need them, they will come.

Calming his mind, the ancient tongue eased from his lips. “To the stone of blood, I summon you.”

A distant rumble of thunder reverberated in the starry sky as the head of the Guardian turned in Jonas’s direction.

Oh, please don’t tell me I just brought this thing to life.

A low growl emanated from deep within the ancient sentry, as the stone quivered then flew from the Sphinx’s ear, landing in Jonas’s outstretched hand. The Guardian, answering in the same ancient tongue, addressed Jonas. “You have what you came for, creature, yet it is not what you desire. Go from my sight, lest I crush you beneath the sands.”

Hearing the deep growl, Dusty looked over in that direction. “What the-” Seeing the monstrosity talking was enough for her to race to the Land Rover. Hopping in the seat, she motioned for Antoine to get in. “Come on! I don’t wanna stick around and wait for that thing to move!”

Another growl sent Jonas backpedaling as the head turned back to its normal position.

“Wait,” Antoine protested, standing his ground. “If that thing’s talking, I got questions and I’m not about to miss an opp-”

Reaching the Land Rover, he grabbed Antoine, tossing him into the back seat next to Dusty, before hopping into the passenger seat, motioning to the road. “No time for that pops. We need to go. NOW!” As the Land Rover sped into the inky curtain of night, Jonas glanced into his side mirror, wincing. “Shit.”

The guards awoke, feeling as if they’d come off a weekend bender. Getting their bearings and seeing the Land Rover’s taillights vanishing in the distance, they picked up their rifles. “Stupid tourists,” they shouted in Arabic.

A deep voice froze them. “Weak-minded infidels!”

Jaws dropping, the men stared up at the disfigured face of the Guardian.

"I have been violated! My treasure, that which I have protected from my creation, has been taken." The head slowly tilted down as the Sphinx's eyes began to glow.

Glancing at the Pyramid, one of the guards shook his head. "I do not understand. There is no treasure left in the tomb. It has all been."

"FOOLS! The treasure I speak of is not that which has been made by the hands of men, but by the evil within their hearts. And it will prove to be their undoing. In failing to protect me, you have allowed it to be taken. For that, you will all perish, and your families cursed for all time!"

Dropping to their knees, the men pleaded with the ancient one. "Please show mercy! We are simple men who do not know of such things. We are humble and beg your forgiven-"

Their words were drowned in screams of terror as a blast of energy shot from the monolith's eyes, consuming them where they stood. Smoldering bodies sunk down into the soft sand. "You are forgiven." Slowly, the Sphinx's head turned back to its normal position as a strong wind smoothed over the sand's surface, erasing all evidence that the guards ever existed except for a few stray teeth.

Watching in horror, Jonas blinked. "He woke up in a bad mood. You'd think he would be thankful, getting that blockage removed from his ear after all this time." Looking down at the stone, he turned it over in his hands. "I don't suppose you'll give me the same hint you'll give Seth?" His question, greeted by silence, confirmed what he'd told Dusty earlier. Only Seth could get the stones to give up their secrets. Looking back at her, he nodded. "Time to call his rottenness."

"Great." Grabbing her phone, she handed it up to him. "You're making the call, right?"

"Yeah. I need to talk to him first anyway," he replied, taking the phone. Finding Travis's number, he closed his eyes and hit the button.

"Why, hello darling. How are ya liking my home?" came Seth's voice over her phone.

"It's hot. And sandy."

"Jonas Sparx! Well, color me happy and make my nipples hard! You sound a whole lot better than the last time we spoke. I take it the little lady gave you... incentive?"

"It's none of your damn business what she gave me." Jonas's lips tightened, hating what he was about to say. "I want to thank you for what you did back there. Though I'm sure you didn't do it from the kindness of your heart, I do owe you one."

A moment of silence greeted Jonas as if the call had dropped. "Now, that's not entirely correct, compadre. Your lil lady friend is the one who's in my debt. I believe I told her so. Your freedom was entirely in her hands, not mine, but you're welcome, all the same. Now that we've exchanged pleasantries, I'd appreciate it if you'd put her on the phone. I do so miss her voice."

Biting back a comment, he handed the phone to Dusty. "Telemarketer."

Groaning, rolling her eyes, she took the phone. Keeping it in her hands for a moment, making him wait, she counted to twenty... slowly. Once the countdown was over, she held the phone to her ear. "Hello?" Her singsong voice carried over the phone. "This is Dusty, how may I direct your call?"

Ignoring the comedy, his tone grew serious. "I'm assuming that you have the stone? Your friend here is beginning to think you don't care. I've tried to reassure him, but he seems to be the

worrying kind, so let's dispense with the expected insults, and move this little play along like adults. Think you can do that?"

"I'm sorry. I don't have that person listed. I do have a Miss Stone that might be out to lunch... permanently, if something – even the slightest hair was taken from his head – were to happen. Do I make 'myself' clear?" She didn't like his tone. "Now, you can dial back the asshole tone and we can make this friendly, or you can do whatever the Flippity-flop you're gonna. We'll just go back to bury this stone in a place you'll never find it. Which would you prefer?"

"Now that's more like it, darlin'. Here's the plan. You come alone. No fangy fun boy. No old man. Just you. Your boy Travis and I'll be waitin' on the end of what used to be old Cairo Road. It's deserted now, so no pryin' eyes. Y'all give me the stone. I give you your boyfriend. Hell, darlin', this is a win/win if I ever saw one."

The voice in her head, silent for so long, shouted. *It's a trap!*

Yeah, but what choice do I have? Ignoring the screaming maniac in her head, she let out a deep breath. "Fine. They'll wait for me outside. If that's not good enough, then you won't have the stone, you'll kill Travis, and we'll be on our merry way to the next one and you'll never get them. Understood?"

"I await your arrival with butterflies flutterin' around in my empty belly." The call disconnected.

...

Seth looked over at Travis. "Second thoughts?"

Pulling out his Glock, Travis eyed Seth. Shaking his head, he yanked the clip out and shoved it back in. "Nope. Let's get this over with."

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Having only gotten one side of the conversation, Antoine sighed as Dusty shoved the phone back in its case. "I don't suppose we're allowed to go with you?"

Not looking at him, she shook her head. "Yes and no. You can wait outside, but I have to go in by myself. We need to go to the end of Cairo Road. It's some deserted road."

Not quite over what he just witnessed with the Sphinx, he blew out a ragged, deep breath. "Please tell me it's a house. I gotta pee something fierce, and after what I just saw... I might wanna check my drawers too."

Shaking her head, she shrugged. "Sorry, I didn't ask, but we can stop at a bathroom on the way."

He waved the offer off. "No, we ain't got time to stop. One good thing about being a man, I can whip it out on the side of that deserted road... probably no one else around for miles."

Jonas looked between them. "You both know that this is a trap, right?"

"Yep. I'd bet my life on that. So, we need a backup plan." Antoine looked at Dusty. "Call my phone."

"Right now?" Dusty asked, going for the phone again.

“No. When you go up to meet him, dial my number. After it connects, just slip it into your pocket. It might be muffled, but we should be able to hear enough to realize what’s going on.”

“Got it. I can do that.”

“I mean, I know Jonas can probably hear like you’re standing in front of him, but I’d like to know what’s going on as well. If things get dicey, Jonas can get to you fast enough.” He turned to Jonas. “I watched enough spy movies to know how this works.”

Nodding, Jonas looked at Dusty. “I know you have one or two of those special bullets with Seth’s name on them, but make sure it’s him first. You don’t want to end up shooting the wrong person.”

“True.” As Hooch appeared in her lap, she settled back, lightly stroking his ears. “Hey boy.”

The hour-long ride to the rendezvous was spent in silence. Dusty soothed Hooch, Antoine napped, and Jonas held court with Bacchus in his mind.

“*You did well.*”

“Not without cost. One knight and four guards. All just doing their jobs. The Sphinx only threatened me... but killed them with some death ray out of his eyes. Explain.”

“The Sphinx wasn’t built to watch over the Pharaoh’s tomb, as most believe, but to guard something far more meaningful. Something you now possess. When you managed to retrieve it, his anger was stoked against those whose job it was to prevent anyone from getting to it, though they did not realize it. The Guardian will forever be silenced now. His task over.”

“That doesn’t help.” For the first time in ages, Jonas felt a pang of guilt.

“*Jonas, you must accept that many will die before your task is complete. You cannot allow yourself the luxury of remorse.*”

He started to reply, but the Land Rover came to a stop at the road. As Seth had told Dusty, it was indeed deserted. If they all died there, no one would ever find them.

“We are here,” Ahmes said, as the vehicle slowed to a stop. He took a vial from his pocket, sipping from it, offering the rest to Jonas, who gladly accepted.

Antoine sat up, looking around. Sighing, he leaned over, kissing Dusty’s cheek. “You be damn careful in there. You hear?”

Reaching over, she hugged him. “Stop talking like it’s the firing squad. I’m gonna drop off the stone and bring Travis out. That’s all.”

Handing the empty vial back to Ahmes, Jonas turned to Dusty. “Twaddle.”

Arching a brow, she glared at him. “Excuse me?”

“If shit gets tricky, just say twaddle. I’ll know you’re in trouble and will be in there in a blink.”

“Got it. Twaddle. Because that’s something I always say.” Rolling her eyes, she fought the urge to giggle nervously. The road was dark and bare. With the phone in hand, sand crunched under her boots as she stepped behind the Land Rover. Calling Antoine, locking the screen, she placed it back in the case. Her whispering tone carried downward. “Testing. Testing. Can ya hear me?”

Nodding, Antoine whispered back, “Loud and clear.”

Retracing her steps to Jonas, she held a hand out. "Twaddle. I knew the day ya said it that you were batshit crazy. I'll see if I can fit it into the conversation, should the need arise. Now, the stone, please."

Being close to Seth, he could feel the ancient puzzle piece's power. It called to Jonas, trying to take over his mind. It was like his very own 'precious' and he didn't want to give it up. He wanted to protect it. It was still too far away to just fly to Seth, but he felt the draw of power, the wordless siren calling to his immortal blood. At first, he refused to let go. A struggle that the old Jonas – without Deva's training – would have surely lost. Steeling himself against the pull, he reached into his pocket, clenching his fist around the surface as if that would subdue its power. "When Seth holds the stone, he'll see the next land. He can't stop that from happening. Now a normal mortal wouldn't see anything, but we might get lucky with you, so pay close attention. We can use any extra clue we get." His eyes locked onto Dusty's as he gently placed the rock in her palm.

If felt like a lightning bolt struck, rooting her in one spot with the first touch. Her eyes couldn't get any wider as a feeling of immense power fueled her nervous system. If she was feeling edgy before, it was gone now, replaced with an energy that couldn't be explained. On the outside, her appearance was more zombie-like – glassy eyes, no movement, frozen solid – which was just the opposite to the internal battle initiated. The moment passed and the breath that was being held was pushed out by lungs on the verge of exploding. Breathing. It was something forgotten in those few moments that felt like a lifetime. Sucking in air, color returned to those caramel eyes – and her face – once more.

"Dusty! Are you okay?" Jonas questioned, shaking her gently.

Swallowing hard, she locked a frightened stare on Jonas. "I... um... saw something."

"What the hell just happened to you? You looked like—" His brow creased. "You *saw* something when you touched it? How?" Thinking back to her odd healing abilities at the church, a glimmer of understanding began. "According to the lore, the stones have no effect on mortals." Pursing his lips, he ignored the obvious question. It would have to wait. "Never mind that. What did you see?"

The man's face painted itself – like a mural – in her mind. "A man's face. Attractive. Long, dark hair slicked back. Deep brown eyes. Olive-like skin. No. It was more like a deep tan. That was all I saw, though. Just his face."

There had to be hundreds of men who fit that description, thousands even, and after five hundred years, Jonas had seen many of them. It could have been one of his uncles, for that matter. Filing that bit of information under 'to be opened later', he reached up and closed her hand around the stone. "I won't let anything happen to you. Now go. Save your friend." His eyes locked onto hers. "That's what's important right now."

For a moment, time stalled without any supernatural help. Losing herself in the flecks of gold within the green goodness of his eyes, Dusty longed to remain there. The first number on the combination lock securing her heart bolted into place. *Seven*. Glancing down at their joined hands, another scene – the two of them locked in a heated kiss – began to play havoc on her mind. The 'never happened' replaying until her eyes focused on the rock.

Ignoring those images, she took a deep breath. This stone was too damn powerful. It made her want things that were well out of her reach. It would have been easier to reach a shooting star.

“Twaddle,” she whispered, stretching up to plant a soft kiss on his cheek. If something went wrong, and Seth decided that he’d rather take her head as a souvenir, she wanted to make damn sure Jonas remembered their safe word. Turning to face the building, her brow narrowed.

It may have been the eighty-four-degree heat, or the waning moon illuminating the building, but it seemed alive. Windows resembling half-closed eyes leered at her, and the four garage bay doors looked like Cletus’s rotting teeth. The decrepit warehouse dared her to ‘enter at your own risk’ with the promise that she would never leave. Even that bit of moon, shining upon six small steps, leading to a set of twin steel doors, teased her. Instinct begged to get back into the Land Rover, to safety, but Dusty Garner never ran away from anything in her life – except being a killer – and she sure as hell wasn’t about to start now.

Building and moon be damned, she headed up the steps. A hand absently reached for the holstered piece, finding the cold steel comforting. If Seth was playing one of his beloved games, she would make sure he found her an unwilling contestant. The steel door, still warm from the day’s heat, resisted, then groaned, slowly giving way to her push. A single overhead fixture, holding a flickering light bulb, swung back and forth as if someone had tapped it. Closing the door, her eyes did a primary sweep of the abandoned building. It could have been anything in its day; small hangar, storage for a prince’s car collection, or even a chemical weapons facility. Tonight, however, it served as a stage with the vampire Seth acting as director.

Not seeing any sign of Travis or Seth, she cleared her throat. “Honey, I’m home. Sorry it took so long, but ya know how traffic can be on this road. Just wall to wall, bumper to bumper dickheads with their road rage. Did ya miss me today? Come out, come out wherever you are.”

It wasn’t just her gut telling her that he was there, the stone began vibrating in her hand, sending jolts of electricity through her body. Once more, the vision of that man’s face flashed in her mind. She didn’t know who he was, had never seen him before... that she knew of. All those answers would have to wait until Travis was out of danger.

Putting the unknown on the back burner for now, Dusty called out again. “Marco....”

In the Land Rover, Jonas looked back at Antoine. The professor nodded, holding his phone so they could hear. She was coming through just fine.

Stepping out from behind a shelving unit, Seth pulled Travis by the arm. With his hands zip-tied behind his back, he looked like a beaten dog. Noticing Dusty’s eyes traveled right to Travis, Seth grinned. “Why, hello there, my dear.” Pulling out a large blade, he cut through the plastic tie, freeing Travis’s hands. “Had to make sure he wouldn’t try any *hero* tricks. You understand, right?”

Looking at Dusty, Travis rubbed his wrists as the circulation returned to his fingers. “Sorry baby. I wish this could’ve gone another way.”

“Now isn’t this sweet? I’m gonna puke. I truly am.” Seth pushed Travis forward a few steps. “Well, I kept my end of our little arrangement. I believe you have something that belongs to me?”

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness. In the short time it took Travis to step forward, she had done a quick assessment with her eyes. He wasn’t hurt. Sighing a breath of relief, she deviously grinned at Seth. “What’s that? Oh! Right! You needed a... what was that again? Wait for it,” wiggling her brows at him, she winked. “Say it with me now.” His confusion made her grin brighter. “A *mortal* to help ya. You have all this power... all your strength... and yet, you still need *us* to help ya with this. It’s a good thing nothing happened in Egypt. After all, where would you...

and this prophecy... be if those knights did kill us?" Reaching her hand around, she showed him the stone. "I believe this is what all the fuss is about."

Wagging an accusatory finger, he laughed. "You're a tad more than mortal, sweet pea." Holding out his hand, the stone rose off her palm and flew into his like a lost child running into its mother's arms. As soon as it touched his flesh, an image of a steel gate with water flowing down a white concrete setting formed in front of him with the river behind it. It faded just as quickly, and Seth's eyes narrowed. "More water?" Rolling his eyes, he smiled at Dusty. Winking, he snapped his fingers, making the stone vanish. "It has been a pleasure, darling, but I'm afraid our little road has come to a rather untimely ending." Looking at Travis, his lips pursed before shaking his head, clapping the man on the shoulder blade. "Pleasure doing business with ya... partner." Giving Dusty a wink, he was gone.

Glancing over at Travis who still hadn't moved, she pondered Seth's parting words. "He's gone now. You can end the act. Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

"Please don't make this harder than it already is," Travis said, leveling the barrel of his gun at her.

Glaring, she shook her head. "Travis Knight, what are you doing? Did he do some weird mind alternating thing to you? Wait... what happened to your sexy accent?"

The gun never wavered as he took a step toward her. "No, he didn't 'do' anything to me. Much as I hate it, we all have our orders. You remember those, right?" A sigh floated past his lips. "Why couldn't you have just left well enough alone? I love you more than anything. That's why that first shot in your hotel room missed."

The color drained from her face. "You shot at me that day?" 'Twaddle' was at the front of her head, but she wasn't ready, yet. "Travis, baby, it's me. Dusty. What the hell is wrong with you? Why would you try and shoot me?! Are... you really working with that killer?"

His green eyes narrowed. "Come on Dusty. You're not stupid. You know how it is. You kill for so long, it becomes second nature. Then, one day, some little voice inside starts to question the orders. So, you start digging, and you find out that things aren't like they told you. Next job you miss on purpose, hoping they'll run, and you can say you lost them. Why the hell didn't you just leave? You know as well as I do, that you can't just walk away from this. They won't let you... Dustina."

Dustina? She never told him her real name. There was only one way. Her eyes widened. "You're C.I.A.?"

He lifted a brow but didn't lower his weapon. He knew her all too well, and he didn't dare give her even a microsecond of a chance to draw on him. "CIA?" He laughed. "Boy they really did a good job on your head, didn't they? You weren't working for the CIA, Dusty. It was," he sighed, shaking his head. "It doesn't matter anymore. I got you a ring. Wanted the whole white fence and three kids with you. Was getting ready to ask you when we had to go off to that crime scene. The only reason I came back. I prepared a speech to tell you everything too. Both of us could've just run off together. But no, you had to get involved with vampires."

"It's not like I had a choice in that, Travis. *If* that's even your real name."

"You know me better than you realize. Dusty, you aren't supposed to *know* about them. But then that *partner* of yours comes along, spills the whole can of beans and now... now I have no

choice. I found Seth, made this deal that I'd act like his hostage, so he could get that stupid stone of his. We both knew you'd come running to save me. You love me just as much as I do you."

"Less and less every second," she said, glaring.

"If it's any consolation, I am truly sorry about Hooch, but..." he sighted down the front of the Glock, his finger on the trigger. "You'll see him soon enough. I love you Dusty, and when I'm done here, well, I'm done."

"This is fucked up, Travis."

"See you on the other side, baby."

The voice in her head screamed 'Twaddle' but she was frozen watching Travis. She didn't believe this was happening and doubted he would pull the trigger.

A squeeze was all it would take. The hallmark of a seasoned assassin. Exhale and squeeze. Don't pull. Only a trained eye would notice his hand move slightly to the left, aiming at her side, instead of her heart. With the impact of the bullet, it threw her backward. The trail of blood showed where it entered her side.

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Within a fraction of a second, time stood still, but not before the bullet made the tiniest hole in her side. It looked like gravity failed and it was now a scene from a space shuttle in flight. Lying horizontally in midair, Dusty looked like she was relaxing on an invisible bed with her foot dangling off the side, barely touching the ground.

Out in the Land Rover, Antoine shook his head. "Not again."

"What the...?" The sound of a gunshot brought Jonas out of the passenger's seat before Antoine could form a thought.

"Now, slow down, son," Seth said, barring Jonas's path to the building.

Practically bouncing off the ancient immortal's body, Jonas glared, then noticed that Antoine was in mid-action, frozen like a statue and nothing moved around them. No sound. Silent. "What the hell is this?" he demanded.

"Well, I couldn't just let our true love get herself all shot up, now, could I? You still need her, and I haven't had my fill of her," he grinned, "yet. I gave you a minute to get your bad self in there and tear old Travis a new asshole." Winking, he patted Jonas on the shoulder. "Ya owe me another one."

...

A loud crash echoed in the empty building as Travis found himself hurled against the rear wall. His gun spun away from him, sliding along the cement floor. Nothing else was moving at the moment and he saw Dusty lying prone in the air. Before another thought could register, he looked up to see Jonas's eyes, burning with the fires of hate.

Grabbing him by the throat, he hoisted Travis up as if he were made of straw. "You have a damn funny way of showing love," he growled, his fangs extended. Tossing him to the side wall, about fifteen feet away, Jonas was upon him before his body settled on the cold floor. "I'm going

to enjoy this.” Before he could sink those death bringers deep into Travis’s neck, the spell ended and Dusty was moving again. Sending a hard right to Travis’s jaw, Jonas growled. “You should play the lottery, asshole!” Dropping him, Jonas rushed over to his partner.

As time started back up, she finished her flying lesson, falling backward over a table. When she hit the cold floor, she yelped. “Ow!” but stayed down, breathing slowly in and out. The pain in her side was the worst she had ever felt. Granted, there were many times that she thought she was shot, but this was the first time that someone actually succeeded. It was a burning sensation. Intense. Almost like someone stuck her with a burning hot fire poker. Her eyes grew heavy as her lungs refused to draw in air. Suddenly, she saw those dark eyes in her mind again. She wondered who that man was and why did he keep surfacing in her thoughts for a fleeting second before vanishing? An electrical current zipped through her body – as if she was holding the stone again – and the air flowed through her lungs once more. Reaching down, she could feel a wetness on her stomach. Pulling her hand away, she noticed the blood on her fingers. “Jonas. I think I’ve been shot.”

Thanks to the mixture from Ahmes, the sight, and the scent of her bleeding, though still enticing, did not have the same magnetic pull. Lifting her shirt, he examined her thoroughly but couldn’t find an entrance or exit hole. “I don’t see or feel anything,” he said, his fingers gliding over the area of her blood-stained shirt. The fabric was torn where a bullet would have hit, yet nowhere on her body was the slightest hint that she’d been wounded.

Her mind was foggy like she was walking through a cloud in the sky and in a daze as Jonas checked her over. She could hear but it sounded more like she was standing in the center of an empty cavern. A hollow-like ringing in her ears slowly began to diminish. Glancing up, she focused on his eyes which looked downright terrified. She had never seen Jonas looking scared before. Not even when he was treading in unfamiliar territory – Deva’s for training – and possible danger.

All the events of the past few weeks came flooding into his mind, as he wrapped her in his arms. His fangs receded, as his eyes returned to their usual green and he kissed her cheek. “I thought I lost you.” It was what he didn’t say – what he couldn’t bring himself to, even now – that stuck in his throat. “I... I can’t lose you.”

“But... there’s blood,” she whispered. In his arms, she was like a ragdoll at first, trying to wrap her mind around everything that happened. Her stomach felt weird, like a splinter in the finger. “Travis actually shot me – the prick – and I felt it go in. Could feel the bullet ripping through me, and there’s blood. Where there’s blood, there is always a wound. You can see it on my shirt! There’s a hole in my shirt but not in my skin? Then what caused the blood? I don’t just bleed for no reason.” Holding him, she whispered, “I saw that man’s face again and I feel higher than a kite,” she rambled. Looking into his eyes, her palm lightly grazed his cheek. “Why do I feel so funny?”

Those were all very good questions, but he didn’t have the answers. As her hand touched his cool flesh, a small transference took place, and, for a brief moment, they joined on a level beyond their reality. “I don’t know,” he whispered. “All I do know is that you’re alive and that’s all I give a damn about right now.” Helping her up, he turned to where Travis’s crumpled form lay, still as the dead. “What about him?”

Still feeling hazy, she glanced over. Any feelings for him died the minute he shot her. “Leave him. If I ever see him again,” her eyes narrowed, “I’ll kill him.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Jonas replied, helping steady her as they left the building.

The wide grin on Antoine's face told them both that he was happy they made it out in one piece, and that he had a good idea about the scroll. "Thank God you're all right," he said, giving Dusty a hug.

Seeing the two exit the building, Ahmes quickly got back into the driver's seat. "Yes, thank the Lord that you did not die in there. It was racking the nerves out here. Where to?"

After weakly returning the hug, she climbed into the car. Her actions were slower than normal. "I agree, but let's not do that again. Once is enough."

Hooch was instantly all over her, sniffing every part, whining. He could sense something was wrong – same as she – but couldn't find the reason. There was the distinctive smell of blood – her blood at that – but he couldn't find a wound.

Laughing, her arms wrapped around his side, holding him close to her body, kissing the top of his head. "I'm fine, boy."

"Yes, let's get out of here before I change my mind and go commit a murder."

Overly excited, Antoine, pulled out the scroll. "We actually caught a break this time."

"It's about time something is on our side," Jonas said, climbing into the backseat with Dusty.

Unrolling it, he showed Jonas the elaborate writing. "It's in English."

Jonas blinked. "English? Interesting, considering that wasn't even a language back then." Turning to Dusty, he motioned to the building. "What did you see when he held the stone?"

"Other than the man's face? I saw what looked like some odd steel gate with water flowing down a wet white concrete arc surrounded by water, I think," she told him, trying to get comfortable. "It didn't reveal a whole lot."

Antoine saw the blood. "Oh my God! I thought you said you were fine?"

Holding up a hand, she lifted her shirt. "I am. I don't know where this came from. Maybe from Travis when Jonas hit him? I don't know. There is no entrance or exit hole, so... I'm not sure. It's the only thing that makes sense."

Jonas nodded. "I did hit him pretty hard." Motioning to the scroll, he smiled. "Good, since it's so easy, put that away. We are going on a vacation."

Furrowing her brows, Dusty looked at him as if he just sprouted wings. "A vacation?"

"Yes. Look, we've dealt with dead bodies, severed heads, been shot at, lied to, and suffered personal heartache and loss. Now, we'll get back on the horse soon enough, but," his eyes rested on her face, "there's so much *good* to see in life. I think we deserve to have a taste of it, even if it's only for a little while. So, what do you say?"

Rolling up the scroll and carefully putting it away, Antoine clapped his hands. "I am definitely up for that. Too much work is not good for the soul. Just as long as wherever it is there is good food." Turning, his deep brown eyes pleaded with Dusty. "I know you're a working machine, but I'd like to smell a few roses before I... before this is all over."

"Besides," Jonas added, "Seth will no doubt have us followed so we can do a bit of David Copperfield on his ass."

Antoine seemed thrilled about the possible ‘vacation’ and she couldn’t let him down. After all, he was a huge help in all this and what was three days to his happiness? The pleading looks in Antoine, Jonas, and Hooch’s eyes were enough to make her cave. “Fine.”

Rejuvenated, Antoine rubbed his hands together. “Where to, boss?”

“Spain. I haven’t been home in over three hundred years, and we’re close enough to get there in a few hours. With Seth having his *eyes* on us, that’ll mess with his head big time.” He looked at Dusty. “Nothing says we can’t work *and* see how people live. Maybe I can even get you to watch a movie.” He winked at Antoine before pulling out his phone and calling Deva.

She answered on the second ring. “Well, if it isn’t my favorite pain in the ass. I take it, you are better now?”

Ignoring her snarky remark, his eyes rolled. “Yes, *we* are all fine, thank you. We’re heading to Spain, for a little vacation because we need a minute to breathe.”

There was a brief pause. “I’m sorry. I believe we have a bad connection. Can you repeat that?”

“Certainly. V-A-C-A-T-I-O-N. Vacation. Would you like it in a different language? Vacaciones. Vacanza. Ferien. Отпуск. Need I continue?”

“A vacation? Seth has the second stone and is jetting off on his own to find it. Do you really have time for a vacation, Jonas?”

“I know he’s having us followed, so we’ll use a bit of misdirection. That’ll slow him down. Look, it’s only for a few days. I know that without you, we’d be up a creek without a paddle, but I’m asking you… no, pleading with you. Let us have this time to ourselves. The next scroll is in English, so we can decipher it within a few hours, so we can call it a working vacation.”

“Hm. You’re right about that. It would confuse him. Possibly make him angry as well. If you wish to chance his anger, that is on you and your pet. I’m not the one you will have to answer to,” Deva warned.

“She’s not my pet, Deva. She’s a living, breathing, woman. You remember what that used to be like, right? Back when you were one.” Hanging up before she could toss a retort his way, he smiled at his companions. “We have three days, then it’s back to work. And I doubt we’ll get another break, so make the most of it.”

Antoine pumped his fist. “Yes! I’m gonna eat until I explode!”

As Ahmes turned the Land Rover toward the Airport, Jonas chuckled at Antoine. “How do you stay so thin, eating like you do?”

Even Hooch was bouncing around all excited.

Dusty groaned. “Three whole days. Do you know how much we could get accomplished in three days?”

Antoine looked at her as if she’d just landed from another planet. “Sweet baby girl, you’re gonna burn yourself out. What are you running from, anyway? If my Gabby was here, she’d give you a good talking to.”

“Well we don’t *have* to use all three days,” Jonas chimed in. “Besides, like I told Deva, we can always do a little work while we enjoy ourselves.”

“Right on,” Antoine agreed. “Thinking about what you saw and that the scroll is in English, I’m thinking Hoover Dam. We can translate this scroll, probably on the plane, and find out where in Nevada we have to look. The Hoover Dam, though putting us in the right direction, isn’t exactly leading us straight to it. Hopefully, it’s not buried under it because,” he winced, “talk about the impossible task?”

“That would negate our good fortune with a quatrain that we can understand,” Dusty said, sitting back, staring out the window.

Seeing her mood, Jonas slid over, putting his arm over her shoulder. “Don’t worry. A vacation will set us all up right as rain! Isn’t that right, boy?” Hooch pounced on both their laps.

Taking his arm from around her shoulder, she shook her head. “Excuse me while I don’t celebrate right now. My best friend just shot me. Screwed me over. Tried to kill me. I’m not in the celebrating mood.” Turning, she looked out the window. “I just need space right now.”

Sliding back over, Jonas shrugged. “Okay.”

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Being close to midnight, the airport was pretty well empty with just a few lines open for the people flying in and out. Jonas popped into the bathroom for a quick pick me up, leaving Antoine to try and get Dusty out of her funk. Luckily, Ahmes kept a blood supply on him, compliments of Deva keeping her staff in line, and he was able to get enough to tide him over until he could get his own supply. Entering slowly, his supernatural eyes scanned the room. He could feel it, smell it, hear the near absent beat of its heart. There was another vampire inside. “Show yourself,” he demanded, keeping his back to the door.

The stall opened, and a nervous voice came from within. “Hello, Mister Sparx.”

It was a voice he recognized, but not one he’d ever expected to hear again. “Sergeant Thomas?” Jonas asked, eyeing the man. “Charlie?”

Rising, the man nodded, his hands raised in a peaceful gesture. “Yes sir, but it’s just Charlie now.” Stepping into the room’s low-level lighting, he waited for Jonas to respond. The man looked like he’d been through a bad makeup session for a ‘B’ vampire movie. His face, once round and full, now hollowed as if stretched over his skull. A pair of deeply sunken eyes stared at Jonas, the life-light within them almost gone.

Jonas knew the signs well, and for a brief moment, felt sad for the man until he realized what must have happened. “What are you doing here?”

“Please,” Charlie said, his voice quivering even more. “Kill me.”

“Relax, Charlie. Tell me what happened.” Jonas had never created a youngling, and even if he had, Charles F. Thomas, *Officer of The Law*, would certainly not have been his first choice or even his last. He was also not in the habit of taking youngling’s lives, even though he knew who had probably brought poor Charlie over.

Charlie’s dead eyes fell to the floor. “Why did he do this to me? I know I haven’t been a good man, that I’ve done evil things and deserve to rot in hell, but this,” he looked down at his gnarled

hands, nails blackened and long, "this is worse than any hell I could have ever been condemned to."

Jonas tried to find a sympathetic nerve within, to no avail. Instead, a plan formed in the back of his mind. "Tell me, Charlie... if you could, would you take the life of the one who did this to you?"

The man's head rose, eyes suddenly ablaze with hate. "Yes."

That one word combined with the reaction was all he needed. "Let's talk then, Charlie. Let's talk about plans and schemes."

All it took was a few minutes, and the plan was set in motion. Charles Thomas had become a part of this adventure. Pausing for a moment, he looked over at Jonas. "How's Dusty?"

Knowing how the man felt, Jonas softly smiled. "She is well, Charlie. When she found out you'd been killed, she became quite angry and... well, let's just say the punk got what he deserved."

"Could I... could I see her? Just for a minute?"

"It's too soon."

He nodded. "I understand." Lifting his shoulders, he set his eyes directly on Jonas. "If I can do what we've planned, you swear to keep your end of the deal?"

"I do, Charlie. And perhaps it may count for something, on the other side."

For the first time all night, Charles F. Thomas, Officer of the Law, smiled. It was a broken smile, but one which held a steely resolve. "Until we meet again, Jonas." In a mist, he was gone from the room.

After gulping down the vamp cocktail, Jonas felt much better. Walking out of the bathroom, he found the other two. "Much better."

Arching a brow, Antoine looked up. "Took long enough. We were about to send out a search party."

"Kinda hoped you'd given up on this idea," Dusty murmured.

"Don't listen to her," Antoine said, with a dismissive wave. "She's just thrilled to be taking this vacation. You should've heard her all aglow when you left."

Seeing the glare that she shot Antoine, Jonas chuckled. "I'm sure."

"She should be fine later. Just wait until we get on this vacation. I think some R and R will be good for all of us," Antoine said, way too excitedly as they boarded the jet.

The four-hour flight from Cairo to Madrid departed on time and once at cruising altitude, the pilot's voice came over the intercom. "This is your captain speaking. Our arrival in Madrid will be in approximately four hours. Weather ahead is clear and starry, so we expect no turbulence. Feel free to unbuckle and wander around the cabin, take part in our well-stocked kitchenette, and enjoy complimentary beverages. Oh, and Mister Sparx? Could you please come up to the cockpit?"

The word kitchenette was hardly out of the pilot's mouth when Antoine shot out of his comfortable leather seat. "Oh, now snap! They are playing my song." Heading to the back of the plane, whistling a tune which sounded oddly like 'Have it your way', he vanished into the small dining area.

Glancing over at Dusty, Jonas rose. “VIP treatment,” he said, offering her a wink, ignoring her eye-roll, before he too disappeared into the cockpit.

The pilot turned, pointing to a small locked chest under the navigation system panel. “Deva said you’d be needing that.” Handing him the key, he turned back around to the controls. “Small area just past the bathroom.”

Feeling like a jerk for talking to Deva the way he had, Jonas took the key, gathered up the chest and entered the private room to replenish. Opening the chest, he smiled seeing at least a week’s worth of ingredients. Removing a single vial from its velvet lined interior, he tossed it back like a drunk on a mission. Feeling the concoction seep into every cell, revitalizing his body, he smiled letting some of the memories from this batch flood his mind. What powers he would gain from it, who knew, but he was sure when the time came, they would make themselves known. Stepping out, he quickly slipped the chest into his carry on. Taking his seat, his eyes glanced out the window as stars flickered. Some in greeting, others in warning. He could almost hear them sing. Or was that...

“A vacation, Jonas? Really? I thought you were wiser than that.”

“Nice to see you too, Bacchus. You really should call first. Just showing up out of nowhere as you do, could raise-” It was then that he noticed the lack of movement outside the window. “I thought constantly stopping time wasn’t a good idea?”

Bacchus shrugged. “Depends on who stops it. Now let’s talk about-”

“Enough,” Jonas cut him off. “I don’t want to hear it. I already know what you’re going to say. Seth won’t rest, and we shouldn’t either, yadda, yadda, yadda. Well, we’re going to Spain. I’m going to visit my home, my mother, and hopefully introduce my friends to some delicious food. When we’re done, we’ll get back to work, probably in some place where our lives are in danger from... well... everybody.” Leaning forward, he gave the ancient vampire a steely glare. “So, leave us alone for a while.”

Bacchus returned the thousand-mile stare. “You may have picked the wrong time to grow a pair, Jonas.”

The stars resumed their night dance as Bacchus dissolved into nothingness, leaving Jonas to ponder his warning.

Annoyed. It was in her tone, her actions, and in her resting bitch face. Dusty looked pissed off. It wasn’t just because they weren’t going to be working for three whole days – which she couldn’t get over that to start – but something else that had stuck in her craw.

Travis. That good-looking drop-dead hunky-monkey had pissed her off to no end that she actually *thought* she cared about the asshole. Her anger was triggered more because she had such bad judgment where he was concerned. Thinking back to the time spent together, she didn’t catch even a whiff that something was off. The whole time she knew him – five years to be exact – he always had that southern drawl, and it just disappeared? It was what added to his sex appeal. There was no logical explanation for him to turn on her like that. “Why do *you* get the VIP treatment? I’m the one getting shot at, lost my dog, probably going to lose my home too, being flown all over the countryside.” Before he could answer, she held up a hand to stop him. “All kidding aside, why are we going to Spain? Now... when you claim ya haven’t been there in three-hundred-years. That’s a long time to stay gone.”

Returning from the dining area with a plate full of cookies, Antoine sat back down, careful not to drop a morsel. "Yeah, what's up with that, homeboy? One would think after that long, you'd have no soft spot in your heart for it. So why Spain?"

Jonas eyed the cookies. "You going to share?"

The professor put more distance between his cookies and the others. "Get ya own damn cookies. You think I'm some waiter?"

Turning back to Dusty, Jonas smiled. "I just feel the time is right to go home, even if it's just for a short time. I want you to see me for what I was since all you really know of me is what I am."

She arched a brow. "Well, I did see that vision of you in Spain. Remember?"

Antoine ignored them, hoarding his cookies as a starving child might.

Smiling at Dusty, he nodded. "Of course, I remember, but you have to understand something. A person's makeup is forged in the land they are born. It's one reason that Seth seemed so at home in Egypt. Even you have a root bundle somewhere. A place where, even if you don't realize it, the place fits you like an old pair of shoes. Worn, but too comfortable to ever toss away."

"Ah. We're going home to your stinky old shoes. Got it." Turning, she looked out the window again, still just annoyed as before as her thoughts stayed on Travis, the asshole.

Sighing loudly, Jonas turned and looked out the window as well. Antoine rolled his eyes as he took out the scroll.

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Seated atop the head of the Great Sphinx, Seth pursed his lips and glanced to the star-filled sky. Once, in antiquity, he might have ruled this land had it not been for his father's weakness toward his queen. A sadistic grin creased his face at the memory, and he patted the stone monolith's head. "When this here little adventure's over, I'm gonna re-carve your face in *my* image." Looking down at the six lifeless bodies of his evening meal, he nodded. "Yep. One day real soon, I'm gonna—" His eyes narrowed seeing a lone female figure, moving among the dead men, removing items of value from each. A gold bracelet, silver necklace, wallets, and even one man's gold fillings. He laughed, gliding down and landing in front of her. "Seriously? His teeth?"

Turning, she patted his cheek. "Everything can be used for spells and incantations." The woman was beautiful, long black hair reflecting the moon's graceful shimmer. Her eyes, black as the sky, looked upon Seth in adoration. Her face, long and youthful, bore a single mark on the otherwise flawless surface of her right cheek; a small, upside down ankh, marking her as a Pharaoh's concubine. Once she had finished her collecting, she reached down, grabbing a handful of sand, and slowly blew it over the dead bodies, speaking in ancient tongue. "Inrit rwaty y atuway. St ehrt xtemw ame n ephus!" The sand beneath the bodies opened deep, swallowing the men. A wind blew, erasing all trace that they ever existed. "No one will find them for a thousand years," she said, a wicked smile turning up her full, pink lips.

"That's nice," he said, not really paying attention. "Now, can we get to the real problem here?" Pulling the stone from his pocket, he held it out. Once more, it showed the water behind a gate flowing down white concrete. "Now, how in the hell am I supposed to find the next piece, from *that*?"

The woman put her finger against his lips. "Be still, Setau. You are too impetuous. You have been since you were born."

"I have repeatedly asked you not to call me that anymore, *Sadeh*," Seth answered, moving away from her well-manicured finger.

She smiled. "Always the willful child."

His eyes narrowed. "Always the meddling mother. Are you gonna tell me where I need to look for this stone, or should I just toss you back into that tomb?"

Recoiling, she put her hands up, turning from him. "No! I will help you. The chosen one touched my enchanted rose, as did his woman." Reaching into her satchel, she withdrew a piece of the stem that Seth brought back to her, after his masquerade as Bacchus. Taking out a small bowl, she ground the stem, added a pinch of salt and an old herb, and then set it on the foot of the great Sphinx.

Seth watched as she mumbled over the bowl. It flashed and cast a man's face over the stone monolith's decayed one. He tilted his head, seeing how well the image fit there. "Who is that?"

Sadeh shook her head. "I do not know. His look is unfamiliar to me, yet it appears to have been the original face which was carved into the great one."

Seth nodded. "Don't suppose he's still alive. Too bad. I'd like to have a long talk with him."

The image faded just as a noise spun Sadeh on her heels, arms outstretched, ready to cast a deadly spell.

"Whoa there, mama," Seth said, stepping between her and the shadowy figure. "That's one of mine." Turning, he motioned for him to approach. The man fell to the sand in supplication. "Oh for..." Reaching down, Seth grabbed his arm and yanked him up. "I told ya to stop that shit, didn't I?"

He nodded.

Fresh blood stained his lips, and Seth shook his head, taking out a wipe and cleaning it off. "Remember what I told ya? Keep your face clean. Not only for good hygiene, but it allows you to blend in among people. I mean really..." finishing up, he stuffed the blood-soaked wipe into the man's pocket. "Now, you have something for me?"

He nodded. "Yes, master."

Seth gave him a second, then sighed. "Well... where did they go?"

"Spain," the man said, cowering a bit. "They went to Spain."

He frowned, straightening the man's jacket collar. "That doesn't jive. Why the hell would they go there?"

"It looks like Sparx went to visit his birthplace and took the others along. I was able to listen outside the door of the old man while they were all talking about the scroll."

After a moment of silence, Seth's eyes smoldered. "And?"

"I heard the old man say something—" Fumbling in his coat pocket, Charlie took out a piece of paper. His hands quivered as he opened it. "Jinshanling. I wrote it down, so I wouldn't forget."

Seth grinned. "Interesting."

"Wait!" came his mother's voice as she approached the youngling. "He could be lying."

"I- I swear I'm telling the truth. I wouldn't lie to you, master. I couldn't!"

Considering her opinion, Seth yanked the man to him by the collar. "Well let's just see about that." The ancient vampire's eyes turned silver, boring into the depths of his henchman's memories.

Jonas: Have you found anything, Antoine?

Dusty: Yeah, it looked like a dam? Maybe? Something with water.

Antoine: That makes sense. You probably saw the Xiluodu Dam.

Dusty: I don't think I'm familiar with that.

Antoine: It's the second largest in China, next only to the Three Gorges Dam. It was constructed in the lower Jinsha River on the upper reaches of the Yangtze River between Yunnan Province and Sichuan Province, which is... um... not important. You mentioned water, a gate with water, and concrete. It's the closest thing I could think of. At first, I thought of Dragon's head, but there is no gate. I think it's leading us right where we need to be in China. The Great Wall, to be specific.

Jonas: Oh, joy. That thing is almost four-thousand miles long. Does the scroll give any clue to narrow it down a bit?

Antoine: Well, not specifically but it does mention Jinshanling.

Dusty: That sounds like a beer.

Laughter.

Antoine: No, it's the name of a part of the wall, built during the Ming Dynasty and if I remember my history, it's only about ten kilometers long.

Dusty: Um, refresh my memory on how long that is? I use American measurements.

Antoine: It's a little over six miles.

Satisfied, Seth released his hold on the man, glanced over to his mother and nodded. "He's telling the truth." Looking back at the man, he straightened out his coat. "You've been a useful mammal. Now here's what I want you to do. You go follow them, just in case, and report back to me if anything seems like it's not going according to plan. You understand?"

"Yes, sir." He nodded quickly.

"And one more thing. You find yourself hankering for what you couldn't have before, you best get a grip on yourself real fast, cause if you harm one cell on that little filly's body, you and I are gonna have a really bad evening. Is that clear, Officer Thomas?"

Sergeant Charles F. Thomas, former *Officer of the law*, now a vampire, shook his head. "I won't touch her. I swear."

"Good. Now," he shoved him away, "git outta my sight." Seth watched as he vanished. Stuffing his hands in his back pockets, he sighed. "I hate Chinese food."

As another private jet took off, its single passenger made a transatlantic call.

“Knight reporting in... Yes, sir. The transponder is working perfectly... That's correct, sir. Madrid... I don't know, but I will find out and keep the committee apprised... Yes, sir. Everything is in order, just as scheduled. I'm certain we'll be able to convince her to come back into the program, once she realizes just what she's up against... I hope so too, sir. I'll report back on schedule. Knight out.” Glancing out the window, Travis grimaced, holding his jaw. “So, Diego, a little homesick, are we?”

...to be continued...

About the author

Working for a living as a vocal actress, in her spare time, L. Dee Walker is always plotting on the (future) next New York Bestseller. She lives in Youngstown, Ohio with her cowriter and best friend, and is always thinking up new creations of fictional realities.

Other books

The Rise of Seth – The Bloodstone Chronicles

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About the author

Having spent most of his life in Northeast Ohio — with one 12-year side trip to Virginia, and an 18-month stint in Florida — Sam Beach loved the worlds of Tolkien, Bradbury and Lovecraft. An avid daydreamer, he spent his school years developing strange new worlds, and placing classmates in them. An avid online Role Player, he found an exciting avenue for his overactive imagination, creating characters, plots and schemes to quell the burning desire in him. In time, those desires became too far reaching for the RP world, and he set his sights on becoming a published author, while he makes a living as a vocal actor.

Other books

The Rise of Seth – The Bloodstone Chronicles

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