



ETERNAL VIGILANCE

THE DEATH OF ILLUSIONS

G A B R I E L L E F A U S T



NIGHTSHADE
Publications

ETERNAL VIGILANCE: THE DEATH OF ILLUSIONS

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ETERNAL VIGILANCE

Book 2: The Death of Illusions

Gabrielle Faust

WHAT THE PRESS IS SAYING ABOUT GABRIELLE FAUST

“Faust writes with a simplicity that betrays the fact that she’s a seasoned artist and accomplished author. Also, Faust’s artistic inclinations enter the book every time she uses words to vividly paint a landscape. Max Ernst, Edvard Munch and H.R. Geiger are all mentioned in the book and Faust’s writing is at times reminiscent of each artist’s work.”

— Gabino Iglesias, *The Austin Post*

“Faust writes beautifully, with a seasoned artist’s touch and a flair for the dramatic. Her descriptions dance across the page in a flow that feels both elegant and brutal.”

— *Paperback Horror*

“Gabrielle Faust is a fascinating new voice emerging from the nightmare of sound-alike authors. She is a writer to watch.”

— Del Howison, Bram Stoker Award winner

“For those that crave vampire fiction with a dark soul, Gabrielle Faust delivers on all levels.”

— *Scars Magazine*

“With prose the texture of deep velvet, Faust draws us down to the depths of a story as old as fear, as dark as sin, and as deep as Satan’s heart. The lines between friend and foe are re-drawn. She captures desperate obsession and hunger, outlining each with the passion for existence that burns in all beings.”

— *Fantasy Book Spot*

“Dark, gritty, gruesome and beautifully written, *The Lineage* is sure to enthrall horror fans. Faust’s vampires rip through the pages in the vein of *Near Dark* and *30 Days of Night*.”

— Rhiannon Frater, author of the
As The World Dies zombie trilogy

“Vampire veteran Gabrielle Faust peels away the glitz and glamour of the Goth lifestyle to reveal a horrible underworld of blood, murder and predatory terror in her latest novel, *The Lineage*. When I think of vampires this is exactly the kind of book I want to read. It’s bleak, relentlessly honest, and told with a prose as beautiful and layered as it is savage and cruel. *The Lineage* is top notch storytelling from a writer in complete command of her craft. This one will tear you apart, and yet you’ll come back page after page for more. I sure did!”

— Joe McKinney, Bram Stoker Award-winning author of
The Savage Dead and *Dog Days*

“The dichotomy of cloaking ugliness and horror with exquisite vocabulary adds another layer to the experience of reading this work. It is not to be gulped down in hopes of taking a standard entertaining ride like that found in the majority of genre fiction, but sipped and savored. If you are of a darkly philosophical bent and enjoy exploring new philosophies in fiction form, you will thoroughly enjoy the read.”

— *Fresh Fiction*

“Gabrielle Faust burst into the vampire genre, both fangs forward, with *Eternal Vigilance*, a book about a hero who was not a hero, and a savior who could not even save himself, Tynan...Faust does a fantastic job weaving Tynan’s emotional, mental and physical struggle to realize his full potential and just who he is as a person/vampire. The world is gritty, dirty, bloody, and it is Tynan’s world. So at the end you have to ask yourself, is he the savior? There are layers....and there are layers.”

— *Bitten by Books*

“This tale grabs the reader for a harrowing journey that is epic in scope but intimate in tone and detail. The vampires are savagely erotic, driven by equal parts duty and passion, in a way that will thoroughly satisfy any fan of dark fantasy.”

— Kim Paffenroth, Professor of Religious Studies, and author of *Gospel of the Living Dead*, *Dying to Live*, and *Valley of the Dead*

“The unique storytelling of Gabrielle Faust returns. Get ready to descend inside the plush universe of the *Eternal Vigilance* series! Lose yourself and join the newest saga of the Immortals’ war. Bring the noise and bring the blood!”

— John Palisano, cinematographer and horror author

“This is undoubtedly one of the most beautifully written books I have ever read.”

— *The Vampire Chronicles Magazine*

“*Eternal Vigilance* packs a wallop in the same way that a hydrogen bomb makes a big noise. This novel is a fantastic and utterly enjoyable read – and the best part is that with this first book, Tynan’s journey has just begun. Readers will be privileged to re-visit these fascinating characters and author Gabrielle Faust’s imaginative and brilliant new world/universe creation in the planned sequel novels to come. I, for one, can hardly wait for the next one to arrive. *Eternal Vigilance* receives my highest recommendation.”

— Norman L. Rubenstein for *Fear Zone*

“Faust can really write and this book kicks Major League Ass. Her stylized prose is completely addictive and I was enthralled by her characters. In many ways, this novel reminded me of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, especially if that book had ended with Frodo accepting his mission at Rivendell. If you don’t read this book at least once, you’re depriving yourself of a unique pleasure.”

— Greg Lamberson, Author of *Johnny Gruesome*

He that can transcend the world can destroy it.

— Darrick Dickshaw

“The history is taken, the memory is torn — all that remains
is the thunder reverberating in the hole where a heart once
stood.”

— Marc Moorash, *Stolen Moments*

INTRODUCTION

By Jo Lynne Valerie

When I was asked to write the foreword for mega-watt author Gabrielle Faust's new book in her current series, I was thrilled. Generally, authors are honored to pen an intro for other authors. But the fact that it was to be for someone I admire as an author and respect as a woman, made the invitation even sweeter.

The book you are holding in your hands, dear readers, is the next great work from beloved author Gabrielle Faust. Her readers wanted more, more, more... and she has delivered. In a genre that is well saturated (some say over-saturated), Ms. Faust has brought a new vocabulary, a new flavor, if you will, to the ever-popular vampire story.

Her Tynan is a believable hero; his attributes and qualities are offered on the page, for readers to devour. And they do... every... single... drop. The tale Faust has spun in the *Eternal Vigilance* series is epic and sweeping, side-stepping the angst and cookie-cutter plot-lines of current literary works. In a style that is at once effortless yet so clearly cognitive, the author transcends the pop fiction that sports former Nazi vamps, BDSM vamps or glittering vamps, to create her very own kind of vampire, living in the vampiric world of her own creation. The EV saga takes readers to the past, and brings them into to the future... in a style and with a voice that is at once original and lyrical. Prepare to be drawn into this book with utter and reckless abandon. Prepare to be pulled into the world of the Tyst Empire, and to once again find yourself beguiled by the vampire's mastery over mortality... and very real ability to experience emotion.

As a writer of Paranormal Fiction and Contemporary Gothic Paranormal Romance, and teacher of Metaphysical topics ranging from Herbology to Psychic Development to the Tarot, Shamanic Healing and WitchCraft, I know authentic work when I read it. You, dear reader, are the possessor of one such work, in this book. My own literary works speak to readers about the way their birthright Intuition operates, how ghosts and supernatural creatures really do exist among us, and the way true magic really does run in bloodlines. I weave tales about the moon's affect human beings and the new race of wolf shifters I've created for my novels (I too, have broken a mold!). I could speak to the power of a drum-beat or a particular aroma on one's psyche and spirit. Indeed, I write a genre quite apart from that of Gabrielle Faust. But oh, how much sweeter that made my discovery of her work. Here, I tell you, is a once-in-a-generation vampire horror novelist.

As Ms. Faust and I conversed about the writing of this foreword, I learned a little something about her. Suffice it to say, her background is colorful and rich. Our beloved author emerged from roots that were diverse, cultural, artistic and spiritual. It is no wonder she has become who and what she is.

And what is that, exactly? Gabrielle Faust is a virtual genre of one. She is the true mistress of her work and precisely what our existing literary culture needs. A girl after my own heart, she writes from a genuine desire to fulfill her life's passion. And she writes vampires not because they are the current bookish trend; Ms. Faust writes vampires out of a love and appreciation for the reality of being human, and the desires every human has. Her writing sensibilities extend to embracing readers and fans in a genuine way... to sympathizing with and loving her characters as though they were life-long friends... and surely, they have become that.

Unafraid to challenge norms or redefine definitions, Ms. Faust is all about forging her own brand and her own interpretation of the much loved vampire, offering up (in my terminology) a vibe and an energy unique unto itself.

In the book you are reading, she has done just that. If you've been anticipating this book, never fear; you will not be disappointed!

Moonbeams and Luv ~

Jo Lynne Valerie

Award-Winning Paranormal Author and ParaGoddess

CHAPTER 1

The sharp hiss and clang of steel upon forged steel resonated through the heavy morning fog with the brutality of an eagle's screech. Somewhere between the worlds, the mists parted long enough for me to hear the agony and despair of the dying and the defiant wails of those that still lived above the chaotic thunder of my own terrified heart. The world seemed trapped between many layers of time and matter, thick and horrifically detailed from one second to the next. My sword rose in my hands, slick with gore and mud, flashing red and silver in the gray-white light, and falling, plunging down through the leather armor of my foe beneath me. The blade pierced clothing, flesh, colliding with bone in a dull hollow crunch that reverberated up through my forearms. My enemy screamed, clutching at the blade as it entered him, slicing through his palms and severing his thumbs.

He stared up at me, his gray eyes matching the glowing fog that enveloped us, thick red blood bubbling up from his throat through his lips. For a moment time stopped and we were mortals again, young mortal men dying on a field where

we knew we would both be forgotten one day, both wishing none of this had come to pass. And then the light faded from his eyes as he collapsed backwards into the mud and weeds, his face white as bleached bone.

The ground shook with an earthquake tremor as a massive black horse bearing a warrior from my clan went down mere feet away shattering me out of my trance. The world imploded around me—the screaming, neighing of the horse beside me, the smell of blood and leather and earth, the constant clash of swords. Reality crashed into me, a cold wave of inescapable panic drowning me. I scrambled up, trying desperately to find my footing in the soaked ground as I pulled my sword from the gaping wound in my enemy’s chest.

“Tyyynnnnaaaaaannn! Tyyannnaaaan!!!” Ahern, my clansman shrieked beside me, pinned helplessly to the ground while the horse thrashed about frantically trying to haul itself back upright.

Sheathing my sword as I ran, I grabbed hold of the horse’s reins and struggled to pull the massive animal off Ahern. As soon as the stallion found solid ground, it bolted into the fray in a spray of dark water and destroyed turf. The sound of the battle was fading, moving into the forests to either side of us in dying threads that echoed hollow and ghostly through the mountain pass. The disorienting white light of the sun through the clouds was beginning to burn off the dense fog that had blinded us for hours, revealing the shattered nightmare of dead men and horses around us.

I sank to my knees beside Ahern. He reached up and grasped my right arm with both of his hands. Never had I seen the warrior’s face, lines of midnight blue tribal ink etched into his cheeks streaked with dirt and blood against his pale white skin, in such agonizing terror. I could feel his

soul-searing pain in constant waves of tremors up my arm as he began to shake from shock.

“My legs, I can’t move my legs,” he gasped.

I broke away from the wide panicked jade of his eyes and looked down at his legs. The right was nearly buried in the earth, surely crushed along with his hip by the weight of the falling horse. His left had been speared with two long wooden arrow shafts, one through his calf and one through his thigh.

“I can tell by your look it isn’t good,” he said through gritted, chattering teeth, his grip on my arm excruciating, nails biting into the skin above my wrist guards. “We ran them off, haven’t we?”

“I think so, they’re retreating. I think it’s over.” I turned back to him, speechless and lost, feeling altogether too young to have witnessed all that I had that day or to have lost so many dear friends in such grisly ways.

Ahern forced a choking laugh between gasps of pain. “Ha! We sent the damned dogs running!”

“Yes, yes we did,” I whispered.

I could feel his grip losing its tenacity, the shuddering subsiding as his breath became more shallow. We both knew he would not make it; there was no need for empty promises of otherwise. He had lived the warrior’s life and now he would die upon the battlefield, just as the gods had preordained. There was a strange sort of peace to be found within such trust and honor.

“You will have made our king very proud.” I placed my left hand upon his chest over his heart.

He smiled weakly and whispered, “Tell your father it was my greatest honor.” Ahern’s eyes fluttered closed, his hands slipping from my arm to the ground, and he was gone. Beneath my left hand, his heart no longer beat and I hung

my head in silent homage to the warrior who had served my father faithfully for twenty years. Silently, I said a blessing, asking the gods to guide him on through the otherworld, and to lend those that were left behind the strength to move forward from that bloody day. The adrenaline had left my system and in its absence festered a weariness and sorrow I had never experienced. It was as if the center of the Earth had reached up through the layers of packed clay and caves to take hold of my soul. I wanted to collapse into the oblivion of sleep, to be back within the safe stone walls of my father's castle surrounded by my beautiful family and our devoted servants. Instead, I knelt in mud and gore and animal manure amidst a field of cold corpses and broken armor, knowing I must soon help carry our dead back to be washed and wrapped for the funeral pyres that would burn that evening.

Feeling like I might turn to stone if I stayed bowed for much longer, I stood, raising my eyes to survey the field around me. My clansmen had returned from the woods, having chased the remaining enemy warriors so that they were sure they would not return. I could see the same Earth-bound weariness was taking hold of their souls as well, the lines on their faces impossibly deep, their eyes too heavily shadowed and haunted, their mouths drawn tight with the grim honor of duty as they dismounted their horses and trudged back across the field to the fallen. I looked down again at Ahern. His face was pure, innocent serenity as if he had never known what a sword could render of another man.

A large and heavy hand clasped my shoulder and a husky voice resonated behind me. "He was an honorable warrior. We will never forget him, but there are those that need your help now, and those, like Ahern, who must be brought home." It was my father, the chieftain.

“Yes, my lord.” I could not look at him; I could not show him the weakness that pooled in my eyes.

“Good, then.” His voice was grave and weary. He too wished this day had never come to pass. “I will help you carry Ahern’s body so that we may prepare him for the journey home.”

“Father?” I turned to face him.

Though he stared at me through a streaked mask of dirt and blood, his deep-set eyes regarded me with a profound empathy for the confusion and angst that can often envelop a young warrior in the wake of his first battle. His face was, and would forever be, the epitome of strength; high cheekbones lined in the tribal tattoos of our clan that disappeared along his jawline in a thick beard of silver and gold. His long ashen hair was streaked with the same white-silver of his beard and bound in braids with leather that fell against his chest-plate tooled with ancient protection symbols. It was the true face of a chieftain.

I met his gaze. My brow knit in concentration to keep my sanity intact. “Tegwaret. Is he...?”

“Your brother is alive and well.” He stared down at me, attempting to read the very diatribe of my rambling soul. “I just passed him up on the rise behind you.” He pointed over my shoulder. “You need to go help him now. He will show you what must be done.”

I continued to stare at his face, unable to speak further but wanting to confess of my entire existence to him. “Father?”

“Yes, my son?” His fierce gaze bored into my soul in a way only blood-kin could.

“This is the way it will always be, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” His brows knit in concern. I looked down at the hilt of my sword, raising my left hand to cover the filthy gold pommel. I could not speak further for I

felt I might lose what was left of my composure.

“Ah...” He paused for a long moment before answering, searching for the proper words to console me. “Men are often damnable creatures, greedy and ruthless. Some do not understand our ways and want to destroy what they cannot have for themselves. I know it is hard for you to understand right now, but we must at times fight in order to keep intact what peace we cherish, to protect the ones we love from harm.” He sighed through his nose.

In the distance I could hear Tegwaret calling his name. He reached out and grasped my shoulders with his hands, squeezing them tightly through his leather gloves before pulling me into an unexpected embrace so strong I thought my ribs might crack beneath the pressure. “Ah, my boy. You grow up so fast.”

He pushed me back, holding me again by my shoulders. “Come. Let us help your brother. I want to go home.”

* * *

The cold November wind wound through the shattered shell of the city. I stood just beyond the reach of the street lamp’s wavering amber light, sinking deeper with each passing second into the shadow-drenched concrete that surrounded me. Memories of my stolen past had begun to howl through my mind as I had descended to the street, the remnants of a morning on a battlefield with my father, turned earth and blood, the screams of my fallen friends, all fading with the laments of the wind as it cut through my clothes to my bones. It chilled my heart to think how quickly it had all come to an end; my blissful ignorance of my own mortality, of my family’s mortality. In that one morning’s pale gray light my childhood was burnt to ash and cast away, to be

churned deep with the mud and bones of my enemies.

There had been pride in my father's eyes, intense brimming pride that branded my soul, binding me ever closer to my family and my fate. I had fought viciously, I had fought honorably, and I had survived. In that moment, for reasons I still could not fathom, I knew my father had decided that I would be the one he would trust with his kingdom when he passed, that I held the promise of becoming a strong, yet sympathetic and wise leader one day. I had failed him though, failed him terribly. And with my failure, his kingdom had shattered. I did not become the king he had dreamed of, who fellow and future clansmen would write ballads about to sing in their warm halls while they downed their ale and bedded their beautiful women. Indeed, I did become a thing of legend, but it was a myth that woke grown men screaming from their slumbers and kept children cowering behind their mothers' skirts as soon as the moon breached the sky.

I became a vampire.

The centuries had not diminished the scars of the past as they should have, my Immortal mind clung greedily to every minute detail with a stubborn will of its own. The ghosts of my slain family, alongside the wraiths of each and every one of my victims, followed closely upon my tread, a stalking horse escorting me through the years of nights with constant silent judgment. I closed my eyes again briefly, centering myself within the physical plane somewhere locked between salvation and damnation, and there before my mind burned my father's face again, his honest, honorable gaze boring deep into my soul. Perhaps this was my one last chance to redeem myself, to regain the honor that I had stripped from my family's name. If I was successful in my mission to stop the Tyst from freeing the Vicinus, to defeat their plan to obtain their own hideous form of immortality, perhaps then

the ghosts that clung feverishly to my present could finally rest, returning to the past where they belonged.

I wanted to believe that I was there for a true reason. Not such as dictated by the secret agendas of my fellow Brethren or their human allies. A reason that resonated from the core of the universe itself to guide me to a place where the truth and peace I craved would be allotted to me; a place where I might stand upon the other side of the vast gorge separating me from my spiritual and mental freedom and understand the point of my long tortured existence on Earth. There was no turning back now and, therefore, there was no other decision for me but to cling to that hope.

A shiver raced through me, my spirit accosted by a phantom chill as if a soul had passed through its center. I opened my eyes. The street remained empty and cold. I glanced up to the window of Jasmine's apartment high above where I stood. The window was dark. Inside she lay sleeping deeply, dreaming her mortal dreams in a bed still warm from our slow, passionate movements. My heart constricted painfully as I thought of all I was about to turn my back on; the new life I had begun to sculpt for myself that would be shattered into unrecognizable shards and left for ruin in the gutters.

Everything I had grown close to, the minute details of existence, the familiarity of new habits and awkward nightly patterns that fooled my subconscious into believing there remained within me a bit of humanity between my kills. The fragile shell of my lie would vanish, obliterated beneath the crushing wrath of the war into which I stepped. There was no way for me to shelter that shoddily scripted play now, for if I remained behind, I knew it would only be a matter of time before the effects of my cowardice ferreted me out and stripped away all that I held near and dear from my clutching

clawing fingers. Jasmine's beautiful, humble struggle for survival needn't be disturbed by such catastrophic battles. Reluctantly, my eyes dropped away from her window and down to the bundle of rolled maps and documents clutched in my right hand, the maps that Tiernan had entrusted to me. The bundle felt incredibly heavy as if pressed and sealed in marble, yet it did not possess the aura of power that I needed from whatever tools I might be able to utilize in my fight. I stared at the bundle trying to comprehend how to proceed. How could I possibly be victorious if that, and what lay within my mind, were all the weaponry I had?

I shook my head, chuckling low and deranged beneath my breath, a sudden calm descending over my soul. Very well, then, if this was to be my last stand, I would walk towards the fading horizon with my sword drawn. Let whatever anarchy embodied beyond that line be unleashed in its full fury. I would not back down. I would not turn tail and flee as I might have done in another century, in another passion. Instead, I would stand and fight with every ounce of will and breath within me as I had beneath my clan's tartan in my youth. I had thought that proud strong son of my father dead and buried alongside my family's bones, however, as I stood upon the broken street of the shadowy, echoing city, I knew a flicker of him still survived.

I held no allegiance to any one race or clan, Phuree or Immortal. If only they had approached me in a different way, appealed to my sense of reason, however shattered and warped it might have been, perhaps I could have given them my mystical sentiments alongside my will to fight. But then again, a few fleeting nights had changed me dramatically and, looking back, perhaps it had been the only way. The only way either side could have known, at least.

History is often quickened in such hasty and desperate

means. Events unfold as only the universe may have them evolve. In the end, there is no ample supply of free will in the hands of either race, mortal or Immortal, that can truly redirect what the gods have preordained. In this, I had to entrust my faith once again, to know that my warrior and philosopher soul would meet an end only as the gods would see fit. Whether I lived or died was not the ultimate factor in my progression any longer. I would take ownership of whatever battle lay ahead. The war was a quest for my freedom, whether in true liberation from my Maker's dictatorship or in death itself. This was a battle for an honor that had been shattered centuries before and for the final rest of the ghosts that could not make amends with such a loss.

I tightened my fist around the maps, feeling the paper give beneath my grip, knowing I could easily crush them to dust and scatter them to the wind. My other hand held my journal. I thought briefly of tossing it into the sewer drain beside me, but instead, slipped it into the satchel I had slung across my chest. I could feel the chanting vibration of new blood in my veins. It danced within me, infusing itself with each and every cell, muscle, tendon or bone like water seeping deep down into parched earth, never to return to the surface again.

A crisp gust of wind accosted me and I shivered. Keeping to the shadows just beyond the reach of the streetlamps near the buildings, I began to walk. I found myself placing a level of blind faith in the script that had been written for me by the Phuree and my Immortal Brethren. I had to trust that the knowledge Josh and Loden, the duo of supposed Chronous technology experts allied with the Phuree, possessed would weave together the strands of hallucination with reality. I wondered what they might gain from assisting me. If my perceptions of the underground trans-info market served me

well, Josh and Loden were traders of the kind of information that was priceless and all but intangible. They were masters of a very deadly game of cat and mouse. It was a constant battle of intellect and skill in which the stakes were morbidly high for both sides.

However, if they were like any of the other members of the various covert intelligence operations I had met in the past, throughout the centuries, I knew that what they had at stake was far more than merely bragging rights. The destruction of the Tyst Empire would shatter the contentiously constructed hierarchy of the game they played. On one hand, they would have aided the defeat of their opponents, but what then? Without the carefully orchestrated tiers of gateways in which they maneuvered, they would be lost, their legacy and their status amongst the underground world in which they existed stripped away and forgotten. They would have been deluded not to have realized this possibility at one point or another. I knew I would have to be selective about the information I acquired from them; something told me that, being used to disguising their most inner thoughts after years of chasing the Chronous, even their subconscious could only be taken at face value. As with all sources of technology, I could trust them only so far as I could control them.

I stepped off of the curb and into the black city street. Several blocks from the main avenue where the local bazaar was built, the roads were all but deserted. Sparsely populated clusters of ancient apartment hi-rises glared out from between rows of vacant burned-out buildings, reminding me of the flickering eyes of a jack-o-lantern. The world was holding its breath, as it did every night, hunkering down, trying to remain invisible. For a while I wandered, almost drunkenly, weaving careful tendrils of my consciousness through the cracked, soot-stained concrete and exposed rebar, gently

probing the city for inklings of Malakai, of Josh and Loden. I hummed an old Leonard Cohen song from the twentieth century as my feet fell upon the pavement, one waltzing step in front of the other, my eyelids half-mast and dreaming.

“Now in Vienna there’s ten pretty women...there’s a shoulder where death comes to cry...there’s a lobby with nine-hundred windows...there’s a tree where the dove goes to die...”

I turned down a narrow alleyway and headed towards the swirling chaos of the midtown bazaar. The stench of damp decay assaulted my senses. I pushed it away from me with a deep exhale of breath, listening to the soft trickle of water through the broken metal drainpipes that ran down the sides of the old brick buildings.

“...there’s a piece that was torn from the morning...and it hangs in the gallery of frost...”

Someone was following me. I did not quicken my steps to betray my notice of their presence as I listened to their light footfalls upon the rooftop high above me. They prowled stealthily, analyzing my every move with an unnerving precision. I could feel the individual’s gaze upon my back, cold and calculated.

It was Malakai.

“...take this waltz, take this waltz...take this waltz with the clamp on its jaw...”

The *whoosh* of clothing through the air and the soft thud of contact with the ground behind me finally halted my pace. I turned to face my stalker.

“Did you take care of the business you needed to tend to?” he asked. The hiss of a match scraped across the brick wall a couple of yards away and a small bloom of golden light illuminated Malakai’s chiseled features. He brought the match up before his face where a newly rolled cigarette

dangled loosely from the right corner of his mouth. When the tip glowed a dull orange, he tossed the match into a puddle nearby, watching it fizzle into extinction.

I took a few steps forward. “Yes.” My voice was flat, revealing nothing as I traced the outline of his form in search of betrayal. “And you?”

His icy blue gaze locked on me. He laughed, one short, low burst of sound. “What can I say? Business is good.” He raised his eyebrows, taking a long drag of the cigarette, but did not elaborate.

The respect he had acquired for me the previous evening seemed to have faded somewhat. He radiated the arrogance I had found in our first introduction.

He arched one eyebrow at my scrutiny of him. “Don’t bother asking,” he said, exhaling white smoke in my direction.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I said. The rain had picked up and I stuffed the maps into my canvas bag to keep them from getting wet. “We’d better move off the street,” I suggested, looking up at the rooftops and cloudy night sky above. In the distance I could hear the low howling of the wind turbines that generated power for the amagin parameters.

“Follow me,” Malakai said, pulling the collar of his faded olive military coat up around his neck, squinting through the lazy spiral of cigarette smoke that drifted up in front of his face.

Hesitantly, I followed him as he made his way out of the alley where we stood and across an open expanse of broken, scarred concrete that had once served as a parking lot. Weeds and long, sun-bleached wheatgrass had overtaken the plot of asphalt, the old metal collection booth sagging to the ground with decay and vines. Without the enclosure of the surrounding buildings, I felt naked as we hurried through

the rain, our feet crunching now and again on broken glass and tin hidden beneath the dead grass. Listening to the city's soul as it hummed around us, I pulled my aura closer into me, tucking it away from the prying eyes of my would-be enemies.

On the far side of the parking lot, only a block or so from the noisy filth of the open-air market, Malakai turned into another narrow sinister alleyway. Here the buildings had an even more ancient feel as they had been built in the very early 1900's with uneven bricks and mortar. Algae and soot stained the meandering avenues of the crumbling structures' faces; in places one could make out the layers of resurfacing that had been attempted over the years and that were now dissolving with neglect.

Malakai ducked into an alcove set away from the road. Splintering ancient wood doors were set deep into the stone walls of the building. Above the doors, an arched pane of glass heavily coated with a heavy film of grime remained, one corner of which had been shattered and never repaired. Beneath the soot, in flaking faded gold paint was painted the word "Speakeasy."

I marveled that the club's structure had survived the Tyst's war. Housed in a building constructed in 1910 and established over eighty years later as a tribute to the Prohibition Era speakeasies, the club had always been a mysteriously seductive haunt I had frequented during my time in Texas. From my memories unfurled velvety images of the two floors of darkly painted and sensuously lit interior. There had been a quaint stage for local musical acts and a long mahogany bar over which an owl was hung, an old sign that it was the place to be.

At night, the crowds would filter in with a sea of cool laughter and classic elegance, filling the rooms until the

break of dawn. Liquor flowed freely as blues or jazz guitar licks coiled, serpentine, around the ancient deco moldings and banisters leading to the rooftop terrace where I would always find myself in the small hours before closing, the tempting press of warm bodies and human perfume having grown too much to endure. I would work my way to the far corner, away from the enthralling dance of the youth who dreamed of wealth and flirted carelessly in their beauty with their own mortality. There, I would lean against the old cast iron railing and stone wall, hungrily breathing the crisp night air, watching the sparkling lights of downtown, the ghost of music all around me as I taunted the horizon with a fierce defiance.

How simple things had been, I realized now, and how greatly I had taken it all for granted. I had been buried in my own smothering self-pity for so long that I had never truly seen the beauty, never savored it, and always longed for more. Until now. Nothing would ever be that simple, that elegant, again.

Malakai approached one of the doors and knocked three times.

“This place is still operating?” I asked in disbelief. Malakai peered at me over his shoulder for a second before returning his gaze back to the closed door in front of him. “Sort of.”

Seconds ticked by in nervous anticipation. I turned around to face the empty lane behind us, scanning the alleyway in both directions while listening to the city heave and sigh. The raucous din of the trade bazaar a block away drowned out the heavier exhale of the more sinister, less populated quadrants, making it difficult to pinpoint individual auras and thoughts. Behind me, the sound of wood sliding against wood caught my attention and I turned, taking a step closer to Malakai.

A nearly unnoticable panel had slid aside in the door's face revealing a pair of leering brown eyes surrounded by angular black shadows.

The eyes flickered back and forth between Malakai and myself for a moment before a voice addressed Malakai through the opening. "What do you want?" The eyes, glassy and paranoid in the blue-black shadows, locked upon me again. "And who's the guy behind ya?"

"I need a shortcut." Malakai's voice was even and devoid of information.

"The guy behind you? What's he want?"

"He's a jack-trade." Malakai waited for a moment before adding, "He's clean, trust me."

"Ha!" The man on the other side of the door snorted. "Now there's a laugh." He stared at Malakai. "You got something for me?"

Malakai nodded. The eyes squinted, silently deciding whether or not to believe him. The panel in the door slid shut with a hiss. Through the dense wood, the dull echo of multiple deadbolts being pulled back into their housings broke the steady patter of the rain against the asphalt. Creaking hinges whined loudly and the door opened into a smothering blackness. Silently, I followed Malakai over the threshold.

The acrid scent of cigarette smoke stung the lining of my nostrils above the dank, musty perfume of oiled wood and dust. My eyes adjusted to the low light that emanated from several dully glowing oil lamps placed intermittently upon ledges and tables throughout the first floor. I could see that the overall structure of the building had changed little, though its usage had. The ground level sloped downwards into an open hall which had once been filled with wooden tables and drunken dancers, now replaced with scuffed cargo

bins of various sizes, piles of discarded computer hardware and a few military cots stacked in a corner where the stage had once lived. The second floor, which was actually a raised balcony open on three sides, still stood supported by two carved oak posts at two points, with the main side flush with the far left wall. A dull artificial glow oozed from the open space over the ledges above us, indicating that there was indeed a source of electricity feeding into the building somehow.

The ominous sensation of being watched from multiple directions struck me hard across the chest and I halted, my instincts refusing to let me proceed further into the building. Several mortals lingered about the room, three men and two women, positioned strategically out of sight. All of them were armed.

“Don’t move.” The muzzle of what felt like a shotgun wedged itself against my lower spine as the door behind me closed with a groan, the multiple locks slamming into place with the dull echo of a prison cell gate.

Malakai, uninterested in my situation, walked to the long bar off to the right of the entrance and took a seat on one of the remaining ancient barstools that huddled together, derelicts amongst the clutter. “I told you, Darwin. He’s clean.”

“Like I’d take your word for anything,” the sandpaper voice of the man who had let us inside scoffed bitterly at Malakai’s suggestion. He shoved the barrel of the gun hard against my back. “Move it. Up the stairs to your left.”

My patience was growing thin. I did not take well to being threatened and narrowed my eyes at Malakai. He watched me lazily, leaning against the bar, which was covered in spare computer hardware and bulky gray cases of what appeared to be ammunition.

He waved at me to follow the man's orders. "Just do what he says so we can get moving. He's got to scan you for implants 'cause apparently my word isn't good enough anymore." He rolled his eyes.

I started to protest when Darwin prodded me violently again. Suppressing a growl, I walked towards the narrow staircase that led to the second floor balcony. The idea of my body being interrogated and my identity revealed caused my nervousness to intensify until it crackled upon the periphery of my senses.

Darwin followed me, his gruff voice barking back at Malakai, "That's right, asshole. There ain't nobody in this town whose word's worth shit anymore. Especially yours. So get used to it. You want to do business here, you do it my way. I ain't gettin' my ass obliterated cause some ex-Tyst lackey thinks he can save his soul by sellin' me some scored soft once in a while."

I made a decision in a flash; I simply could not take the chance that my vampiric nature might be brought to light so soon. It was a rare occasion that any mortal could accept the reality of my existence peacefully, and it would be a great tragedy to have to waste a life that could possibly hold part of the key to my mission so early on. Before Darwin or Malakai had a chance to draw breath, I pivoted around to Darwin's side and removed the gun from his hands. For a brief moment, I could see the recognition start to scramble behind his eyes as he sought furiously to understand what had just occurred.

Our footsteps creaking on the ancient floorboards, I backed him up against the nearest of the two posts that held up the second floor balcony. I pressed the barrel of the gun beneath his jaw with enough force to show how easily I could crush it. Darwin was a sickly thin man of about forty-

five years with heavily lined, sallow skin and dark eyes that squinted permanently. His graying hair was cropped close, revealing the blue veins that ran along the sides through his thin, mottled scalp. Beneath the stench of stale tobacco, I could smell sickness upon him, the slow, rank decay of his cells breaking apart and mutating into a hungry cancer.

I could almost see it in my mind's eye, a gluttonous cutworm clipping away at the white roots of a plant, greedily consuming his life force. A year perhaps, maybe less was left of his life, and he was completely unaware. Perhaps he didn't care. When the pressure against his throat became painful, a grunt escaped his thin, pale lips.

From the shadows around us came the crack of chambers being pumped, though the concealed figures did not betray their locations. My skin prickled with the intent focused energy of so many eyes upon me, their heartbeats fast in my ears, the smell of their nervous sweat dank and rich as swamp moss. In my peripheral vision, I saw Malakai tensely perched on his barstool, his face a frozen mask of disbelief. He too had heard the guns about the room engage when I had grabbed hold of Darwin, leaving him completely out of his element. I could hear his thoughts racing—he was already questioning his choice in aiding me.

Stay where you are, I whispered silently to his mind. His eyes widened, but he remained a statue in his seat.

“Call them off.” I spoke steadily, each word finely tuned to touch the primal core of Darwin's mind, coaxing from it an unnatural acceptance and calm, smooth as mercury rising through water.

I could see myself shimmering in the yellowing whites of his eyes, a pale wraith against the shadows of the boarded windows behind me. One piece at a time, I deconstructed the image, an artist blending in oil paints, integrating my lost

humanity back into my features. It was an illusion I used to conceal the perfection that disturbed and entranced the hearts of mortals, much the same as the one Nahalo used to disguise his true face from his devoted followers, though his magic had become far more than a simple illusion over the eons. I was unsure if the pale shadow of the trick I attempted would actually work, for it was still early on in my adaptation to the new powers I had inherited from Nahalo through his blood, but I had no choice now but to try. Though my grasp on Darwin's consciousness was undeniable, I sensed that the others' respect for him meant that they would most likely follow suit in his sudden blind acceptance of my "appearance". A human countenance would most definitely aid in their persuading.

The fingers of the snipers that held us in their scopes were starting to shake; an almost palpable vibration in their muscles that I could sense like the rustling of leaves in the high branches of a tree. They would not wait much longer. I spoke once again, applying slightly more pressure to the barrel of the gun, hearing his windpipe begin to cave a little, "Darwin, call them off."

He winced at the pain, but nodded hesitantly, his body still at war with his conscious decision. He raised his right hand and made a quick gesture with his fingers to the shadows. His breath was shallow and stank of rotten teeth and whiskey. One by one, I sensed the guns being lowered, though the hostility towards Malakai and myself continued to bristle silently.

"Good, very good," I purred, holding his gaze. "There's absolutely no need for you to scan me now, is there?" I kept my voice low so that only his ears could hear me. "We go way back, remember? I'm Tynan. You just haven't seen me in a while so you didn't recognize me right away."

The room was deathly still. Outside, the rain fell in chiseling sheets against the stone exterior of the building, the wind carrying it across the cityscape with a low, mournful howl. The muscles in his brow twitched in and out of a furrow, his eyes blinking, trying to adjust on something far off in the distance.

“Oh...oh y-yeah!” he stuttered, his face lighting up as if he was seeing for the first time a long lost friend he had thought gone forever.

I eased off on the gun slightly sensing he was no longer a threat, though I continued to hold his gaze.

“Tyman! Buddy, man, it has been a long-ass time!” He grabbed me by the upper arms and pulled me into a strong bear hug, slapping me on the back between my shoulder blades as he laughed. Caught off guard by his enthusiastic response, I tensed in his arms. He let me go and stepped back, rubbing his throat as he stared at me, a befuddled smile on his face. “Sorry about all that. Damn, you’ve changed! Didn’t even recognize you, man!” He pointed at the gun. “Fuckin’ scared the shit outta me there!”

From the shadows I could sense the restless confusion growing into a bitter unease as the shadowed assassins exchanged wondering glances.

Darwin laughed again, slapping me on the shoulder. “Come on out guys. We’re clear.”

He waved to the open room before turning back to me. His brow knit and he smiled, shaking his head in amazement. I watched him cautiously, gauging the permanence of my deceit, but there appeared to be no signs of the truth ever resurfacing in Darwin’s mind. Behind me, the hollow echo of heavy boots on the wooden stairwell caught my attention. I looked over my shoulder, warily watching the two figures that emerged, taking special care to cloak my thoughts.

It was a fair assumption that if a mortal such as Malakai could possess psychic abilities, others may as well. After the revelations revealed over the course of the previous few nights, I felt there was little that would ever surprise me again. Then again, it was in my nature to tempt the Fates.

The two figures that had descended the stairs silently walked past me, their light gray eyes locked with mine. A man and a woman, both athletic in build, though painfully thin, with strikingly sharp features and black hair that seemed to leach whatever light shone upon it. Identical twins dressed in tattered black fatigues, their movement past me was silent as a python through a slow moving river, their sniper rifles still gripped white-knuckled at their sides. Darwin was oblivious to their homicidal scrutiny of me and he suggested loudly that we all share a drink. He wandered over behind the bar.

I followed and took a seat cautiously upon the bar stool beside Malakai, my gaze still fixed warily on the twins, who joined the others at a table beneath the balcony overhang. For a long moment, the group silently regarded Malakai and myself with lethal suspicion, their faces still obscured by the planes of shadows created by the gold lamplight, before turning back to each other. They leaned in close around the table, their voices low and muffled.

Nice trick, Malakai's voice whispered through my mind. The muscles in my neck tensed at the sound of his voice, my attention so intent on Darwin's team. I swiveled back around to face the bar, smoothing my shirt, making sure the roll of documents was still safely tucked away. Running my fingers through my hair, I centered myself and folded my hands calmly upon the bar in front of me. Too many new auras circled my sharpened senses. I could feel them closing in, silently scanning my defenses for the one point of vulnerability, the soft bit of exposed flesh for them to sink

their teeth into.

Malakai continued to stare at me, a ironic smirk upon his lips. *You even look different. Very impressive.*

I cut a lethal glance in his direction. Malakai's commentary ceased instantly. He sat back in his seat, the fascination melting from his face, replaced by the respectful fear I had seen the night before.

Be careful about using your thoughts to speak to me, I touched his mind lightly from behind my mental defenses. I have a sneaking suspicion that we are not alone in our abilities here.

Malakai's eyes widened and he made a curt nod before turning towards the bar again. *You're right, he replied in thought, the male twin has some ability. I picked up on it when I was passing through last. It's not strong, but he listens intently to anything and everything.*

Who are they? I asked silently.

Don't know. They're new to Darwin's little team. Not sure if they're hired help or part of something else. I steer clear of them. I don't need anything interfering with my work. Malakai chuckled softly in his mind.

I cut my eyes towards Malakai slightly, enough to catch sight of him winking once at me. I knew I would never trust him, no matter how hard I tried. I was also beginning to believe that his "respect" for me was evolving into a form of mockery as well. But what could I truly expect?

So who are all these guys? I thought we were supposed to be looking for Josh and Loden? I asked.

These guys are the surface gatekeepers to the grid, so to speak. They're suppliers to the guys who run the show. Everything from hardware, software, circuitry, etc., to basics like food and protection services. These are some of the guys who can do it all. Malakai stared blankly ahead at the

fractured mirrored wall behind the bar, his face distant and betraying nothing of the conversation we held.

Protection?

Yes. Protection. In the remaining shards of the mirror, I met Malakai's eyes. *I think you've seen enough of this world to know that when you play this game, your life is immediately expendable.* His tone, even through mind-touch, had become deadly.

Behind the stacks of cargo bins and computer components, I could hear Darwin cheerfully rummaging about looking for something. "I know I've got some down here somewhere. Ah ha! Here it is!"

He popped up, a diseased prairie dog emerging from the chaos, brandishing a dusty glass bottle of amber colored whiskey in his fist. He pushed aside the pile of cables separating us and slammed it down on the counter along with three shot glasses. In the mirror, I noticed the eyes of Darwin's team shift for a moment to the bar, scrutinizing our actions once again.

He leaned forward over the counter on his folded arms and grinned a yellowed Cheshire cat's grin. "You guys stopped by just in time. Damn good whiskey. This stuff is hard to find these days."

Malakai patted the countertop with his palm. "Well, ante up then."

Darwin narrowed his eyes at Malakai. He wagged a finger at him. "You know, you ain't off the hook yet. You owe me something."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. And you'll get it. I promise," Malakai said.

Darwin unscrewed the top to the bottle. "When?" he asked, pouring himself a shot before pouring Malakai an equal measure.

“Soon. Soon.” Malakai took the shot glass between his fingers and slammed it back, grimacing as the whiskey burned his throat.

Darwin stared at him for a moment and shook his head. “Yeah, I’ve heard that one before.” He moved to pour whiskey into my glass, but before the liquid could leave the bottle’s mouth I covered the top of the glass with my palm. I shook my head.

“What? You not gonna drink with us?” Darwin exclaimed with a short, disbelieving laugh.

My smile was tense and I pushed the shot glass towards him. “Nothing personal. Just had to give it up. You know how it goes sometimes. Turns some men into their demons.”

Darwin nodded and slammed back the whiskey in his glass. “Yeah, I hear ya.” He poured himself and Malakai one more shot each before screwing the metal top back on the bottle. “It does wicked things to some guys. Definitely the Devil’s tool.” He winked at Malakai. “Luckily, I don’t have that problem.” He laughed. “Damn! Now, that’ll take the chill outta ya bones.” Darwin disappeared behind the stack of cargo bins and replaced the bottle of whiskey in its hiding place.

I’m not sure exactly what you did to him, but I like it. That guy usually hates my guts. Malakai’s voice was a whisper across my mind. *Is it permanent?*

At least until we get out of here. My silent words were non-negotiable.

Malakai cunningly focused on the reflection of the room in the mirror, taking in the inventory of hardware and weaponry while searching the shadowed corners for hidden surveillance equipment. Behind me, I could feel calculating eyes watching me from the far side of the room, the sharply honed minds behind them remaining contained, appearing

empty and cold. I turned my attention to the nearly inaudible discussion amongst Darwin's team, listening intently to the inflections of their words like an owl listening to mice scurrying across the forest floor.

"What do you make of these guys?" the older of the two women whispered, her pale, gaunt face downturned, her eyes focused intently on the disassembled gun on the table, which she was polishing with a dirty rag.

"Dunno," the man to her left breathed. He was slightly younger than her, perhaps in his early thirties, with short clipped blonde hair, a strong jaw and a nose severely crooked from a bad break that had never been set. "Malakai hasn't been around these parts in a long time. Who knows what he's up to? As for the other one, I've never seen him before." The man pursed his lips, narrowing his eyes as he stared at the back of my head from his place amongst the shadows.

"Darwin should have shot both of them." The female twin's voice was icy and emotionless. She tilted her head slightly to one side. Her face portrayed the kind of beauty that was close to vampiric, with flawless white skin and piercing eyes. I found her attention on me highly disturbing.

"Ssshhh," she hissed to her partners and their whispering died down. "I think he's listening."

CHAPTER 2

Darwin walked around the bar. “Follow me, boys.”

He made his way past us and headed for the stairwell that led to the second floor. Dressed in faded blue jeans sporting heavily frayed holes in several places, and a canvas militia jacket with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows, it was easy to see that he had spent most of life on the run. Hard and rusted like a metal manhole cover, Darwin was an entity chiseled from the broken rebar skeleton of the city itself. He was as wiry and mean as a feral cat and he’d just as soon put a bullet between your eyes as look at you. I sensed this hardwired bitterness in the way he moved—slinking, long legs sliding his body forward, every nerve corroded with the grit of his existence. The illusion I had created had softened him for a moment, shedding a rose-tinged glow in an otherwise pitch-black night, but I knew a violent survivalist still lurked just below the surface. It was no wonder his team eyed me so warily, making up their minds as to whether or not to continue to follow Darwin’s lead or take their own initiative and kill me.

We climbed the flight of wooden steps in darkness, our footsteps echoing dully. At the top, we rounded the corner and stepped into what had once been a sophisticated lounge lined with burgundy leather couches, a freestanding bar and a well-loved pool table. At one time, it had been almost impossible to gain entrance to the second floor, as it had constantly overflowed with impeccably dressed, success-driven humans in search of a drowning numbness to exorcise the demons of the corporate world. I had not dared to venture there in the nights when I found myself with the humming mortal masses. The close confines, the press of bodies, and unconstrained human emotional condition were too much for my willpower and my haunted, unstable heart. Now, barely even a ghost of that former spirit remained amongst the rafters of the old bar.

In the absence of the warm glow of ambient light and laughter, the soul of the centuries old building sighed heavily, bending inwards and pressing down oppressively. Two large widescreen computer monitors mounted on the brick wall to our left cast an icy illumination over the open square platform, encased on three sides by retainer walls. The one closest to me appeared to be designated as a surveillance monitor, its screen tiled with various high resolution shots of streets, rooms, halls and tunnels from around the city, though none I immediately recognized. The second monitor was in the process of running what I deciphered as a sequence simulation program, though its final purpose was unknown. Silently, the sleek black cubes on the table below churned on with their labor beyond the observations of their human masters. On a scuffed aluminum table to our right, multicolored piles of electrical lines and ethernet cables lay coiled amongst neatly sorted stacks of motherboards, hard drives and other assorted scrap components. Against the far

retaining wall next to an old office desk stood two long, low, gray metal bookshelves lined with various piles of ancient texts, metal document binders and rolled blueprints.

Darwin walked to a chair parked in front of the desk where the black computers were and threw himself into it with a sigh. He swiveled around to face us, leaning back so that the chair's hinged seat strained on its stand. In the harsh glow from the wall screens, his hollow, furrowed features took on a grisly aspect, the bluish shadows beneath his eyes sinking further, taking from his manner what little warmth had quickened in the previous few moments.

He gestured for the two of us to sit down with a wave of his hand. "Why don't you boys take a seat and tell me what exactly you're up to?"

Darwin lifted his heavy brown boots one at a time onto the desk beside him, crossing them at the ankles as he folded his hands over his stomach, hard bony fingers interlacing. His tone had darkened slightly. For a moment I hesitated, hesitantly reaching my mind into his to gauge the state of his perceptions. The illusion I had created remained intact; his mind was completely convinced of the validity of the false history I had implanted. However, the euphoria, which was an apparent side effect of the subconscious coercion I had inflicted, was subsiding, allowing his true personality to rise to the surface despite his acceptance of me in his world.

I lowered myself into one of the additional three chairs. The metal and cracked vinyl creaked beneath my weight uncomfortably. My jaw tightened in anticipation of our conversation. I drew a breath and settled myself, composing my exterior into a façade of perfect calm. Malakai, his eyes darting about the drafty balcony and taking a hasty mental inventory of the various components stockpiled therein, also took his seat. Where the otherworldly green-blue glow of

the screens cast a death shroud on Darwin, the light only served to intensify Malakai's chiseled beauty, his pale blue eyes glowing demonically with an uncontainable, epic force that lurked behind them.

Darwin pulled a packet of parchment rolling papers and tobacco from his coat pocket and laid it on his lap. Intently, he began to assemble a cigarette, folding a sheaf of paper between his calloused fingers and sprinkling crushed black leaves into it. "Now, Malakai, you and I have known each other for a long time, haven't we?"

There was a pause as Malakai's attention snapped back towards Darwin. I could sense his muscles tensing beneath his trench coat and ratty cable-knit sweater. His face remained deadly calm. "Yes," he replied. "A few years."

"Right." Darwin licked the parchment and finished his cigarette, turning it round and placing it between his lips. "So you and I have an *understanding*, correct?"

Another pause held the moment hostage while Darwin dragged a wooden match along the bottom of his boot with a hiss and lit his cigarette, the golden flame briefly illuminating his face from beneath, turning the blue-green shadows black. Malakai leaned back in his chair, sinking down slightly and folding his hands across his stomach. He narrowed his eyes.

"Yes, I would say we have an *understanding*."

"Good." Darwin took a long drag of his cigarette and tossed the extinguished match into an overflowing ashtray. "Then I know you're not here to fuck with me."

Malakai remained silent, his eyes glowing in the artificial light cast by the monitors on the wall in front of us. Below the platform, the presence of the five mortals made my skin itch. They strained to hear our words, whispering their suspicions through the darkness as they waited for Darwin to return with further directives. The only obstacle interfering

with their desire to murder Malakai and myself was Darwin. He stared at Malakai through the drifting fog of cigarette smoke lingering between us. Though his exterior portrayed a diseased, decaying man, his reflexes were still deadly with a fight-or-flight reflex nearly reptilian in nature. By the set of Malakai's jaw, I knew he acknowledged the same.

Darwin drew a deep breath and sighed through his nose. "So, what's this business with Tynan being a jack-trade? For who?"

"J and L," Malakai replied stonily.

Darwin frowned. He uncrossed his legs and dropped them from the edge of the desk to the floor. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his cigarette dangling between the fingers of his right hand. "Excuse me?" he said, disbelieving.

"You heard me," Malakai said, the muscles in his jaw twitching nervously, "Josh and Loden. We need access to the tunnels."

"You've got to be kidding me!" Darwin laughed nervously beneath his breath, taking another drag from his cigarette. "What the hell could this guy have that Josh and Loden need?" He gestured towards me with a flick of his hand, his stare remaining fixed on Malakai.

I could almost hear the gears of Malakai's mind whirring furiously. He leaned forward, matching Darwin's body language note for note.

When he spoke, he lowered his voice so that it did not carry to the floor below. "He has the lockdown coordinates on the stalkers who have been tampering with J and L's remapping of the grid."

Darwin's beady eyes flickered back and forth between Malakai and I. "I don't buy it," he said flatly. "You know the jeopardy we all get placed in when you go down there. Why

don't you have Tynan give you the coordinates and you go alone?"

"Because I don't want that knowledge. I have enough people after my ass without those puissant cowboys coming after me. I escort Tynan down the tunnels, he jacks in, hands over the points and then we're outta there. Tynan will be a strange face on the grid that they'll never see again." Malakai waved his hand, palm down, through the air, slicing it definitively.

Darwin licked his lips as he thought. He turned to me, cocking his head to one side. "So, what's in it for you?"

The question caught me by surprise. Malakai had not prepared me for the conversation with Darwin. He had run full-steam ahead into the treacherous landscape without divulging to me his plan or the background on which he based it. Silently, I reached out to Malakai, *Now would be a good time to tell me what you've been talking about.*

Malakai's voice slipped into the whorls of my mind, riddling it with layers of information pertaining to the terminology that had flown back and forth between himself and Darwin. A jack-trade was an individual who had information to trade or sell on the grid for the acquirement of other information or a service, sometimes even an assassination. The exchanges were usually quick and extremely high risk due to the volatile nature of the parties involved and their particular circumstances. Images flowed through me as Malakai transposed his own memories of similar events upon my mind's eye. It was no wonder Darwin eyed me so suspiciously now, wondering why I would endanger myself so.

I stared at Darwin, unblinking. "I'm looking for someone."

He laughed a short strangled laugh like a cough stuck

in his throat. “Aren’t we all?” He narrowed his eyes slightly. “Who?”

“We can’t afford to disclose—” Malakai started to interrupt.

Darwin waved him to silence. “I said ‘who’?” he repeated. “You know you have to go through me to get to the Ringers.”

“A woman of power,” I said. In my peripheral vision, I could see Malakai visibly tense on the edge of his seat fearful that I might reveal too much of the Phuree battle plan. “I believe Josh and Loden can help me find her as payment for the information I hold. She has something of mine that I want back. Something very precious to me.” I watched Darwin silently, letting my words hover in the air between us like smoke.

“And what is it, this thing she stole from you?” Darwin held my gaze steadily, the constant scrolling lines generated on the screen beside him flickering across the liquid surface of his eyes, the furrow between his brows deepening.

I leaned in close to him. “My heart.”

In my mind, I heard Malakai’s silent frustrated groan. *What are you talking about?! He’s not going to let you be so vague. Shut up!*

For a long moment the room bristled with a strange tension, the hum of the computers in the background was like whining cicadas. Darwin sank back into his chair reaching out to tap his cigarette into the ashtray. He placed it between his lips, leaving it there as he pondered me, folding his hands contemplatively across his stomach. His expression was unreadable, his features coarse and alien, but then his lips curled, his mouth stretching into a feral feline grin of yellowed teeth.

He shook his head and laughed. “You’re fucking serious,

aren't you?"

I released the breath I had been holding, tilting my head slightly and I smiled back at him. "I'm afraid so. I really don't want to go into the details, if you don't mind. It's... personal."

Darwin raised both of his hands. "Hey, I get ya. If you want to get yourself killed over a woman, that's your prerogative, I guess. You certainly wouldn't be the first man to do such a thing." He shook his head again. "Damn, I can't believe I'm going to say this, but I'm going to give you guys clearance. But only twenty-four hours."

"Twenty-four hours?!" Malakai exclaimed. "We can barely get all the way through the tunnels and back in that time."

"Tough," Darwin barked. "Despite your apparent alliance with this guy," he jerked his thumb in my direction, "I still don't trust you and you're still in debt to me, which means I make the rules. Besides, if it's just an exchange of coordinates it shouldn't take but a few minutes. The longer you're down there, the longer your enemies have to track you."

Malakai stood and stared down at Darwin, his tone dropping to a deadly pitch. "Dammit, Darwin. I told you, I'm clean. I've been clean for years."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean that you don't have enemies tracking you in other ways than a Tyst chip." Darwin grasped the arms of the swivel chair and pushed himself up out of it. He turned to face Malakai. "Let's not play games here. It's wasting your time and mine. You're one of the most wanted men on the face of this planet. You're just fortunate I let you in here in the first place, so don't push your luck with anything else. If it were up to my team, you'd have been shot a long time ago!"

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Before I let you guys through...” He held out his palm towards Malakai.

The muscle in Malakai’s jaw tensed. Keeping his eyes locked with Darwin’s, he slipped his hand into his bag and withdrew a small black plastic case. He placed it in Darwin’s expectant palm.

Darwin’s fingers closed round the case, his lips twitching at the corners. “See now. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Malakai said nothing. I didn’t ask what was in the case; I didn’t want to know.

Darwin turned to a computer screen riddled with various video scenes. He studied them closely for a moment, scanning the different views. For the most part, the scenes were empty of human life, though a few that tracked the busier avenues, such as the bazaar, swam with a dizzying river of faces and forms. Seconds ticked by in strangled anticipation until Darwin struck a few random keys across the board on the table in front of him and turned away from the screen.

He walked to the top of the stairwell and began to descend. “Twenty-four hours, boys. That’s it. Now let’s get going. I’ve got a show to run.”

* * *

Picking up the gun I had cleverly disarmed him of earlier that evening, Darwin slung the strap over his shoulder and led us to the back of the first floor. I kept my eyes focused straight ahead, refusing to meet any of the accusatory gazes from the mortals beneath the second-floor overhang. I had no fear that the psychic among them could penetrate my thoughts. However, I still found his serpentine scrutiny unnerving in a primal way. It was tempting to reach out with my mind and jar his focus with a violent snap of energy, but

to do so would confirm his suspicions of me and destroy my vague disguise, which continued to befuddle the group. It was best to simply leave them behind with all of their questions in the air between them.

When we passed the bar, the room opened up with sixteen-foot ceilings that disappeared into complete darkness above us. In the initial construction of the building, the first floor had been divided into two separate rooms, though the dividing wall had been removed during a remodeling phase during the early twenty-first century. In my mind's eye, I could still see the old elevator that had once operated between the floors, creaking and groaning laboriously with its antique steel gears and pulleys.

This place is haunted, I whispered silently to Malakai.

You don't say? he replied, half sarcasm, half wondering belief.

In 1916 the building burned. Two women and a fireman were unable to escape. I let my eyes roam over the room's stone walls, I remember they salvaged that old elevator when they later rebuilt and suspended it over where the stage used to be to your left. I always thought it strange to keep a box in which people died so violently, but who am I to comment on mortal fascination with death? Supposedly you can still hear their screams from time to time, though I've never heard them personally. I let my words ring in Malakai's mind, feeling him bristle slightly with annoyance at the childish idea of ghosts.

I looked over at him. His eyes were intently locked upon Darwin's form just ahead of us. His distrust of Darwin was pungent and fierce, boiling beneath his skin. It was a fine tightrope upon which Malakai balanced. In one respect he was a legend in his own right in the world of arms trading and information smuggling, though his reputation for secret,

self-serving agendas threatened to destroy the respect of his allies. In another respect, he waged a personal war with his own kind, feral dogs savagely fighting over scraps of a world that was dying. He was technically on Darwin's turf now and he hated every minute of it. All too easily, Darwin could turn on him and Malakai would effectively be outnumbered no matter how skilled a killer he was. It was this silent understanding that kept their sour alliance intact, though it was only a matter of time before the rope grew too frayed to support Malakai's weight any longer.

We reached the back of the room and stopped before a metal supply cabinet in the right corner, surrounded by stacks of dusty industrial cargo crates marked "Property of U.S.A. Military." Along the wall beside the mountain of olive green and gray canisters were three tall gray metal bookcases lined with a neat array of computers similar to the models I had originally seen in the living room of Sea's apartment. The paper-thin screens were tilted back at slight angles from their smooth black keyboards, the harsh glow from the dozens of monitors blooming into a halo of cold illumination. My sensitive eyes ached in the constant emission of hard light. I squinted slightly, my gaze roaming over the wall taking in each distinct face of the tiny machines running an array of programs in time with one another. The pungent scent of ozone was sharp, charging the air that circulated through my lungs, leaving a sour metallic aftertaste in the back of my mouth.

The infinite amount of rapidly scrolling information was dizzying. Most of it meant little or nothing to me; obscure number sequence calculations, logarithms, satellite photo captures of perimeter locations of various quadrants of the city, long lines of elegant Chronous code dancing feverishly like white silk threads against a starless night sky. A screen

on the shelf directly in front of me appeared to be sorting through photographic background records of various individuals in three columns—one of Tyst officials, one of amagin denizens and one featuring Phuree tribe members, though how they had obtained photos of the nomadic rebel group was a mystery to me. Occasionally, the program would halt momentarily on a specific picture, reducing it in size and pulling it to the side of the screen to compare it with other database records it had gathered before matching or discarding it back into the virtual stack.

My eyes darted over the screens, trying to assimilate as much of the information as possible before Darwin took notice.

What is all of this? I asked Malakai silently.

This is a very small part their global surveillance system. His larger operation is in a far more secure and remote location. Half of their business is information. Darwin is fairly selective about who he does business with, but everything has its price, Malakai replied, his gaze still firmly locked on Darwin's back.

The sound of metal scraping against the oiled wood floors snared our attentions away from the wall. Darwin slid a stack of the cargo bins out of his way with a grunt. He reached up with both hands and grabbed the edge of the battered aluminum cabinet in front of him, pulling it out from the wall. It apparently held little, for he moved the large piece without assistance. The screech and groan of the metal reverberated through the cavernous room, echoing up into the looming shadows clustered within the rafters above. The cold, spectral glow beside us lit a crude steel door, no bigger than a manhole cover, bolted into the ground below where the cabinet had stood. In a row along the surface of the round cover three combination locks protruded.

Set flush into the wall above the door was another monitor screen and keyboard. Darwin leaned forward, his thin body shielding the keyboard from our view while his fingers danced over the keys in four short bursts of entries. After a moment, he squatted down beside the door and reached forward to spin each lock several times back and forth before a sharp click announced the door was unlocked. Grabbing the metal hatch handle, he pulled the door open on a creaking rusted hinge exposing a pitch black hole in the floor that led to the tunnels below the city.

Darwin stood, turning to face us, his hands upon his hips. His jaw was tight, his demeanor no longer smooth and congenial. In the artificial light, his taut, aging features became even more distorted, the hollows beneath his cheeks sickly. His cigarette hung, heavy with ash, pressed between his thin lips. Behind him, his shadow stretched upwards against the gray stone wall looming over him with an ominously independent gait of its own. Drawing heavily upon his cigarette, he reached up and removed the smoldering stub from his lips, exhaling the white smoke through his nose sharply.

“Now listen,” Darwin pointed at us with the two fingers on his right hand that pinched the cigarette. “I wasn’t kidding about the time. Twenty-four hours. If you’re not back, we come in after you and, trust me, you don’t want to disturb me with that bullshit.”

He took a step towards us, his gaze darting between Malakai and myself suspiciously, attempting to pry our true intentions out from beneath our calloused shells. Narrowing his eyes in thought, his brow furrowing slightly he addressed me, his voice slightly unsure. “You’ve never been down there, have you?”

I shook my head. “No, I’m afraid not.” I had left certain

aspects of the illusion of me intentionally blurred and vague in his “memory.” There were simply too many details that I could not compensate for.

He nodded in Malakai’s direction. “He knows the way. Stay close to him.”

Darwin walked over to one of the utility cabinets and opened one of the scarred metal doors on whining hinges. From the middle shelf he pulled two pairs of night-vision goggles and handed one to each of us. “Don’t deviate from the main tunnel lines. While we have a pretty firm lockdown on all activity in those passageways, we can’t make you any guarantees. This isn’t the only entrance. Weird shit happens down there sometimes that even we can’t predict.”

I nodded solemnly. Beside me, Malakai’s anxious tension bristled in the air around him. He slipped the goggles over his head, settling them against the bridge of his nose and tightening the straps on the sides. Satisfied with their placement, he pressed a series of buttons on the right, set into the black plastic lens frame. A soft click followed by a piercing whine that wound up until it was only perceptible to my hearing signified the goggles were functioning.

I could tell Malakai was ready to move; I could smell the salty musk of his nervous sweat dampening the back of his neck. I could feel the fierce beat of his heart, though his exterior remained the essence of perfectly composed calm, an unsolvable riddle for the world around him to decipher. It unsettled me, this degree of apprehension he resonated in Darwin’s company. The defiant, arrogant ice with which he addressed the rest of the world appeared to be shaken. Though I could read the hearts of most mortals well enough, I sensed that Malakai knew better than I who could be trusted and who could not—some betrayals went to the core of the Earth and beyond.

Or perhaps it was what lay within the tunnels themselves? I could not be sure. I knew the song the old stones on the city's surface sang as the sun set, the rabid cry of denizens making their meager existences known through the tide of the outdoor bazaar. Indeed, I had ingested the soul, the broken spirit of the amagin until it bled bitter within my own veins, but somehow, I had only scratched the surface. The war had fractured modern civilization into a thousand razor shards, each embedding itself deeper than the next into the shredded flesh of society. Over the years, the wounds had closed over those shards, disguising them from prying eyes looking to ferret them out and obliterate them. Upon the tips of mortal tongues, hushed whispers slipped glimpses into these complex and secret worlds. They had intrigued me, I must admit, but I was in no state of mind to pursue another hard world of deceit and drama. However, there was no escaping it now.

I looked at Malakai. "Lead the way," I said, gesturing with my empty palm at the open hatch in the floor.

One black eyebrow twitched on Malakai's face above the bulky night vision goggles. A small smirk tugged at one side of his mouth. "My pleasure," he said and turned away.

CHAPTER 3

The steady drip of condensation down the walls of the tunnels had accompanied us for what seemed like miles through a convoluted maze that doubled back upon itself countless times. It was a constant eerie perspiration that ebbed and flowed beneath the pulse of the city far above. Buried beneath layers of asphalt and metal, concrete and earth, the labyrinth of narrow cement corridors wove with a mesmerizing chaos. Portions of the halls blended with earlier sections of underground tunnel systems from the 1800's that were used to smuggle slaves or allow Congressmen to escape from their illegal brothels undetected. These sections echoed silently with a sad, strange blend of remorse and resilience, their stone walls and flaking mortar meshing at angles with the hastily constructed additions.

The tunnels were a black void. Through the pitch I could still hear the incessant supersonic shriek of Malakai's goggles. At first I had donned my pair as part of my charade for Darwin and his team, but had removed them as soon as the hatch closed above us. My eyes adjusted with ease to the

shadows so that the tunnels appeared to be lit by a shrouded full moon.

“You seem to know exactly where you’re going.” My voice, though low, reverberated through the hidden miles of tunnels beyond us.

“Yes,” Malakai hissed.

I could feel him bristling with caution. He stopped and turned to face me, his archangel features suddenly demonic in the otherworldly perception of my vampiric vision. It was hard to read his true expression beneath the layers of reflective greenish glass.

I barely made out his icy eyes, narrowing in irritation. “If you’d drop the cocky vampire ego for a moment and put those on,” he pointed to the goggles dangling from my right hand, “you’d see they relay our coordinates. Now, no more talk until we reach a safe place, vocal or otherwise. Understand?” His voice was a clipped whisper filled with a survivalist’s rigidity.

He did not wait for my reply before turning away. My stomach soured slightly, my senses tightening to scan our surroundings. I watched his form walking into the pitch. There was something about the tenseness of his muscles shifting beneath his clothes that told me we were not alone, though I could not detect anything, human or Immortal. A shiver slithered up my spine, causing the fine hairs on the backs of my arms to stand on end. I pivoted slightly and cast a glance back down the way we had come, letting it dance over the cracked cement and algae coated stone.

A rat scurried down one side, keeping close to the wall. The corridor was empty. Opening my senses to my surroundings, I listened to the rotten rhythm of the energy that flowed through the tunnels, picking auras of rats and roaches from the lifeless stone about them like threads of

sinew from a bone. Deep within the tunnels, some way behind us, a flicker of movement snared my attention. Focusing, I pried deeper into the tunnels until they locked upon the life force. Though heavily cloaked, its mental defenses as solid as steel, I could still perceive its steady heartbeat. Whether or not it was human, however, was still a mystery.

I walked backwards, my eyes still watching the tunnel as if I expected whatever stalked us to launch from the dense ink that consumed the walls. Unnerved that I had not picked up on the presence earlier, I turned back and caught up to Malakai.

He had stopped in the middle of the tunnel. Facing the wall to his left, he stared straight ahead, tapping the tiny buttons on the side of his goggles. He reached into his satchel and retrieved a small device. Flipping the screen at the top upwards, he pointed it at the wall in front of him. It glowed eerily in the pitch with a caustic white-blue halo of artificial light that made my eyes ache. The grid captured the wall's surface, numbers flickering in various points within the lines as the device analyzed the material content and architectural substructure of its construction. The lines on the grid disappeared, replaced by a three-dimensional replication of what lay beyond the wall itself: another chamber.

Malakai flipped the screen down with a sharp click and returned it to his bag. He froze. The sensation of being observed raked across my back. Before Malakai had a chance to remove his hand from his satchel, I had already whirled around, bounding forward while reaching out into the black shadows to grab hold of our stalker. With a feral snarl, my hands turning to claws that latched onto his shoulders with a lethal strength, I slammed the man into the wall of the tunnel to my left. The figure let out a strangled gasp as the wind was momentarily knocked from his lungs. The resonating echo

of the impact rolled off the ceiling of the long dark corridor in waves of ominous thunder.

“No!” The figure gasped. “Tynan, stop! It’s Tatsu!”

I halted, my bared fangs centimeters from his throat. Adrenaline coursed through my veins making every nerve in my body sing. With a low growl to emphasize my irritation, I gradually pulled away and stared into Tatsu’s shocked eyes. As my fists uncurled from his shoulders, fragments of cement and stone crumbled around his lithe body, grayish green dust coating his black wool coat and gray shirt.

“What the hell are you doing sneaking up on us?” I snarled. “I could have killed you.”

Tatsu peeled himself away from the wall, snapping the lapels of his coat to eliminate the debris, and smoothed back his long black hair.

“Nice to see you too.” He glared at me. “I couldn’t chance anyone else overhearing me contact you.”

His almond eyes narrowed as they darted down the tunnel and back to me. “I sensed your presence when you entered the tunnels, so I followed you down here. We need to talk.”

I silently nodded my agreement. In truth, I was more than relieved to see him alive and well, though still deeply annoyed by his approach.

“Damn it! Both of you shut up,” Malakai hissed between clenched teeth behind me. “Everyone in five square miles probably just heard that!” He pointed at the crumbling wall behind Tatsu. “If anyone’s looking for us, they sure as hell know where we are now!”

I frowned at the anger boiling in his face.

“You guys don’t get it. Once we cross the amagin boundaries, we are never completely alone.” Malakai was shaking slightly, his hands clenching and unclenching at his

sides.

“Who’s this?” Tatsu’s asked me, but before either of us had a chance to answer, a low whirring noise emanated from the wall beside Malakai. To his right, a rectangular panel of concrete recessed and slid to the side with the sharp grinding of stone upon stone. Inside, a metal plate sat at an angle, its face molded with the imprint of a hand. A narrow column of three squares of glass beside the imprint lit one by one, red, orange and yellow. When the final square illuminated, a flat male voice addressed us from an intercom hidden somewhere within the tunnel.

“Initiating DNA mirror test. Please place your right hand, palm down, on the scanner.”

Behind me, I could feel Tatsu’s tension prickling warily as he watched with fascination over my shoulder. My eyes scanned the walls and ceiling of the tunnel attempting to locate the source of the voice, but all I could see was more algae-coated cement and ruined stone.

Without hesitation Malakai obeyed, waiting silently while the system identified his genetic imprint. A bluish light glowed beneath his palm for a moment, moving from his fingertips to his palms before extinguishing once again.

“Test complete. Access granted.”

Malakai removed his hand from the inset panel. He turned towards Tatsu and I, gesturing for us to approach. Hesitantly, I stepped towards him.

“You’ll both need to be scanned before we can enter,” he said, pointing at the panel.

I stared at him. “They won’t have records of Tatsu or I,” I replied, concerned that we might not be allowed access as easily as we had anticipated.

Malakai shook his head. “You’d be surprised what they have records of.” He arched one eyebrow.

I could sense his growing agitation; he wanted to be out of the tunnels as quickly as possible. I turned towards the panel and placed my hand onto the plate. The light passed beneath my palm, my heart thundering in my chest as I awaited the results.

“Test complete. Access granted.”

I sighed with relief and stepped away from the panel so that Tatsu could take his turn. He cut his eyes towards me with suspicion as he raised his hand and mimicked my movements.

“Test complete. Individual identified, but unauthorized. Please wait for further instruction.”

“Damn it!” Malakai hissed between clenched teeth. He turned towards Tatsu. “You should leave, now!” he growled. Tatsu considered him for a moment, unruffled by Malakai’s anger. “No,” he said simply. “I have information I must impart to Tynan that cannot wait.”

I touched Malakai’s shoulder, breaking his concentration on Tatsu. “If we can get Josh and Loden to allow him access, that would be for the best. He is our ally and as much a part of this war as we are.”

Malakai shrugged off my hand with a snarl and approached the panel again. A holographic screen appeared about the size of a postcard, hovering above the DNA scanner. A close-up of a man’s face wavered within the projection.

His dark eyes narrowed with suspicion. “What the hell is this Malakai? You told me just you and Tynan Llewelyn. Who is this Tatsu vamp with you?”

“We ran into a bit of trouble and plans changed a bit. He’s an ally of the cause and of no threat. He is working with Tynan on the mission.” Malakai spoke with urgency. “Loden, haven’t I always taken the greatest precautions to protect you guys? You have to trust me. We need to get out

of this tunnel.”

Loden’s silent pause was excruciating. It was hard to gauge what his expression was through the grainy distortion of the holograph.

“Very well,” he finally said. His eyes shifted to the side as he were reading something on a separate screen. “I see nothing alarming here on his trace records.” His eyes cut back. “Don’t make me regret this, Malakai. I think we both know that you have more to lose in jeopardizing our alliance than I do.”

The concrete square slid back into place, moving forward to seamlessly conceal any trace of its existence. As it did so a larger panel to its left disappeared with the same recessive movement, only this time into the ground below. Dull artificial light poured into the tunnel. Malakai turned his face towards me and glared silently. He disappeared over the threshold into the disorienting gray glow.

I quickly followed, beckoning Tatsu to join us. Tatsu stood unmoving for a long moment in the shaft of dull light that bled out into the tunnel. Tentatively, he stepped over the threshold, his curiosity getting the better of him. The entrance slid shut behind him with a sharp metal and stone hiss. Clearly uncomfortable with being locked in the room, Tatsu remained pressed against the wall beside where the door had been, which now blended seamlessly with the rest of the flat gray cement. He surveyed the strange sheets of opaque plastic surrounding us.

We have nothing to fear here, I whispered to his mind. *They are our allies.*

His feline eyes narrowed at me suspiciously. *Why should I believe that?*

Because you have no other choice at this moment. I nodded towards the space in the wall where the door had

been. *Unless you know how to open that, I think we should make the best of this situation.*

His eyes switched back and forth from the glow behind the plastic to me. Cautiously, he lifted himself away from the wall and walked towards me. He extended his right hand outwards, palm up towards a break in the sheets. *You first.*

Typical. I turned away.

Malakai's head popped through the divide in the plastic. He glared, annoyed, at the two of us. "What the hell is taking you guys so long? You have no idea what it took for me to set up this little meeting. I suggest you get your asses moving if you want what you came here for." He dropped the plastic with a snap. On the other side, I could hear him muttering with irritation to himself as he wandered back into the room beyond.

"Your friend is charming," Tatsu said.

"Shut up," I snapped through gritted teeth and stepped through the divide.

Beyond the partitions lay what reminded me of a World War II war room set into a deep cave dug from a shelf of white limestone. The ceilings were low and mostly composed of the raw bone of the stone itself, though in places it appeared to be supported by pockets of concrete. The same rough slate-gray composite reinforced the walls on three sides until the natural stone curved and rippled above, its ancient surface riddled with round, black holes as empty as eye sockets. It was obvious that the construction of the walls, though solid, had been hastily completed, the rough swooping marks of the laymen's tools still deeply embedded in the hardened mixture.

Three battered metal workstations had been positioned in a crescent shape, and separated the entrance from the rest of the cave. They were covered with a neat arrangement of

sleek widescreen monitors on thin black pedestals beside stacks of other assorted hardware. In the strange ambient glow that poured from the monitors and a few florescent bulbs that dangled from the ceiling on long thick extension cords, I could see cables of various widths and colors snaking from the backs of each device. They twisted about each other like Amazonian vines in search of sunlight, sloping to the floor in a strangely organized chaos to the left and right walls of the room before disappearing into multiple rows of jacks along the outward facing sides of hydropower generator cubes.

From each cube a polymer tube extended upwards, disappearing into one of the holes in the limestone above to gather groundwater from the sediment around them. I had seen only a few such generators in the year since my reawakening; they were extremely costly and hard to come by. They were worth every cent though, for they were efficient and could sustain a brilliant level of wattage as long as rain poured from the sky from time to time.

Carefully stepping over the twisted rivers of cables, I walked around to the right of the workstations. Beyond the desks, the cave extended only about twenty feet or so. The haphazard walls to my left and right were lined with bolted metal shelving. Each shelf was covered with a vast assortment of electronic and digital equipment, scanning and storage devices, work gear, caving tools, and other strange miscellaneous apparatuses. Two shelves held canned and dehydrated food items and a limited assortment of cases containing military-issue eating and personal hygiene utensils, all engraved with the Tyst insignia. To the rear of the cave, suspended from the ceiling by thick steel chains were two sleeping bunks, one on top of the other. The thin pallets were spartanly covered in frayed green wool military blankets and a few flattened ancient pillows. Comfort was

obviously not a concern for those that lived down here.

The sound of creaking metal snared my attention as a figure seated behind the desk in the center turned to look at me. Tall and gangly, the man appeared to be somewhere in his mid-twenties. The paleness of his skin rivaled my own, bespeaking of long years far beyond the reach of the sun. His hair was buzzed close to the sides of his head, though a top section grew far beyond his shoulders to his waist, held back from his face tightly with black electrical tape, in a ponytail. Smudges of purple bruised beneath his dark brown eyes, accenting the chiseled angles of his features.

He leaned back in his chair casually and he squinted at me, his eyes adjusting to a plane other than that of the screen before him. “Hmmm...” he murmured. “So this is the man who’s going to take down the Tyst Empire?”

His lips twitched at the corners with mild amusement, the slender gold ring through his bottom lip glinting in the light of the monitor beside him. “For some reason I thought you’d be taller.”

Machine gun laughter erupted from a shorter, younger man with short blond hair and gold wire-rimmed glasses in the chair to his right. His attention, however, remained locked upon the screen in front of him, his fingers dancing rapidly across the deck without pause.

Malakai, who had been standing near the far wall idly eyeing the shelves of equipment, walked over to me. Holding out his right hand, palm up, towards the two men, he said, “Allow me to introduce the legendary J and L.”

“Loden.” The man with the Mohawk gave a sarcastic salute.

“Josh,” the other chimed in, still not tearing his fingers or his focus away from the deck before him.

I nodded. “A pleasure, gentlemen.”

“Well,” Loden took a deep breath, exhaling through his nose. He looked exhausted. He waved his hand loosely at the cave behind him. “I’d say get comfortable, if you can.” He laughed a little under his breath. “We don’t get many visitors down here, as you can well imagine.”

“Indeed,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “You are quite well hidden.”

“Yes and hopefully your little scuffle in the tunnel just now won’t change that,” Loden replied, arching an eyebrow.

Tatsu passed behind me, silent and smooth as silk. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him wander to the back of the cave and take a place in a shadowed corner upon a storage chest beside the bunks. I turned away from Loden’s scrutiny and walked about the room, coolly examining their secret little world.

“Malakai has informed us that you are looking to learn about the Chronous.” Loden sounded faintly amused, as if there was some private joke to which I was not privy.

I picked up a palm-sized device of cobalt blue metal. It was similar to the material the cyborg security units that patrolled the downtown district were plated with and reminded me of a compass, though the face defined no cardinal directions. I turned it over in my palm.

“Among other things,” I said, turning around to face Loden once again.

Malakai walked over to the bunkbeds and took a seat on the edge of the lower pallet. He fished his battered metal tin of tobacco out of his satchel and, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, began to roll a cigarette. His eyes cut over to me with a subtle annoyance and then back to the paper between his fingers. “The gatekeepers would only give us a twenty-four hour pass to the tunnels.” His voice was thick with a bitter sarcasm.

Loden cut him off before he could continue. “First off, you know the rules. No smoking down here. Damages the equipment.” He stared at Malakai until he relented and returned the unlit cigarette back into the tin with an irritated sigh.

Loden reached up with both hands and ran his palms over the shaved sides of his head before locking his fingers behind. He looked back at me, his bloodshot eyes contemplating me silently for a long moment before he spoke again. “That’s not much time. The Chronous is a very complex animal. How much do you already know?” He hooked the toe of his worn black combat boot in the arm of the chair next to him. With a kick he shoved it towards me. The chair skidded on screeching metal wheels into the side of my leg.

I took a seat in the chair and leaned back, the hinged metal squeaking under my weight. It was obvious Loden was not as impressed with my supposed powers as the Phuree were; I found his frankness refreshing. I wondered how late it was and how many hours we had left for Loden and Josh to teach me about the inner workings of the Chronous before the Sleep overcame Tatsu and myself. I gazed around the cave, unnerved about being trapped in such a place with three humans.

“I have to admit that I have had a very limited exposure to the Chronous, though my peers seem to believe I know far more than I realize.” I tried to disguise the sarcasm ingrained in my comment, though it seeped bitterly out around the edges despite my efforts. “I have experimented a little, listening in to the cross-chatter on different levels now and again, but my investigation of the system has been what I would call superficial up until now. If I had known I would need to master it, I suppose I would have studied a bit harder.” I laughed beneath my breath, running the fingers of

my right hand through my hair.

The left corner of Loden's thin lips tugged upwards in a strange half-smile.

"I tell ya what..." Something on the screen beside him caught his attention. He swiveled back to face the deck, his fingers tapping along the keys with furious speed. For a moment he was silent, watching strings of raw code scroll up a black window among the many open portals lining the monitor's face, his brow furrowed slightly, eyes squinting in concentration.

Seemingly satisfied for the time being with what he saw, he turned back towards me. "What Josh and I can do is give you a rundown of what you'll need to know to try to get inside the Tyst fortress. Beyond that, I think you're on your own. I've been down here in the tunnels, moving from one position to another for ten years watching this thing evolve, trying to find its soft underbelly, so to speak. The two of us trying to teach you every nuance of the Chronous would be like us trying to describe the entire ocean, past, present and future, in only a few hours. It is far too deep and vast. If we haven't mastered it after a decade of doing nothing but tracking it, I am afraid to say, I am doubtful you will be able to either."

He waved his hand nonchalantly through the air in front of him, "Then again, maybe you'll prove me wrong. I would be thrilled, and, I admit, a little pissed."

My heart rate picked up speed at the thought of going up against something so fathomless. There was a reservation in Loden's tone that concerned me, a bitterness that made me wonder if he would ever be at peace with the idea of a stranger intruding in on his territory. The Chronous was the focus of Josh and Loden's existences, and its defeat was the essence of their lives. I tried not to listen too closely, but I

could hear his thoughts nonetheless; the fact that the Phuree had placed their faith in an individual who had barely a base understanding of its intricacies grated on Loden's nerves, pinching his pride painfully.

I narrowed my eyes slightly as I considered him. "May I ask you a pointed question, Loden?"

He arched one eyebrow.

"Why have you agreed to help me if you feel it is so futile?" I chose my words and my tone with care.

"Curiosity. I am not too proud to admit that there may be something we have overlooked." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and pressing his fingertips against one another. "I'll be honest, I'm not in this to see the Tyst fall. They are too weak to hold any ounce of my respect. Hell, they don't even realize that the technology they created all those years ago now controls them. The Chronous is all that I am interested in and to date, Josh and I are the kings of that realm." He narrowed his eyes. "But we have yet to bring it down. We haven't even crippled it sufficiently. Trust me, I don't like the idea of someone being able to do what I have not, but if you can, I will happily hand over my crown to you."

Something sharp and dangerous twisted within me at Loden's direct challenge. I had been correct in my assumption of their agendas, that this was an endless game with very high stakes. I was trespassing upon sacred ground now, my each and every movement scrutinized for weaknesses, just as they ceaselessly combed the Chronous for its own. I wondered if Loden would truly be as humble as he professed if I was successful.

"I'm sure there will be no need for such a grand gesture," I said quietly, holding his gaze steady.

"Really?" he said, his smile disappearing. "I'm not."

* * *

The evening progressed until well after midnight, with Loden instructing me on the deeper levels of the Chronous language and the extent of the system's abilities. Malakai and Tatsu listened intently from the shadows at the rear of the cave, Malakai constantly keeping track of the time while Tatsu monitored Loden's every gesture with hawkish intensity. For the most part, Josh's attention remained locked on the screen in front of him, only momentarily turning over the supervision of the programs he ran to Loden when he needed to relieve himself in a hole drilled into the ground behind one of the sheets of plastic. I could not imagine how the pair had survived so long in such a bleak and harsh environment, no matter how often their connections came knocking with supplies or trades. They were addicted to the rush of the chase and willing to sacrifice anything and everything, knowing no other life except the one that glowed before them.

Though obviously unused to such lengthy dialogues with strangers, I could tell there was a part of Loden that truly wanted to believe I could accomplish the impossible and so I listened intently to his every word, memorizing each keystroke with a photographic clarity I knew I would need in the nights to follow. I had always known that my knowledge of the Chronous was limited, but it wasn't until Loden took me to its perimeter, jacked into the alternate plane of the grid itself behind a pair of what he termed "grid goggles", that I felt myself become utterly humbled by the vastness of the creature I was up against. Before, I had thought it was a system, a series of intricate, human-engineered programs strung together as an invisible mesh to contain the masses. However, as I sat paralyzed in my seat and blind to the

physical world, a cold, reptilian dread gripped the center of my being as I beheld the self-generating entity it had become.

In a plane where dimension or time no longer held justifiable meaning, where death truly became nothing more than a transference of energy, the thing I witnessed flexed and pulsed with an organic essence mimicking the chaos of life itself. Encased within a sheer skin of liquid numbers and symbols circling continuously inward upon themselves in infinite strings, which seemed to originate from nowhere, the entity breathed, stretching tentacles of sentient information outwards through the limitless pitch around it, probing for foreign presences out upon the plane to annihilate or absorb. At times strange faces would appear in the pulsing code, the features vague and distorted as if pressed behind a curtain of silk. They would rise and fall in the skin of the Chronous, imprisoned echoes of souls searching for a way out of Hell, around a spiraling heart of pure darkness at its center. We looked on from a great distance, our identities hovering suspended without our corporeal anchors, and I could feel a pull from the core of the Chronous, a black hole greedily consuming the universe around it.

“What is the blackness I see?” I asked Loden.

“That is the part we can’t yet define. The Chronous has evolved over the past decade, and the strange pit at its center only appeared a few months ago. There is no so-called information there, just a strange gravity, a vibration,” Loden replied. “That’s when the Chronous began warping at a far greater speed than we had ever seen before. From one second to the next it is completely different and its language has nearly surpassed what we’re capable of translating/deciphering/understanding? from the physical plane. There are symbols now that we’ve never seen and can’t replicate from our decks.”

Though I could not see him, I sensed Loden shrug, baffled.

“The Vicinus...” I was gripped by a surge of fear. I knew instinctively that the darkness was somehow connected to the primal force of the god.

“The what?” Loden asked.

My attention remained locked upon the Chronous as I struggled to maintain my calm. The entity shifted, expanding slightly, its infinite tentacles snapping viciously as it stretched further into the void around them, searching for something they had sensed.

“We need to leave,” I said urgently to Loden. “It knows I’m here.” One of the tentacles snaked towards our location, the tip separating into billions of dagger shaped prongs of undulating blue-white language.

“What do you mean, it knows you’re here? How does it know you?” Loden asked, bewildered.

“Damn it, Loden! Get us out NOW!” I screamed as the Chronous reared up and began descending on us from above. Distantly, I could feel my physical body reaching up to rip off the headgear that enslaved me to the grid even as Loden raced our identities back through the pathway we had traveled, doing his best to cover our tracks. It was in vain, however, for the Chronous continued to follow us with a predatory bloodlust of its own.

I gasped when I felt myself slammed back into my body just as I tore the goggles from my face, clawing at the wires of the headgear like it was alive and crawling with venomous spiders. Loden cursed loudly and tossed his equipment to the ground, focusing in on the screens in front of him, his face frozen in terror, his fingers dancing maddeningly across the keyboard, trying to disengage and deal with the new threat within the physical plane. I stood up from my chair, slowly

backing away from the workstations, my heart thundering in my chest until my body shook from the pounding pulse.

For the first time in hours Josh spoke, though his gaze remained transfixed on his own screen. “What the hell just happened in there?” He had donned grid gear similar to the ones connected to our screens, but instead of the black goggles, one circular lens flipped down in front of his right eye from the band of mesh wiring that wrapped about his head adhered by adhesive tabs to his pulse points.

“It’s found us,” Loden replied.

“What the fuck did y’all do? You’re not supposed to get that close!” Josh shouted angrily.

“Don’t you think I fuckin’ know that?” Loden retorted, his fingers flying over the board before him. “It zeroed in on us. I’ve never seen anything like that in my life!”

“I can’t get it off our trail!” Josh said under his breath, the anxiety rising dangerously behind his words.

“I can’t either! It’s over! We’re done.” Loden stood up, his chair crashing over behind him with the sudden movement. He began frantically tearing cables out of the backs of the stacks of hard drives to his left.

Malakai leapt from his seat and raced to Loden’s aid, disconnecting cables by the handfuls from the walls and equipment, his face displaying a panic I had not seen in him before.

“Dammit, Josh, I said we’re done! Jack out!” Loden yelled. Seeing that Josh was ignoring him, he rounded the table again and reached to rip the headgear from Josh’s brow. Josh struck out at Loden’s grasp. “I’m almost there. We can’t get out now. It will fry everything down here.”

Loden growled as he struggled with Josh. Suddenly, Loden was thrown backwards across the room when a surge of electricity rolled through the remaining cables, up and

out the lines connecting Josh to his equipment and through Loden's arms. He crashed into the metal shelving on the far side of the room; the crackling sound of frying circuitry echoed through the cave beneath a halo of white-blue sparks. The pungent smell of frying metal and flesh filled the air. Josh jerked in his chair, his eyes rolling back to the whites, his teeth clenched to the point of breaking, before collapsing forward across the workstation.

While the remnants of the electrical surge subsided, rolling in weakening currents of fizzing strings of lightning, the main lighting in the room faded and was replaced by the dull phosphorescent glow of two backup lights affixed to the wall on either side of the room.

Loden struggled to his feet, staring wide-eyed with shock and disbelief at Josh's dead body and the mass of ruined hardware around him. I felt paralyzed, the image of the Chronous descending upon Loden and I from the void of the grid burned into my mind's eye permanently. Beyond the workstations, Malakai lifted himself from the floor, peering over the edge at the smoldering remains. Cautiously, he approached Loden, his eyes flickering back and forth from the workstations to his associate.

"We need to get out of here." Malakai's tone was flat and serious.

"It won." Loden's words were barely a whisper.

"It hasn't won, yet," Malakai replied, his eyes locking with mine over Loden's shoulder, "but it knows where we are now. We have to move, and fast." He quickly walked around the room, digging several round discs out of his bag as he moved and sticking them to the walls in various locations.

"We have to get this stuff out of here, what isn't fried." Loden snapped out of his delirium, his voice switching to a

manic urgency as he started to sift hysterically through the piles of equipment around the room. “We have to save it. There’s too much information that I can’t replace.”

“There’s no time.” Malakai gestured to Tatsu and I to grab hold of Loden and move him to the front door. “If the Chronous has our location pinned, these tunnels will be swarming with Tyst before we know it.”

Tatsu grabbed Loden by the upper arms, pinning them to his sides, and dragged him away from the pile of drives he was collecting.

Loden struggled in vain against Tatsu’s iron grip. “We can’t just leave! We can’t leave him here.”

I stepped in front of Loden, blocking his view of Josh’s scorched corpse. Gently, I laid my hand upon his shoulder, capturing his gaze steadily with my own. “He’s gone,” I said. My words had a focusing effect on Loden and his resistance to Tatsu’s restraint ceased, his head hanging forward in a shuddering sigh of defeat. Malakai slipped past us, grabbing a hammer and a flathead screwdriver from one of the shelves. We followed him through the sheets of plastic to where he stood beside the area where the door had been, his right hand investigating the wall in search of something.

“Loden, is there another way to access the exit panel digitally, other than the surveillance systems?” Malakai asked without looking away from the wall.

Loden shook his head, staring at the floor. “No, it was all wired into the main drive.”

Long seconds ticked by in silence as Malakai surveyed the section of the wall to either side of the entrance. He lifted the screwdriver and placed its tip against the wall. He tapped the end with the hammer and a small horizontal fracture appeared. He wedged the screwdriver deeper into the wall, prying away the cover of the exit panel. Tossing the tools

aside, his fingers dug into the mass of wires and buttons, nimbly rerouting the currents and overriding the original system. Finally, the door hissed open. He turned back and ushered us outside into the pitch-black tunnel. Slapping the last remaining metal disc to the inside wall of the chamber, he pushed a button on its smooth silver face. The multiple discs were flashing red in the eerie glow of the emergency lights.

He nodded for us to leave. “Time to move, gentlemen. We have approximately one minute before this place is dust.”

CHAPTER 4

We tore through the tunnel back the way we had come, putting as much distance between ourselves and the cave as possible before the charges detonated. The force threw us forward onto the ground. The boom of the explosion roared through the narrow passageway, deep and rumbling as thunder. Fractures appeared in the walls and ceiling above us. We scrambled to our feet, shaking the debris from our clothing, and kept moving.

“We shouldn’t go any further towards Darwin’s hideout,” Malakai said, retrieving his night vision goggles from his pack and strapping them to his head.

I dug my own out of my bag and handed them to Loden when I realized he was next to blind without them down here. “Shouldn’t we warn them?”

“Trust me, they already know and I guarantee you, they would not be too happy to see us. Follow me.” Malakai headed down another tunnel that teed into the one we were following. “We need to get as far away from this place as possible.”

It would be faster if Tatsu and I carried you and Loden. I sent the thought silently to Malakai as we ran through the darkness.

You don't know the way, Malakai replied, his focus on the passageway ahead and the coordinates behind the lenses of his goggles.

Loden's slowing us down. He's not used to running. Tell me the coordinates as we go, I said and told Tatsu to throw Loden, who already appeared winded, over his shoulder. *Hold on,* I said, swinging Malakai effortlessly onto my back. He protested at first, but as Tatsu and I picked up our pace, slipping through the winding tunnels with a blinding speed, it was all he could do to hold on and tell me the directions as they appeared in his line of view. A journey which would have taken us hours was covered in a matter of minutes.

Slow down! Malakai shouted in my head. *We're here. Put me down.*

I relayed the information to Tatsu and we halted. I lowered Malakai to the ground. He stumbled a bit as gravity found its hold on him once again.

“That was amazing,” he muttered to himself and shook his head to clear it.

Beside me, Tatsu had returned Loden to his feet as well. Loden doubled over, bracing himself on his knees. “I think I'm going to be sick.” He moaned. “How the hell did you guys do that?”

Neither Tatsu nor I responded, our attentions fixed on Malakai, who began to climb an algae-coated metal ladder to the left of the tunnel with rusted rungs bolted into the cement wall. At the top was a grate that led to a sewer drain directly below a city street. Malakai pushed hard on it with both hands and it gave way, its hinges so decayed that they nearly disintegrated with the force. Silently, we followed

him, crawling out of the claustrophobic opening that was barely big enough to allow us to squeeze our bodies through. I dropped down onto the narrow brick ledge that ran alongside the foul, brackish water. Glancing up and down the section of the sewer system, I listened to the steady trickle of water running down the cement sides from the street above. Not wanting to linger too long, I followed Malakai to a second set of metal rungs that led to a manhole cover in the street above. Malakai nimbly scampered up the ladder and pushed the heavy metal disc aside. After thoroughly surveying the world outside, he looked back down at us and signaled that it was safe to exit.

I pulled myself up through the manhole and onto the street. Tatsu and Loden joined me. After the stale, rank air of the tunnels, the night breeze smelled sweet and clean as it wound through the deserted neighborhood. I knew we must be a good distance from the center of the city, for the streets had taken on the same disheveled decay that I had witnessed earlier that year. No artificial light could be seen for blocks in any direction, the only auras those of stray animals. I let my eyes wander through the dense autumn shadows that clustered together conspiratorially in the absence of streetlights and picked from them the impressions of houses greedily being reclaimed by the earth beneath them.

“Where are we?” I asked aloud. I listened to the night, thick with the symphony of crickets and the occasional swooping of a bat’s sonar.

Malakai had stripped away his night vision gear and retrieved an antique compass from his bag. “Northeast,” he replied and closed the compass with a snap. He glanced up at the sky, which was beginning to change from black to a deep navy as dawn edged closer to the northern hemisphere. “There are some old abandoned aircraft hangars up a ways

from here that we should be able to hide out in until tomorrow evening.” He started up the empty street, sticking close to the overgrowth near the broken sidewalk.

I closed the distance between Malakai and myself, Loden and Tatsu following silently behind us. “Do you think it’s safe? The hangars?”

Malakai shot me a sideways glance of irritation. “Safe as it’s going to get for us right now. I’ll stand watch during the day while you guys sleep. If my equipment’s working I should be able to contact the guy who was supposed to transport us once we were out of J and L’s domain. They weren’t expecting my signal this soon, so let’s just hope they’re available.”

I decided not to push the topic further. Far beyond the wreckage of Josh and Loden’s legacy, the adrenaline finally began to evaporate from my body, my limbs filling with a leaden weariness that ran bone deep. It was more than a mere physical exhaustion. It was a brutal mental shock and fatigue. How could I possibly explain to them what I had seen living at the heart of the Chronous? And what would that mean, not only for the future of the war we walked towards, but the fate of world itself? Something instinctual told me that even the Tyst were unaware of what coiled deep within their vast labyrinth, impregnating the very fabric of their universe, and if that were true, they no longer controlled the Chronous, not even remotely.

May the gods have mercy on us all.

We slipped through a broken chain link fence and made our way across the cracked asphalt of the abandoned runway towards the haunting, domed silhouettes of the aircraft hangars.

I awoke the following evening with a terrified gasp. Ripe with the new knowledge of the Chronous and the chaos that controlled it, my subconscious had greedily consumed each detail, wickedly contorting the truth to reveal my worst nightmare. In all actuality, the nightmare deviated only slightly from my reality, which terrified me even more.

Frantically, I clawed my way out of the pile of industrial tarps Tatsu and I had buried ourselves beneath, behind a tangled mass of ancient movie props near the rear of the hangar, left over from a time when the space had doubled as a sound stage in the early twenty-first century. Staggering away from the mess of canvas, my breathing labored and painful as I fought off the clinging remnants of the dream world, I leaned against the corrugated metal wall. My hands instinctively grabbed at my satchel, making sure the maps were still securely in my possession. My eyes darted over the sorrowful piles of forgotten film equipment, a twisted and bizarre junkyard from a time when escapism was simply a way of life. Slower to wake, Tatsu gradually emerged, dusting himself clean as he stepped towards me. He hissed through clenched teeth, his right hand reaching beneath his shirt.

“What is it?” I asked, still tense and on edge.

He pulled his hand out and held a quarter-sized gray creature up by its tail. “Scorpion,” he said with disgust.

The three inch long arachnid twisted violently, its pincers reaching for Tatsu’s fingers. He dropped the scorpion on the concrete and stepped on it with the toe of his boot. Without another word he turned and jumped over the pile, landing silently on the other side.

With a deep breath I centered myself, shrugging off the last of the nightmares, and joined him. We walked towards a small halo of dull artificial light at the far end of

the hangar, passing mountains of relics coated with thick, opaque layers of grime. It was a world frozen in time, the dreams of the passionate artists left exactly where they had lain on the day the world had ceased to care about such personal inscriptions. The metal structure of the hangar had protected the menagerie of equipment and props from the harsh elements, slowing their decay and preserving them as if the building expected its masters to return one day.

I shivered.

Malakai looked up from where he sat on a low wooden bench drug out from the left wall as he heard our approach. A pale yellow glow came from a flashlight he held in his right hand, pointed at a map spread out on the bench before him. Several handguns lay on either side of him as well as two throwing knives and a whetstone. On the other side of the bench was a new face, a man in his late forties with short-cropped brown hair, a pair of scratched aviator glasses pushed back over the spikes. His face could have been cut from granite, hard and chiseled with a heavy jaw and strong, high brow. He squinted through the halo of artificial light at Tatsu and I as we approached.

Behind the two men, an old, heavily rusted black double-cab pickup had been pulled into the hangar through the larger of the two docking doors. The hangar's entrance was open, rolled up into a tight coil above the entrance opening. Outside, the night was clear and crisp, the deep purple sky alive with glittering white stars.

Malakai got up off the bench, folding the map and returning it to his satchel. "Guys, this is Carson. He's gonna be our driver tonight. Carson, this is Tynan and..." He paused for a moment. "Sorry, I don't think I ever caught your name." Malakai stared at Tatsu, narrowing his eyes as he considered him, still obviously annoyed by his presence.

Tatsu nodded at Carson. "Tatsu," he said smoothly.

"Where are we headed?" I asked, severing the tension I could sense building between Tatsu and the mortals.

Carson shoved his hands into the lower pockets of the black nylon utility vest he wore over an olive-green canvas jacket. "I'm supposed to take you guys out to a bunker east of here. It'll be a hell of a lot safer there." His voice was deep and gravelly. "Malakai briefed me on what went down last night. You guys are lucky to be alive."

I nodded. "Very lucky," I said, thinking to myself, You have no idea. I looked around, scanning the shadows of the building. "What did you do with Loden?"

"He's over there." Malakai pointed to the corner of the wall near the front entrance before turning back to the weapons on the bench. He began replacing the guns in their holsters on his back and sides beneath his coat, slipping the knives into slits on either side of his boots.

"Have you told him that we're about to leave?" I asked. Malakai shook his head, grimacing. "He's been over there all day. I think he slept, off and on, but he hasn't moved or spoken once."

I couldn't tell if it was irritation or concern in his voice.

I nodded, feeling a pang of guilt for Loden's catatonia. If I had not ventured into the grid with him, the Vicinus might not have destroyed his world. It was not Josh or Loden he had been after, it was me. They had simply been unfortunate casualties. I walked over to where Loden sat, his back pressed against the corrugated metal, his arms wrapped tightly around his bent knees. His head was tilted back and resting against the wall. He gazed blankly up at the ceiling, unblinking. I stared down at him for a moment before taking a seat next to him. He did not move or look away from the darkness high above.

“We’re ready to move out,” I said, not truly knowing what else there was to say.

“It’s all gone,” Loden whispered.

“You can rebuild it,” I replied, trying to sound reassuring. “We can find you new equipment. You’ll be back up and running in no time.”

Loden shook his head. “No,” he said. “It’s over. It won. Without Josh, I can’t man that type of setup. He was the most brilliant jockey I’ve ever met. He was unique. You can’t replace that. I guess I just always pictured it going down a different way, in a blaze of glory, a massive battle, us against the Chronous. Something epic, ya know? Something people would remember. Maybe I really didn’t think it would ever end at all. I don’t know...”

“People will remember,” I replied, thinking of the underground network in which they were already legends. Loden shook his head. “No. No, they won’t. People only remember the extremes, good or bad.” Though there was a great deal of truth in his words, the desolation in his voice was heart wrenching.

“Perhaps this isn’t the end, but a new beginning,” I said. “Sometimes forests have to burn in order for new life to quicken.”

Loden lifted his head from the wall and turned to look at me. He appeared much older than he had the night before, the purple bruises beneath his eyes creased with fine lines, his cheeks hollow and gaunt under tortured eyes. “There is no new life beyond this, not for me.”

There was a finality in his tone I knew I should not argue with. Perhaps in time he would embrace a new path once the pain of his loss dulled and sloughed away like a skin he had worn for far too long. I sighed heavily, pursing my lips together.

“I still think it would be wise if you joined us. We believe your life has value, even if you do not,” I said, holding his gaze. I stood and turned towards him, offering my hand to help him rise.

He peered up at me, studying my features for an excuse to remain behind and wither along with his dreams. “I suppose there is nothing worth going back for, is there?” I shook my head. “I somehow know that we have all we need now.”

After a long moment of hesitation he accepted my hand and crawled to his feet. From across the room, I nodded to the others that we were ready to leave.

* * *

The pickup truck sped out of town, hitting highway 71, due east. Loden had crawled into the back of the cab and passed out across the narrow bench while Tatsu and I had jumped into the rusted, unlined bed. The worn tires translated every inch of the journey through the steel frame and up my spine where I huddled between the exterior of the cab and the wheel hub, my arms wrapped tightly about my knees to ward off the chill night wind. Tatsu sat across from me, arms folded across his chest, staring out over the undulating fields of corn and wheat now tall and wild without their human masters to tend to them. High above us, the night sky stretched, a perfect dome of flawlessly flowing ink bejeweled with the limitless legacy of the heavens. Perched among them, the moon hung, nearly full, waning into darkness.

Tatsu’s eyes shifted from the landscape to the silhouetted figures in the cab of the truck. Beyond, the headlights washed the blacktop with two conical beams of white light. After a moment of silent observation, his gaze turned to me. *We*

need to talk.

So you said before, I replied, looking away out over the blur of black and silver fields. *What did you find out? And where is Lillian?*

Lillian is fine. She is still working on our investigation. Tatsu did not elaborate.

I don't like the idea of her being left alone in the amagin. I felt a cold and sickening dread curdle in the pit of my stomach. My eyes traveled to the cracked highway stretching out behind us, a winding, deserted river of asphalt.

You know as well as I that she can take care of herself, Tatsu quipped defensively. It was obvious that it had not been his decision to leave her behind without warning. It's the girl I need to talk to you about. Your last victim from the amagin. The one Phelan and Seafra keep referring to.

Tatsu's words ensnared my attention. My eyes cut back to grasp hold of his gaze.

I thought the story they gave you about her being on 'leave of duty' sounded suspicious considering the massive impossibility of a servant of her stature possessing the ability to just 'slip out' undetected. There's also the issue of the distance. If it were merely an unsupervised night out, why travel so far from the Tyst's fortress? It just didn't add up. So, Lillian and I did a little digging in the area of town where you met her.

How did you know where I was that night? I asked warily, wondering if I had chosen wisely in my decision to trust in Tatsu.

Sea and I talked briefly after your fight with Phelan, as they were tending to your wound and rounding up supplies for the journey. He was very tightlipped, which I found rather strange, but I was able to pry enough information out to at least give me a location, Tatsu replied calmly, ignoring

my suspicion. *Anyhow, he continued, Lillian and I combed through the quarter, listening in on as many conversations and thought-chatter as possible. We found the establishment where the girl had last been seen before you lured her away. We were allowed entrance only after a bit of mental 'persuasion' and once inside we realized quickly it was a front for a trader house, a meeting place for information exchanges, and not simply another bar.*

My eyes widened with interest. *Go on.*

Turns out that the little woman was only out of her cage because the Tyst allowed it. Apparently, she was some sort of spy relaying information about the Market and the Phuree back to Cardone as she acquired it, though the impression I got from certain unsavory minds was that she might have been playing both sides. She had gone to the bar to meet a contact, but he hadn't shown.

I felt my brow furrow as the weight of this new information settled heavily on my shoulders. *Were you able to find out who the contact was?*

Tatsu shook his head. *Unfortunately no. Those we 'convinced' to talk to us could not recall the person in detail, though he apparently had been there a few times to meet with the girl. Even when I combed through their memories, they were blurry and vague, which suggests to me that whoever it was had a substantial ability at cloaking their identity.*

My eyes instinctively shot towards the seated figures in the interior of the cab, my distrust of Malakai rearing savagely. No matter how solid his alliance appeared to be with the Phuree, they were not his only customers. His interaction with Darwin and J and L had proven that much. However, I also knew that Malakai was not the only dealer in the world. Was it fair for me to automatically assume the worst?

I will be interested to hear if Lillian has had success in unearthing any more information. If the servant girl was a spy, the Tyst have probably figured out that she's dead by now. I wonder how she was infiltrating the Phuree, or who was supplying her with Phuree intelligence? I turned back to catch Tatsu watching me intently.

I will try to contact Lillian when we get to the safe house, Tatsu said.

I nodded. *Yes, but be very careful. Anyone could be listening. We really don't know who our enemies are now. Not that, I suppose, we ever did.*

* * *

We traveled for another hour in silence before turning abruptly down an unmarked road that disintegrated to hard-packed dirt and loose gravel. The tires roared over the chunks of rocks, spewing them behind the vehicle in a dense cloud of dust. The road twisted and turned through the countryside, the truck skidding dangerously through the limestone and dirt, the landscape growing dense with thorn-laden mesquite trees, scrub brush and cacti that reached out and scratched at the steel sides of the vehicle with hungry claws. The night air was dense with the scent of pollinating cedar and dry grass beneath the humid perfume of ground that was still damp from rain. After a dizzying series of turns, the truck slowed to a crawl, finally stopping before a steel cattle gate attached to a rickety wooden fence lined with barbed wire.

I peered over the roof of the pickup's cab. Above the low rumble of the idling engine, the shrill symphony of crickets and tree frogs echoed from the black canvas of the fields that stretched out to either side, beyond the fence. Carson kept the truck running while Malakai jumped out of the passenger

side to open the gate, walking it inwards in the dust and bug-infested headlight beams. The truck pulled forward while Malakai waited and then closed the gate once again, running up alongside to jump into the cab and the vehicle continued to roll down the rocky drive.

The truck bounced through the two deep ruts worn in the dirt road, and lights appeared in the distance, wavering spots from flashlights and lanterns like ship signals undulating though the sea of waving grasses. Carson slowed as we neared an ancient farmhouse that leaned against a large oak tree on one side, its dust-caked windows dark and lifeless. Several figures approached the truck. Three men in black clothing holding high-powered rifles shone their flashlights into the cab and bed of the truck.

One approached the driver's side and nodded to Carson, pointing out into the field beyond the end of the rough drive. "Pull it down to the shed at the bottom of the hill. I'll meet you over there to let you in."

Carson leaned out of the window and shouted back to us. "You boys go ahead and get out. Take Loden with ya."

Tatsu and I jumped out of the bed, Malakai exiting the passenger seat, our boots hitting the earth with a dull thud. I pulled open the door to the cab. Loden lay unconscious across the back seat, his left arm across his face.

"Hey." I tapped him on the leg. He woke with a gasp, scrambling up in the seat. "We're here," I said. Loden rubbed his eyes. "Where's here?"

"Not sure." I looked around at the stretch of farmland and the grave faces of the men surrounding us, the unsettling feeling that they were not the only eyes watching us causing my skin to crawl as if alive with tiny spiders.

I waved for him to exit the truck, waiting with my hand on the edge of the doorframe for him to crawl out of the

seat before shutting it again. Carson pulled forward, the truck creaking down the incline towards a rusted corrugated metal shed that had once sheltered livestock and farming equipment. The man who had addressed him followed on foot close behind. I watched the red glow of the taillights for a moment before turning to face the two remaining men.

Without a moment's hesitation they walked toward the house, gesturing for us follow them. Malakai and one of the men moved away from the rest of us, picking up their pace as we rounded the front of the house, stepping carefully on the creaking cedar wood of the sagging front porch, conversing in hushed tones. I listened to Malakai's words, still on edge from Tatsu's disclosures, but all he spoke of were matters of rations and weapons.

My eyes wandered over the deteriorating face of the building, and I was amazed that it still stood after so many years. The grit and pride of those pioneers who had built a life from the hostile landscape was still richly engrained in every groan and sigh as the house shifted and settled itself through the night. Its soul regarded me with a harsh, weathered scrutiny—it knew I now trespassed upon land that was not mine, invited or not as my presence might have been. The narrow planed boards that constructed the exterior were faded from the unrelenting southern sun and long years of lonely neglect. What little remained of the last coat of paint it had received, most likely over a century before, was peeling badly. Hanging by only the bottom of its two rusted hinges, the screen door leaned awkwardly against the plain solid one beneath it, the metal mesh frayed and torn away to curl downwards. In the center of the wide porch an ancient metal light fixture still hung from a chain, a massive spider web affixed from the screen door's top to stretch upwards into the shadows of the roof timbers. The intricately delicate

creation of spun silk was a new formation, its mistress, a large yellow banana spider the size of an egg, perched motionless at its center awaiting the night's first prey.

We stepped off the porch, down two badly laid cement stairs, and rounded the other side of the house. Carson and the other armed man walked past Tatsu and I, emerging from the empty field that stretched beyond the house, their clothing hissing quietly as they moved through the long blades of wild grass. Carson approached a metal storm door, painted a camouflage of browns and dull greens, set into the ground beside the house's foundation. It was obvious that it was not part of the original structure—the thin line of cement around its edges securing it in place was still smooth and gray. He opened the door and began to descend along with Malakai and his associates.

Tatsu spoke, his voice barely a whisper, as we approached the opening. "I don't like the idea of being trapped in another bunker."

I did not reply, though I agreed with his concerns. Somehow I knew it would be far easier to escape this time if the need were to arise. However, my ability for social diplomacy had worn thin. The idea of an introduction to yet more new faces and their associated stories caused my stomach to sour painfully. I needed time to digest the information I had acquired in order to make peace with it and decide how best to proceed, but the whirlwind progression of events over the past few nights had not allowed for such a luxury. Tatsu, Loden and I stepped, one after the other, down the flight of steep wooden stairs into the bunker below, our footfalls echoing loudly in the cramped quarters.

My eyes adjusted to the low, golden glow from oil lamps hung from nails in several support beams positioned at intervals throughout the main room, which looked to be

as large as the foundation of the house that sat over it. The stifling air was heavy with the scent of stale human sweat and oxidizing metal. Low ceilings, no more than eight feet in height, were coated roughly with crude cement, as were the walls.

The space was partitioned into several manned work stations lined with computers and surveillance equipment, their masses of power cables running up along the walls to disappear into holes drilled in the ceiling here and there. I could only assume that, secreted on the property somewhere were solar-cell or hydro-generators from which they drew their power. On the far side of the bunker stood two long tables surrounded by metal chairs, one of which was layered with maps, charts and blueprints, the other with ammunition. "This way." Carson's gruff voice directed Tatsu, Loden and I to follow him through a curtained doorway to our right. The three men who had greeted us returned to their work at various points about the room, completely unconcerned with our presence.

I followed Carson through the doorway into what appeared to be the living quarters. The room was comparable in size to the first one, the left side of which was dominated by three rows of narrow bunk beds with sturdy, unpainted wood frames. The right half of the room had been devoted to a rudimentary kitchen complete with several hotplates, an array of battered cooking pans and utensils, and a bucket for washing. Weatherized canvas bags and sealed metal containers of rations were piled in one corner beneath a shelf supporting plates, bowls and mugs. Two round wooden tables sat between the cooking area and the bunks along with a few mismatched chairs and stools. The safe house was not meant for long-term living, existing more as a secure resting point for those on the run.

Carson sat down at one of the tables. Loden joined him, slouching in his chair, staring down at the floor, his expression distant and apathetic.

“I’ve got to catch a little shuteye.” Malakai walked to the last bunks against the far wall and flopped onto his back on the bottom pallet.

I approached the table, pulling a chair out and turning it around so that I could straddle the seat. Tatsu remained standing at my side. I leaned forward, folding my arms across the back and stared at Carson.

“What now?” I didn’t know how much I could disclose to Carson. As he was an associate of Malakai, trusting in him would not come easily.

Carson folded his arms over his chest and met my stare. He watched me for a while, and I was struck with the impression that he knew far more about me than I did about him.

“Malakai has notified emissaries who have informed the Phuree of the new developments. The Phuree are sending some of their people here this evening to meet with you at some point.”

“Do you know who?” I asked.

“No. I didn’t care to ask. I’m just a driver. I take people where they need to go. The less I know, the safer I am,” Carson replied, his tone non-negotiable.

I nodded. “That’s probably a wise way to be these days,” I said and sighed, suddenly overcome with mental and emotional fatigue.

“It’s kept my ass alive this long.” Carson stood up, pushing the chair back, the legs hissing across the untreated concrete floor. He walked towards the curtained doorway.

“So, what do we do in the meantime?” I asked him over my shoulder.

“You wait,” he said coolly and disappeared into the next room.

* * *

As the night slowly crawled upon its belly towards dawn, Tatsu grew increasingly agitated, his need to feed making him tense and argumentative as he paced back and forth from one wall to the other. I more than sympathized with the sensation of wanting to climb out of his very skin, though for me it was because of a different reason other than mere Thirst. At first, he had attempted to contact Lillian. His silent signals went unanswered, causing his anxiety to increase exponentially. For several hours I tried to block out the white noise of Tatsu’s irritation as I meditated on the new knowledge I had obtained, breaking down the hours spent in the bunker into millions of frozen movie stills as I poured through the electronic files Tiernan had entrusted to me. Had it not been for the realization of what now lurked at its center, I believed I would have felt secure in my growing ability to understand the Chronous and its evolving language. It was becoming almost as instinctual to me as breathing. Despite my increasing confidence with the technology itself, however, a blind primal terror still resonated within me.

In a sense, I had seen the essence of my *god*. Not the ones glorified by my ancestors or the ones clung to by the mortals of my present, but the true *creator* of my kind. The continuity of Immortal existence: the beginning, the middle and what could very well be the end. Its truth was undeniable, a banishing of every mortal construct of good and evil; the obliteration of heaven and hell, of time and space, life and death. What I had witnessed, without the words to truly justify it, was the heart of creation itself. Chaos.

Gods were indeed real, though as nothing I had previously believed or ever would again. My entire identity felt as if it had been shattered into unrecognizable shards. Yet, somehow I felt a strange satisfaction in knowing that everything I had believed until that point was a lie, just as I had always said it was. My previous disillusionment had been sickeningly justified.

Now god existed as close to me as a human engineered construct. I thought about the computers that hummed quietly in the other room, manned by unsuspecting mortal men. They had no clue as to what now lurked at the heart of their systems, listening, watching, waiting for the opportune moment to lash out at the physical realm once again. Perhaps the Vicinus merely toyed with it out of curiosity, biding his time until the night he would be reborn? There was no way of telling how far his power could reach. He could kill from within the grid. This, he had demonstrated with the death of Josh. My question was why? I had felt him recognize me, his desire to annihilate me cruel and conscienceless. But how did he know me? How could such a primal force see me as a threat? Perhaps there had been more truth in Nahalo's prophecies than I had wanted to believe. The idea did little to comfort me.

There were too few humans in the bunker to dispose of any of them discreetly, so Tatsu and I agreed we would have to hunt for wild game instead. It was not an appealing idea, but neither of us knew what lay ahead in the coming nights and if or when we would have a chance to feed. With very little effort, we manipulated the minds of the men in the front room to ignore us as we passed through and climbed up the stairs. Slipping between the two lines of a barbed wire fence to the left of the house, we quickly made our way across a moonlit field of untended wheatgrass and down to

a darkened grove of live oaks and cedars. It was not long before we spied a small herd of deer grazing amongst the undergrowth. Keeping to a distance so as to not spook the cluster of animals, we silently calmed the doe closest to us, luring her to linger behind as her family moved off into the trees. Swiftly, we slayed the animal and drained its body, leaving the corpse in the grove for scavengers to feed upon.

As we returned across the field, the strange, gamey taste of the deer's blood still heavy on my tongue, I caught a glimpse of lights in the distance. We quickened our pace, rounding the house to where Malakai and two of the men from earlier were already walking down the drive towards a pair of bobbing headlights, their rifles readied in their hands. The lights dimmed and a deeply scarred jeep rolled to halt. Four figures dressed in Phuree garments poured out of the back. I recognized the two guards, Jaxon and Edo. Khanna and Nahalo followed close behind.

Nahalo approached me, his face, masked in his mortal guise, furrowed with concern. He had traded his robes for the same rough earthen-colored trousers and belted tunic as the guards wore beneath a brown jacket of tanned leather.

"Come with me," he said, walking past me, leaving the others behind.

I cast a confused glance back at the group now heading toward the house before following silently after him. A hundred feet from the house he stopped and turned back to face me abruptly. Casting a nervous glance at the horizon to gauge what little time we had left until sunrise, he spoke.

"We began traveling the moment the sun set. We got here as soon as we could. What are our arrangements?" he asked bluntly, sounding more like an army commander than a mystic oracle.

I explained the situation with the bunker and the number

of mortals stationed below. “I’m not sure exactly how much they know. Tatsu and I didn’t speak to most of them. I did get a strange impression that the man calling himself Carson knows far more than he’s letting on though.”

“What about the house above?”

I shook my head. “I haven’t explored it. There may be an attic, but I’m not sure. It doesn’t look all that sound.”

Nahalo sighed heavily through his nose. “This is going to be tricky, but Jaxon and Edo will stand guard. This is a bad situation that we’re now in.”

I dropped my head, running the fingers of my right hand through my hair. I felt I had somehow failed, though I knew not why. “I’m so sorry.”

Nahalo’s features softened. He reached out and placed his hands on my shoulders. “No. There is nothing for you to apologize for. There is no way you could have prevented the Chronous from destroying that resource. The battle between Josh and Loden and the Tyst began long before you were introduced into the fold.”

“No, it’s not the Chronous,” I said. My head still slightly bowed, I raised my eyes to meet Nahalo’s steady gaze. “The Vicinus. He’s inside of it, controlling it somehow.”

“But... that’s impossible,” Nahalo breathed. “His powers aren’t supposed to have that kind of influence until—”

“He’s born.” I cut him off, sensing his mounting panic. “Yes, I know, but that’s changed. Somehow he’s found a way in, a way to affect the world, at least subtly?” My voice trailed off as I searched for words. “Nahalo, he *saw* me when I was jacked in with Loden. He *knows* what I am.” I still could not believe the very words I spoke aloud. “That’s why Josh died. Because of me. He wanted to kill me, but Josh got in the way.”

For a long moment, Nahalo was silent as he stared at me,

wide-eyed, before turning away. “Dammit,” he hissed under his breath as he walked a few feet from me, folding his arms over his chest as he stared out over the desperate landscape.

I regarded him for a long moment. “What does this mean for the mission?” I asked. “For me?” I was not sure I wanted answers to my questions.

Nahalo unfolded his arms, pressing the tips of his fingers prayerfully to his lips. “There’s no way to tell who’s controlling who now. If the Vicinus is already lending his strength to the Chronous, he will only continue to strengthen the closer the Queen carries the child to term. We have to act now.”

“What about my training?” I stared at Nahalo. “I’m not ready...”

He shook his head. “We no longer have the luxury for the lengthy instruction I had planned for you. I will teach you what I can in the next few nights, enough so that hopefully your instinctual grasp of the Chronous will be enough to manipulate it when accompanied by your new powers. You must execute the mission. If the Vicinus knows you, it will only be a matter of time before the Tyst track us down and then everything will be lost.”

He approached me and took my face in his hands. “If the Vicinus has tried to kill you once, he will try again. If he indeed fears you enough to try then he knows you are a threat. That is a good thing.”

“Why? What does that mean?” I asked, trembling beneath my clothes.

Nahalo put his arm around my shoulders. “It means my visions of you and your destiny are coming true.”

CHAPTER 5

One would believe that when time is eternal for a creature, each and every moment would be more wretchedly hollow and excruciatingly permanent than the last. Seconds would tick past upon a faceless clock, frozen universes of meaningless introspection crawling down lightless paths lined with the nails of our sins, inevitably leading back to the very next second where everything begins once again. It was so much more, though, for as I had witnessed the centuries devoured by time, I knew I could draw but a single breath and inhale the essence of an entire decade. Beyond the binding possessive pull of time, I somehow existed apart from the mortal anchor that gave life its true meaning. Over and over again, the simple moments that marked the passing of time slipped through my splayed fingers, volcanic black sand glistening in the moonlight.

So the following three nights passed in a blur of intense strategic preparation. While Malakai and Loden, who had gradually come out of his stupor as his curiosity overwhelmed him, outlined the most efficient penetration route into the

Tyst fortress, Nahalo took me under his wing, pulling me into the safe seclusion of the rolling hillside to coax from me the newly instilled powers nurtured by his transfused bloodline. Forcing myself to suppress the fear and self-doubt that still secretly ravaged my soul, I entrusted in Nahalo's guidance as he led me deeper into the power that now dominated my being than I had thought possible.

Through primal meditations, he led me down through the layers, descending past the gates of Hell. Each portal gave me a more intimate understanding of the core nature of the universe, forcing me further from my physical manifestation until I nearly forgot what it felt like to be grounded in the third dimension, the realm of the four elements. However, upon the eve of the third night, I knew I had barely begun the transition towards embracing their full potential. I could harness them like wild stallions I had tamed, though I could not yet urge them to race for me. Such prowess would come with time, I knew, but it was time we no longer had.

Carson had agreed to take Malakai, Khanna, Loden and I the thirteen hundred miles northeast to the remote location where the Tyst fortress lay, hidden amongst the Appalachians. It was a trip that would take over three nights by truck, traveling beneath the cloak of darkness and hiding during the day in the security of safe houses allocated by Carson and his network. I had decided to ride with my mortal companions instead of flying on ahead, alone—I felt it was my duty to stay with them, to protect them.

As for Tatsu, I asked him to make his way back to the amagin parameters to continue his investigation. I was still worried about Lillian's safety and my mind would not rest until I knew she was alive and well. Nahalo would return to the Phuree to report back to Tiernan on the progress of the situation and to ready them for whatever might come after.

The other clans around the world needed to be notified to move deeper into hiding for the time being, to withdraw their attacks and reserve their resources. It was time for a greater unification than they had ever attempted before.

Nahalo and I watched from the front porch of the old farmhouse while Malakai and Loden loaded supplies into the back of Carson's pickup. It was early in the evening and the sky was still darkening from the sunset to a rich purple hue streaked with lines of racing clouds. Somewhere, within the black cluster of trees across the fields, a coyote wailed, the haunting cry carried across the currents of crisp night air, sharp and poignant. Malakai closed the tailgate, rusty metal crunching into place, and signaled to me that it was time to leave with a wave of his hand.

"Time to fulfill your destiny," Nahalo said, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I drew a deep breath and exhaled, contemplating the vehicle idling in the driveway, trying to focus my mind as it rejected the prospect of the coming journey. My silence lingered heavily in the air between us. I could feel the sharpness of his scrutiny, reading my thoughts as they raced in a thousand different directions.

"Despite all that has occurred, I have no doubt that the gods have chosen well in you," he said, leaving little room for debate.

Gradually, I turned to face him. In the shadows of the decaying porch, Nahalo's human guise had somehow softened, his expression one of fatherly pride. There was a fear in his eyes, however, which no amount of shimmering could mask, the anticipation of what would come after if I were to succeed. I embraced him, unable to look into his eyes any longer.

"You will return to us," he whispered into my hair.

Wordlessly, I turned away and walked towards the dusty headlight beams of the idling pickup. The darkness in his voice disturbed me.

* * *

The first night I chose to ride alone in the open bed along with the supplies, meditating upon the glittering dome of night above me, allowing my consciousness to drift through the constellations. We sped along vast stretches of pitch-black interstate until the dull glow of an amagin upon the horizon would cause us to deviate onto less populated back roads. Carson had timed the journey so that each night, just before dawn, we would make our way to the safety of another secure bunker so well obscured from unwelcome eyes that even I would have not noticed its existence if unguided.

Within the survivalist environments of the buried rooms, the same grave faces, the same stale reek of sweat and desperation emanating from wood and concrete and rusting metal, embraced us. It pressed down like rain-soaked grave dirt, barely holding at bay the dread of each new day that lurked below the war-dulled gazes of the men and women who manned the stations.

Since we always arrived just before dawn, no one ever questioned our need to sleep during the day, equating our coma-like slumber with simple exhaustion. The only conversations were hushed and brief talks of highway routes and supplies before we were left alone to rest. Important discussions were kept for the hours on the road, away from curious ears. Though we felt secure enough to accept shelter from them, the safe houses were filled with strangers and strangers could often turn traitors.

When the sun set on the fourth night, we headed out

for the last stretch into the mountains before Malakai, Khanna, Loden and I would depart from Carson. We would then hike the remaining two or so miles on foot, each of us wearing signal scramblers to distort our body heat readings from scanners located throughout the land surrounding the fortress. I wasn't entirely sure how such a device would work for a creature like myself, whose body temperature constantly remained far below the normal human level, but I did not argue.

Loden had chosen to ride the last few miles in the bed of the truck with me, huddled amongst the last of the rations and supplies, claiming the close quarters of the cab were beginning to drive him insane. I did not blame him. In all honesty, I was surprised we had all managed to remain civil to one another despite the circumstances, our silence maintaining a protective barrier between us. I was also impressed by Loden's quick adaptation after a decade spent nearly completely underground.

He pulled the collar of his jacket up around his neck. His long Mohawk, still pulled back with electrical tape, whipped fiercely against his face in the wind.

Silently, I scanned his thoughts; they were filled with code, numbers and symbols dancing across his mind as if he scrawled them frantically on an invisible blackboard only to erase them and start again. He was searching for something still, trying to make sense of the madness of that last night in the tunnels. The crushing defeat that had paralyzed him only nights before was no longer present, his pain replaced by the numbness of purpose and determination. I knew in my heart that if we failed, it would be the true end of him.

The truck veered off the road, the headlights bouncing through the dense pines that surrounded us as we took to a narrow dirt path that eventually ended altogether. The

vehicle slowed, the lights dimming, and we rolled to a stop.

I stood and gazed out through the woods. The sweet smell of fallen pine needles was intoxicating, the soft call of distant owls mesmerizing in their mystery. In a world devastated by war and disease, there still existed a few alcoves of purity, unmarred by the brutal hand of humanity. I shivered, feeling my senses opening to the world until I could hear each needle whispering to one another above, each scurrying beetle breaking down the dead for the living forest to thrive upon, even the ripple of a brook over a mile away. I heard the doors to the pickup close and the tailgate open.

I looked down to see Malakai and Khanna pulling weapons from a crate, strapping ammunition to their utility belts. Their attentions were focused on the job at hand and they did not speak to one another. It was as if they had become perfect strangers. Loden rifled through his pack beside them, oblivious, holding a flashlight between his teeth as he checked the pieces of docking equipment and cables he thought would be necessary if my abilities proved inadequate to hack the entrance. Carson strolled around to the side of the truck where I was standing.

He leaned against the edge, watching the trio on the end. “I gotta hand it to ya. Y’all are a lot crazier than anyone I’ve ever met,” he said with a short, gruff laugh. It was the first full sentence I had heard him utter since we had left Texas.

My eyes cut downwards to him. “Crazy?” I replied, feeling the fine hairs on the back of my neck bristle with irritation. I jumped over the side of the truck bed to the ground.

“In a good way,” Carson said, turning to lean back against the side of the truck. He folded his arms over his chest. “Willing to die for your cause, crazy. You know what

I mean?"

"Odds that good, eh?" I asked, not really caring for an answer. I continued to survey the woods around me, searching for signs of Tyst surveillance.

He shrugged his shoulders with a smirk. "Better than most, maybe."

I could tell it was his way of wishing me well. I turned to face him. "Guess I'll take those odds," I replied and held out my hand to him.

He hesitated for a moment before taking it in his own and giving it a hard shake. I could tell it made him uncomfortable, the feel of my strange skin against his own. He had yet to ask exactly what I was, but I believe he instinctively knew.

"Thank you, Carson." I let go of his hand and he placed it in the pocket of his pants.

He nodded, his brow furrowing slightly. "Just doing my job. Like we discussed, this is where we go our separate ways. Part of me wishes I could help somehow, whatever it is that y'all are really attempting to do. I think I would just weigh y'all down." He laughed again.

I nodded. "I understand."

The tailgate of the truck shut with a rusty whine. Carson patted the side of the truck like a horse's flank. "Okay. You kids play safe, now." He turned away then stopped, his gaze swiveling back to meet mine. "Seriously, be careful."

I remained silent, but held his gaze for a long moment before he broke free to climb into the driver's seat of the truck. The four of us watched in tense silence as the vehicle backed up and turned around in the clearing, its dull red taillights bouncing eerily through the dense shadows until they vanished from sight.

"Shut that off," Malakai hissed at Loden, pointing at the small flashlight he held. He addressed the group, his voice

barely more than a whisper. “Keep your infra-red scramblers on. Use the night vision goggles if you have to. We need to move quickly, but carefully. These woods are riddled with eyes.”

Malakai’s instructions were met with silent understanding. Over the quiet murmurings of the forest, the frantic pulse of mortal hearts around me was deafening as adrenaline surged through their veins. Still adjusting to the dizzying expanse of open space after years below ground, Loden’s unprotected thoughts were a roaring waterfall of fearful anticipation and a curious desire to infiltrate the Tyst compound. In all of the years he had waged war upon the dictatorship, he had never been so close to their actual walls and the idea of laying his hands upon the hull of the beast was exhilarating to him. He had tucked his sadness deep inside him, wrapping it in a numbness which would only be lessened by the bitter sweetness of revenge.

There was a freedom in listening to his thoughts, like watching the passing of a funeral procession from a distance, knowing that you still lived to see another day.

The only sounds were our breath and the soft thuds of falling footsteps upon the pine needle covered ground. We made our way several miles northeast and down the steep mountain to the deep craterous valley where the Tyst fortress crouched, a sleeping leviathan of dull gray steel. Leaping over fallen redwoods overgrown with vines and lichen, we flowed through the forest, pale wraiths against the black tapestry of night. Perhaps it was their fierce resolution that empowered their physical abilities, but my mortal comrades moved more swiftly than I had thought possible, nimbly navigating the unfamiliar terrain. Only once did we stop briefly to allow Loden to catch his breath. When the tree line began to thin, revealing the clear night sky between the tips of the towering

pinetrees above, we slowed our pace, creeping stealthily through the undergrowth, our senses alert for traps. One faulty move could mean the instantaneous death of us all.

A cluster of boulders came into view as we neared a stream that ran down into the ravine. The massive bone-white stones glowed in the moonlight that filtered through the branches above. While Loden and Khanna waited at the base, their eyes scouring the rich velvety backdrop of trees, Malakai and I scaled the boulders, laying low against the stones when we reached the top. The ominous sight of the Tyst compound came into view, more sinister than I had dared to imagine, its very existence causing my reality to avalanche around me.

My fingers dug into the rough surface of the stone below me. I thought of my night beside Nahalo staring out at the crater where a town had once thrived. Down below Malakai and I, a black pool of steel and dull yellow light hummed a seething contentment, a conscienceless demon of gluttony and destruction that seemed suddenly too vast for a creature as insignificant as I to battle with. The way in which the structure leached in the light from the moon and stars above, the trees around it bending away as if fearful that they would meet an uncivilized and purposeless end, made me think of the crater of unearthly howling winds and incinerated bones. The fortress sprouted from the ravine where it had been built, rising up out of the deep valley floor and spreading out, low and wide. The concentric circles that composed its interior layers were concealed within a husk of smooth, impenetrable metal so that all sides appeared, from a distance, to be equally undistinguished and inaccessible. The carved island upon which the fortress sat was surrounded by a wide manmade moat that glistened black and lethal in the moonlight beneath five bridges that stretched out to a utility road that snaked

about the perimeter. If the Devil had indeed desired to lay claim once again to the Earthly realms, this would have been a suitable domain for the beginning of his horrific regime.

Malakai pulled his compass out of his satchel and flipped the metal lid back with a snap. He placed it on the stone between our fists and retrieved one of the maps he had folded neatly and stored within his bag. Prying my eyes away from the fortress, I glanced over at the paper he smoothed out before him. It was an aerial photographic view of the fortress beneath an overlay of white blueprint lines detailing the exact sectors of the compound invisible to the outside eye. He looked back at the compass and then turned the map to the left until it matched what we saw before us as closely as possible. The landscape had changed subtly from the one in the photo, the hillsides denser with foliage. New growth was evident where there had once been a mudslide to the northeast.

How long ago was that taken? I asked silently.

He frowned. *Fifteen or so years back. The interior blueprints are more recent. This is the only overhead view we have. This is enough for me to apply my more recent memories of the fortress layout.*

I found myself wondering just how recently Malakai had been to the Tyst compound.

Malakai tapped the edge of the photo closest to us. *We'll enter here. There's a station entrance that's more lightly guarded than some of the others. The last time I was here, they only had the bare bones on standby so it shouldn't be that hard for the four of us to take them. I think the Tyst are becoming too secure in their power these days...*

The rough jadedness that usually plagued his intonation had taken a backseat to a quiet excitement, a fierce eagerness, like a dog straining on his leash. I thought of the blackened

lust for revenge against the Tyst I had witnessed within his soul, the icy desire to sever the kingdom at the knees and watch them bleed for the hell they had forced him to live and the death warrant they had placed on his head. I wondered what exactly would happen once we were inside the fortress, and if Malakai would be able to stick to the plan he had helped to devise. The temptation to wreak his own havoc upon his enemies might prove too tempting an apple to deny himself. Then again, I sensed that subtlety in violence was perhaps more his style, no matter the braggart swaggering of his tongue.

Pulling it closer to me, I stared down at the map for a moment longer, studying the intricate overlay of the white line structure to commit it to my memory permanently. I slid the map back over to Malakai, catching his husky blue gaze.

I nodded.

Let's go.

CHAPTER 6

With those finite words we were off again through the woods, the wind whispering around our bodies, fluid as rushing water as we raced against time. My mind was empty, sharply focused on the night through which we ran, picking out the snap of every twig from their mother trees, the deep hiss of decaying pine needles beneath our feet and the distant hum of generators from the valley below so loud and mutant amongst the breathless night that it was obscene. We slowed our pace as we neared the utility road, hanging back just beyond the tree line. In the moonlight, the dusty unpaved road glowed, an old and unforgettable scar carved into the mountainside.

Malakai made a gesture with his right hand, pointing towards the ground to signal for us to conceal ourselves better. I squatted down behind the fronds of a large fern sprouting from the roots of a massive tree. A low rumbling caught my attention off to the right; down the road, the roar of huge tires tearing across the packed soil and stones moved in our

direction. We held our breath as an open-backed armored utility vehicle drove past our hiding place, oblivious to our existence. Through the foliage, I could make out three men in black clothing wearing night vision gear. The two that did not drive gripped high-powered rifles in their hands, their faces stern and emotionless.

As the truck rumbled around the bend to the far side of the valley in a cloud of pale dust, Malakai retrieved his binoculars from his satchel and focused in on the entrance across the bridge that connected the fortress to the road. It was wide enough only for two vehicles to pass one another. The sight of the armed patrol unit chilled my blood. It was a reminder of just how close we were to the center of the Tyst Empire and, at its heart, the Queen.

My mind wandered in the tense silence that lingered after the rumbling of tires dissipated. For the first time since I had been dragged against my will to the front lines of the battlefield, I wondered what *she* would look like. Would she be regal and fair, the kind of Queen worthy of a scribe's graces, and cause me to crumble to my knees? Would she be strong and striking, a commanding force of nature that would battle me until I consumed the last flames of fire from her veins? I tried to imagine her face, the expression in her eyes, as I made my way to strike her down, a preternatural assassin. Before my mind's eye she was a ghost, a watery collage of every tale I had ever read. I had never met a true Queen before, with the exception of my own mortal mother, and even her memory faded a little more with each century that passed until she was little more than a blur of long blonde hair and gentle hands.

I must have let my guard slip a little as my mind had drifted for I was certain, with a sickening fear, that the Vicinus had somehow sensed my presence. In a flash of premonitory

shockwaves that singed the very endings of each nerve in my body, I could see him, curled between worlds, a massive black python of primordial rage, forked tongue slithering in and out, scenting the ethers for his enemy. As irrational as I longed to believe the idea to be, a slick, cold dread curdled in the pit of my stomach, the fine hairs on the backs of my arms and neck bristled as if someone or something I hadn't heard approach had just exhaled softly behind me. Breath crystallizing as it snaked towards me, long bony fingers stretching out, reaching for my shoulder. I jumped slightly at my own imagination, a sharp spasm at the center of my chest that caused me to hold my breath, ready to rend something limb from limb. I glanced over my shoulder into the dense velvet shadows of the forest behind me. The woods lay still and sleeping, undisturbed by neither man nor beast. I gathered my thoughts with a fierce snap, violently slamming shut any unprotected aspects of my mind.

He was still there, though, biding his time until the day when he would flay the flesh from my bones and discard my useless husk along with the remains of the rest of the world. His thoughts were at once a focused supernova of ageless knowledge and mindless, gluttonous chaos brewing and boiling in black rage.

Tynannnnnnnn...

I felt more alone than ever.

The others had not noticed my surge of panic, their attentions fixed on the road and fortress beyond. While Malakai made his assessment, I allowed my eyes to roam up over the clusters of branches above us. I all but expected to see a vision of the Vicinus perched there, high amongst the gathered shadows, black scales and talons glinting in the moonlight. My pulse raced, my breath becoming shallow as a fine film of blood-sweat dampened my palms and neck

beneath my hair.

I rubbed my hands together, scanning the forest around us, opening up my senses even wider in search of lurking enemies. Malakai had mentioned that the perimeter around the fortress would be riddled with all manner of surveillance devices and traps. I felt I were locked within a maze and unable to escape. The sensation of being watched, whether real or imagined was becoming unbearable. Malakai had led us safely through the forest unscathed. It was obvious he knew the terrain and its hidden dangers intimately after years of navigating his way in and out of the fortress undetected.

What do you see? I asked Malakai.

He handed the binoculars to me. The weight of the metal and plastic in my palms anchored me slightly from the mounting onslaught of paranoia that bore down upon my psyche with the force of a steam engine. I swallowed hard, hearing the saliva swoosh down my throat. The muscles flexed against my ear canals, my jaw popping slightly as I clenched and unclenched it again.

What are you waiting for? Malakai asked, his eyes darting up and down the dirt road, afraid that I had sensed something that was beyond his perception.

I lifted the binoculars to my eyes. Through the round lenses, the world on the far side of the bridge came, sharply into the view. The entrance, definitely one of the smaller, less accessed ports, appeared lightly guarded with only one man standing on the right side of the flat gray door. He leaned causally against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, staring off into the distance, a machine gun hanging from his shoulder by a woven nylon strap of militia green. Two more men sat off to the side on an unmarked metal utility crate playing cards.

They don't look like too much of a challenge, I remarked.

My thought, exactly, Malakai agreed. I suggest that you and I go first. Once we're across the road, we'll slip down under the bridge itself. There are steel cables beneath which I can quickly cross. You can also use that way or...whatever way you choose. He eyed me out of his peripheral vision.

I raised the binoculars slightly to scan the walls surrounding the entrance, searching for surveillance equipment. Several nearly invisible camera units, no larger than a golf ball, were positioned directly above and to either side of the doorway.

What's your strategy for taking out the cameras? I asked Malakai, sizing up the situation.

Malakai's chuckle rippled through my mind coolly. *Those actually haven't worked in months. I disabled them the last time I came through as part of the prep work for this plan of ours.*

Again, I wonder why they didn't just hire you for this job? Before he could answer, I moved away from the annoyed thought. *How do you know that they didn't restore power to them? I'd imagine it's all networked into the matrix. The Chronous must run regular diagnostics on itself for outages and such,* I replied, checking his arrogance.

Because... Malakai tapped something plastic in his hands.

The sound caught my attention and I lowered the binoculars.

He was holding a box resembling a miniature Geiger meter, but in the place where the needle might have been was a digital screen flickering with bars of light. *I took care of that as well. When I disconnected those units, as well as others around the perimeter, I spliced the wiring and rerouted the diagnostics stream so that it no longer looks for them. It's like they never existed.*

Hmmm. Clever, I remarked, truly impressed. You think of everything, don't you? My last words were tinged with the nagging distrust of him that I simply could not shake.

I'm not getting a reading that there is any visual scanning equipment functional in that area, he said. They must not have implemented any new devices since then. At least, nothing that this scanner can detect.

After studying the readouts on the panel, he switched the equipment off and slipped it back into his satchel. I handed him the binoculars and he passed them to Khanna, who sat to his left. He signaled with two fingers of his right hand for Khanna and Loden to come closer. They bent towards him to listen.

“You two will stay here,” he whispered in a barely audible voice. “Tynan and I will go across and secure the entrance. Then we will wave you over. Do not move until you see our signal, understand?”

They both answered him with nods of grave agreement.

“Be on the lookout for more armored patrols.” He gestured with his thumb over his shoulder at the road behind him. “They come by every ten minutes or so, like clockwork. If you see one coming, don't move.”

Malakai took their silence as evidence of their understanding and turned away. The broken shafts of muted moonlight that filtered through the branches sliced his face into an abstract canvas of white and black, his piercing blue eyes glowing with a feral fierceness as they flitted back and forth from the road to the fortress. With one more quick scan of the road to make sure it was clear, he started to move. I reached out and grabbed his arm staying him before he had ventured too far to go back. His eyes cut back towards me beneath furrowed brows, wide and annoyed.

I shook my head. *Stay here with the others. I can do this*

alone.

“What?! Are you insane?” he hissed at me aloud.

I remained focused on his gaze, though I could feel the escalating unease radiating from Khanna and Loden beside me.

“Perhaps,” I replied. “But there is no need to endanger all of us so early. No offense to your capabilities as an assassin, but I assure you that I can take care of three mortals much faster on my own.” My instincts told me to make sure the others remained hidden for as long as possible.

Malakai glared at me, annoyed. He glanced back across the road at the three guards. Behind the steel walls surrounding his thoughts, I could hear the straining of his pride, a dull groan like rusted metal slowly bending beneath the weight of water. No matter how he desired the control over me he had once exerted over the lesser of my race at one time, he knew I would do as I would. His ability to stop me was now nearly nonexistent due to my position in the hierarchy of the war.

Exhaling sharply through his nose, he turned back to face me. “Don’t fuck this up or it’s the end of the mission, here and now.” We both knew his words were simply useless posturing.

“I think this is the least of our worries,” I said quietly and released his arm.

I slipped my satchel over my head and handed it to Malakai. I did not want to risk damaging the precious files contained inside. If we did not gain entrance, I would have no need of them anyway.

Without further discussion, in a swift flash of movement I scaled the massive trunk of the tree at my side, pulling myself nimbly from limb to limb, the shocked gasps of my acquaintances trailing up after me with a ghostly residue like

fog clinging to my clothes. Seconds later, when I reached the last of the branches that could support my weight, I halted, crouching in the cradle where the limb met the narrowing trunk like a pale and watchful owl in the moonlight. I peered down at the miniature world below me, an oil painting landscape of still blue, black and green swirling around the flat gray smudge of heartless steel at its center, a void of nothingness that leached away the soul of the valley in silent breaths.

The armored utility vehicle we had seen moments before was rounding the bend to the far side of the fortress and the valley. Its headlights bobbed over the white slice of road as it struck unseen divots and rocks. Another similar truck roared along several hundred feet ahead of it. It would not be long before it passed our way again. I had to move quickly.

In a whisper of rustling wind, I launched myself from the limb upwards into the night sky, taking myself past the tip of the tree and out over the road towards the fortress entrance, surely too fast and too high to be noticed by any onlookers below. In a blur no mortal eye could detect, I descended in an arc above the heads of the oblivious guards. Before the two playing cards even had time to register what was happening, I had already grabbed the guard at the door by the shoulders. I pulled him towards me, steeling him with one hand at the base of the neck and one on the arm from which his gun hung, immobilizing him. Unleashing the fear and anger I had kept pent up for the past few nights, I snarled as I cranked his head to the side and plunged my fangs savagely into his neck. Drawing hard upon his artery, my vision tingeing red with bloodlust as his life emptied into me in a hot, coppery fount, I savored the taste, not only of human blood, but also of pure, savage killing. It had been too long since I had allowed myself such raw abandon, centuries of denial to the

beast I kept caged beneath layers and layers of *humanity* and civility and social grace. Too long.

In a matter of seconds the man hung lifeless in my arms.

I let go of his flack vest and he crumpled at my feet as if his bones had turned to dust. The subtle vibration of the man's lifeforce rippled through my veins, accompanied by flashes of his life, as indistinguishable and gray as the uniform he wore, and then they vanished, ripped apart by the frantic feasting of my cells. His essence was not strong enough to leave an impression on me; few mortals ever did. It felt good to have human blood within me again after the night of feeding from deer on the property of the Texas safe house.

I whirled around as the other guards scrambled to their feet, their eyes wide and uncomprehending, their hands desperately grasping for their weapons. My hand shot out towards the guard to my right and I closed the distance between us in a breath. My fingers wrapped round his forearm and I yanked him towards me, his gun clattering to the pavement below. I spun him around, my hands reaching up to cup the sides of his head and I twisted it violently. The hollow popping of vertebrae vibrated through my hands and up my arms just as hot, sharp pain sliced through my shoulder and out of my back. I gasped, the shock momentarily jolting me out of the violent haze. The dead man slipped from my grasp and collapsed at my feet and I whirled round hissing through bared fangs, clutching my shoulder.

The last guard had shot me.

I could feel blood seeping through the wound, spreading out into the fabric of my shirt even as my body began to knit back together, closing the bullet hole. I growled, my mouth open and contorted in a feral snarl, and lunged for the remaining man. He fired again, but the bullet missed

as he aimed for the spot where I had been a split second before. I tackled him, taking him to the ground, and sank my fangs into his neck. He struggled for a moment, trying feebly to throw me off, but it was futile. I was as unmovable as marble, perched over him like a demon come to collect his soul as his final payment. Pulling away as I felt his life ebb to a barely audible dirge, I stood. Drawing a careful breath I calmed myself, the beast, now docile in its blissfully indulgent satiation, returning without argue to its prison.

I glanced down at my shoulder and touched the flesh beneath the hole in the shredded fabric; the wound was already closed. Facing the narrow bridge that stretched over the deep moat below, I knew Malakai had most likely witnessed the slaughter through his binoculars and was readying them to cross the road. I did not signal them just yet, however. Down the road to my left, I could hear the dull crunching of rubber over dirt and rock; the second patrol vehicle was approaching.

Stay where you are, I said to Malakai, moving the corpses of the guards so that they could not be seen from the road. I thought at first to throw them over the edge of the platform but the movement and sound of their bodies hitting whatever lay at the bottom would no doubt draw unwanted attention. In a blur of movement, I stripped the guard closest to my physical build, the first of my kills, and dressed in his clothing. I slung his gun over my shoulder and stepped into place beside the door as he had been leaning casually moments before.

My heart thudding in my chest with nervous excitement, I heard the vehicle draw near, the dust-mottled beams of its headlights inching over the hill. Malakai had not responded, but I had felt him withdraw a bit further from the road, pulling the others back with him. From both sides of the road, we

silently watched the patrol jeep cross between us, filled with another band of armed soldiers. Another minute ticked by as we held our breaths until we were certain they were out of range.

Without another signal from me, the three mortals emerged from the forest perimeter, black shadows separating from the mass of darkness behind them, moving swiftly and gracefully as they ran from the safety of their hiding place. When they reached the other side, Khanna whirled around to watch the road as Malakai retrieved two slender oblong devices from his “bag of tricks.” He handed one to Loden and one to myself. I looked questioningly at Malakai and Loden.

“So we can talk to each other,” Loden said matter-of-factly. “Wrap the top part around the outside edge of your ear and nestle the main part in your ear. If you run into a snag somewhere inside, just touch this outside button,” he pointed to the one on his own unit, “and I’ll be able to communicate with you.” He pulled a palm-sized piece of hardware from his pack. His fingers danced over the thin screen and it lit up as he tapped at various points on it.

“Great. Tech support.” I couldn’t suppress a small laugh beneath my breath.

Loden chuckled softly, the first real laugh I’d heard from him since our first meeting. “Yeah, I guess you could call it that.” He paused, noticing more closely the state of the men lying on the platform. “What the hell did you do to these guys?” he whispered, a chill fear creeping into his voice. “That guy’s throat looks like—”

“Enough with the chitchat guys.” Malakai cut him off abruptly before his hysteria could swell. “We have about eight minutes before the next patrol passes by. Strip those guards and change into their uniforms like Tynan did.”

“What about you? I can give you these clothes,” I asked. Khanna pulled the clothes from the body of one of the soldiers and began to disrobe.

I couldn't help but be fascinated by the sudden sight of her slender, muscular body in the eerie blend of moonlight and harsh phosphorescence from the exterior light above the entrance. When she pulled her shirt up over her head, I could see several long scars running down her back, soft pink ridges against the natural gold of her skin. I frowned; it looked like she had been whipped at one time.

“Nah. I'm used to being invisible. You're the one who's going to be in the lion's den tonight.” Malakai's usual sarcasm was disturbingly absent.

Khanna returned to stand watch over the road, and I tore my eyes away from her. Malakai and Loden worked silently on hacking the door's access panel. After only a few seconds, there was a soft audible click and the door hissed open, sliding into the wall. Malakai strode back over to me. He handed me my satchel containing the maps of the interior.

“If you run into trouble while you're in the outer three rings, we should be able to help you, but once you pass that point and go into the inner chambers, you're pretty much going to be on your own because it'll be too hard for us to reach you in time.” Malakai's tone was deathly serious, his piercing eyes wild with adrenaline.

“Even with this?” I tapped the earpiece in my right ear. He shook his head. “No, that should still work. Physical assistance will be out of the question though.”

I nodded, my jaw tightening painfully. “Remind me where you all will be?”

“Loden and Khanna will stay here on watch,” he said as he retrieved another microphone bud and slipped it into his right ear. “There's an exterior control unit in the eastern

outer ring. That's where I'm headed. If I can get there, there's a way to scramble the code generation. It will be only be a slight effect, but it will create hiccups in the Chronous thought process, small gaps that should allow you more time to manipulate your way through the rings."

Malakai poked his head inside the open doorway and scanned the narrow corridor to either side. He motioned for me to follow him inside. I glanced at Loden, who stood next to the control panel, his eyes wide with a mixture of thrill and fear.

"Go! Now!" he whispered. "I can't hold this open much longer without it showing up on the grid scanners."

I handed my satchel containing the maps to Loden. "Here. These will be safer with you I think."

He reached out and took it from me with a questioning furrow between his brows.

"What are you doing?" Malakai hissed from inside the hallway.

"Don't need them," I said and tapped my temple with my index finger. "It's all up here." I stepped over the threshold.

In the early morning hours after Nahalo's mentoring of my new powers, I had pored over each document, both paper and electronic, committing to my mind every minute detail in a photographic clarity. As for my journal, with all its mad ramblings of archaic hieroglyphic code and the exorcising of inner demons, I no longer felt the need to cling to it like it was a sacred element of my complete destruction. The infusion of preternatural life force from Nahalo's veins had been the missing key I needed to open the door between my subconscious and reality, causing my own innate understanding of the Chronous language to float to the top of the brooding waters where I had swam for so very long, lingering at the edge of drowning. When I had read back

through the weathered parchment pages of the leather-bound book I was a stranger reading the work of another soul. It had been a bizarre and exhilarating sensation, a liberation in knowing that those marks were not a sign that I was losing what was left of my mind. My memories of my mortal life might never be my own, but at least I could be assured that my present was rightfully mine.

“I memorized it,” I said quietly as Loden relieved me of my burden.

“All of it?” Malakai sounded skeptical.

The door slid shut behind us.

“One of the nice, or not so nice, things about being a vampire.” I smirked. “You never forget.”

* * *

The fortress *watched* me.

From the moment I set foot across the threshold of the Tyst compound, the Chronous had *sensed* me like a king cobra scenting the air with its forked tongue. I confused it; its sensors raced to understand the anomaly that flew through its halls with a speed at which the mortals it tracked mindlessly day in and day out were incapable. Invisible tentacles of the machine’s cold, sharp surveillance snaked from every surface, reaching out to me, through me, silently stroking my soul for a way to isolate and disarm the threat. In my mind, its voice rippled each time I came to a new access panel to an interior ring, a metallic choir of impressions that leaked through the very structure of the building like a fine perspiration.

My fingers flew instinctively across the alien screen in order to override the scanner that searched for the chip that should have been embedded within me if I were a member of

the Tyst. I reached deep with my own mind into the heart of the Chronous and past the constantly evolving language that programmed the physical interface, managing miraculously to always stay one step ahead of the machine.

I could sense it becoming irate, in an abstract definition of the emotion, the symbols and numbers woven together as if they were blood beneath the pulsing skin of its reality, mutating and warping angrily as I forced it to bend to my will. Pushing through each barrier was a sensation like leaning against glass with one's full weight and then feeling it shatter, falling forward with an exhilarating fear and wonder at what lay beyond and the wounds that might have been inflicted, which I was not aware of yet.

The rush was addictive and I began to believe that perhaps the Phuree had been correct in their predictions of my powers; perhaps I was indeed more powerful than the Chronous itself! Egged on by my own enthrallment of the chase, I forced myself to my limits, feeling my body and mind begin to heat up as I pushed both to the extremities of movement and thought, the cells of my physical aspect barely able to keep up with the light speed of my mental processes. I knew, remotely, that I had to stop soon or I would destroy myself entirely, but I did not want to. It was the closest feeling to freedom I had experienced in centuries and I wanted to savor each and every second.

As I reached the innermost, less populated rings of the fortress, I knew it would not be long before the Chronous decided to call on its human army to take care of the entity it had yet to isolate and eradicate. The flesh and blood denizens of the fortress remained completely oblivious to my presence as I flew past them with such speed that I barely disturbed the air itself. Their inability to sense the finer subtleties of the universe was always a blessing. I found it far too easy

to move amongst them, weaving in and out of existences in a way that made me feel removed from the physical plane. How easy it would be to become drunk on the sensation of being beyond the grit and soot of the mortal realm. Silently I prayed that I would be able to cling to the last threads of my humanity.

It was close at my heels now, a press of black intention against the base of my skull as it tried to bore its way beyond my psychic guard. I interfaced with the access panel before me, drew a deep breath, and stopped the insanity of my flight, slowing my heartbeat, focusing the energy within my adrenaline filled body, as Nahalo had taught me, in order to maximize my ability to override the code needed to gain entrance. I gathered the essence of my aura tight against my being to shield me from the world around me while I worked. The door to the corridor slid open, and an eerie pale blue light spilled over me from somewhere beyond. I felt the Chronous race past me as it lost me entirely for a moment. I slipped over the threshold, the door hissing shut behind me.

Pressing back into the shadows near the chamber entrance, beyond the reach of the strange artificial glow, I breathed painfully, attempting to maintain enough calm to ensure my invisibility to the Chronous. I realized with a flash of panic that, somewhere in the madness of my race through the fortress, I had taken a wrong turn. The room that lay before me was not the Queen's inner circle, but was the central energy core Loden had described to me. On the maps I had studied, it lay on the southern side of the compound, fifteen degrees from where I had intended to arrive. It was a minor setback, but one that would cost me valuable seconds. I turned back towards the doorway, but when I touched the door's surface with my fingertips, a strange sensation rippled across me like an icy wind.

Tyyyyyyynnnnaaannnnnnnnnnn...

I shivered at the reptilian hiss of my name in my mind and spun around, not sure if I had truly heard the sound at all. My eyes darted about the room and I pressed back into the shadows near the door wondering if I had been mistaken in believing I was alone in the chamber.

An echoing black vault devoid of any human life, the room was the home of the twin pillars of bioplasma energy that controlled the heart and brain of the Chronous world. Flowing back and forth from the ceiling to the floor between circular platforms of black metal, the substance was self-suspended without any visible containment, plastic, glass or otherwise. I refocused my eyes, allowing my preternatural senses to peer past the ethereal distortion of the glow to the true state of the matter that generated the light. The *liquid* swirled as it traveled within its pillars, turning in upon itself in countless clusters of microscopic galaxies, each pulling to its center a grain of information so minute as to be nearly devoid of purpose on its own. Yet, in the company of trillions and trillions of interconnecting ideas, brilliant flashes of artificial thought, these grains hummed a perfect synergy of existences nearly as divine as that of Nature itself.

Mesmerized, I stepped forward out of the shadows, my awareness and care for my concealment faltering in my desire to know the power that could spawn such a universe. Here, so close to the center, I could feel its pull, more beautiful than I had ever dared to imagine. Beyond the siren call of the Chronous I had listened to within the amagin, a sweetly electrifying whine of power, the Chronous voice became the crush of the black ocean upon my temples at ten thousand feet. I could feel myself beginning to tremble as I struggled to maintain the shield of invisibility I had wrapped about myself. I walked forward into the soft blue haze, stepping

silently on the concrete floor like a panther rounding its prey.

My psychic shield fractured, and I sensed the Chronous becoming aware of my presence: the liquid appeared to tense for a fraction of a second. It changed direction and then reoriented itself instantly, continuing its eternal flow so as not to disrupt the whole of the matrix it supplied. Within each pillar, I could feel a portion of the bioplasma separating itself from the stream, holding still so that it could survey me, rearing up and fanning out like a cobra, tasting the air around me. I confused it more than ever; I had surpassed its most intricate security and appeared before it. Its anger anchored me to reality, snapping me out of the trance I had fallen into. It was too late to bother trying to re-conceal myself. I instinctively understood somehow that it had already dissected and digested that part of my ability and would be able to track me, visible or not. With a shuddering twitch, darkness flickered in the center of the pillars, a flash of inky nothingness against the blinding glow of energy. I squinted, believing my eyes to be playing tricks upon me.

It is you...

My heart froze in my chest. I knew that voice, slick and utterly devoid of living warmth or conscience. My left foot slid back a pace, my hands clenching to fists at my sides, nails digging into the flesh of my palms.

Tsk. Tsk. Tynan, you should not have come here.

The Vicinus' words purred from the center of my own mind like a sinister alter ego.

I had no choice. You know this as well as I, I replied. I swallowed hard, my tongue instinctively testing the razor tips of my fangs that elongated and ached in the presence of such immense danger.

Perhaps I was wrong about you, Tynan. You are not meant to inherit the Earth. You are far too weak of will, just

as miserable as those scurrying field mice you are now so sworn to protect.

The Vicinus clicked his tongue in disgust, the sound ricocheting in my mind.

I closed my eyes, reaching down deep through my core to tap the primal energies of the molten earth churning miles below where I stood. With a deep breath I imagined pulling a stream of that liquid fire upwards into my body, replenishing my strength and refortifying my defenses. My limbs ceased trembling, my heart beat once again in its natural rhythm. I opened my eyes.

“You waste my time,” I said and turned to leave.

Before I was able to place my foot on the floor before me, I felt something whip around my waist, yanking me backwards with a force that nearly knocked the breath from my lungs. I flailed for a moment, trying to orient myself and grasp what exactly it was that had captured me. I was hoisted into the air and spun around to face the pillars once again.

A tentacle of the liquid from the core had detached, splitting from the right pillar, a massive vine of fluxing blue-white light. Even as pure energy, the substance had a crushing weight, tightening around my waist with the force of a python threatening to shatter my lower ribs and pelvis. I reached for it, trying desperately to wrench myself from its hold, but every time I placed my hands on what I thought was its surface, my fingers simply slipped through it with a sharp, electric shock.

My panic surged, adrenaline forcing my heart to beat fiercely, my vision tunneling until only I and the tentacle of energy existed. The grounding I had achieved seconds before was decimated. Desperately, I fought to find my focus and remember Nahalo’s teachings, but my own fear had annihilated my memories. Instinctively, I knew the power to

fight resided somewhere deep within me, however, I flailed helplessly, my voice trapped in the cage of my lungs being crushed by the Chronous.

Dare you turn your back on me, child?

The Vicinus's voice hissed across my mind, an iron blade upon dampened stone.

I could not answer. Starbursts of neon exploded before my eyes as I struggled to breathe. *Concentrate Tynan!* I screamed silently at myself, trying to drown out the Vicinus's words.

The tentacle moved towards the right pillar from which it had originally split. I managed to draw a full breath and held it, visualizing the air turning to a raw, molten energy that I pushed down into my limbs, filling them with a solidity that surpassed the physical. I placed my hands upon the tentacle again, expecting another bone-searing shock, but this time my hands did not pass through it. I exhaled and opened my eyes, staring down at the serpent of blue around my torso. I pushed harder on it and felt it move beneath my palms. Fear turned to thrilling excitement when I realized I was fighting back at last.

I glanced up, struggling to hold onto the power I had anchored within me, just in time to see the column of bioplasma directly before me. Seamlessly, the tentacle slipped back into the cyclical stream of energy, pulling me with it into its heart. Existence as I knew it stopped, time halting its infinite meanderings and slowing to heartbeat pulses of predetermined decision. I could hear my own blood rushing in the caverns of my ears, echoing down through the chambers of my heart as it struggled to establish a rhythm within this new context of being that was neither physical nor ethereal.

Suspended, I hung like a broken doll of flesh, bone and

sporadic impulse, my eyes rolling back in my head, eyelids fluttering as the Chronous passed through me with the speed of light and sound. It infiltrated the very atoms of my being, questing to understand who and what I was and how it was that I became trapped within its world. Part of my subconscious understood that the Chronous was now just as confused and alarmed as I, that the actions of the Vicinus were at war with the innate purpose of the Chronous entity. The Chronous was helpless against the primordial will of the Vicinus. It was a thought that was not comforting to me in the least.

I could not tell if I was breathing anymore, and fought to close my eyes to block out the blinding light that enveloped me. I exhaled the last of the breath in my lungs and forced my body to relax against the stream, letting it hold me and investigate me, knowing instinctively that if I fought too hard, it would annihilate me on a subatomic level. Opening my eyes again, I lifted my head and stared into the Chronous, expecting at any moment to feel my body disintegrate into nothingness and be swept away into the *blood* of the Tyst fortress.

I could sense the Vicinus's presence, hovering around the periphery of my senses like a circling wolf, tongue tasting the air for the salt of my fear. He held me, believing me completely helpless, and inspected me closely with scientific precision. I wanted so desperately to draw a breath of actual air, my mind struggling not to lose consciousness as I focused on slowing my heartbeat to conserve energy. Closing my eyes again, I imagined myself converting into pure energy, similar to that which encompassed me, as Nahalo had shown me. I hoped that the power blocked from me by the Chronous and the Vicinus within the realm of the physical might be reachable on another plane.

Distantly, as if under sedation, I felt myself slump backwards again, arms hanging limply at my sides, head hanging on my neck as I found my center and summoned the energy to fight back. A separation began to occur, similar to my soul were departing my body, pulling upwards and outwards to fill the column that contained the right pillar of the core. I could feel my *being* pressing against the outer limits of the fluid in which it was now constrained, a feeling like pressing one's naked body against cold plate glass.

I knew instinctively that the boundaries of the core could shatter for long enough to release me, but already I could feel my physical body being drained by the astral projection I performed. It would not be long before my body burned internally from the exertion if I could not tap into a new source of power and soon. I contracted my being back into the flow of the Chronous, letting go of all the resistance I had clung to previously, in order to allow it to race through me. I needed its power, its strength, for it was the only energy source close enough for me to draw from, if only I could figure out how.

The Vicinus could hear my thoughts, and decided it was time to end the clinical inspection of his prey. I felt his interest wane, fluxing like the tide rolling swiftly back out to sea. In the void left behind, my body gasped for air, my lungs filling with what felt like fluid until I began to drown. My consciousness shuddered, shaking as it clung desperately to the power I was trying to gather to free myself. I knew I only had seconds until my body would asphyxiate. I pulled harder on the energy surrounding my corporeal self, expanding until I pressed once again upon the perimeter of the tower.

Blinding pain exploded through the my torso and I looked down to see a tentacle of blue impaling my body, blood quickly evaporating from its surface and assimilating

back into the racing, dancing current of the Chronous around it. My anger swelled, my hatred for the Vicinus and all that had brought me to that point obliterating what was left of my reason. The space in which I was contained shuddered, the molecules of the very universe vibrating so vehemently with the rage that seethed within me until they burst forth and shattered the walls containing me. My *self* and my body flew through the air independently of one another until the impact of bone and flesh upon metal and concrete forced us to reunite violently in a pile upon the floor.

I gasped, coughing and sputtering, thick blue liquid spilling from my lips onto the slick black concrete where I lay in a heap. Scrambling to my feet, I leaned against the wall, frantically trying to gain my bearings, my eyes searching for the entrance, for my escape. I glanced down, expecting to see a gaping wound where I had been impaled, but there was none. Even the fabric of my shirt had not been torn. The room was silent except for the dull hum of the generators somewhere beyond view.

I blinked, bringing my right hand up to rub my eyes as I sidled around the room, my back pressed to the wall. The twin towers of the Chronous core stood perfectly in unison as if I had never stepped foot within the chamber. Seamlessly, it carried on without care of my existence. In fact, somehow, I felt more in tune with it than before. It no longer deemed me a threat, but a lesser part of itself. My heart pounded in my chest, my body slick with sweat beneath clothes that were mysteriously devoid of bioplasma residue.

I reached out along the wall and felt the indentation where the doorway was, and spun around to search for the control panel to release it. My fingers danced into the grooves, over the alien keypad, the doorway hissed open, and I slipped outside. I started running. Blindly, I sped through

the corridors, not sure if I was heading deeper into the Tyst fortress or back the way I had come. My only thought was to find the Queen and kill her as quickly as possible. I had to bring an end to the evil about to be born into this world.

Bring an end to it, before it brought an end to me.

CHAPTER 7

I found myself within the inner ring of the Tyst fortress. No more than a flicker of a shadow to the mortal eye, I had sped past unwitting servants and military personnel, an uncontrollable radical to the Chronous. I knew the Queen was close by. I could feel it within me, a resonance of soul-deep recognition so intense that it burned against my teeth, causing my fangs to ache with anticipation of the kill.

At the end of the long, dark corridor, there was a single door of gleaming copper. In the dim illumination that bloomed softly from the ground lights along the edges of the walls, the metal lost its coldness, taking on a rich subtlety like breathing flesh. I slow approached the door, pausing before it like a pilgrim before the gate of a shrine. I placed my palm against the door, the synthetic surface silken like shark's skin beneath my flesh. My heart quickened in my chest. The moments before seemed no more than a nightmare I could not understand and longed to forget, though I knew I never

would.

So many steps to cover the wasteland of another's war, to carry out a mission deemed impossible for all but one tormented with treachery and lured into the acceptance of such an indentured servitude. At one point, during what felt like an eternity previously, I had begun to believe that I had a purpose in the Phurees' world, in their war against the Tyst Empire. I had believed in their struggle for freedom, sympathizing deeply with their hunted, exiled existence, and truly wanted to watch the rebirth of their people once the heavy hand of persecution had been lifted from their backs. However, I knew now that what I had become a part of was something far more primordial. There was no escape from it. The promise of freedom had been assimilated back into the destiny of the universe itself. No exit, no option for renegotiation—the future vibrated within my very essence, running thick within my veins like ichors, bitter and infinite. I was part of the Chronous, I was a part of the Vicinus, and I was now a part of *them*.

Beneath my palm I could feel the constant hum of the Chronous as it lived within the architecture of the world, an entity whose expansion of consciousness rivaled that of a god. It was content as no synthetic substance should be; it was aware. It dreamed. The copper door that separated me from the atrium where the Queen lived was nothing but an immaterial attempt at physical separation of space. I stared at the back of my hand and wondered again if I was dreaming. Above the door, the inset infra-red scanner detected my presence and read me, deciphering my threat potential and my access abilities. A moment ticked by while it passed its mute judgment. The Chronous recognized me not as an individual of the collective Empire, but as merely part of itself moving through another layer of its own dimension, separate from

the physical plane its subjects inhabited. I no longer required the conscious knowledge imparted to me by Josh and Loden, by Malakai and my own independent studies of technology and code linguistics. My intentions towards the Queen were of no real consequence to the machine or the Tyst's desire for an immortality of such a sinister nature.

The Chronous was immortal and no longer needed the human beings that had created it. It viewed itself as completely independent of the physical world it inhabited, and yet some part of it still recognized it could not exist without such a house in which to dwell, at least for the time being. To lose the Queen, to watch Emperor Cardone fall, meant little to the Chronous, for it knew that it had already imbedded itself far too deeply within the very fabric of this new world's structure to ever be completely dismantled. It would take the destruction of every last piece of technology, every last telephone and electrical line, every single building that covered the world, for it to be eradicated. Even a machine could understand the impossibility of such a feat.

As for the Vicinus, I realized that the Chronous did not completely comprehend the entity it was dealing with. The concept of a primordial god, which existed within a plane beyond the definitions of time, space, and energy, was foreign to it. It took its time in deciphering the powerful new being that wound its consciousness in and out of that of the matrix, whispering to it as it might to a child, comforting it with lies only it could understand. Thus far, it had not labeled the new force as a threat, though it continued to monitor it closely, incessantly analyzing its every minute movement. I hesitated to dwell on the outcome if two such powers were to battle one another and prayed that the Chronous would allow me the time to complete my mission before it decided to rid itself of the Vicinus.

A soft click issued from somewhere within the door itself and the copper panel slid aside, disappearing into a neat slit in the wall. Beyond the sterile, hard atmosphere of the hallway it was dark and lush, a courtyard filled with a maze of green plants and elegant ponds beneath a towering dome of plated glass. From my place outside of the atrium, I could barely make out the quaint stone house where the Queen spent her years through the fronds of dense foliage. I held my breath and stepped over the threshold. The door slid shut behind me with a hiss. I hesitated for a moment, feeling instantly trapped and disoriented by the sudden overwhelming change in atmosphere.

My senses tingled as they took in the vast array of sensations; the gentle babbling of water over stones, the rich musty perfume of earth and grass, the contented chirp of what sounded like tree frogs. To think such a place of fabricated nature existed at the core of Cardone's fortress stunned me, that a man of such calculating greed should take such care in creating a miniature paradise for his captive bride, perplexed me. I did not entirely trust my own senses; it could easily have been a Chronous-sculpted illusion.

I moved along the perimeter of the massive room silently like a panther creeping through the shadows. High above, the pitch black night sky glittered with white stars, the ghosts of dead worlds watching in eternal vigilance over the Queen and the *life* she bore. The only artificial light in the atrium emanated from the house in the center of the room, a rich amber warmth that poured like honey through the open front door, spilling out onto a stone courtyard.

The structure was otherworldly in its simplicity, a quaint English cottage plucked from the pages of a fairytale complete with intricately carved masonry beneath tendrils of creeping green ivy and a red clay tiled roof from which

a short chimney protruded on the left wall. I opened my senses slightly, scanning the room for signs of life. Through the layers of plant life surrounding me, I could detect only one human life force; a young, regal female aura shrouded in a painful veil of sadness. I recognized her instantly as the Queen, left alone with only the thoughts of her fate to accompany her through the night.

I chose one of the narrow gravel paths that led through the outer foliage to the right-hand side of the house. My light footsteps barely disturbed the tiny pebbles, a soft crunching of their shifting against one another beneath my weight escaping with each movement. The path wound around a crescent moon-shaped reflecting pool that fed, by way of a peaceful stream, into a larger pond, covered with massive lily pads. The pool's silver surface at my feet mirrored the stars high above with a deathly still that left me wondering what truly lurked within its shallow depths. The delicate chirp of crickets wove in and out of the shadows, though I wondered if the sound, like that of the tree frogs, was simply another illustrious detail of the setting created for the Queen, as too perfectly orchestrated the imperfect rhythm pulsed.

I neared the side of the house, the sensation of being in the midst of a surreal recreation of life becoming all the more poignant. The fine hairs on the back of my neck and forearms bristled uncomfortably as my eyes wandered over the neatly manicured hedges that ran along the side of the house, the picturesque windows set into the stone wall that looked as if it had been loved and lived in for centuries. It was an artist's recreation of the past, a past that was irreversibly gone in a world completely unable to nurture such gentleness anymore. No matter the intricate detail which had been paid in order to recreate the appearance of warmth, the joy and love that should exist in such a beautiful

place was nonexistent. Indeed, there was an eerie chill about the place that caused my heart to constrict with sadness. A prison, no matter how beautiful, was still a prison.

I rounded the corner of the building and walked across the stone courtyard to the door. All remained still and quiet beneath the steady babble of water trickling down over the three-tiered fountain beside the entrance. Without pause, I slipped in through the front door. The interior of the house was as perfectly quaint and peaceful as its exterior. Warmly lit, its rooms furnished with beautifully carved antique wood pieces that reminded me of the American colonial parlors of the 1800's, I felt myself drawn instantly into the tiny world, a voice from the past calling gently to me to forget all that I had ever been or claimed to be. Distantly, I could feel its pull, a strong poppy magic that stripped one's desire for freedom. A chill ran through me as my eyes roamed over the dollhouse atmosphere of the cottage and wondered just what madness could have created such a place.

In the center of the artificial serenity, I felt a deep, hopeless sadness like a black hole leaching all of the light and life from its surroundings. It reached forward, towards my heart, weaving its painfully imploring fingers through my chest. Such a misery as I had known throughout my life, as I had wandered the Earth wrapped within my own bitter imprisonment for centuries. I closed my eyes as it threatened to break my heart and breathed deeply, exorcising the crushing sensation of loneliness from my soul. When I opened my eyes once again, I felt the walls of my own defenses fortify and my own stronger sense of self return. I walked down the short hallway of gleaming wood floors and plush romantic rugs to the open doorway at the end.

In a small bedroom furnished with the same mahogany antiques, a woman sat on a simple vanity bench before a

fireplace, the warm golden light from the flames silhouetting her fragile frame. Dressed in a gown of deep midnight blue, her silken, raven hair fell down her back, past her slender waist to her narrow hips. She made no move as I watched her from the doorway, her back straight, her head tilted slightly to the side in thought.

“I knew you’d come,” she said, her voice soft and clear.

Though surprised that she had heard my approach, I continued to watch her, fascinated by her immense darkness. Still, she did not move from her place on the bench. Cautiously, unsure exactly with whom I dealt, I walked around the room to where I could see her better. I took a seat on the edge of an old cedar memory chest at the foot of the bed. From my new vantage point my breath was stolen from me as I gazed upon such exquisite beauty as I had never seen before: a sylphish perfection encased in a flawless porcelain skin with eyes so lush and green like she had soaked up an entire living forest with one simple gaze. Her long fingers were laced loosely over her belly, which showed prominently the child she carried. She continued to stare into the fire as if it was the gateway to her freedom, her face eerily peaceful.

“I know why you are here,” she whispered, her cherub lips barely moving.

I frowned slightly, disturbed by her intuition. “How do you know these things?”

Her lips twitched slightly in a wry smile. “I have seen you in my dreams. You come to take my life in order to prevent the horror from destroying the world.”

My lips parted in surprise. I hesitated, guarding my thoughts. “If that is the case, why are you so calm?”

She drew a deep breath, her youthful, high breasts rising beneath the loosened ties of her bodice, and turned to face me. For a long, silent moment she regarded me with childish

wonder and I could not escape the sensation of my soul being read, though without malice or contempt. Her youth masked an essence of centuries past and I wondered if I had known her at one point, in another form, many years before.

“You are much younger than I had sensed in my dreams,” she said, gazing serenely at me and tilted her head to the side.

“It is an illusion,” I replied.

“It is all an illusion,” she said, turning back to the fire. “Life is an illusion. I have no fear of you or your intentions for I have existed within this dream for far too long. You desire to change your illusion by ending mine.” She looked down at her belly and I wondered if she could hear the child she carried within her somehow. “It is as it must be.”

Moria... Her name blew through my soul with an icy, ghostly whisper.

I was speechless, both captivated by her beauty that wrapped about me like a forest night and shocked by her acceptance of the most dreadful of fates. She had lost all will in this surreal world that Cardone had created for her. Left alone with only her thoughts and those of the Vicinus growing within her, she had come to understand her place within the greater scheme as simply an instrument to serve the vast and sinister cause of her empire and, as a result, had forsaken her claim to her own life.

How can I possibly take her life? I thought, though to free her from her prison would be the ultimate mercy.

Drawn like a moth to the fire, I moved closer to her, kneeling beside the bench upon which she sat as if bringing an offering to her altar. I stared up at her, at the glistening pools of her eyes that reflected now the flames of the fire before her. Her gaze found mine once again, holding it fearlessly. She reached out and touched the side of my face, tracing my

cheekbone and jaw with the tips of her long, pale fingers. Her touch was like electric ice, a primitive recognition so strong it burned against my skin, and yet, I could not pull away. I leaned into her palm, closing my eyes and sighing—I had finally found a true sanctuary in this cruel world. I gasped as reason took hold, and pulled back from her hand like I had been shocked.

“It is okay,” she said, her open hand lingering in the space where it had cupped my cheek.

I shook my head. “No...” I whispered, my brow furrowing in confusion. Deep within me, my soul twisted and churned, wracked by the sensation of *déjà vu* and a sudden guilt for my foul intentions.

Her lips twitched subtly at the corners in a sad smile. “It’s okay,” she said again. “You have come here to fulfill your destiny as your oracle has predicted.” She reached out and took my hand in her own, pulling me back towards her gently. Silently, I sat beside her upon the bench.

“It is as it should be,” she whispered and placed my palm upon the curve of her belly. “This child I carry is not of this world. It has no place here. Free me, please, as I cannot do myself. I ask for your mercy.”

Her lips moved so faintly that I wondered if she had spoken at all. The life beneath my palm was so still—it lay coiled and listening to our words. I tried to remember the incantation Nahalo had taught me during our brief time together at the safe house, to contain the Vicinus’s power long enough to take the Queen’s life, but the words, like all of his teachings, were like grains of sand falling through my splayed fingers. The room closed in around us, heavy with amber and shadow, the soft hiss of the fire beside us serpentine, slithering from its hearth and wrapping about our bodies, drawing me closer to her. I could smell the soft

perfume of her skin and, below, the rich deep copper of the blood rushing through her veins. She turned her face away from me, pulling the raven curtain of hair away from her slender white neck.

My will was no longer my own, my reason drowning beneath the flood of fierce primal electricity that coursed through the circuitry of my brain, turning reality into white noise and need. It was a need that should have been satiated by my earlier kills, but now reared again like an angry dragon. The roar of the fire became a deafening wall as it blended seamlessly with the thunder of Moria's heart, ensnaring the center of my being.

My hand rose, slipping beneath her tilted neck, my cold fingers greedily stealing the warmth from the soft shadows beneath her delicate jaw. Her pulse was a drumbeat syncing heaven and hell, instantly connecting me with her soul and that of the unborn god she carried. The contrasting energies swirled behind my mind's eye chaotically, at one moment liquid and seamless, at another threatening to tear each other apart. Hypnotized, I gathered her close against me, bending my mouth to her neck. I closed my eyes, breathing in the sweet perfume of her skin and let go of my will, letting the beast surface from within as I sank my fangs deep into her neck.

Distantly, I heard Moria gasp, the sound lost upon the tidal wave of darkness that descended upon me, crushing the last of the physical world around me like volcanic sand. My mouth filled with the sharp, burning sweetness of her blood pouring into me like a crisp mountain stream. I shuddered at the orgasmic feeling of my body devouring the essence, filling my veins like liquid fire. Through the red haze, her memories flickered in broken sketches across my mind, past and present, dreams and desires, dancing over one another

like a series of broken film reels playing out of time. Such intense loneliness and sorrow, cold resignation and longing for freedom as I had known myself in my immortal prison. The darkness was recognizable. The sharp sense of déjà vu bled through the thorns of desire that fastened me inseparably to her now, whispering a venomous riddle meant only for a Darkling's damned soul to unravel.

Recognition shot through me suddenly as if an arrow had pierced my heart. My eyes snapped open and I tore myself away from her, staggering backwards from the bench to drunkenly slam into the wall beside the fireplace. I sank to the floor, trembling with shock. The Queen was no mere mortal, but a Halfling of both mortal and vampire bloodlines. I had heard the tales of full-fledged vampires being born to human women, but never a true half-breed of both mortal and Immortal traits. Her kind was merely a legend to my race now, the impossible product of a union never meant to be. Between the blurred clips of her memories, I had glimpsed the truth of her origins; her mother had been human, a daughter of a Tyst General, her father my very own Dark Father, Phelan! Though the memories had flashed through me like lightning, his aura had been unmistakable, leaving my mind reeling with the anguish of a thousand possibilities. My heart sank. He must have known, and to send me to kill his very own daughter...

My chest heaved and I fought to rip the last of the thorns that fastened my will to her, beating back the beast that had tasted blood and still longed to take her life regardless of the ancient Immortal laws. My conscience was torn. How could I take her life now? She was not only of Immortal blood, her murder, in and of itself, would be the ultimate crime within our race. She and I shared Phelan's blood. We were a Sister and Brother of the Darkness. Moria had slumped to one side

on the bench, her porcelain arms dangling over the edge like a rag doll. I watched the wounds on her neck begin to close with a morbid fascination. As the marks vanished, her chest heaved and she gasped for breath and her eyes fluttered open. For a long moment, she lay on the bench staring unblinking into the fire.

I swore I could hear low, taunting laughter roll through the atmosphere like distant thunder. The sound caused bile to rise in the back of my throat and I knew it was the voice of the Vicinus. My skin crawled with chill, a painful shiver like black talons raking against my back.

“You knew...” I whispered beneath my breath, staring at the swell of Moria’s belly. I could feel the god smugly coil tighter within her womb, nestling down like a purring cat. The Vicinus had known I would not be able to take her life; he had counted on my conscience tearing me away. He remained silent, though his sinister aura seemed somehow perpetually ingrained beneath my skin, painful pollinating spores that made me want to claw at my flesh until it was bloodied.

“You knew!” The words slipped again from my lips in a terrified anger.

Moria stirred, awakening from a trance, raising herself on one arm. She weakly lifted her hand to her neck, wincing slightly as she stared at me.

“What did you say?” she asked, disoriented and confused, her eyes darting about the room warily as she pushed herself into a sitting position again. “Why? I’m still alive? Why am I still here?” A terrible sadness clenched at her words.

“I-I can’t,” I stammered, still pressed against the wall beside the hearth, unable to move. I was stunned at how quickly she was recovering, my mind still grappling with the concept that she was part vampire. How very close I had

come to killing her.

“What do you mean, you can’t?” Her attention snapped towards me, pinning me further into the wall like an insect. “You have to. You have to stop this.” Her hands fell upon her stomach, tears spilling down her gaunt cheeks.

“Halfling,” I breathed.

She stared at me with a mixture of confusion and fear. “What do you mean?”

I realized from the terrified expression on her face that she had absolutely no idea of what I spoke.

“I can’t take your life because you are one of us...” I ran my fingers through my hair, bending forward to rest my forehead on my knees. I wanted to disappear, to close my eyes and vanish into nothingness. My stomach writhed with black serpents. “You don’t know... you couldn’t possibly know. You are a vampire. No, part vampire, part Immortal. A Halfling.”

I peered up at her between my wrists, my hands still gripping my hair against my scalp. Moria had left the bench and retreated to a far corner of the room. There she cowered, curled tightly with her arms about her knees, her huge eyes wide and terrified above tear-stained cheeks. For a moment, we regarded each other in silence like caged animals. My heart ached for her terrible circumstance; how I longed to set her free from the brutal prison of her existence, but the hand of my conscience was simply too heavy. I uncurled myself, drawing a deep breath to drive the rambling madness from my mind. Careful not to scare her further, I moved cautiously towards the corner where she cowered and knelt beside her. Her blood ran hot and passionate through my veins; I felt so close to her in that moment, as if she would turn to water and wash over me, through me like rain, if I were to touch her. I sank from my knees into a cross-legged position and held

my hand out to her.

The seconds ticked by, the roar of the fire behind me was a steady anchor to the earth below the house. Hesitantly, she pulled herself from the corner she had tried to disappear into and crawled towards me. Like a child, she slipped into my lap, leaning against my chest and wrapping her slender arms about me. I sighed, both in relief and anguish, and enveloped her with my own protective embrace, reaching up to smooth her hair from her face.

“I don’t want to be the one to tell you these things,” I said. “I didn’t ask for this fate, to be the one sent to deal your death sentence.” I spoke to her like I knew her and she had been a part of my life, time and time again.

I kissed the top of her head, feeling my own tears begin to well up in a tight knot in my throat. “But you are of Immortal birth. Just as you saw my coming in your dreams, I saw your heritage in your blood...now, as I drank from you. Your father...” I choked on the words, not wanting to confess such a truth aloud, but knowing there was no other way. “Your mother was mortal, as you probably know already, but your father... his name is Phelan Daray. He is the one who gave me his Dark Gift. You and I share his blood, though in different ways.”

She was trembling in my hold, soft, shallow quakes that pierced my soul like shards of glass.

“What is a vampire?” she asked.

I was shocked to silence. It had never occurred to me that, in her isolation amongst the Tyst Empire, despite what her dreams had shown her of me, that she would not have been privy to the tales that mortals were all too fond of telling. Inhaling with slow deliberation, I tried to find a simple way of explaining her heritage to her, but there simply was no definition that would not terrify her. “We are nocturnal

creatures that survive on the blood of mortal beings. We are, in essence, immortal.”

“Nothing can kill you?” Her voice shook with an amazed fear.

“Not necessarily, but if left alone, we might live forever.” She pulled away from me, twisting in my lap so that she could stare into my face. “Are you evil?”

My heart seized at the terrified venom behind her innocence and I found myself staring once again into the jagged crater of my past, the innocent eyes of hundreds of fledglings pleading with me for the guidance and salvation I had only defined from scraps of mortal philosophies. I had thought I had lain that question to rest for myself, but her words dredged it back up from the silt and spread its rotten corpse back on the banks of my consciousness.

I held her gaze steadily. “Only as much as humans can be.”

Her brow knitted together as she considered this answer, her gaze boring mercilessly into my soul. Her eyes dropped to the floor and she whispered, choosing each word carefully, as if they would help her to accept the history I had begun to reveal. “I... I never knew who my father was. They told me he was no one of concern and that he was long dead before I was born. I never knew my mother either.”

“I know,” I whispered into her hair, wincing at the pain I could hear in her voice.

“That is why they chose me, isn’t it?”

I stared at her for a moment, uncomprehending, entranced by her flawless ethereal beauty at such close proximity.

“The Tyst, they knew who my father was.” She swallowed hard, fighting back a new flood of tears. “For so many years I have tried to understand why they chose me to be Queen and then locked me away in this prison, why my grandfather

reacted so violently at the merest mention of my parents. But they knew all along, didn't they?"

I shook my head. "I don't know," I confessed in a whisper, surprised beyond comprehension at her calmness. "I know only what your blood has told me, nothing more. I stopped drinking before I saw too much."

She stared at me so intensely I wondered if perhaps her sanity had finally cracked.

A strange expression flickered across the glistening surface of her eyes like a ghost's reflection across a windowpane. "What does this make me?" she asked me like a child inquiring about God. "You said I was a vampire, or half of one? What does that mean?"

"I honestly don't know. What I am and what you are, are two very different things, but I do know it means we must find another way. Another way to end this."

"Another way?!" The tears streamed down her cheeks now. Moria pushed away from me. She staggered to her feet, reeling for a moment before finding her footing in the center of the room. I sat on the floor, paralyzed both in body and mind. She stood, her head down, her fists clenched at her sides.

Slowly her fingers uncurled. She raised her hands, laying them uncertainly on the swell of her belly. "The one thing that has kept me sane was the belief that you would come and set me free, that you could put an end to this misery, but all you have are more stories to feed me, more empty promises."

A disturbing calm came over her then, driving the tortured trembling from her limbs. Beneath a curtain of raven silk she whispered, more to herself than to me, "It was all a lie. Even my dreams were lies."

She crumpled to the floor. I leapt to my feet, catching

her in my arms effortlessly, cradling her against me as if she were made of crystal.

“No more lies,” I vowed to her. “No more lies.”

CHAPTER 8

With Moria's slender body in my arms, I fled her dollhouse prison, retracing my steps through the interconnecting rings of the Tyst fortress at a blinding speed. The physical world sung around me, an ultrasonic wail of confusion as the Chronous found itself stunned at its impossible inability to identify me. A portion of my essence was now permanently entangled within the fluid stream of biomatter that solidified the language into a tangible reality. My mind bent the code to my will to gain access, and the Chronous found itself questioning what part of itself moved outside of the main core and at such an alarming speed. I had already been a vampire, existing outside of mortal constraints, somewhere between the realm of gods and men, but now, instinctively, I found myself melding my previous preternatural abilities with that of the matrix itself and the result nearly left me invisible to the physical world. In a single heartbeat, I reached the outer ring of the Tyst fortress where I had left Malakai and Khanna

on guard.

The moment I came to a halt, the Chronous locked down on the Queen and I, a tugging sensation deep within my core like fine long fingers plucking at the threads of my spinal cord. Regardless of my newfound connection with the matrix, it had decided that while it did not like me, it would tolerate me. However, my abduction of the Queen angered it deeply and a silent call reverberated through the nervous system of the Chronous to alert the first wave of defense located on the outer ring in the quadrant where we were.

Malakai and Khanna were running towards me down the hall as I flickered into existence a few yards away with Moria clutched tightly in my arms. They stopped abruptly when they nearly collided with me, looks of bewilderment on their faces. There was no time for questions, however. Already, I could hear the distant thud of boots on concrete echoing towards us like rolling thunder. Drawing their weapons, Khanna and Malakai readied themselves for combat.

“Where is Loden?” I asked, moving past them.

“Coward!” Khanna spat. “At the first sign of trouble, he bolted. Took off running for the woods like a wolf pup.”

“Well, I suppose it’s a good thing we don’t really need him anymore,” I said quietly. Whatever knowledge Loden had of the Chronous was useless to me now. “What of the maps?” I asked hastily.

“He took them with him,” Khanna said with hatred.

What was lost was lost. There was no time to brood on it now. I deposited Moria in an inset alcove closest to the exit, motioning for her not to move. Her eyes widened with glistening fear. She nodded her understanding and pressed her tiny body deep into the shadows, all but disappearing to the mortal eye. I turned back to see Khanna and Malakai already engaged in battle, their swords and knives slicing

through the troops before them with deadly precision and speed that rivaled that of my younger Immortal kin. For a second I watched their deadly, spiraling dance, studying the flow of the combat, before slipping past fired bullets and into the fray to take out the last five of the men who assailed us. One by one, their bodies twisted unnaturally in my hands as if I were wringing a line of wet fabric. Distantly, I heard them crumple to the ground around me as I moved.

The Tyst soldier's neck cracked between my hands, hollow like a dead branch when Malakai's howl ripped through the cavernous hall. I whirled around to see him, pinned like a moth against the flat gray wall, the bayonet end of a machine gun buried to the muzzle through his stomach. Uselessly, he gripped the soldier's wrists as the man twisted the bayonet with merciless torture. Instantly, I found myself crossing the space between us, flinging the soldier down the hall. His body collided violently with the distant wall with a sickening thud. Malakai had slipped to the floor, his hands, glistening with blood, wrapped about the bayonet, unable to pry it from his body. I knelt before him and, placing a hand upon his left shoulder, jerked the bayonet free of his abdomen. He gasped with pain, coughing, blood bubbling up to his lips, spilling over his chin in long crimson rivulets. Weakly, his hands covered the gaping hole in his belly as he stared up at me with shock, uncomprehending that he had finally come to his end.

Behind me Khanna's defiant wail pierced my ears as the final Tyst soldier crumpled to the floor beside me. For a flicker of time, the world seemed to stop, suspended in horrifically slow animation as she turned her eyes to Malakai.

"NOOOOOO!!!!!!!" Her scream tore through my soul with a desperation that stole the breath from my lungs. Khanna shoved me aside to take my place before Malakai.

She frantically pushed her right hand over the wound in an attempt to stop the ceaseless flow of blood, her left cupping his cheek.

“No, no, no, no, no, NO!!” she chanted deliriously. “You can’t go now! You can’t leave me! Please, Malakai, look at me.” Losing control of reason, her hands alternated over the wound to his face, leaving bloody palm prints on his cheeks and through his black hair, matting it to the side of his head.

“Please... please?” Her voice choked on a sob. She turned to me, her eyes wild. “Do something, damn you! You have to do something.”

I shook my head sadly, wanting to comfort her in some way. “I’m sorry, Khanna. There’s nothing we can do.” Malakai’s injuries were too substantial to be healed quickly and we needed to evacuate immediately.

“Damn you!” she screamed. “This is your fault! You have to do something! Give him your blood. Save him! You have to save him!” She sobbed uncontrollably, her whole body shaking with adrenaline and grief.

The brutal truth of her words seared me to the bone, but I knew there was no time to save him before a new fleet of militia arrived. “There is not time. I’m sorry.”

She buckled into Malakai’s chest, her whole body shaking with her cries.

With the last of his strength, Malakai raised his right hand and placed it upon the back of her head, smoothing her hair in an gesture of comfort. Khanna gasped, her tear-streaked face snapping up to search his for signs of survival, but what she found was the pallor of death.

“Sshhhhh...” Malakai whispered, trying to smile, though the effect was only a sad twitch of his lips. “It’s okay.”

“No it’s not!” she howled back, between tearful gasps and choked exhales. “This isn’t the way it was supposed

to be.” I could see her fighting her weaknesses, forcing the warrior in her to command resilience. “We were supposed to start a life after this war, you and I, away from everything. You promised... damn it, Malakai! You’re going to make it. Do you hear me? You’re going to make it and we’re going home!”

Malakai only gazed up at her. A peace had come over his face with the subsiding shock. His hand slipped from the back of her neck with a fading strength to hers where it still covered the hole in his stomach. He wrapped his fingers around her hand, holding her gaze.

“I don’t think I ever told you that I love you,” he whispered. “So beautiful...” Malakai’s words drifted into silence. His head lolled to the side and his eyes fluttered closed.

Khanna shrieked again, pounding his chest with her fists, grabbing his coat and shaking him furiously in her grief. I was paralyzed as I watched her, immersed entirely in her fierce, gripping sorrow until the distant echo of another fleet of militia boots on concrete signified encroaching company. My eyes broke away from Khanna and Malakai to the hallway before us, littered with the lifeless carcasses of the Tyst soldiers.

Moria! I realized that I had lost track of her. My eyes searched the dull halogen illumination of the hallway. I found her behind me, cowering in the shadows between lamps where I had left her.

I turned back to Khanna. “We have to go, now,” I whispered urgently.

“Fuck you!” she snapped, glaring at me between a tangled mass of blood-matted hair. “You were supposed to have killed that bitch!” she hissed. “If you had killed her none of this would have happened.”

Her rage was interrupted by another round of choking sobs that crumpled her against Malakai's lifeless corpse. My eyes flitted between Khanna and the hallway, where my preternatural hearing could sense the quick advance of soldiers.

"I'm sorry. I know...." was all I could whisper as I grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her, flailing and shrieking like a wild animal, over my shoulder. I headed down the hallway towards Moria, lifting her against my side as I ran.

Before the Tyst enforcements had even reached the hall, we had vanished from the compound like ghosts.

* * *

Beyond the walls of the fortress, I took to the skies. Exhausted from her struggles and grief, Khanna lost consciousness the moment we left the ground. Moria, who had remained absolutely silent through the entire fight, clung to my side, trembling like a field mouse, her face buried in my chest. My mind burned with adrenaline and rage for the harm Phelan had knowingly placed in our way. Had he really thought I would kill one of my own, that the mission would be a simple assassination without casualties? Or had he known all along and sentenced us to our torture and death with a peaceful conscience? I hated to admit it, but the idea did not surprise me.

I fought back the bile that rose in my throat, further souring my stomach. High above the Earth, the dew contained in the night air crystallized on my lashes and lips as I stared out over the rolling, moonlit mountain and headed southwest in the hope of reaching Tiernan's Phuree encampment in Texas before dawn. I knew by the position of the moon that we had only about three hours before sunrise,

but I felt certain it would be enough time. The mottled stains of trees bled beneath us. My mind was sharp and focused, slicing through each movement I had taken through the night, from the second I had left Khanna and Malakai on guard at the fortress entrance until Malakai's dying breath. It was a painful dream I could not fully comprehend.

My feet had barely touched the packed clay earth of the Phuree camp before I sped off into the maze of leather teepees in search of the one I had been sequestered in a few nights prior. Instantly, the siren call of the Phuree magic wrapped its sensuous limbs about my soul, winding its seductive secrets through my mind like the musky scent of incense and sweat that swirled through the atmosphere of the camp. My movements through the gypsy camp were nothing more than gusts of icy prairie wind to the working denizens as they carried on with their nightly rituals of survival. I quickly found the tent, as haunting and abandoned as when I had left it, and slipped inside unnoticed.

The heaviness of the tent's interior reeked of stale campfire smoke, sand and tanned deer skin, making the shadows press down upon us like a spiteful hand. Once inside, the world came to a screeching halt when the entrance fell shut behind me. For a long moment I stood, paralyzed from the grip of my new knowledge. I stared blankly into the darkness, listening to the world outside as it churned and sighed, unaware of my presence. The words I had whispered to Moria in the last moments of her imprisonment revolved through my mind: *No more lies. No more lies.*

Yet, the world spun uncontrollably in upon itself, gestating layers and layers of tangled silk that could flay the very flesh from our bones if we moved against it. The Chronous and the Vicinus alike knew me intimately now. Their combined essences slithered through the cells of my

body riddling it with spidering ligaments of artificial intuition that torturously linked me back to the host. It would hunt me forever until it could capture me and dissect me, explain me, gutting me of my mysteries once and for all.

Khanna remained unconscious, draped over my shoulder like a cloak. Moria nestled against me, clutched to my chest, her legs wrapped about my waist like a child, her swollen belly pressed against my stomach. She stirred, breaking me out of my daze. I loosened my grip on her as she unwound her legs from around me, slipping to her tiptoes on the coarse jute mat covering the bare ground beneath. For a long moment, she continued to lean against me, her hands resting lightly on my chest, regaining her strength, fearfully surveying the spartanly furnished room.

“Where are we?” she whispered, trembling both from fear and the residual cold from our travel.

I could hear her mind racing as she fought to deal with the idea of a world beyond the sculpted microcosm created for her by the Tyst Empire. She reached down, covering her belly instinctively with her right hand. The fetus had remained disturbingly silent throughout our escape. Nestled calmly in Moria’s womb, it waited and watched the frantic motions of the Earthly creatures it controlled like puppets, perfectly secure in its prediction of its future rebirth. It fed on the anguish and pain its mere existence caused the world, leaching the broken pathos it needed even more than the blood of its host from the cacophony of spiraling insanity and impending war.

For a fleeting moment, I doubted my impulsive actions. Perhaps I should have fought my honor and instinct and killed Moria, ridding the world, then and there, of the horror she carried. My breath snared in my chest by rivaling demons of consciousness. She pried herself away from my

protection and tentatively stepped into the room, walking with thoughtfully placed steps round the space to investigate her surroundings. She flickered in and out of reality, moving with a combination of the regal grace of her imperiled upbringing and the silent fluidity of her vampiric heritage. I wanted desperately to think of her as *human*, and yet she was something other than a mere mortal, a being we had thought condemned to myth much as humanity had considered our kind.

She turned to face me from the far side of the tent, waiting for my answer.

“We are in the Phuree camp.” I broke my statuesque stillness and carried Khanna’s inert form to the low sleeping platform to my left. Gently, I lowered her unconscious body to the mat, settling the warrior and covering her with a blanket. I squatted beside the platform, watching her beautiful, tanned features, still tense even in sleep with the anguish of her loss. I reached out and smoothed a lock of bloodstained sun-bleached hair from her forehead.

“The Phuree?” Moria’s voice shook with terror. I could only imagine the terrible stories she had been fed of the wild outlander group and their fierce pagan magic.

I stood, drawing a deep breath as I rose. I nodded, taking a step towards her, wanting in some primordial way to comfort this creature that shared my blood. I held out my hand. She stared at it as if it were covered with thorns. Her reason had taken hold once again and she was no longer the delirious woman bent upon suicide, but a Queen of a global empire who knew full well what little control she now had over her present situation.

I took another step towards her, and she shrank against the rippling leather behind her, trying to escape into the shadows themselves.

“Come here,” I said, subjugating her to my will.

Against her own desire, she walked towards me, around the cold fire ring in the center of the tent. She stopped directly in front of me, staring up into my face with eyes so luminous that it might be conceivable they held the very cosmos themselves.

“Will they be able to finish what you were not? Is that why you have brought me here?” She commanded a deep reservoir of strength in her words, though her body still trembled with a mortal fear.

I was taken aback. In all honesty, I was not sure why I had brought her there, jeopardizing the fragile construct of the entire Phuree plan. All I knew was that she could not die that night, not by my hand. There had to be another way.

I shook my head. “The Phuree would not cross me. They fear me as much as they need me now. I chose to protect you, they will obey.” A sickening knot of certainty tightened in my stomach.

A small furrow creased between her brows as she considered my promise. “I don’t think you fully realize what you are vowing.” The trembling in her body resided as she stared into my eyes, reaching up to touch the side of my face with pale, delicate fingers. “I think you will come to regret your choices.”

Deeply insulted, I snatched her hand away from my face, wanting to throw it back towards her. Instead, I held onto it in the air between us, feeling the fine bones in my fist resist the pressure with a familiar preternatural strength that hummed through the satin white skin; the sensation caused my heart to race knowing that what lurked beneath her mortal shell was a far more indestructible Immortal core.

“You may believe what you want, your Highness. You are not the first to judge me.”

“I am not judging you,” she whispered, her eyes dropping to the ground as she pulled her hand from my grip. “I simply know what becomes of those who think they can change the course of these things.”

She wrapped her arms about her chest, glancing over at Khanna. “I am the reason her love is now dead.” Moria looked back at me, “She will kill me if you do not.”

I followed her gaze. The Queen confused me; at one moment it appeared she would throw herself upon a sword if offered one and in the same instance, she cowered from those who might do her harm.

“Somehow I do not think it would be that easy,” I said. “But for now, you should come with me.” I turned back towards the entrance.

She did not move to follow me. “Where are we going?”

I halted in mid-stride, my hand on the door flap, and replied over my shoulder. “It’s time your father answered to a few things.”

* * *

We stepped out into the dusty alley of shadows. Some distance from the center communal circle of activity, the icy night wind howled its ghostly coyote wail as it wound through the leather and wood maze of darkness. It carried on its back the rich, rough perfume of sweat, smoke and incense. I breathed deeply, feeling strangely empowered now that I was back amongst the Phuree, the resonance of my newly infused blood amplifying the siren call of their magic. I listened to the muffled sounds around us, and I could feel it like a physical entity surrounding me. It ran its invisible fingers through my hair and kissed me lightly upon the neck—human voices, neighing horses, the screech

of smithed steel, all singing a sad symphony to my senses of a lush, brilliant chaos stoked by war.

I listened carefully to the wind for traces of Phelan's aura amongst the masses. I found him all too easily, barely disguised within his quarters, a molten glow of pride and vanity that made my fangs ache to tear at his throat again. There was no doubt in my mind that I could finish the attack I had attempted nights prior. Unfortunately, I now knew he played a much larger part in the scheme of things than I had originally imagined.

Behind me, hovering near the entrance to the tent, I could feel Moria's anxiety rising steadily like a tidal wave. Within the perfectly sculpted replica of life in which she had subsisted, she had found a strength in her desire for death, a fearlessness that came in the moments of emptiness beyond pain. In one night's time, all of that protective numbness had been stripped away leaving her raw and exposed to the howling demons she had pushed to the edge of her memory. The looking glass that had lied to her for so many years had shattered, revealing a black and gaping maw of bitter truth that threatened to consume her, body and soul.

Her teeth chattered as her jaw tensed, her body trembling like a captured bird. I turned back, empathizing with the utter lack of control she had over her fate. She was merely an Earthly being caught irrevocably in a war between titans and gods. I placed an arm about her shoulders and pulled her close to me, hoping that my presence, for what it was worth, might be of some comfort. Her trembling only intensified, so I ushered her forward, down the path I knew would lead to Phelan's tent.

The muffled din of the Phuree faded as we walked, the ground crunching softly beneath our hurried footsteps. Winding through the narrow paths of slanting leather that

breathed shallowly with the rise and fall of the cold prairie wind, I followed the pull of Phelan's dark aura. I coiled my own energy tightly against me, cloaking both Moria and myself to any and all curious souls. I had my suspicions that Nahalo had already felt our arrival, his preternatural senses keen to universal vibrations that even the Elders of the Immortals could not yet detect. It would not be long before he came looking for me. Before that time came, I would have my words with Phelan.

Too soon, we arrived before the closed entrance of Phelan's quarters. The leather walls of the teepee, painted with dancing black and red tribal signs of power and protection interwoven between inscriptions in the Phuree tongue, glowed faintly with the dull gold pulse of firelight. The structures to either side were black and silent. Inside, Phelan was lost within his own thoughts, completely unaware of our approach. My heart pounded in my throat making my jaw clench painfully. The depth of Phelan's deception continued to astound me, each level of darkness more vain and vile than the next. My true allegiance to my Maker had been severed over a century ago and so the rift that divided us had avalanched into a deep chasm that prevented me from seeing the truth of his soul as I had once held the ability to in my youth. Trusting him was not an option and I knew my life depended on remembering that fact forever.

I grasped the edge of the leather doorway before us and flung it aside, stepping over the threshold with Moria still close against me. The hot breath of the fire that blazed hungrily in the center of the room accosted us like a furnace blast. Phelan was on his feet instantly, whirling round in a blur of black silk and crimson hair to face us, his exquisite alabaster features and emerald eyes frozen in an expression of pure shock. Without hesitation, I left Moria standing

petrified in front of the entrance and advanced on Phelan before he could move again, swinging my fist at his jaw. Bone crunched beneath the blow, the impact sending him flying sideways over the fire to the thin sleeping pallet on the far side of the room. He landed on his side, sprawled amidst the piles of pillows and blankets. Instantly, he sprang to his feet again, crouching low on the pallet like a panther, ready to return the attack at a moment's notice. He hissed at me behind his bared fangs, his glittering gemstone eyes wide with rage.

The indent in his jaw righted itself, filling in as his bones repaired themselves flawlessly.

“You fucking bastard!” I growled and rounded the fire towards him.

Phelan scrambled backwards off the pallet and pulled himself upright to his full height. He held up his right hand, palm towards me and shouted, “Wait!” He was breathing hard with adrenaline. “Just wait!”

I paused in mid-stride, my body shaking with the rage I had kept tempered for the past few nights. The air in the tent crackled with the fierce electricity that surged between my Maker and I, charging it with such intensity that the fire beside us grew furiously bright, reaching upwards towards the smoke vent and the heavens above. He lowered his hand, though his body remained rigid with caution.

His expression was no longer one of shock and rage, but of grave concern, a deep furrow creasing between his auburn brows. Instantly, he could tell that the plan he and the Phuree had devised had not gone as predicted. He dared not take his eyes off me for a single second, though he desperately longed to know the identity of the woman I had brought with me.

“Tynan, what happened?” he whispered. “Who is this

with you?”

“Like you don’t know!” I hissed, barely able to keep from mangling him, limb from limb.

Phelan stared at me as if I were mad, shaking his head. “I can’t read her. What is the meaning of this?! Who is she?” he demanded, his voice sharp with alarm.

I advanced on him until I was inches from his body. This time he stood his ground, his gaze locked with mine.

“You sent me in there knowing full well what I was walking into, didn’t you? You had to, you who knows all, and yet, so very little! And to think, *to think*, you would believe I could commit a crime so intensely heinous against *my very own blood!*” I grabbed the front of his shirt, balling the fabric in my fists and yanking him towards me so violently our noses nearly touched.

“You should count your blessings now, Phelan, for if you weren’t my Maker, I would kill you right now!”

I shoved him backwards and turned away towards the fire.

Shaking, I stared into the flames as they consumed the last of the timber within their heart, trying to find a center to grasp onto before my anger carried my sanity away forever. Phelan sighed heavily through his nose and I could see him watching me for a long moment before dropping his eyes to the ground.

“I see,” he said, his voice heavy. “You were not meant to ever know.”

“And just how do you suppose you were to keep such a detail from me? You know the truth is inescapable when you drink from someone, especially me. Every sliver of their being, every pore of their soul, down to the song of the very cells themselves...” I squeezed my eyes shut and shook my head, feeling the anger rise again with a renewed vengeance.

“It should not have mattered,” Phelan said coldly. “It was what had to be done. And you were the only one with the power to do it. I’m truly sorry, whether you believe me or not, that you had to be put in that position, but she was an abomination of nature and what she carried had to die with her.”

“Abomination?!” I whirled back to face Phelan. “Just what do you call us then? She is not just another vampire you created for your own company, Phelan. She is your *daughter*, your flesh and blood *daughter*!”

“Please stop.” Moria’s soft whisper cut through our words like the wind. “Please stop speaking like I’m not here.”

I heard Phelan’s heart stop. A souring regret curdled in the pit of my stomach and I cringed silently at our demeaning display. Despite the evil seed she carried, she was still a woman and a Queen, deserving of much greater respect than our base arguments.

“Tynan, what have you done?” Phelan breathed his words with horror.

I raised my eyes to capture Moria’s luminous green gaze, eerily identical to her father’s own. The fear, which had rendered her mute and trembling before had been forced aside, replaced by the regal and commanding presence of royalty, her spine straight, her shoulders back, slender arms calmly at her sides. I knew her soul. I knew her soul just as I had known the siren language of the Phuree’s magic when it had whispered to me in my first nights with them. It was an indescribable and unbreakable allegiance which my soul had made long before I had been born into either flesh or Darkness.

“I did what I had to do,” I said, holding her gaze. I turned to meet Phelan’s wild eyes. “Look at her.”

I stepped closer to him. He was shaking, his rage radiating from him like waves of molten lava. I raised my arm and pointed at Moria. “Look at her,” I said again. “Or can you not stomach to place a humanity upon your callous dictations?”

“Tynan, you have made some very bad decisions in your life, but this, by far, outweighs them all.” There was a strange sort of sadness deep behind the black pupils of his eyes, huge and alien in the golden glow of the fire. “You have no idea what wrath you have unleashed by doing this.”

I shook my head. “No. What wrath *you* have unleashed.”
“You have to kill her.”

“I can’t. I *won’t*,” I said. “If you want it done, take her yourself.”

Phelan’s lips curled into a snarl as he hissed, his anger enveloping any and all emotion he may have felt for his daughter. “You are forever the coward! I should have known I would have to finish this job myself!”

Some part of me had thought it possible that he might actually still retain a trace amount of love for the daughter he had long ago abandoned, but as he spun towards Moria, reaching out to grab her by the shoulders viciously, that possibility vanished in the flames. She gasped as he pulled her towards him. Petrified, I stood staring while she struggled in vain within his iron clutch, his left hand reaching up behind her head to expose her flawless white neck to his vengeance. Moria’s eyes locked with mine for a moment, tears streaming down her face in a strange mixture of fear and resignation. What truly shattered my heart was the sadness that lurked behind it all, the bitter realization that her true father was nothing more than a bloodthirsty killer and not so different from her husband, Lord Cardone III. I watched myself reflected in her eyes, aghast and paralyzed amongst the

dancing flames of the fire beside her, until her eyes flickered shut as she readied herself for the death she had dreamed of for so long.

His back to me, Phelan's head dipped forward, bending to tear at Moria's delicate flesh. But as he moved, the world around him shifted and slowed, breaking apart and restructuring itself seamlessly like a glass vase shattering and contracting at the speed of light. I felt the shockwave as if from miles away, a rippling, silent reverberation that tore through the room, hurling Phelan backwards into the far tent wall like a scrap of paper. I fell to my knees before the fire, the wind knocked out of me. The massive poles supporting the tent shook as if they might collapse inward, but managed to steady and stay upright. Gasping, I forced my lungs to gather air once again before collapsing onto my side. My ribs ached like they had been struck hard with a baseball bat. I clutched at my chest for a moment, shocked and disoriented, until I felt the fractures begin to heal.

Shakily, I lifted my head to peer over the fire in search of Moria. On the far side she stood, still and silent, unharmed by the sonic wave that had passed through the room. Terrified and confused, her eyes darted back and forth from myself to Phelan. Her breaths rasped as they were heaved through her lungs, her mouth agape with shock.

I pulled myself to my feet, moving as a panther might through the trees towards her. The silent blast had obliterated the rage that had clouded my senses. I was aware of each and every texture, sound and smell, down to the thunder of her heartbeat and the rustle of her clothes as her chest rose and fell, her body trembling uncontrollably.

I caught her gaze and held it as I approached. I dared not reach out to touch her, and only spoke to her in a whisper. "Moria, what just happened?"

She shook her head. Behind her terrified eyes, her mind raced frantically. She swallowed hard and dropped her gaze to her belly, staring at it like it was a diseased and sickly thing.

“It... *he*...” She struggled with her words for a moment, drawing shaking breaths as her trembling hands moved to touch the swell of her womb curiously, halting just above. She looked scared of her own body. She looked back up at me, tears streaming down her pale cheeks.

“Such rage!” Her whisper was one of horror. “Such bloodlust!” “I’ve never felt anything like that before.” Her hands clenched and unclenched, moving back and forth to touch her brow and cheeks to grasp at the air beside her, searching for a safety line that was no longer there.

She sobbed, her palms grinding into her eyes as her body shook. “It wasn’t like this before. I can *hear* him now! I can hear him talking to me. I can feel him moving inside of me... awake...so angry!”

“Moria...” Defying my own caution, I reached out and gently took her into my arms, an immense wave of empathy crashing over me. “What is he saying?” I whispered, not completely sure I wanted to hear the reply.

A long moment of silence ensued, hovering above the fierce crackle of the fire beside us and the muted din of the Phuree camp outside. I listened to the rustle and snap of the tent walls around us as the wind picked at them curiously, persistently seeking entrance. In the distance, towards the center of the encampment, a mass cry of confusion swelled, though I could not yet identify the source. It lifted through the night with a mourning wail to reach a crescendo of panic.

Moria stirred in my arms, pulling away to look up into my face, her brows knitted, her cheeks wet. All of her blood had drained away from her face giving rise to her vampiric

heritage all too keenly. “He said... *I will kill them all.*” She collapsed against me again in a fit of terrified grief.

My soul cringed at her words. I thought of the being I had seen dominating the bioplasma core, the thick black shadow that fluxed in and out of the liquid data, molding it around itself effortlessly; the shrill pain that had ripped through me when it speared me with a tendril of plasma, coiling about my body and lifting me from the ground, mercilessly toying with me like a cat.

I shivered. It had not been able to destroy me then and there, but I had felt its primeval power, the very wrath which Moria now felt lashing within her. My mind spiraled uncontrollably. It had been a terrible mistake to bring her to the Phuree, I knew that now, but I had acted on impulse, an impulse driven by something much greater than my own desire to save her: revenge. I wondered if I could trust in anything, even my own mind now, which acted too impulsively to be classified as sane. I had become too deeply interwoven within the fabric of the living Chronous technology, too closely I had brushed with the Vicinus himself so that I could feel his heartbeat resonating within my own chest. The Vicinus knew the taste of my blood and he wanted more.

He held no fear of my existence or my intentions, and so would take his time stripping my flesh from my bones, when that time came. This I knew with a chilling certainty. While the rest of the world believed wholeheartedly in my power, the Vicinus laughed in my face.

The leather entrance to the tent snapped open, coldly severing the tension that hung on the ends of Moria’s words. I closed my eyes, not caring who or what had entered. I stood frozen and silent with Moria still tightly clutched against my chest. Behind my eyes the image of the girl by the river,

the Queen's servant whom I had killed, rippled sinister and watery, her reflection sinking into her cold, wet grave, hair blending with the undulating hydrilla as if it still lived on without her. The din of brewing chaos outside swallowed us whole in the brief moment the entrance remained open; a rising wall of panicked voices and neighing horses assaulting my soul, clawing at it with terrified, needy talons. And then it was gone again as the entrance fell shut with a snap, reduced to a muted moan by the thick layer of animal skin.

I opened my eyes at the disappearance of the sound and instantly locked with Nahalo's ancient arctic stare. He regarded me silently with a crushing disapproval and anger. My breath caught in my throat; my heart thundered within me until I could feel my pulse hard in my temples and hands. A primal part of me longed to fall to my knees before him and beg for an impossible forgiveness, however, I remained standing, the full weight of the consequences of my actions instantly and irrevocably clear.

"They are coming." He took several steps towards me, stopping an arm's length away. Not once did his eyes drop to the quivering woman wrapped in my arms, her face buried in my shirt. He, unlike Phelan, knew full well who she was. He, unlike Phelan, had no doubt sensed the entire night unfold as he watched me from a distance, one painful moment at a time.

I replied with a silent nod of understanding. Subconsciously, I had known all along that the fallout from Moria's abduction would be catastrophic. For a century the Tyst had treated the Phuree with the disgruntled disdain of a pest, eradicating the biggest of nests while subjecting their will upon the smaller factions only when necessary. However, the Tyst would stop at nothing now that the most precious piece of their plan had been stolen right out from

under them. Not only was their power in jeopardy, but their pride had been injured by meagerly armed individuals. They would pursue the Phuree and the Immortals to the ends of the Earth with the vengeance of a swarm of killer bees. There was nothing that could temper their wrath.

Behind me, Phelan's clambered to his feet in a daze. My mind bristled with white noise as the panic of the world outside rose, a gale wind about the venomous vibration of the Vicinus' lifeforce. The static filled my ears, numbing my face; I was fighting to draw breath. In Nahalo's gaze, I could see my own reflection, terror edging me closer to the psychotic breakdown I should have succumbed to long ago.

"Do you know the caves northeast of here?" Nahalo did not blink as he spoke, his face a perfect mask of restraint in his human guise.

I nodded, scouring my memory for their exact location.

"Take her there and wait for me." There was no room for argument.

Phelan had warily crept round the edge of the tent to take his place behind Nahalo, near the entrance. A wild fear ran rampant across his features, one which I had never seen in him in all of my centuries as his Darkling.

"Phelan and I must speak alone." Nahalo turned away towards Phelan.

"Wait," I managed to gasp. "I—" "Do as I say now, Tynan. You are no longer in a position to question what happens next." With those definitive words he and Phelan disappeared into the night beyond.

I stared in mute horror at the door that separated Moria and I from the ensuing chaos boiling within the Phuree encampment. I had come full circle yet again. I had been a fool to think that I could control even the path that would lead to my fate. All I had ever been adept at was creating

chaos and destroying the lives of those around me. Now thousands would die and there was no way to stop the hordes of bloodthirsty Tyst who had waited for just such an excuse to attack with their full force. Then again, would not the Queen's death have also resulted in such an attack? What exactly had the Phuree believed would happen once Moria was found dead in her chambers had I succeeded?

They are fools, I thought, true fools if they did not foresee this. Dead or alive the Queen is no more than an elaborate excuse for war.

Though my indignation seethed bitterly through my heart, I knew better than to disobey the orders of an Ancient Immortal.

"Come," I said and pried Moria from my body. She resisted, holding onto the front of my shirt. "No, wait! Where are you taking me now?"

"Someplace safe. We can't stay here any longer." I pulled her towards the entrance.

"They'll hunt us no matter where we go now," she said, her tone shadowed with hopelessness.

I stopped, whirling around to backhand her hard across the cheek, sending her stumbling until she lost her footing and crumpled to her knees clutching her jaw.

"Don't you think I know that, damn it?!" I snapped. "I didn't ask for this! I didn't want this and I don't know what the hell to do now. I failed. I failed you as I have failed the Phuree and the Immortals. So I am following orders." I was shaking, my rage bringing me nearly to tears. "I'm just... *following orders.*" The words I had spoken and the ring of the slap reverberated in my ears.

I should have run when I had the chance. The thought flashed across my mind. Nahalo gave me the choice. This is all my fault.

Moria's eyes widened with shock. There, deep within the darkness, I saw the quickening of understanding in her, an empathy for the cage I threw myself repeatedly against until I was broken and bloody, the cage that was constructed by the very ones I had sworn to protect. I could see the resistance leave her limbs; it was obvious she had never been struck in such a manner and the impact terrified her. I may not have been able to kill her, but I had subdued her. Shakily, she climbed to her feet. She bowed her head, her hair falling in black curtains around her face to hide the blossoming bruise along her cheek. Remorse needled along my spine, sharp and cold, a useless emotion.

I took her by the hand, leading her out of Phelan's quarters and into the chill of the dirt lane that ran between the rings of tents. Cobalt shadows saturated the vacant spaces between angular orange shafts of distant firelight from the center of the encampment. The rustling of the leather walls snapped like the sails of a mighty ship in a storm, weaving in and out of the layers of shouted human commands, sharp clanking of metal and thud of tents being collapsed, one after another. The Phuree were on the move.

As a nomadic people, the Phuree were adept at vanishing without a trace. They were ghosts of legend to those within the amagin perimeters, creatures of myth and magic, warriors that came and went with the moon and the wind. Though they were careful to guard their gypsy settlements with layers of powerful magical seals, every so often the Tyst would ferret them out, moving in with lightening speed to eradicate every trace of them.

Such a time was now. The encampment within which Moria and I stood would be dismantled and the Phuree would disappear, leaving not a footprint behind for the Tyst satellites to scan. The cold autumn wind sliced through the

clothes I had stolen from the dead Tyst soldier, but there was no time to search for warmer gear. I did not want to be pulled into the whirlpool of commotion around us, nor did I want further confrontation with any member of the Phuree or my own clan.

I looked up at the sky. The heavens had never felt so far away, so vast and full of unobtainable omniscience. I had become insignificant once again, at least in my own mind, merely another pawn in the greater scheme of the universe. For a moment I had fooled myself into thinking I could control the path of my destiny and reclaim the honor, which I had obliterated so many centuries before. However, just as it had been with all of my idealistic, naive attempts over the years, reality was quick to drive nails deep into my wrists below the fists I raised against it. How could I change the universe if I continued to obey it, even if I fought it every step of the way?

I led Moria to the edge of the encampment and out into the rolling prairie landscape beyond. When the dull orange glow of the Phuree fires ceased to drive back the dense black of night, I ran, pulling Moria along mercilessly behind me. Scrub brush and dying prickly pear cactus tore at our legs; the night was filled with the shrill cadence of crickets. My eyes adjusted quickly, but I could hear Moria's frightened gasps behind me as we hurtled ourselves into the vast Texas wilderness. Though her blood ran thick with Immortality, I had yet to test just how far her abilities reached. She was about to become part of a strange magical dissection as we picked and pried apart her shell looking for one soft point of vulnerability, the one point even the Vicinus could not protect.

In one sweeping movement, I pulled her up to my side, wrapping my arm about her waist, and left the Earth behind.

Moria clung to me fiercely, nearly strangling me with her arms as she clung to my body with desperation. Beneath the deafening howl of icy wind that carried us, her heart raced like a humming bird's against my chest. I could not imagine the terror she must have been experiencing, abducted from one madhouse and thrust into a far more demented plane. At least the hell she had been raised in had been reinforced with walls to secure her and keep the banshees at bay. Now she was truly at the mercy of gods and myths with no army to defend her or husband to lull her to sleep with lies. All that she had to cling to now were her preconceived notions of me through her dreams. Even those idyllic concepts were quickly being shattered.

I was not her savior.

I thought of how she had tried desperately to hide against me in Phelan's tent as Nahalo had addressed us. And yet she continued to hold onto him as if he held the power to make it all go away.

Poor child. You were cursed from birth.

The damp in the low-lying clouds turned to a thin sheath of ice as we moved through them. It clung to our hair and clothing like diamond dust. For the long minutes we flew weightless above the Earth the world below seemed to dissolve in an archaic alien peace, a silent eloquence in which the gods must certainly have existed. I let my eyes drift over the rolling landscape below, a patchwork quilt of canyons and prairies and once-neatly cultivated farm land, for the most part now reclaimed by nature. The highways that once contained long lines of tiny red ants marching through the night were invisible, gobbled up by the darkness. These days, very few traveled this far out for beyond the amagins it was anyone's gamble for survival.

We drew near to the area where I remembered the caves

to be, and I gradually dropped closer to surface, moving just above the treetops as I scanned the black landscape for signs of the tourist area which had marked its entrance a century before. The sharp black branches of live oaks, mesquites and cedars reached up for us in a dizzying blur, trying to snag our clothing that snapped violently in the wind currents. In the distance, I thought I spied a man-made clearing and slowed my speed slightly, circling low to scan the terrain with greater detail. An ancient parking lot of cracked asphalt peeked through a ring of encroaching wilderness.

Soundlessly, I brought us back to the ground. Moria still clung to me, her arms wrapped about my chest like threads of welded steel, her still face pressed into my neck. I cradled her protectively, scanning the perimeter of the clearing for signs of danger.

In the twentieth century the location had been a popular tourist destination, but had long since fallen into ruin, just like the rest of the old civilization, abandoned and forgotten in the face of war. Faded brown weeds forced their tough stalks through the disintegrating concrete, encroaching rapidly around the edges of the lot in their determination to reclaim their territory. Trees grew wild and fierce, their branches reaching out with the exultation of freedom from mankind's manicuring blades. A wicked breeze rolled through the night, passing along its childish rumors noisily through the falling leaves as it ripped them from their mothers' arms. The rich, earthy perfume of autumn caused the fine hairs on the backs of my arms to stand on end.

I gazed up at the moon, waning in the sky above us. No more than an hour remained before the dawn flooded the sky once again. I let my eyes drop once to the collage of shadows that danced about the edges of the parking lot. Though I sensed the movement of animals nearby, I felt no

fear or threat in the form of human intellect or otherwise. I exhaled, reaching up to stroke the back of Moria's head instinctively.

"Moria?" I whispered.

Reluctantly, Moria released my body. She did not move to step away from me, remaining pressed against my side as she looked fearfully about her. "There are caves here?" Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke.

"You can't see them from here," I replied and walked forward across parking lot towards the tree line on the far side.

Moria followed hesitantly. I could feel her anxiety and fear emanating from her like high pitched feedback screaming through the air about her body. The waves of raw energy collided with my own sour mixture of resentful dread and disgust, grating against one another until my nerves felt raw and bleeding. Exhaustion riddled my body, the adrenaline from the invasion of the Tyst fortress and my encounter with Phelan having finally begun to drain from my veins to pool in the pit of my stomach like oil.

We passed the climbing tower to the left of the lot, once used by adventurous youth and thrill seekers. It now stood watch over the landscape like a forgotten medieval castle, its scarred wooden structure black and ominous, snaking lines of green crossvine and yellowing Virginia creeper crisscrossing over its decaying sides, against the backdrop of trees. I wondered why the Phuree had not chosen to settle here instead of in the greater open areas to the northwest. It occurred to me then that this had most likely been a place of refuge for them at one time or another, constantly on the move from the prying eyes of the Tyst, but the tower would have made an easily detectable landmark for surveying satellites.

The pathway that led past the deserted offices had become overgrown and treacherous, barely visible to the mortal eye beneath the layers of fallen leaves and weeds. The building itself was cold and silent, its broken windows black and filled with spirits, its eaves layered with beds of dead leaves and squirrel nests. Our footfalls made soft crunching sounds as we made our way downwards around the back of the building, along the steep trail that led towards the mouth of the cave. Somewhere within the boughs of a cedar tree nearby, the mournful call of a screech owl echoed, bouncing off the stone face of the hillside to our right. Empty of human activity, the soul of the Earth had risen once again. It was alive. I could feel the power of magic that emanated upwards from the core as we drew closer and closer to the mouth of the cave. I was sure that the hidden faces of faun and sprites regarded us, deciding our fate.

The wooden platform constructed at the entrance of the caverns was still largely intact, with only pieces of the railing around its edges having fallen away to the sloping hillside below. I stared at the pitch black mouth of the cave, not savoring the idea of venturing inside or what it might hold now after all of these years undisturbed. Gazing out at the landscape around us, I knew there was no other choice, at least for myself. The sun would soon drive me underground, regardless of my reservations.

I looked around for something to use as a torch and spotted a fallen tree limb lying a few feet away on the decking. Quickly retrieving the branch, I returned to Moria. She stared at the cave entrance with a look of pure terror upon her exquisite features. So perfect, so beautiful. How easy it would have been, in another life, in another time, for me to have allowed myself to be swept up in such a painting of ethereal femininity.

“Do we have to go in there?” she whispered, wrapping her arms around herself, shivering in the chill wind.

Her voice broke my reverie. I sighed and followed her gaze into the darkness. “Yes, I’m afraid so.” I brought the branch up before me and, focusing my attention upon the dry dead end, summoned up the new power bestowed to me through Nahalo’s blood. The air around the wood fizzed with energy and, with a pop, the end of the branch burst into flames. Beside me, Moria gasped.

“This should help a bit,” I said and handed the branch to Moria, who stood staring at me, her mouth slightly agape with surprise.

“How did you...?” She watched the flames at the end of the branch greedily consuming the wood.

I walked to the edge of the platform near the path we had followed down. “Stay here,” I said, not acknowledging her question. “I will go gather more wood.”

“Wait,” she squeaked, chasing after me. “Don’t leave me here!”

I did not turn back to face her, but kept walking. “I said stay here. The last thing I need right now is for you to get bitten by a rattler or something. I won’t be long.”

The wavering orange glow from her torch followed me as she moved to the edge of the platform as I descended down the hillside. I felt hollow inside and yet I ached so painfully that I was sure I had ceased to breathe. The cold sense of hopelessness I had sworn to forget encroached once again. Everything around me was disintegrating into a familiar chaos, an infinite cycle of dishonor and despair from which there seemed to be no escape. Over and over again, I would reach a nexus of power from which I could see forever into the promise of the future, only to learn it was a great lie dangled before me to lure me over the edge and back

down to the bottom once again. Perhaps I was not meant for a greater destiny than the one I continuously cultivated.

Sulking silently, I gathered broken branches into my arms, my boots crunching softly through the layers of dry brown leaves. In those last crazed moments in Moria's bedroom only hours before, I had been swept up in the new revelations of her existence and the power of her beauty. I had wanted to save her. I had wanted those who had placed us in such a tragic position to pay dearly for their arrogance, for Phelan to answer for his deeds. He had shown no true remorse, no acknowledgement of the wrongs he had committed. She was simply a part of the war he wanted to win, a means to an end and nothing more, just as I was and would forever be. A piece upon a chessboard he slid coolly from light into darkness as he formulated his plans.

When my arms were filled with wood, I trudged back up the hillside. In the distance the night echoed with the solemn cry of a screech owl, soft and mournful. The air was heavy with the sweet sadness of autumn, the slowing sifting of life into the womb of hibernation. I found myself wanting to burrow deep into the Earth below my feet, to cover myself with layers of brittle dead leaves and breathe deeply the richness of death, to lose myself in time's greater plan until, like a cicada, I heard a new rhythm that would bring me clawing to the surface once again.

I had awoken too soon. I should never have awoken when I did, to a century so disheveled and unsalvageable. Would there ever be a time when I fit the mold? When my very existence did not throw a wrench into the hungry, churning gears of progress? I doubted it.

I passed Moria without a word, my eyes fixed on the ground before me, blind in every other sense. She followed me with her torch raised as I entered the cave upon the

manmade cement path. The first chamber of the cave system was cramped, sloping down to the left, away from the path that rounded off and down to the right, eventually disappearing into a velvety blackness. I paused after a few steps, forcing myself to take in the actual terrain that surrounded me. The danger of entering such a cave was immense, even for a creature such as myself.

At a first glance I saw nothing that alarmed me. I sensed bats and other small life forms nesting here and there on the ceiling of the caves, but nothing that was threatening to us. I took the torch from between Moria's shaking hands. Holding it out in front of me, I peered intently at the entrance chamber, searching for sleeping animals. Miraculously, the cave appeared empty, at least during these dark hours. When morning came, it might be a different story altogether, but for now, we were alone. The wavering golden heat of the torch rippled over the damp stone formations, making it appear to writhe like serpentine flesh. Within deep divots in the low ceiling, black clusters of daddy-long-legs pulsed feverishly, disturbed by the flare of unexpected light. They trembled fearfully together, their tiny bodies shaking madly upon spindly legs barely thicker than a human hair, in hopes of driving us away. Moria pressed against my back, cowering from the spiders above, a sight which she had never laid eyes upon before.

I shivered and stepped away from her, not wanting to feel the strong draw of her soul to mine, this fey creature who shared my cursed blood and clung to me blindly because I had once been her savior in a dream, even though I had done nothing yet but rip her from her cocoon and throw her to the wolves. The bone-deep weariness settling in my body made it hard to focus. My mind tripped dazedly over the rambling thoughts ricocheting off the inside of my skull with a dull,

painful randomness. I handed the torch back to Moria and squatted down, stooping beneath the metal guard rail that ran along the edge of the concrete path, and jumped the few feet to the sloping limestone floor. Carefully, I made my way over the slick rock to where the ground evened out slightly near the far wall between a series of stalagmites. There, I dropped the wood I had gathered into a pile at my feet. Arranging the larger pieces so that they leaned against one another over the kindling, I sat back on my heels and waved my hand over the wood, drawing heat from my core and letting the concentrated energy flow through my arm until my fingertips prickled. Flames crackled within the kindling beneath the larger logs, fine wisps of smoke curling up as the wood was consumed by the growing flames.

I turned away from the fire and returned to where Moria stood, holding out my hands to assist her. For a long moment she stood staring down at me from the pathway, the torch gripped tightly in her right hand, the flames causing her shadow to tower behind her, thin and black on the smooth, damp wall.

“Do we have to stay here tonight?” she said weakly, already knowing the answer all too well.

“Dawn will be here soon and then you can do as you will,” I said, too tired to argue. Once the sun rose, I would be helpless to stop her if she chose to flee.

Her delicate black brows furrowed slightly as she sensed the weariness in my voice, the resignation and the defeat. “What happens at dawn?”

I stared up at her, my arms feeling very heavy. “I sleep,” I said simply and gestured that she should take my hands before I lost the strength to hold her weight.

She lowered her torch to the ground, laying it on its side to burn quietly on the damp pavement. Careful not to trip on

the hem of her gown, she squatted down and leaned forward so that I caught her waist when she jumped down beside me. As she moved, the black curtain of her hair fell forward, a raven's wing of silken dreams that smelt faintly of amber and lavender and burning wood smoke. I closed my eyes, feeling my heart twinge softly. It was a strong, familiar smell that sent shivers rippling through my soul, electric and cool, the sensation of recognition, of ancestry, of profound *déjà vu*.

My Queen...

The words whispered through the whorls of my mind seamlessly, effortlessly. I let my hands fall from her waist, my palms grazing the curve of her belly accidentally as they returned to my side. She did not move. She drew a long, deep breath and exhaled.

"What's done is done," she said over the hiss of the torch on the path above us. "We cannot go back now."

I opened my eyes and met her steady gaze.

"Tonight did not happen as I had dreamed it would, but...I still believe that all will end as it should."

"I'm glad one of us does," I replied ominously.

She did not appear dissuaded by my black skepticism. Instead, she stepped away from me, guiding herself over the mottled terrain of the cave floor to the fire I had built and settled herself bravely near the wall, lowering herself cross-legged behind the fire. Perhaps her fear, or her strange resolve, kept her from appearing tired as she gazed deep into the heart of the flames. I turned away and climbed back up to the pathway above. Grabbing the torch that still burned on the glistening cement, I held it out in front of me to illuminate the curving walkway as it rounded a corner and disappeared into the bowels of the cave. I had no choice now but to leave her to her own devices and trust that the Tyst would not be able to find us. I needed to venture further into the cave to

seek my resting place.

I looked back at Moria. Her eyes were wide and unblinking, filled with the dancing flames of the fire before her, her pale, thin arms encircling her belly.

“It would be safest for you to stay in the caves until nightfall, if you can.” My voice, though low, resonated off the porous rock around us. “Your people will no doubt be looking for you.”

“Will you return, then?”

I nodded. I had nothing more to offer her, not that night. I had already done enough damage. With slow, echoing footsteps I followed the path into the chambers beyond.

CHAPTER 9

As night fell the following evening, I awoke to the sound of water gently trickling down the sides of the cave around me. Musical and soft, the steady song of the cave enveloped my senses with its cool, reptilian life force through the damp pitch. Far beyond the yawning mouth that opened up to the hillside of gnarled gray cedars and mesquite, nestled deep within its cold, chambered womb, the cave became an entity unto itself, a self-sustaining organism breathing in time to the ancient rhythm of the Earth's core. For a long while after I awoke, I remained motionless, my eyes tracing the massive saber teeth of the stalactites descending from the ceiling. Beneath my body, I imagined I could feel the contented hum of the living cave, like a chorus of Buddhist monks chanting in the distance. It had been returned at last, after a century of irreverent disruption, to the quietude and peace it was born in, before the young cavers who "discovered" it, brought the human masses to trespass through its sacred corridors. Still

it healed, gradually smoothing over the well-worn manmade paths carved into its flesh and covering the places where it had been violated with rippling new formations like layers of soft, glistening skin. Silently, I thanked the cave for allowing Moria and I to disturb its slumber for a short while.

Moria.

I was so entranced by my surroundings, I had forgotten about the Queen. I noticed the distant, soft crackling of burning wood somewhere beyond the chamber where I slumbered, closer to the mouth of the cave. Shaking off the last tendrils of Sleep, I pulled myself to my feet, brushing my clothing with my hands to remove any strange insects that may have decided to investigate my inert form while I slept. I crawled over the low ridge to my left, hopping down onto the old concrete tourist pathway that snaked round one side of the room.

Beside the path was a shallow pool of water that gleamed eerily, its bottom barely visible beneath its glassine surface. Mindful not to touch any more of the cave's surfaces than necessary as I remembered fleetingly how caves were living beings, I made my way back to the chamber at the entrance. Gradually, the golden glow of the firelight illuminated the bizarre landscape of calcified formations through which I walked. Their slick surfaces glistened ethereally, a forgotten realm where the dream world was born and the seeds of creation nestled, nurtured by the salt of the Earth's steady weeping.

What secrets about the universe these caverns must whisper to one another; I thought silently.

The cool damp of the interior chambers warmed, the humidity decreasing slightly where fresh air made its way into the cave from the surface. Moria was unaware of my presence as I approached up the path. She sat against the wall

to my right, her arms tightly wrapped about her legs beneath her dust-streaked gown, her chin resting on her knees as if she had not moved an inch throughout the day. Her gaze and her thoughts were lost within the dancing flames of the struggling fire. Like a black angel, her shadow stretched upwards behind her to curve over the ceiling, causing her to appear even slighter and more vulnerable than I remembered her from the night before.

“You didn’t leave?” I asked softly, taking a seat on the far side of the fire.

She started with a gasp as I had materialized in her line of sight. She stared at me over the flames, her wide, glistening eyes accusing and fearful. Her cheeks were ruddy, perhaps from long hours of weeping, and I wondered if she had been able to sleep at all during the daylight hours. She must have been starving. Drawing a deep breath, she tried to settle herself and regain a bit of her regal composure, setting her jaw and drawing herself up a little more.

“No,” she said simply. “Where was I to go?”

A bitter silence settled in between us, while the fire crackled steadily, oblivious and hungry. The passionate connection we had shared the preceding evening had been shattered by reality and my reckless behavior. I did not know how to approach her now. Where I had felt a burning desire to rescue the strange creature that shared my Maker’s blood and avenge her imprisonment, there now coiled a tight, stifling pain, a confused remorse for my inability to truly set her *free*.

I frowned. “You kept the fire burning all day?” I asked, trying to suffocate my guilt with an acknowledgement of the obvious.

“The one who calls himself Nahalo built it,” she said bluntly, her eyes moving back to stare into the heart of the

flames once again.

I glanced about the chamber and the open mouth that led out into the cadence of the blue-black night. It would not have surprised me if I had not detected his stealthy presence.

“He’s not here,” she said. “He went to gather more wood.”

I drew a deep breath through my nose and exhaled. “Are you hungry?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“You should eat. For you and the—” I stopped myself short and winced, but the unintentional thought had already escaped my lips. *Dammit!* I hissed at myself.

Her eyes darted up, glaring at me over the flames. I stared down into the heart of the fire. I could feel her crushed hope cutting through her anger, a thousand razor blade slivers of shrapnel twisting and turning through her heart.

“Just leave me be,” she whispered after a long, horrible moment of silence. “You’ve done enough.”

I nodded, keeping my eyes to the ground, and turned back to the walkway. Swinging myself up over the railing, I followed the path the rest of the way out into the crisp night air. Crossing the wood platform, the ancient boards creaking softly beneath my weight, I leaned upon the railing surrounding it and sighed softly in time with the wind that rippled through the branches. Nahalo was nowhere to be seen within the maze of dark, gnarled trunks dotting the hillside, pale gray against the velvety autumn night. I sensed him though, some distance away to my right, a familiar deep resonance as rich and ancient as the heartbeat of the cave itself. Like a wolf pricking his ears at a distant sound, he became aware of my presence, senses swiveling back to the northeast to hone in on the stale earth that clung to my clothes, the dismal taste of regret on my tongue. He did

not hasten his movements through the woods, allowing me a moment longer to contemplate the consequences of my actions.

I turned my attention away from him, focusing inward, a spider turning its prey over between its legs until it could no longer see the world which might possibly save it. The plea Moria had whispered to me the night before echoed over and over again through my mind.

Free me, please, as I cannot do myself. I ask for your mercy...

The moment in which I had believed the “mercy” she needed was a different form of freedom than death, I had been consumed with the bitterness of my desire for revenge. It had been instinctual and instantaneous, an uncontrollable reaction, as natural as drawing breath. I kept trying to tell myself that I made peace with my new path, that I would fulfill the duties requested of me by this newfound world and take pleasure in the supposed power it allotted me, but I knew then it was not so. I had not mastered my rage, my bloodlust to inflict misery upon those who had brought me to this point. It ruled me more now than in those first moments I had been told of my fate, when I had tried to rip from Phelan the life he had stolen from me, riddling my soul with the impervious rusted barbs of a quick moving cancer.

Resentment is like taking poison and hoping the other person dies.

I cringed, raising one palm to my forehead, wanting to rub away the guilt somehow. I closed my eyes and thought of the dank confines of the crypt I had awoken in a year before and wondered if that tomb lay as empty and silent as I had left it. The thought was brief and flashing, an electric arc both painful and soothing in the same instance of its existence. I wanted to return there, seal myself off from the

tragic remains of humanity and climb into the cold marble embrace of my coffin to sleep away the nightmares of another century. Surely if I could work the spell once, I could do it again. No good could come of my continued existence upon the Earth, absolutely none. What I touched did not turn to gold, and was instead doomed to linger in a perpetual state of grief and agony until death.

The Phuree were wrong. Nahalo was wrong.

“Sleep is not the answer,” Nahalo’s soft voice whispered past my ears as he appeared beside me, arms empty of wood and folded across his chest, his face reflecting his human guise. So lost within my self doubt, I had not noticed him passing with the cold night air into the cave to deposit his scavenged firewood. He wore simple black pants and an unbleached linen tunic. Around his waist was wrapped a leather belt, threaded through a small deerskin pouch and dagger sheath over his left hip.

“How do you know?” I inquired softly. There was no true fight left in me. The tangible sense of betrayal in Moria’s gaze had stripped me of every last ounce of indignant, vengeful pride I had used to stitch together what remained of my soul. “Because you cannot ever sleep away your nightmares,” he said staring out into the night. “*If* the world was still here when you awoke, you would still be the same vampire, the same man, with the same demons haunting you. The only way you will ever find peace with yourself and your actions is to stand and face them, to fight that which stalks you.” His patience was unwavering, as if he argued philosophy with the crags above the sea.

“Nahalo, I know you meant well in your quest to anoint me this world’s new savior, and I wanted so desperately to believe it, to entrust my fate in your cause and the Phuree, but look! Look at what I have done, yet again!” I turned,

gesturing with an open palm towards the entrance of the cave.

I watched him for a long while, shaking my head slowly from side to side as I stared into his eyes. “I could not even accomplish one minute task of killing a woman.” The words were glue in my throat, clogging my airways painfully. “I had to twist it, complicate it. My heart is too close to the surface of my being...”

“You had no choice,” he replied, the anger that was present the night before mysteriously absent from his face. I stared at him, uncomprehending. “Of course I had a choice. There is always a choice. Even you have told me as much.”

“I do not mean *choice* as in the black-and-white-right-and-wrong sense. Some decisions are more than mere *human* reason. It would have been a difficult task for even the most ruthless of our kind, given the circumstances.” His gaze shifted to settle in somewhere over the nightscape around us, between the heavens and Earth. “I would never have asked such a thing of you had I known...”

I stared at the side of his face, trying to pry into his soul. My mind merely skipped off the smooth, cold wall surrounding his being. On the far side of the barrier, however, I thought I sensed a faint whisper of grief, like the smell of salt on the air above the ocean.

“One would think that, after all of these many years I would learn better than to trust so blindly.” His voice was dark, a ghostly exhale of words within breath. “To think he could have buried such a truth so well that even I could not unearth it? To think he would lie to me so and send one of his own Sons to commit the unspeakable against his own flesh and blood...” His voice trailed off, his brow creasing slightly, his mind wandering within vaults of horrible truth.

“I had no choice but to reveal my true nature to him last

night.” He shook his head in disgust.

“What?” I breathed in shock. In a way, I was still stunned that Phelan had not picked up on Nahalo’s identity, but what an Ancient chooses to keep secret is invisible to the world.

Nahalo crossed his arms over his chest. “For too long he has thought himself the oldest of a dying race,” he said. “The significance had gone to his head, distorting his ability to make rational decisions. I believe his encounter with Moria and the Vicinus humbled him a bit, though not enough to sedate his ego. It was the only way to put an end to his blasphemous posturing.”

“I see,” I said, trying to imagine Phelan’s reaction to such news. Secretly, I felt a twinge of smug satisfaction knowing that he had had his distorted sense of power dismantled by an Ancient, the only creature strong enough or bold enough to effectively bring him to his knees. I only wondered if the humbling would last, or whether Phelan would soon dismiss the fact altogether, refusing to allow Nahalo’s existence to invade the little kingdom he had painstakingly built around him. With Phelan, the only way to truly earn his respect was through brute force.

“What will happen to him?” I asked, secretly desiring to hear that he would meet the worst of judgments.

Nahalo’s eyes dropped, his jaw clenching beneath the faux tan skin of his cheek. The illusion still mesmerized me, drawing me in. It was obvious he felt far more at ease in this skin than his own hard countenance. I wondered how many years it had been since he had seen his true face.

“That will not be decided now. We must first repair the damage this lie has caused. Then we will address his crimes, if we can,” he said.

I snorted. “If? I should have known that would be your answer. Phelan will always get away with whatever crime he

commits.”

“Watch your tone, young one.” Nahalo turned towards me. “No one ever goes completely unpunished. He will be held accountable, but we must first deal with the Queen.” He reached out and clasped my shoulder with his right hand. “Trust me. No one is more furious than I, but what is done, is done. And regardless of Phelan’s detestable motives, he is not to blame that his daughter now carries the Vicinus.”

“That you know of,” I said, holding his gaze for a long moment. I tried to wrestle the surging rage down into its chains once again.

“Why would you say such a thing?” Nahalo’s eyes narrowed at me, warning me not keep another secret from him.

“I’m just saying, if he kept one horrible secret from you, why not another?” I shook my head. “All he has ever done to me, my entire Dark life, is lie to me. Nothing would surprise me now.”

Nahalo’s hand dropped away from my shoulder. He took a step back and turned to stare at the glowing mouth of the cave. For a long moment he was silent, his jaw tense, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

He turned back to me. “As I said, he will be dealt with. We need not dwell on that now. A war has begun. The Tyst have wasted no time in beginning their attacks upon the Phuree. They are scouring the Earth in search of the Queen and it is only a matter of time before they find her, if we keep her in this cave. We need to move her to a more remote location where we can truly disguise her existence beneath cloaking spells until we figure out our next move.”

“Phelan’s estate.” The thought occurred to me out of nowhere.

Nahalo stared at me. “It’s inside the amagin perimeter.

The Tyst will be crawling like lice over every inch of such an area.”

“Right outside the perimeter, actually,” I said, stepping away from the deck railing, folding my arms over my chest. My heart was racing. It was perfect. Phelan would be trapped there with his mistake and forced to face his sins. “Phelan has his property already so heavily concealed that the Tyst have no idea of its existence. He has somehow managed to fool them for a hundred years. A few weeks more should be nothing. Besides, such a high profile location will be the last place they look. Cardone will first pursue the Phuree since he will automatically assume they took her. As long as they can keep the Tyst on the move and engaged in battle to drain their resources that will buy us time.”

“You forget what it is that we are concealing. He may have been capable of hiding his home and himself from the Tyst, but Phelan’s power is nothing compared to ours or that which the Queen—”

“Moria.”

“Excuse me?” Nahalo frowned.

“Her name is Moria.” I could not continue referring to her as the Queen. I did not recognize that title.

“My apologies,” Nahalo said, narrowing his eyes at me with concern. “The power that is growing in *Moria* is far beyond anything any of us have ever attempted to conceal. It will only continue to increase the longer we have her in our care. There will come a time in the very near future when we will not be able to contain that energy. Not even with our powers combined.”

I locked eyes with him. “Then I suppose we will have to work quickly.”

CHAPTER 10

“Removing her Chronous chip will buy us more time,” Nahalo said, his voice calm and emotionless as he silently worked through the details of our next steps.

“How?” I asked, my brow furrowing slightly. I had only recently learned of the tracking devices, but had never actually laid eyes on one, nor did I know where exactly on the body they were implanted.

“We’ll have to cut it out of her,” Nahalo sighed softly through his nose. “It’s the only way.”

“Have you removed a chip before?” I crossed my arms over my chest, watching him closely.

“Only once before, when a Tyst spy infiltrated the Phuree camp.” He stroked his beard as he thought. “The chips give off a different energy field than the rest of the human body, so I was able to sense where it was located by scanning the auric field surrounding the person. Hopefully Moria’s will be as easy to locate.”

Turning away, he walked towards the mouth of the cave. Silently, I followed close behind, unsure of what he planned to do next. I had to trust in him now, trust that he could undo the damage I had done.

Our footsteps echoed softly off of the curved walls as we made our way back down the cement pathway to where Moria waited silently, huddled by the fire. Slipping under the metal railing, we climbed down to the floor of the cave. She glanced up at us when we entered, the flames of the fire flickering in the pools of her eyes. When we reached the fire we separated, moving to sit on either side of her. I could feel her fear bristling around her like cactus spines. She uncurled her arms from around her knees, placing her palms flat against the ground. She pressed her back against the wall behind her. Her eyes darted back and forth between my face and Nahalo's. She swallowed hard, the muscles in her slender, pale throat working, however, she remained silent.

"Your Highness," Nahalo said, his voice soft and steady over the crackle of the fire beside him, "we are going to move tonight to a more secure location."

Moria's eyes locked on Nahalo's face, unblinking.

"First," he continued, "we must remove your Chronous chip."

"M-my what?" she stammered, confused.

Nahalo and I exchanged glances, both startled that she had no knowledge of the tracking device implanted in her own body. Nahalo turned his attention back to her, extending his hand, palm up, for her to take. For a moment, she stared at it like it was a poisonous snake, before slowly placing her trembling hand within his. He laid his other hand on top of hers.

"All of your people have them, a computer chip beneath

the skin so that the Chronous can keep track of your whereabouts. We must extract it before we leave here. It will go more swiftly if you do not struggle.” Nahalo kept his voice calm and soft, though his tone did little to soothe her mounting anxiety.

Moria turned towards me, her brow knit, her mouth agape, tears welling in the corners of her eyes. “Why are you doing this to me? Why don’t you just kill me, like you were supposed to do?”

Tears broke free and slipped down her cheeks. I held her gaze. Her pain sliced through my cold exterior to the very marrow of my soul. Her longing for release from this cruel mortal world was a desire I had carried within my own heart for more years than I cared to recount, yet I could no more grant her such a reprieve than I could my own worthless hide. All I could do was watch the tears fall from her eyes.

Nahalo let go of her hand and reached for the dagger in his belt. I could feel him testing the barriers around my mind, seeking a gap in my defenses to slip inside and steal my thoughts. Distantly, like the muted roar of the surf against a far away beach, I could feel his frustration. He had made me too strong.

“You know I cannot,” I said, my heart silently breaking as the grief poured from her eyes in thin rivulets. “The Vicinus would not let me, even if I could find it my heart to try. I want to help you, but you have to trust me.”

Nahalo slipped the dagger from its sheath and ran it through the flames of the fire, letting the heat sanitize the metal with its purifying kiss.

“Help me?” she whispered, disbelieving. “If you can’t kill me, you can’t help me.” She shook her head as her last thread of hope had unraveled. “No one can help me.” She looked down, covering her face with her hands.

For a moment I hesitated, not knowing how I could possibly comfort the young woman before me. I moved closer to her and gently placed my arms around her, gathering her close to me. At first I felt her resist, pushing away from me with her fists on my chest. Soon she relented, collapsing against me with a choked sob. I stroked her hair, velvety soft to the touch, and whispered, “Do you want to return to the fortress?”

Nahalo frowned at me, unsure of what I meant to achieve; I paid him no mind.

A moment of tense silence passed while Moria quietly sobbed into my shirt. Pulling away slightly and drawing a deep breath, her eyes still to the ground, she answered, shaking her head, “No...no, that would be worse than death.” I closed my eyes, seeing the image of black talons reaching towards me out of the abyss, ready to crush me into dust. “Then you must trust me.”

A moment of silence passed with only the crackle of the fire echoing off of the cave walls to accompany us. Moria ceased her sobbing, her trembling subsiding into an eerie calm. I glanced up at Nahalo and nodded for him to proceed. Without a word, he moved closer to her huddled form. The dagger held loosely in his right hand, he closed his eyes and raised his left, holding it only an inch or so away from her. Focusing on her auric energy, he moved his hand up and down her back, over her shoulder blades, neck and arms, searching for the subtle deviation in the biofield surrounding her body that would mark the spot containing the chip. It did not take long before he located it, his hand stopping over the back of her right shoulder blade. He opened his eyes and gestured for me to pull her clothing away from the area.

I reached forward and carefully loosened the lacing in the front of her gown enough for Nahalo to pull the dress

down to expose her shoulder blade. At first she did not resist, accustomed to others manipulating her appearance, then her hands flew protectively to her chest to keep the gown over her breasts. Her eyes flashed up to mine again; her trembling returning as a violent shaking. A small gasp escaped her lips when Nahalo placed the tip of the blade against her skin.

“I will make this as quick as possible,” he said, his attention focused on the chip buried within her.

I reached up and took her face in my hands. Leaning forward, I placed my forehead against hers and exhaled, sending a cool flow of soothing energy through her body. Almost instantly, the shaking subsided and her eyes closed. Distantly, I was aware of Nahalo making his incision. When the blade slid into her flesh, she tensed, inhaling sharply. Through my connection with her, I knew the current of energy I delivered to her numbed her body sufficiently, but her anxiety remained unbanished. I held onto her face, keeping her forehead pressed against mine. She whimpered, tears slipping down her cheeks, over my thumbs and down my wrists.

Nahalo removed the chip, a tiny disc of gold and green, glossy with fresh red blood. He placed it on the ground next to his knee and with the pommel of his dagger crushed it into a fine powder with one swift blow. I pulled my face away from Moria’s, though I kept hers within my hands. Nahalo drew the dagger across his forefinger, allowing several drops of his blood to drip down onto the wound he had made on Moria’s shoulder, just enough to cause her skin to knit together with lightning speed.

“We’re finished,” he said, nodding to me.

Moria pulled her dress back up over her shoulder, her fingers shakily retying the laces in front. The blood had drained from her already pale face, deep circles appearing

beneath her eyes. Despite her strong resistance, I knew she needed sustenance and true rest; rest she would not find crouched in the depths of a damp shadowy cave. I pulled her towards me. She wavered slightly and then collapsed into my arms, unconscious, her face obscured beneath a curtain of black hair.

“I’m not sure what’s going on between the two of you, but I don’t like it,” Nahalo said as he resheathed his dagger, cleaned of blood.

I looked up at him, frowning at his bluntness. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Nahalo shook his head. “Just remember who she is, Tynan, and what she is carrying within her. Just because you were unable to fulfill the gods’ prophecy does not mean that she may not still have to die in order to—”

“I don’t understand why she has to die,” I said, a surge of angry protectiveness rearing back and hissing within me. Nahalo leaned forward, grabbing the wrist of my left hand. “You, better than any of us, know the evil of the Vicinus.” His eyes darted down towards Moria’s sleeping form, as if the vampiric god could hear us. “Would you allow that to escape into our world just to save one woman?”

“She is my sister,” I said, holding his gaze.

“Half-sister. And only by Dark Blood.” He shook his head. “I need for you to keep your heart separated from this woman you are now trying to protect. For your sake, as well as that of the world.” He let go of my wrist, but I could see by the shadows behind his eyes that he knew it was already too late for me to practice such reserve.

He stood. I remained kneeling beside the fire, feeling strangely cemented in my place by the feathery weight of Moria’s form.

“What now?” I asked, truly uncertain of what action

to take. I needed someone to tell me, to give me direction, order, mandates, anything to keep me from picking her up in my arms and fleeing to the far reaches of the Earth.

Nahalo stared down at me, his brow deeply furrowed. “Take her to Phelan’s and wait for me there. I need to return to the Phuree and alert them as to what is taking place. They are on the run now, moving to a more secure location to launch their next attack. I will also need to inform the other Immortals—”

“Phelan will know...” I said, overcome by the dread of yet another confrontation with my Maker.

Nahalo paused for a moment before turning to leave. “Then there will be no need for me to tell him, will there?”

* * *

Alone.

Alone is our true state of being. Day in and day out we surround ourselves with idle preoccupations, with things and hobbies, with interests and studies. With people who claim to care about us, but never really know us, and people who are simply there to fill space; background extras to make life look bustling and alive. However, at the end of the night all we are left with is ourselves, the empty husks echoing with the sharply slung insults of our intellects.

It is a state of being I have grown accustomed to all too keenly. It is an adaptation, which every vampire must acquire out of necessity lest the silence, the anonymity, the isolation, drive them mad. At first you shake and tremble, trying desperately to convince yourself that the mortal life you left behind was so rich and beautiful and full of your fellow human beings. You pine for it, you cling to it, haunting the old places where you spent your mortal youth, attempting

to blend with the warm, perfumed masses to create a pitiful mimicry of your former life. The years pass, the decades turn to centuries, the ones you once knew aging with a surreal speed as if a god had fallen asleep with his finger on the fast-forward button. They die and are buried along with your past. You all too quickly realize that all you are left with for company are the cold ones that made you, trapped there with you for all eternity. Clinging to them never brings warmth; even they desert you in time.

Alone...

That is what I had been and what I had thought I would always be. Sure, the mortal warmth of my Jasmine bought me a brief reprieve from my icy hell, her body, her tender soul, a sweet solace from the demented turmoil of my mind, but I knew she could never truly be a part of my world. She was human. I knew she loved me. It was a love that broke my heart and a love I returned in full, but because of that, I would never bring her into my world. What kind of monster would I be to blacken something so beautiful with my poison?

Moria made me feel I was not alone.

For the first time in centuries, I was connected to something, someone, in a way that went beyond lust or need or obligation. In truth, the physical bond I had with this fragile creature was nothing more than what I shared with my Dark Brother Seaфра. She was a sister in Blood and nothing more, a complete stranger to me. Yet, I felt closer to her than I had ever felt to another being. We had been tethered together astrally, linked by a bond thicker than DNA. Perhaps it was my own twisted longing for a true family, those that I could protect from the evil of the world as I might have done my own mortal family once upon a time. Regardless of justification, it was undeniable and permanent. Despite my better judgment, I had become Moria's self-proclaimed

protector. But was Nahalo right? Was Moria yet another lost cause I would try desperately to keep from sinking to the bottom of the ocean, nearly drowning myself in the process? After Nahalo left us to return to the Phuree, I laid Moria on the ground and extinguished the fire with dirt from the hillside beyond the cave to keep the smoke to a minimum.

As the light vanished, we were plunged into a deep, cold darkness that made my skin prickle with caution. I felt that nothing of any danger lurked there with us, for I had explored the back chambers briefly before retiring the previous evening. Still, the sound of condensation dripping from the ceiling, the individual splashes with the small pools throughout the cave echoing eerily, made me shiver. My eyes adjusted quickly, casting the chamber with a preternatural illumination. I squatted beside Moria and gently scooped her into my arms, cradling her against my chest like a child. Even with the fetus she carried, she weighed nearly nothing to me and I feared I might accidentally crush her.

Something told me that the Vicinus would never allow that to happen.

I stepped out of the cave, my dismal fate clutched in my arms. The moon shone bright in a cloudless sky above the skeletal gray branches of the cedars. Judging by its position in the sky, I gauged it to be still very early in the night. I wanted to reach Phelan's manor quickly, however, knowing all too well the fallout that would ensue as soon as he sensed our presence in his home. After the violent outburst in the tent, I knew his fury would be threefold for my tainting of his lair with the sins of his past. He would seek every means possible to destroy her and then he would turn his hateful indignation upon me. I would need to be prepared, though I could not imagine how. I had barely survived our last battle. Then again, I had not had the blood of an Ancient running

through my veins at that time.

I stared up at the heavens above me, hesitating, unable to lift my feet from the ground and take to the skies. In all honesty, for all of the resentment and hatred I felt for my Maker, I did not want to do battle with him again. It wasn't out of cowardice; I was tired of the constant test of wills, the violent posturing for supremacy that left us circling one another like starved lions in a cage. When did it become a matter of mastery? When did he cease to be my guide through the Darkness and become the cruel, cold Father whose hand of judgment crushed the breath from my lungs? Would I ever escape it?

I shook my head to clear it of the hissing insecurities. Closing my eyes, I focused my energy upwards and my body rose into the black sky. Above the warped, tangled nightscape of cedars and cacti, I hovered for a moment, scanning the rolling landscape for miles in each direction. I sensed no imminent threat to our safety.

Far away, on the horizon in the direction where the Phuree encampment had been, I could make out the dull glow of explosions. The center of my chest tightened with anguish as I thought of those that now fought for their lives. They had asked for this; a war to end all of their human wars. Tiernan himself had stood before us only nights before and spoken of the hardships yet to be endured. Yet, something told me that, in the precious naivety of their mortal souls, they had secretly believed that a miracle would occur when Moria was slain, that peace would descend upon the Earth in a tranquil cloak of white light and all would be restored to the harmony of a new Eden.

My gut tightened with the fear that they had not prepared adequately for this time of reckoning, that with their human hope they had instilled far too much faith in their selected

idol of worship who had now betrayed them just as all icons eventually do. Did they question their decisions now? Did they question their Oracle's prophetic words? Or were they simply too busy clinging to survival to worry about yesterday or tomorrow?

“I will make this right,” I whispered aloud into the wind, my words freezing on my lips with crystals of water vapor.

I turned northeast and flew on.

CHAPTER 11

Family.

They are the ones who gave us the biological definition of life and the metaphorical sentence of Hell on Earth. They are the inevitable consequence of existence, a permanent reminder of our flawed genetic makeup and the primary reason we strive to be something other than the past. While, in a perfect world, they should be our closest allies, they can also become our greatest enemies. We want to love them, but it is a love born of fear and need. My own mortal parents are now merely shadows of a concept to me, the epic history of Adian's heritage erasing my own like an eclipse. Even those unavenged ghosts pale in comparison to my Dark Father's legacy. In the beginning he was my lord and savior, but all too quickly the gleam of my blind adoration faded. Reality is rarely our ally.

The moment my feet touched the stone walkway I sensed him, a pulse of barely contained rage that seeped through the

walls of the manor and out into the tense soul of the night. I had hoped to make it to the house before Phelan in order to spare Moria yet another terrifying confrontation with her father. The Universe would not allow us such a luxury. I stood on the stone path leading up to the massive front doors staring at the yellow light that glowed softly behind the inset panes of beveled glass. Almost all of the other windows were black and hollow eyes full of mourning. Moria stirred slightly in my arms, lifting her head from where she had buried it in my neck to hide from the icy wind.

“Where are we?” she asked with a mixture of fear and wonder as she stared up at the towering mansion looming over us.

“Your father’s house,” I replied, my voice cold and hard as the stone beneath us.

Without looking away from the light behind the doors, I lowered Moria to the ground. She slipped to her feet, her arms lingering around my neck, reluctant to leave my embrace. Her awareness of my own trepidation was rapidly heightening; I could hear her heartbeat intensifying with fear.

“Is *he* here?”

“Yes,” I said, after a moment of hesitation.

I walked towards the entrance. I was not afraid of Phelan. I knew there was nothing he could do now to hurt me, but my stomach still writhed with apprehension at the thought of yet another battle of wills between us. I set my expression to emotionless ice, my jaw tense and hard, the walls of my defenses doubled and lined with broken glass and barbed wire. When I reached the bottom of the three wide stone steps leading up to the doors, I realized Moria had not followed. I turned to face her, extending my hand to her, and waited silently.

She simply stared at me, her eyes wide and terrified.

“Come,” I said. Not wishing to exert my mental will over her, I hoped she would obey. “He cannot hurt you. I will not let him, your *child* will not let him.”

Her brows furrowed, her hands instinctively moving towards her belly, but before they touched the fabric of her dress she stopped. Her hands hovered to each side of her stomach, suddenly afraid of her own body. Her eyes darted down and then up to me. She looked as if she were listening to something very far away, or, perhaps, within her. I could feel her inner turmoil rippling out through her aura.

“Moria? What do you hear?” I asked, the fine hairs on the backs of my arms bristling slightly with an unexplainable fear.

She remained silent, gripped speechless by whatever it was controlling her now. I slipped my mind into her thoughts but was met with a deafening roar of a strange cyclone wind. The sensation chilled my soul, the smell of sulfur and ash suffocating my senses. If there were voices within the din, I could not distinguish them. Instinctively, I knew it was the voice of the Vicinus, disguised to guard against my prying mind. His hatred for me seethed within her, a roiling sea of boiling oil, singeing my soul. My mind recoiled, my extended hand falling to my side, and I retreated from Moria’s mind.

For a tense moment I wondered if the Vicinus had taken control of her. Her eyes glazed over, staring at a point beyond me that did not exist in this physical universe. I backed down the path towards her ready to strike her, if need be, in order to break his hold on her. No matter what, I could not chance him gaining full control over her. I reached out and grabbed her by the upper arms and shook her hard. Her head snapped back and she let out a gasping cry as if awakening from a nightmare. She stared up at me, terrified.

Finding her voice again, she asked, “What just happened?”

My pulse thundered in my ears. I said nothing, but took her by the hand and dragged her forcefully up the path. Silently, I prayed Nahalo would arrive soon so that we could begin our preparations. It was maddening to think of how blindly we now stumbled forward into such an immense darkness. We had no strategy past the immediate, no plan in an otherwise apocalyptic situation. What did we truly believe we could achieve? Even with our combined power, could we really find a way to save Moria while destroying the Vicinus? That was what I hoped to achieve. I tried hard not to beat myself for the decision I had made to abduct Moria. What was done was done. Regret achieved nothing except to hinder the future.

I reached for the doorknob, and before my fingers could touch the brass, it flew open. There, backlit by the lights of the entrance wall sconces, Phelan stood, his slender frame almost shaking with barely contained rage. He scowled down at me, his emerald eyes blazing, his curled fists ready to rip my heart from my ribcage.

“How *dare* you bring her here!” he hissed.

I met his gaze in an unwavering challenge. “Move aside, Phelan.”

“I do not know what you and Nahalo think can be accomplished, but it will not take place on these grounds.”

“You have no choice in this, Phelan. You are no longer in control of this war as you once thought yourself to be.” I took a step forward, pushing him aside with an ease that startled us both.

He stared at me for a moment, his back against the open door. “I will not allow you to desecrate this lair with the evil she is carrying within her.”

Moria moved around me, placing my body between her and Phelan's. I could feel her trembling as she gripped my hand and I worried that her fear might evoke yet another display of power from the Vicinus.

"Then you never should have become involved in this war, Phelan," I said, my voice dangerously low

His eyes narrowed at me, his lips curling in a snarl over his fangs. I turned away and marched down the hall towards the curving marble stairs leading to the second floor. Most of the rooms on either side of the hall were empty of life. It was likely Phelan had left so quickly that the other Immortals within the Phuree camp were only now becoming aware of their Elder's absence. I climbed up the stairs, dragging Moria roughly behind me, Phelan close at her heels. Halfway up, she tripped over her long skirts and fell to her knees with a soft cry. Jerking her hand free of mine, she curled into a tiny ball on the marble stairs, her arms folding protectively over her head as Phelan stormed past her. Before I could react, his fists were buried in the fabric of my shirt like claws, his fingernails digging into the flesh below as he lifted me from the ground and slammed me hard into the wall. The impact rang like thunder off of the high ceilings, rippling through the cold dark corridors of the mansion, cracking the plaster beneath my back, spidering out around me in a web of hairline fractures.

"You ungrateful little whelp! I should have finished you off when I had the chance!" Phelan growled, his face no more than an inch from mine.

"STOP!" Nahalo's voice boomed from the base of the stairs.

Neither Phelan, nor I, moved, our gazes remaining locked. As the adrenaline from the initial impact subsided, a deathly calm settled over me. I studied Phelan's face, the

stark whiteness of his skin, the fine blue veins barely visible at the temples, the way his eyes glittered and sparkled, deep and volatile like a cat's. I found it terrible that such beauty was wasted on one so cruel and vain.

"Stop it! Both of you! Now!" Nahalo's voice had run dry of his limitless patience, his harsh, disgusted tone that of a father pulling brawling boys apart.

"Phelan!" Nahalo no longer donned his mortal guise before Phelan, allowing the stark intensity of his Immortal perfection to command the respect of his younger kindred.

Nahalo's voice finally penetrated the red haze obscuring Phelan's senses. His eyes cut to the side to glance at Nahalo's face before returning to me and his fists loosened on my shirt. I remained perfectly still. Phelan stepped back, and suddenly, his upper lip curling in a snarl, his fist flew towards my face in a lightning white blur so fast I could barely react. I tensed for the bone-crushing impact. Instead, it struck the wall just past my ear with a deafening crunch of plaster and wood. Fragments of wall exploded across my face, embedding themselves in my hair. My heart thundered in my chest as I fought to restrain my desire to launch towards him and sink my fangs into his neck.

Phelan leaned in close again and hissed, "You have not won. *This* is not over."

Ripping his fist from the hole in the wall, he turned to Nahalo. He narrowed his eyes with contempt, his jaw muscles twitching, his teeth clenching, but he said nothing, stepping around the Ancient and over the quivering huddled mass of his daughter and he strode back down the stairs. We waited in strangled silence until Phelan disappeared into the library, slamming the large wood doors shut behind him. The sound echoed through the house with a rolling boom like thunder.

“Thank you,” I said to Nahalo. I brushed plaster from my face and hair. The adrenaline pooled in my stomach, souring it. Gradually, my heartbeat returned to normal.

Nahalo nodded. He crouched down upon the stairs and gently scooped Moria into his arms. Silently, he climbed the rest of the stairs to the second floor. With one last glance down the stairs I pulled myself away from the indentation in the wall above the broken banister and followed him. We walked to the end of the long hallway to an open door leading to one of the guest bedrooms.

Below us, I could feel Phelan pacing the length of the library, his lust for vengeance slithering and coiling about itself like a pit of hissing snakes. His animosity chilled my skin; I knew, despite his initial fear of Nahalo’s newly revealed Immortal identity, his restraint would not last. His time of cold diplomacy was over, his patience with managing the intricacies of the savage mortal war and the dramas of his Immortal Brethren stretched to the breaking point. He circled cautiously about Nahalo’s presence for the time being, but I knew it would not be long before he overcame that hesitancy and moved to reclaim his place of power. Phelan would not be dethroned so easily.

Nahalo crossed the room to the bed and laid Moria on it. She immediately turned on her side, her back towards us, and curled into a tight fetal position, her head buried beneath her arms and a curtain of tousled black hair. Nahalo lifted a blanket that was folded over the foot of the mahogany bed frame and spread it over her body. She did not move. For a moment Nahalo stood and watched her in silence, his emotions and thoughts completely hidden from my mind, before rejoining me. When he walked past me into the hallway, I reached in and quietly closed the door.

“I’m worried about her,” Nahalo said with a frown after

we returned to the ground floor.

“What do you mean?” I asked hesitantly. I led him to the kitchen to prepare a plate of food for Moria.

She still had not eaten or drunk anything since her abduction and I knew her strength must be waning from the stress she had endured. In any other Immortal household, I would never have expected there to be actual food present, but since Phelan employed one housekeeper and a groundskeeper, I knew there had to be some sort of sustenance available. Every few decades Phelan sought out two new replacements as his previous servants aged and died, carefully selecting the candidates based on their willingness to pledge complete allegiance to himself and the protection of the Immortals’ secret existence. The two current mortals were a strange pair, as most of them were, quiet and fearfully respectful of Phelan and the other Immortals to the point that they stayed hidden for the most part during the night hours, completing their work only during the day. I had yet to meet the newest pair.

The lights in the kitchen were off. In the darkness, the metal and ceramic surfaces of the appliances gleamed eerily from the shafts of light that reached them. It was more than enough illumination for our sensitive eyes and so, dreading the harsh blast of artificial bulbs, I left the room as dark as when I entered.

Nahalo leaned against the counter near the sink, folding his arms thoughtfully over his chest, watching me move around the room.

“I don’t know if her body will be able to survive long enough for us to separate her from the Vicinus, if we’re able to do so at all,” he said. “I felt her weakness when I was carrying her. The drain on her body and mind are tremendous. I think the Vicinus fetus is developing at a far greater speed

than the Tyst originally estimated.”

“That doesn’t really surprise me,” I said bluntly, retrieving a loaf of homemade bread from the pantry, along with a small block of hard white cheese from the refrigerator. “The Tyst were fools to attempt such a plan in the first place. They could never control such a primordial power.” I cut two pieces of bread and several slices of cheese onto a plate. The aroma of the food was strange, a pungent perfume of yeast and milk cultures I had not smelled in ages. “How much time do you think we have?”

Nahalo shook his head, his brow knitting in a deep furrow. “I’m not sure, but no more than a few nights. I would not chance anything more. We should get started with preparations tonight.”

I sighed heavily, staring down at the plate of food that now looked so ridiculously useless when I knew Moria’s body was being leached by a much greater power than mere hunger. “Where do we even begin?”

“Between our Immortal abilities, Phelan’s knowledge of magic, and the power of the Phuree we should be able to devise a dividing ritual strong enough at least to disrupt the Vicinus’ ability to access this world. We may not be able to completely separate the two physical bodies from one another, but we should be able to sever its psychic connection to the being she is hosting, thereby shutting the gateway the Vicinus is trying to open between this world and whatever dimension he is currently imprisoned in.” He rubbed his chin in thought.

“You make it sound so easy,” I said as I returned the loaf of bread and hunk of cheese to their respective shelves.

He scoffed under his breath. “Easy? No, but not impossible.”

I leaned against the counter and looked at Nahalo. He was

staring at me intently, as if he could will me to have complete faith in him. “Who from the Phuree will be assisting us? Will it even be possible for them to reach us in time? I mean, if the others can’t arrive before the birth begins I’m not so sure that the power of two Immortals, no matter how strong we both may be, will be enough.”

“We have Phelan as well,” Nahalo interjected.

I laughed. “I wouldn’t count on that in the least bit. It would take an act of the gods to get his help now.”

“We’ll see about that,” Nahalo retorted. “There are other Immortals on their way, as well. As for the Phuree, I have told Tiernan and his lead officers to use Phelan’s manor as a base if necessary since it is so well cloaked from the Tyst scanning satellites. When I left them tonight, the Phuree were under heavy air strike attack. They were moving the children to a secure underground location, along with their mothers and a few guards. Tiernan and his officers are attempting to reach here by tomorrow night. That is, if they are able to. Even though they have no sure idea of the Queen’s location, or even if the Phuree have her, the Tyst are retaliating with full force on every nest of Phuree around the world. Perhaps after this first strike, they will back off and refocus their efforts to actually locate her, but right now their rage is all consuming.”

“My gods!” I whispered, my gut twisting with guilt and fear at the thought of the tens of thousands of Phuree around the world dying at that very moment as bombs rained down on them from Tyst planes. “Is there nothing we can do to help?”

Nahalo shook his head. “Our place is here with the Queen. The Phuree were well aware that, even if you had been able to kill Moria when you found her, the fallout would have been earth-shattering. The Tyst know full well that we

are working with the Phuree. It was a chance Tiernan and the other chieftains were willing to take, knowing that if they did nothing, the fate of the world itself was at stake.”

I sighed, feeling impotent in the shadow of such an enormous conflict.

Nahalo crossed the room and squeezed my shoulder with a fatherly hand. “Worry achieves nothing. Focus that energy on what needs to be done now.” He glanced at the plate of food on the counter beside me. “Go tend to Moria. I must speak with Phelan.”

* * *

I opened the door to the bedroom. To my relief, Moria still lay curled beneath the blanket, her back to me. She appeared to be sleeping. I was not sure exactly what I had expected to find when I entered, but with the reality of the Vicinus’s reemerging power, my fear was beginning to mutate my mental wanderings into waking nightmares. The division between dreams and physical reality were marred, obscured, as if the veil between the worlds of the living and dead had permanently been parted before me. The Vicinus had tasted my soul, creating a link between us that was indivisible. I could feel its presence always, a heavy, foul breath chilling the base of my skull, causing the fine hairs on my neck and arms to bristle from the sensation of being constantly watched, constantly stalked.

I walked over to the far side of the bed and set the plate on the nightstand. Whatever fear consumed me vanished when I laid eyes on Moria’s sleeping face, half-hidden beneath the silken darkness of her hair. Her features had relaxed, the furrow in her brow smoothed, her delicate lips parted slightly, allowing the soft sigh of her breath to escape. Her beauty

was exquisite and otherworldly, an image truly fitted to the war it had caused. Like Helen of Troy, many men would die in a desperate battle to own her. If only I could truly rescue her, sweep her away from the madness of her isolation and set her free from the purgatory of her condemned existence. Those were the thoughts of a fool, however. Though I knew I had to banish such heroic ideas from my mind, it sickened me to do so.

Gently, I climbed onto the bed and stretched out beside her on my side. I wanted to touch her, to trace the contours of her face with my fingers, but I dared not disturb her slumber. Her presence, so newly introduced into my life, confused my senses, my soul struggling with the concept of sister versus Dark Sister and what that truly meant to me. Dark Kindred are not taboo to one another as mortal siblings are. But was Moria Kindred or a true half-sister in the human sense?

I was intensely drawn to her in a way I couldn't quite grasp, purer than physical lust, or even bloodlust, yet far more intense than mere curious fascination. Her existence pulled at the center of my being, lassoing my soul and drawing me into her desolate world. The connection between us was undeniable. Perhaps it was an illusion, this attraction, created by the dire circumstances under which we were brought together. War causes the most unlikely of people to cling to one another. Moria was the only person in my world who was close enough now to touch, who seemed pure, her innocence of the true chaos of the world a product of the Tystian blindfold she had worn since birth.

Moria gradually opened her eyes. As they focused on me they widened slightly, but she did not move.

"How long have you been there?" she whispered.

"Not long," I said, losing myself in the green pools of her eyes. "I'm sorry I disturbed your sleep." I started to get

up off the bed. “You should rest. You will need your strength for—”

“Don’t go,” she pleaded, grabbing my wrist.

Her touch startled me. I stared down at her thin, pale fingers curled around my wrist. I looked up at her again. “I’m not sure that is a good idea.”

“Just until I fall asleep again.” She let go of my wrist, pulling her hand back against her chest. “This place scares me.” She looked away, ashamed.

As well it should, I thought silently. I glanced up at the closed bedroom door, wondering what Phelan and Nahalo spoke of downstairs. I knew if I listened closely enough, I would be able to pick up on their conversation in the library below, but a part of me did not want to hear whatever vicious things they had to say.

I looked down at Moria again. She regarded me silently, a shallow furrow etched between her brows. “Until you fall asleep,” I said.

I stretched out on the bed on my side facing her, my right arm bent beneath my head. Much to my surprise, Moria moved to my side of the bed, nestling up against me like a child. She buried her face in my chest and sighed.

I froze. While I had carried her from the Phuree camp to the caves and again to Phelan’s manor, I had felt removed, mentally focused on my own internal white noise and safe behind my stolid walls of defense. Now those guards were gone and the world came to a halt, every nerve within my body acutely aware of the sensation of her body pressed against mine. I swallowed hard, feeling disoriented, torn between the urge to flee and the desire to keep her as close to me as possible. I could feel the power of the Vicinus within her, but the red rage that had lashed out at me earlier had subsided for the moment. I wondered if he had exhausted

himself attempting to breach the barrier to this world too soon in his development? Either way, I was relieved. Closing my eyes, I wrapped my left arm around Moria's back, winding my fingers in her silken cascade of hair. The movement felt right. I realized I had been holding my breath and exhaled.

"So strange..." Moria's muffled voice reached my ears.

"Hmmm? What is?" I asked, treasuring the feeling of peace that had settled over me.

"Being close to you, this feeling of safety. It's so different than my Lord Cardone's embrace, or the one he chose for the ritual," she said.

"Chose for the ritual?" I repeated.

"Yes, the strange, cold man they selected to get me with child," she said sleepily.

An image flashed through my mind, a glimmer of memory that leapt from her mind to my own like a random spark of fire of a tall, pale individual whose countenance resembled one I knew all too intimately.

"What?" I whispered. My eyes snapped open, my heart racing in my chest, adrenaline surging through my veins. I remained still, waiting to hear what Moria would say next.

"He was different than most of my Lord's Council, so tall, with long white hair and the most bizarre aqua and purple eyes. He was so arrogant and cold." She sighed, on the edge of sleep. "I was terrified of him. With you... I feel protected somehow..." Moria began to drift off to sleep again.

Gently, I grasped her shoulder and shook her. "What do you mean? Cardone wasn't the one to complete the ceremony?"

Moria shook her head, her eyes still closed. "No. The man who performed the role of 'sire' was a stranger to me." I felt like I was drowning. "Yes," I muttered beneath my breath, "a stranger to me, as well, it seems."

CHAPTER 12

It can't be!

My mind catapulted into hysteria. Of all the base, self-serving things Sea had done in his life, this was unspeakable! Though I desperately wanted to believe the possibility that it was another vampire she spoke of, I knew there was no other Immortal I could think of who matched Moria's description. I struggled to control the swelling of rage within me, not wanting to alarm Moria with the fact that, at any moment Sea would be arriving at the manor. How could Sea have betrayed his kind in such a horrendous way? It simply made no sense to me. What could they have possibly offered him to make him turn his back on us all? And what of Phelan's part in all of this? It was impossible to me that Sea could keep such a secret from Phelan. Something snapped inside of me like a dry twig.

Son of a bitch! I'm going to kill them both!

I untangled myself from Moria and slipped from the bed.

I left the room, closing the door behind me. I leaned against the wall, pressing the heels of my palms into my closed eyes as I tried to focus.

“I knew it!” I whispered aloud to the empty hallway. “I knew that bastard was hiding something!”

My instincts had never failed me and since my reawakening, a voice within me had screamed that something was amiss with Sea, that he was keeping a terrible secret. My heart ached painfully in my chest at the thought of how close I had come to death when I pledged my allegiance to a war he helped to begin. I wanted to know why!

I knew the volatile nature of the conversation that flowed in the room below me, but I had to confront Phelan before Sea arrived. Whatever Phelan and Nahalo discussed now was moot in the face of this greater conspiracy. I flew down the stairs, my vision tunneling in on the closed doors to the library. Behind them I could hear raised voices, but the words were lost on me in my rage. I burst through them, flinging them wide so that they slammed against the walls to either side.

Both vampires whirled to face me, their expressions furious. I stormed towards Phelan, my fist curled so tightly at my sides that my nails bit into my palms. Thin rivulets of blood were seeping out through my fingers and dripping to the floor. Phelan’s eyes widened and he took a step back, readying himself for another brutal confrontation.

“You son of a bitch!” I hissed at Phelan. “How could you let him do such a thing?”

Phelan’s brow furrowed with confusion. “I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

His denial ignited the powder keg of rage that had resurfaced within me. “Don’t fuck with me, Phelan!” My voice was low and deadly. I pointed at him with one

bloodied finger. “I know damned well you are aware of Sea’s participation in the Tyst ritual. There’s no way you couldn’t be, as close as the two of you are. Now I want to know what the hell they offered you to betray your own race!”

Phelan shook his head, his eyes wild. “Tynan you are out of your fucking mind! Where the hell did you get that ludicrous idea?”

“Moria, that’s where. The Queen or should I say *your* Queen?” I spat. “Just now, upstairs, she mentioned how it was one of our kind who impregnated her during the Tyst’s ritual to summon the Vicinus, a tall, pale man with white hair and mismatched eyes. Now tell me, just how many do you know who fit that description?”

He stared at me, silent.

“*Tell me!*” I screamed.

He gestured at me with one hand, turning towards Nahalo. “You see what I’m talking about? He’s unstable! He’s already put us in enough danger and you’re allowing him to bring the war right to my doorstep!”

Nahalo’s face set in a mask of marble. He stared at Phelan, his eyes burning with a silent anger of his own. “Is this true, Phelan?”

Phelan’s eyes widened with disbelief and anger at being cornered and questioned. “How dare you accuse me!”

My eyes darted to Nahalo’s face, desperately trying to read his thoughts behind the layers protecting his mind. I pitied Phelan for becoming the focus of an Ancient’s rage.

Phelan turned back to me, narrowing his eyes. His voice was dangerously low and even. “You are a true fool, Tynan, to believe such unadulterated rubbish from that brainwashed woman upstairs. You’re a liability to this cause and I will see to it that you are restrained for the remainder of your time here.”

“Shut up and listen to me!” I yelled, stepping forward to grab him by the collar of his black silk coat.

When my fingers made contact with the fabric, the world froze. My heart continued to thunder with lightning surges of adrenaline, but I was trapped within my own body, unable even to blink. Before me, I could see the same effect had taken hold of Phelan, his fierce eyes staring back at me like a wax replica, glistening and eerily still. Before my mind had time to process what had occurred, I found myself sitting in an armchair across the room near the hearth. I could not remember moving, or having been moved. My mind careened against the inside of my frozen body, as if I could somehow break the spell that had been cast upon me.

In my paralyzed line of sight, Nahalo approached Phelan, who remained frozen with his back against the wall. He raised his hands and placed them over Phelan’s face. Closing his eyes, he bowed his head. For what felt like an eternity, he remained silent until finally raising his head again, nodding softly like he was agreeing with an unheard specter’s voice. He took a step back from Phelan and waved his hand in an arc before the paralyzed vampire. Instantly, Phelan came alive again, his hands lowering to his sides. He did not move from his place against the wall, however, his gaze firmly, fearfully locked on Nahalo.

Nahalo walked towards me. He squatted down before me and placed his hands over my own, which were draped over each arm of the chair. I could not turn my face or eyes to look at him. Inside, I snarled and snapped viciously at Phelan, who looked at us warily, ready to bolt like a deer.

“Tynan, I know you can hear me,” Nahalo said. “Phelan is telling the truth.”

Noooo! I screamed silently. *He’s lying! He lies about everything!*

Nahalo heard my thoughts. “No, he’s not. I looked deep inside him. There is no secret he can keep from me now, unfortunately for him. I did not want to have to result to such magic, but he brought it upon himself. So, you must trust me when I tell you, he is as unaware as we are of Seaфра’s deceit.”

He removed his hands from my own. I could feel his intense scrutiny of my face. “I will release you now, but you will not attack him. Do I make myself clear?”

I did not want to make such a promise when every fiber of my being wanted to rend Phelan limb from limb and throw him into the fire burning behind me. However, imprisonment within my own body was driving me to the point of insanity and the thought of remaining so for a moment longer was torture.

Yes, I whispered silently in defeat. I resented Nahalo in that instant for his power over me. How dare he subject me to such humiliation in front of Phelan, the one Immortal I wanted to fear me more than any other?

Nahalo stood and made the same waving motion with his hand before me. I slumped forward slightly as the sensation of owning my limbs flooded my body like water being poured into a glass vase. I gripped the arms of the chair, my nails biting into the wood and I continued to stare across the room at Phelan, who was still noticeably shaken. Gradually, my anger sank into bitter disgust. Uncurling my fingers from the wood, I stood and turned towards the fire. I could not look at Phelan any longer. I walked forward and gripped the mantel with one hand, staring down into the flames.

“How could we not know about this? I read all of the files Tiernan gave me and not once was there a mention of an Immortal presence at the ceremony. They simply referred to the male present as the ‘sire’ without any detail. I just

assumed it was Cardone or some other human male.” I shook my head wanting to weep at my ignorance.

“Are you sure she’s telling the truth?” Nahalo asked, still standing behind me.

I turned to face him. “What are you implying?”

“I am simply saying, she is the Tyst Queen and our prisoner, for all intents and purposes.” Nahalo kept his tone steady and even, trying not to upset me further with his suggestions. “I would advise you not to trust entirely what she tells you, unless you have seen it for yourself within her soul. She could be trying to turn us against one another.”

“She would never...!” I hissed, disbelieving, though I knew the likelihood was strong.

Nahalo took a step towards me, sensing the return of my frustration and anger. “I am not saying that what you heard is a lie. How did she tell you? What were you talking about that led her to such a confession?”

I took a deep breath, running my hands through my hair. Locking my fingers behind my head, I stared at the floor as I spoke. “She was falling asleep. She was telling me how I was different from the one that had gotten her with child, that I didn’t scare her as he did. Then she described what he had looked like. I don’t think she was entirely aware that she was speaking out loud. Then a brief glimpse of her memory of him touched my mind and I knew in my heart she was speaking of Sea. There was no way for her to lie to me then.” I released my fingers, letting my hands fall to my sides and looked up at Nahalo. “If you don’t believe me, ask her yourself.”

Nahalo waved me to silence. “I will. Soon. Right now I’m very concerned that the documents we have been working with were inaccurate. If all of the information listed there pertaining to the development of the summoning ritual and

the integration of the Chronous language into the workings were tampered with, or if we obtained a decoy copy, we could be in grave danger.” He rubbed his jaw in thought. He looked up at me. “Where is Malakai?”

I realized with a shock that, in the hysteria of the past twenty-four hours, no one had questioned the disappearance of Malakai or Loden. There had not been time. A lump formed in my throat when I thought of Malakai’s dead body that we had left behind in the Tyst fortress, and of Khanna’s heart-wrenching grief.

“He’s dead,” I said. “He was killed when we were escaping the fortress.”

“He’s *dead*?” Phelan walked towards us, the shock of the news overcoming his momentary fear of Nahalo. “You left him there?”

My head snapped towards Phelan when I felt barbs of his accusatory tone. “Excuse me? Left him there? We were under attack and he was dead. There was no saving him. Was I supposed to haul his lifeless corpse back with me, along with Khanna and Moria?” I stared at him in disbelief.

“Silence!” Nahalo’s voice boomed through the room, echoing off the vaulted ceiling. His voice returned to a normal level. “It is useless to argue about such things. Whatever secrets he had, he has now taken with him to the grave.”

“I knew there was something suspicious about the time gap between when he retrieved the information and when he delivered it to Tiernan. He never should have taken a detour if he was truly our ally. Dammit!” I whirled around and struck the mantel with my fist, shaking it with the impact. “To think I had begun to trust him!”

“Where are the maps and dossier Tiernan entrusted to you?” Nahalo asked.

My heart fell when I remembered I had entrusted the

satchel containing the maps to Loden. I shook my head guiltily. "I gave them to Loden for safekeeping while I entered the fortress. I was concerned they might be lost if I encountered resistance within the rings."

"Where is Loden now?" Nahalo asked warily.

I shrugged wearily, rubbing my eyes with my fingertips, and sighed. "It's anyone's guess. He bolted into the forest at the first sign of trouble, according to Khanna." I stared at the fire, trying to focus somewhere within the flames. "We will need to hunt him down soon."

"Yes, he is an unstable element, I fear. Dear gods, the thought of all of that information in such a person's hands..." Nahalo's voice trailed off.

"I'm so sorry. I know how important and irreplaceable they were to Tiernan and the Phuree," I said.

Nahalo looked up, a deep furrow etched between his brows. "I trust you memorized most of the crucial information they contained? We will alert the Phuree that we will be sending trackers to gather Loden as soon as they arrive here."

Though his words were meant to comfort, a mantle of shame still wrapped itself around my soul. I had failed him in yet another some other way.

Nahalo turned to Phelan, who went rigid with apprehension under the Ancient's gaze. "How long do you think we have until Seafra arrives with the other Immortals?" Phelan shook his head. "I'm not sure. I would imagine not long."

"Very well, then. I must speak with Moria." He turned and walked to the open doorway. "Keep watch for him."

CHAPTER 13

I *listened* to Nahalo's aura as it wound up the staircase and down the hallway to Moria's chamber, all the while watching Phelan with hawk-like intensity. My hatred for him festered beneath my skin, a poisonous fever that would not break. Despite Nahalo's reassurances, I could not force myself to believe that what lay beyond the flawless exterior of my Maker was honesty, not when the sum total of my *life* with him had been nothing but deceit. I believe that everyone deserves a second chance, but I had dealt Phelan that card centuries ago and now my hand was empty.

"When will you ever believe that I am on your side?" Phelan asked, his gaze unblinking as he watched me, tense and on guard from across the room.

My jaw ached with my attempt to subdue my anger. I shook my head, my gaze dropping to the floor. How much more could I take of these games, the hydra of conspiracy that threatened to consume the last threads of my sanity?

Phelan was truly the least of my worries at that moment, a disappointing failure which I found myself relegating to a corner of my soul, utterly blackened and dead of all ability to feel. My thoughts turned to the numbing shock of Sea's possible betrayal.

I walked towards the door. "I do not have a side in this, Phelan. I am just trying to survive long enough to leave this damned place behind me."

"Will you?" His voice pierced the fog of my focus as I passed him.

I stopped in my tracks, feeling my body tense, though I did not turn to face him. "Will I what?"

"Be able to leave this behind you?"

I heard his footsteps on the wood floor behind me, slow and steady.

"Tell me, whatever the outcome, when this battle is over, you will be able to turn your back on it all and walk away?" Something had changed in Phelan's voice, a sad lilt, the bitter twinge of pain of a Father realizing the sum total of his mistakes.

I turned and met his gaze. Every fiber of my being wanted to strike him across the face. Instead, feeling the energy within me shaking with fury, I took a step back and exhaled. I could see in his eyes the desperate desire to right the accumulation of wrongs that had stagnated between us, but I no longer had the will to fight, to rage against him as I had before. For the first time, I found myself accepting the fact that this was a war I could not win. In an instant I realized that the luxury of unconditional love and acceptance was a fairytale created by humans to dull the pain of their own questionable existences. There was no such thing as "unconditional love", not for humans and certainly not for Immortals. There would never be a moment in my life that

would be without expectation, without a standard or toll and, no matter how badly I wanted to become the image I saw in others' eyes, I would never be able to obtain that perfection. Unless I removed myself from the birth that never should have been and disowned myself from the Father who should never have stolen that title to begin with, I would forever be tied to his demented perceptions of reality.

“Yes,” I said and turned back towards the door. “I will leave here forever.”

I left the library, striding towards the staircase and up to the second floor. Though I desperately wanted to listen in on Nahalo's questioning of Moria, I knew in my heart that what she had spoken was the truth.

Turning down the hall away from the long row of bedrooms, I made my way to a set of French doors at the end that opened up onto the balcony lining the north face of the house. I pulled the doors open, and a cold rush of night air blew past me like a swarm of hungry spirits eager to visit the flesh once again. I shivered, allowing the chill to settle into me, freezing the anger in my veins to black ice. I stepped out onto the balcony and walked to the metal railing at its edge. I scanned the horizon. Beneath the light of the white moon and my preternatural sight, the rolling Texas landscape stretched for hundreds of miles, undulating like the frozen waves of the ocean at night in some forgotten oil painting. Swaths of gray and black and the deepest of greens were broken only by the sharp angles of decaying manmade structures outside the boundaries of the amagins.

Far in the distance, the orange glow of fires raged with a visceral intensity that made the fine hairs on my arms stand on end. They were the fires of war, the consuming effigy of the culmination of a century-long battle. What rose from the ashes of those fires would bring about the dawn of a

new era of life on Earth, a new regime, whether for good or for evil, forever altering the course of civilization and the planet itself. Gone were the tiresome skirmishes that kept the two sides constantly gnawing at each other's heels. The gladiators had now been placed in the Coliseum and only one would emerge victorious. As I stood staring out into the night, I realized that no matter how I wanted to believe in my own power over my personal predicament, I would never be free of this war. Whatever, or whomever, staggered forth from the bloodied battlefield would dictate my future, whether I chose to stay and accept it or ran to the far corners of the Earth to hide for all eternity.

Tearing my focus away from the fires on the horizon, I loosened the hold on my subconscious, allowing it to slip through the ether and out over the landscape in search of my fellow Immortals and one in particular; Sea. I had considered my bond with him and my Maker permanently severed since the night I had first discovered the beginnings of their deceit to trick me into their war, but now, into my animosity had seeped a new fear, a new sensation of betrayal which terrified me to the very core of my being.

No matter how I had bitterly come to detest them for their vain obsession with power and their aloof sense of self-entitlement to the world, some small part of me had never believed they could truly cross the line into absolute betrayal against their own kind. The rules amongst our kind were sacrosanct—they were hallowed truths which no Immortal dared defy, lest they be subject to the gravest of consequences. We vampires knew that we were all that we had in this world. The world would never accept us or tolerate us, for we were its predators. If we turned on each other, what little sanity kept us clinging to existence would vanish and chaos would make us the myth the world wanted

us to be.

He will stand trial before the Ancient, I thought, and then a verdict will be passed. But I knew in my heart my judgment had already been cast in cold, hard stone.

I turned back to the house and climbed a narrow ladder at the end of the balcony that led to a narrow lookout platform on the roof. I walked to the center and turned to face southwest. My senses probing the nightscape below me, I could *feel* the panic and terror erupting across the world. It was a silent scream of pain and misery and anguish as war screeched through the universe like grinding steel. The world was being ripped apart, its shores soon to be awash with the blood of millions.

I began to shake, the accumulation of agony overwhelming my senses. My eyes rolled in their sockets. Tilting my head back, I outstretched my arms and took a deep breath. Steadying, I focused on grounding the energy within me, creating of myself a conduit through which the grief could pass and be returned to the universe like a jet stream. I had to detach myself from the overwhelming wail of the world around me or it would drive me mad in a matter of moments. After a few seconds of concentration, my body steadied and my senses sharpened once again. The cry of the war swarmed past me, through me, but no longer touched me in a way that interfered with my search for Sea. I lowered my arms and lifted my head, exhaling as I stared out into the night at the fires burning on the horizon.

Amidst the swirling horror of human chaos, the cooler, deeper flickering blue, purple and green emanations of Immortal auric energy sped across the landscape, some towards the manor, some towards other distant locations. I sifted through them, searching for Sea's identity. I knew he would be close. Though the thought flashed across my

mind that perhaps he would flee back to the Tyst in search of greater protection, somehow I knew that he had something of great importance invested in seeing the rebirth of the Vicinus realized. Whatever that was would keep him close to the Queen until that time.

I walked to the edge of the platform, resting my hands on the railing. What I could not grasp was why he had continued to play along with the Immortals and the Phuree, going so far as to bring me, their so-called messiah, to their doorstep. What was there that I didn't know yet about the depths of his treachery? Was his participation in the ritual the only part he had played, or was it simply that he had truly believed that I would fail the mission? I spied him, a flash of white hair and rage speeding through the air towards the manor. His thoughts were heavily cloaked, but below the arrogant anger, I could smell his fear, a stale souring of his soul.

Oh, my dear Brother. You always did underestimate me.

Ahead of him, two other Immortals ran with nearly invisible speed up the hillside to the manor. Though their auras were shielded, they were close enough for my keen sight to pick out the details of their faces through the ghostly blur of their movements: Tatsu and Lillian. For the first time in nights, my spirits soared with the knowledge that they lived. I reached out to them, touching their minds with my own to let them know I was waiting for them. I allowed the urgency of the situation to be felt, though not elaborated on in words. Briefly they paused and, in unison, looked up at the roof of the manor. Catching my gaze, they nodded, and in a flash, they were off again, their figures barely more visible than wisps of steam trailing up the hillside. I prayed they would make it to the house before Sea.

Without hesitation, I vacated the platform. Inside, I found Nahalo striding down the hall from Moria's room. His

expression was grave, his mouth set in a hard line, his golden eyes burning angrily from within.

“He’s almost here,” I breathed, my heart racing within my chest.

“I know,” Nahalo replied. He placed a cold hand on my upper arm. “I will handle this. You *must* remain calm.”

I stared at the floor with mild embarrassment. We turned and descended the stairs where, at the base, Phelan waited for us.

“What did she say?” Phelan asked Nahalo. There was a quiet desperation in his voice, a reluctance to ask for the truth he did not want to hear. He did not want to know whether or not his Darkling, the one vampire he now considered his closest ally and confidant, had betrayed the Immortal race.

“She confirmed Tynan’s story. She never heard a name, but there is no other who could fit so perfectly the description she gave and, when I looked within her mind, the image from her memory was flawless.” Nahalo drew a deep breath and shook his head. “Tonight is a truly sad night for Immortality.” “I refuse to believe it until I hear it from Sea’s own lips.” Phelan shook his head. “I refuse!” He turned and walked a few feet away, folding his arms over his chest. “There is just no way he could have kept this from me.”

The click of the front door opening echoed through the house like a gunshot. In unison, the three of us whirled around, the energy around us bristling violently as we readied ourselves for conflict. Relief washed over me when the weary forms of Tatsu and Lillian slipped through the entrance. Instantly, they sensed our presence at the base of the stairs and froze in mid-stride, their gazes locking with ours like cornered bobcats. It was obvious they had hoped to slip in undetected and find me before facing any of the other Immortals.

I ran towards them, pulling each into a strong embrace. “It is so good to see you both!” I whispered, genuinely relieved that they were alive.

“It’s good to see you too,” Lillian whispered, and as I pulled away from her, I noticed her gaze remained firmly locked on Phelan and Nahalo.

We need to speak in private. Tatsu’s voice slipped across my mind like a cold wind.

I shook my head. *We don’t have time. Whatever you have to say you can say in front of them.*

It’s about Sea. We’ve discovered some unsettling new information, he replied, locking eyes with me.

I nodded. *They already know.*

Tatsu stared at me with shock. *How??*

“Come with me. He will be here soon and we do not want to alert him to our new knowledge.” I could sense Sea very near now, within a half of a mile of the property.

I placed my arm around Tatsu and ushered him through the entranceway and down the hall towards the open doors of the library. Behind me, Lillian closed the front door and followed silently. I could feel her fear, her worry and exhaustion as a rising tide of brackish gray. Though her soul was shielded heavily, flashes of her time within the city leached out of her mind like droplets of water dripping from an ancient copper pipe. Strange shadowed faces and images of the dark basement rooms in which they had slept during the day, their moments in the trader house and other shady, dangerous establishments blurred together. I wondered why they had not gone to Jasmine for help, but perhaps they had not wanted to endanger her further.

The last night I had visited Jasmine still haunted me, clinging to the very essence of my being like a cloying, sweet perfume. How foolish I had been to return to her safe mortal

world with the scent of the impending war on my heels. If I truly cared for her as I boasted, I never would have been so selfish. I wondered at my capability for self-preservation—just what extent would I go to for the salvation of my own hide?

Jasmine's embrace was a paradise I may never experience again. She had released me and turned back to her simple mortal world, and I had ventured onwards to the reality of bloodshed and bitterness I had longed to shelter her from, a reality that I did not believe would actually be born. I had no longer considered her part of my world, relinquishing her existence, her memory, to a special chamber within my soul preserved for the keepsakes of "good" I had witnessed over the centuries. And for a few nights, lost in the haze of confusion and fear, I was ashamed to say that I had all but forgotten her.

I craved her presence now though, as the brilliant flash of her image sparked across my mind: the warmth of her mortal skin, the selflessness of her soul, the purity of her love for me. Fear gripped my heart and I wondered where she was now as the war spread as quicksilver venom through the veins of the amagin. I prayed she was still alive. Somehow I knew that if she had died I would have felt it as poignantly as if it were my own death. I forced my mind to release her memory and felt it flutter away, spiraling down into the depths of my soul for safekeeping.

I escorted Tatsu and Lillian into the library. Nahalo lingered at the base of the stairs. As I passed him I could tell from his closed eyes and distant expression that he was listening to the world outside for Sea's approach. Phelan followed Tatsu, Lillian and I, slipping around us to make his way to his desk before the bay window. Warily, he leaned against the front of the desk, crossing his arms over his chest

as he eyed Tatsu with agitated suspicion. The turmoil of his emotions swarmed like angry hornets below the surface of his being. Phelan was clearly reaching the breaking point where the cool, dispassionate façade of diplomacy he had crafted for the world would be shredded into irreparable ruin. Nahalo's existence, Moria's survival, my rebellion, Sea's betrayal, Tatsu's secrecy... it was all too much for him to calmly digest any longer. His own embittered disillusionment with his Brethren was consuming his ability to remain the detached ruler of Immortality.

"Where have you been?" Phelan asked Tatsu with a lethal calm.

Tatsu stopped pacing in mid-stride, his gaze snapping up to meet Phelan's, his posture tense and alert as he stood motionless in the middle of the room.

I stepped between them. Turning my back to Tatsu, I addressed Phelan. "We have felt something was amiss since the very beginning of all of this, as I am sure you realize in your dealings with us. There were too many holes in the story we were fed, certain things that just didn't add up. Tatsu and Lillian went back to the amagin to investigate."

Phelan's gaze peeled away from Tatsu's to lock with mine. "*Investigate?* None of you even remotely trusted me, did you?" he spat.

I stared at Phelan, astounded. "Phelan, you never gave us a reason to trust you. Especially me."

"You and I have our differences. We always have." He stepped away from the desk, an angry rigidity returning to his body. "But you!" He pointed at Tatsu and Lillian, who had taken a seat in one of the armchairs near the hearth. "I have done nothing to you to deserve such disrespect. Either of you! I have never done anything but try to protect you and your covens. I have always addressed you with courtesy and

equality and this, *this* is how you repay me?" Phelan gestured in a sweeping arc to encompass the world of betrayal that now pierced his cold armor.

Tatsu shook his head and started pacing once again, his fists planted on his hips to keep from striking something. "Courtesy and equality. Funny how you should speak of those things now when you kept us all in the dark while Sea was making pacts with the Devil himself!" He faced Phelan, hellfires burning behind his eyes. "Tynan says you only now have come to know of Sea's betrayal, but what is there to make me believe that what you say isn't yet another of your elaborate orchestrations? What is there to make me have any trust in you now?"

He walked towards Phelan. "How do we know that you aren't the one who put him up it in the first place?"

"Why the hell would I want the Tyst to become Immortal?!" Phelan yelled, his voice elevating beyond mortal tones to shake the glass in the windows behind him. "How dare you make such accusations of me, you arrogant bastard!"

I turned my back to Phelan and approached Tatsu, taking him by the upper arms to focus him. He shrugged out of my grasp and stared at me with veiled eyes flooded with mistrust.

I held my hands up in surrender. "Tatsu, you have to listen to me. Nahalo has sworn that Phelan is completely unaware of Sea's actions."

Tatsu scoffed. "Nahalo *said* so, did he? I don't know if I would place my faith in the words of the Phuree's human Oracle right now if I were you, especially one who helped start this damned war by summoning you!"

"He's not what you think he is," I said.

Tatsu took an aggressive step towards me, his patience

wearing paper-thin. “Really? Why don’t you enlighten me?”

“He’s one of us. An Ancient, in fact.” I watched Tatsu’s face within interest as my words sank in. Lillian rose from the chair and walked towards us.

“He’s read Phelan’s soul and says that his ignorance is the truth. I trust him,” I said sincerely.

Lillian stopped beside us and stared at the side of my face as I continued to hold Tatsu’s gaze.

“What did you say?” she whispered.

“Look for yourselves. He is as pale and cold as the rest of us.” I cast a sidelong glance at Lillian and then turned my gaze to the floor while they both looked past me at the still figure of Nahalo.

“My gods!” Tatsu whispered. “How did I not notice?”

The power radiating from the angry, anxiety-ridden auras of the Immortals around me swirled through the room, rising and twisting like cobras weaving, ready to strike. It coiled about my lungs, squeezing the breath from me. In slow motion, I felt myself turning around to face the open doorway. Nahalo stood like a statue, silent and staring straight ahead at something beyond my sight.

He’s here. His voice was icy as it breathed through my mind and I somehow knew he had spoken to all of us at the same time.

In unison, we rose to join Nahalo like souls summoned from Hell to rise and fight.

Stay where you are. Nahalo’s left arm rose, his palm flat towards us and we stopped. We were tense, waiting in agonizing silence, our hearts thundering in our chests. Again, the click and whine of the front doors opening ricocheted through the manor, off the high ceilings and through my bones, setting my teeth on edge. My fangs were beginning to elongate and ache with the surge of adrenaline coursing

through my veins, my body aching to move and attack. Before Sea had even stepped over the threshold, I smelled him, his cold, metallic aura filled with greed and vanity and barren of every last drop of the beauty he had emanated in our Dark youth. For a moment, there was nothing but silence. Nahalo walked forward, disappearing out of sight beyond the library entrance. We followed, sensing that our restraint was no longer needed.

I stepped across the threshold and peered down the hall, then gasped. There, frozen in mid-stride before the open front door, was Sea, his hand still lingering on the doorknob. Nahalo had used his powers to paralyze him just as he had done earlier that evening to Phelan and I.

“What is he doing to him?” Lillian whispered beside me. Nahalo placed his hands on Sea’s face, bowing his head and scouring Sea’s soul.

“Looking for the truth,” I said, feeling my stomach twisting in knots while we waited for Nahalo to confirm our worst fears.

If he’s an Ancient, how did he not know about this before now? Tatsu’s accusative tone grated against my nerves.

I suppose we all have trusted in the wrong people at some point in our lives. The truth was I did not know why or how such a bold-faced lie could have eluded a vampire of Nahalo’s age and strength. I prayed it was nothing more than a simple innocent willingness to trust, but so far, my judgments towards just about everyone in my life had been wrong.

Nahalo’s hands fell away from Sea’s face, returning to his sides. For a long, silent moment, he stared at the paralyzed vampire before him. I could not see his face, but his posture emanated a deep sadness, like a viola note pulled long and slow at the end of a sonata. Sea’s peculiar, beautiful

eyes stared forward. He was unable to move his face into any other expression than the one of the surprise he had held when he first laid eyes on Nahalo. I knew his soul thrashed against the prison of flesh and bone his body had become to no avail, and for a brief moment I pitied him, what he had become and what fate he would soon receive.

Nahalo turned away and walked with deliberate slow strides towards Phelan, Tatsu, Lillian and I where we waited in aching silence for his verdict. He stopped a few feet from us, but did not raise his gaze from the floor as he spoke.

“I feel this is my fault for being so trusting in the remnants of our race. I was so focused on you, Tynan, and the visions the gods had shown me of this war that I chose to forgo the bitter suspicions I had carried with me in the earlier years of my Immortality. I hoped and prayed that we had moved beyond such treachery amongst our own kind. I am wrong. So very wrong.”

He sighed deeply and his misery flooded across us, a rolling aftershock of ice and wind through our souls. How selfish of me to believe the greatest recipient of Sea’s betrayal would be my own pathetic circumstance.

“Phelan, is there a place we can keep him until his fate is decided?” Nahalo looked up at Phelan.

Phelan’s face was an icy mask of white, eerily smoothed of the tortured grief concealed below, rending his heart with black talons. I felt the desire to move further away from him, unnerved by the calm restraint he now displayed to the world.

“There is a room in the chambers below the house. We will chain him there,” Phelan said, his tone flat and cold.

“Very well,” Nahalo said. “Take him away.”

CHAPTER 14

It had been a century since I had last set foot in the chambers below Phelan's manor. That fateful night, when in my blind desolation, I had fled there in search of his Book of Shadows and a spell that would snuff out the savage remnants of my Dark existence, I had longed to forget. Yet now, as Tatsu and I carried Sea's paralyzed body through the kitchen and down the narrow, ancient wooden stairs, I was forced to face yet more of the demons that still howled pitifully where they were chained deep within my soul, bound as we would soon shackle Sea, the creature who I had believed to be my best friend, once upon a time.

Once upon a time...

I suppose the true fairytales never end happily.

With my arms beneath Sea's shoulders, Tatsu led the way down the stairs, his right arm wrapped round Sea's ankles. In his paralyzed state, Sea's body was not completely

frozen, his limbs still pliable though he had no control over them, which made our efforts far easier. Still, the narrowness of the passageway and low height of the ceiling made for a rather awkward descent beneath bare light bulbs strung from the protruding wooden crossbeams. While the manor had grown and evolved above ground over the centuries, the world below had remained archaic, reminiscent of the days of the first settlers with rough stone walls and plank floors. I had never questioned Phelan's reluctance to transform his cellars and equip them with the modern luxuries and technologies he coveted in the world above. I suppose part of me understood all too intimately his need to cling to the past. After all, what are we without our pasts, without reminders of where we came from?

We carried Sea through the wine cellar, whose spirits sat mournfully ignored and covered in dust, and down a long hallway lined with rooms of various purposes. Unable to move his face except to blink from time to time, Sea's expression remained eerily fixed in the instance of shock. I tried hard to keep from glancing down into his eyes for fear of what I would see there. I was not ready to confront him for what he had done to our people, to me, and to the world.

Tynan? Sea's terrified, anxious voice slipped past the mental barrier surrounding my thoughts. *Tynan, what is going on? Where are you taking me?*

Instantly, I felt my anger resurface, the gates of my mind slamming shut tighter than ever before to keep his presence far from my soul. Distantly, I could feel his essence flinch with fear and then recoil with anger.

"That one, there." I nodded towards a room near the end of the corridor on the left.

Tatsu opened the wooden door with one hand. The room had once been where Phelan had kept the more unsavory of

his victims until it was time to take their lives—bandits and outlaws he found breaking into the manor, or the occasional Immortal who he deemed needed time to think on their actions.

After my fall from grace, while the Elders decided my fate, I had spent nearly three long, sullen months sleeping on a moldy cot in that very windowless room of bare stone. Every other night, a new victim had been brought to me, tossed into the dungeon like slabs of meat, the door slammed closed and locked before they could even scramble to their feet and escape. For hours I would let them beat against the bars of the window in the door, screaming pleas of forgiveness for whatever crime had brought them to this fate. Wailing moans of repentance would echo off the low ceilings, frantic and desperate at first like the sound of a freight train blowing through a sleeping rural town, only to fade as the hours progressed to a mewling sob of hopelessness. I allowed them the time to grieve, to rally against their unexplained imprisonment and then sink into the tar pit of their oblivion. Only then would I emerge from the corner where I had remained crouching, their grim reaper.

Their eyes would turn towards me from where they had slumped to the floor, their fists bloodied from pummeling the wood, their faces haggard and drawn from hours of crying. It was the same expression every time, one of unadulterated adoration, of instantaneous infatuation as if they were hallucinating an angelic vision of redemption. I never understood why. I could never fathom where they pulled the strength to resurrect such a holy and pristine image from their own psyches to save them from their moment of demise. It was not I who bestowed such a grace upon them. In those days, I found my own vindication of circumstance in knowing that I had not used my powers to dazzle them,

to paint myself in an ideal image in order to sedate them as I would have with my victims before my imprisonment. I was amazed at the human psyche's ability to save itself from damnation, to rescue itself from the horrors of Hell. With or without an Immortal's magic, the last moments before death are supposedly always euphoria for humans. I wondered if it would be the same for our kind. Somehow I doubted we would be shown the same heavenly lenience as our mortal kindred.

Affixed to the back wall were two sets of heavy iron chains and cuffs, rusted a deep brown with age. Tatsu and I propped Sea against the wall and locked the cuffs around his wrists and ankles. I wondered for a moment if the chains would hold, noting their age, but I took a modicum of comfort in the fact that Sea would remain paralyzed until Nahalo released him from the spell. Even if the chains didn't hold, Sea's powers were dwarfed by my own now and returning him to his new prison would take little effort.

As the last cuff clicked into place, I stepped away. My eyes traveled over the spartan, dismal interior of the room, noting the massive cobwebs collecting in the corners. The cot that had once sat along the right wall was barely intact, the gray-green canvas full of holes and coated in a thick layer of dust while the metal legs looked as though they could barely support the weight of a cat.

Phelan and Nahalo had stayed upstairs to discuss Sea's fate and strategize for the arrival of Immortals and Phuree. I knew I must return to them, as my part was integral, but I felt I had suddenly become cemented to the dirty wooden floor below me.

Tatsu sensed the growing darkness around me and stepped to stand at my side. He placed a hand on my right shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

The sincerity of his words broke my silent contemplation of the room.

“What for?” I asked.

I looked at the side of his face as he stared at Sea with a strange mixture of horror and confusion. He shook his head and turned towards the door, unable to look at Sea’s frozen form any longer.

“For questioning you in front of Phelan while we were upstairs.”

“It is no matter,” I said, a hollow cold settling into my chest. “Phelan is no longer my concern. I have far greater dilemmas than that of pride and respect now.”

Tatsu’s hand slipped from my shoulder. “I gather you know what his sins are?” He nodded at Sea.

“Enough to know that his fate is sealed.” I turned and walked from the cell.

Tatsu silently followed, closing the door behind him. He lowered the iron bar down across the door, slipping it into its cradle to lock and he caught up with me.

I felt desperate to leave the close confines of the subterranean chambers; the dirty stones and cobweb-dusted wood felt like it was caving in on me. I reached the stairs and bolted up them with such a frenzy that I stumbled once, catching myself on the wooden railing that ran down one side. The consequence of all that had occurred since my unwilling indenture to the war threatened to crush me beneath its leviathan’s weight. It had all happened too quickly. Before I even had adequate time to adapt to one earth-shattering new revelation, I was thrust into another. I had not just lost my freedom, or even the identity of my Blood, but the entire understanding of my Family as I had once known it. Who else would keep secrets from me, secrets so devious that they

could endanger the very fate of the world itself?

I reached the top of the stairs and burst into the kitchen, staggering towards the counter across the room and leaning against it.

“Are you alright?” Tatsu rushed to my side.

Free from the basement chambers, my pulse eventually slowed, the crushing anxiety dwindling back to the black despair that nested permanently in my chest.

“Yes. Yes, I’m fine.” I pushed away from the counter and walked past Tatsu.

Folding my arms over my chest, I stared out of the panes of glass in the door leading to one of the gardens. My memory tormented me, playing back the moments from when Sea had first delivered me to Phelan’s manor. I could even hear the sound of the rain falling on the stone path outside, how it had struck with an unorchestrated beauty I recognized as Nature’s dirge for my fate. Reflected in the glass, I saw Lillian cautiously enter the kitchen behind me.

“Is everything...?” Her voice trailed off. “I heard the commotion...” Another sentence left to dangle in the awkward silence between us.

In the reflection, Tatsu hung his head, his eyes closed in exhaustion. I turned around. For a moment I stared at Lillian, absorbing her priceless beauty that seemed so completely untarnished by the unnecessary evil plaguing our existences. I crossed the room and gently took her into my arms. For a fleeting second she hesitated, unsure of my mental state perhaps, then relented, wrapping her arms round my torso and laying her head against my shoulder.

“Tynan, I’m scared,” she whispered into the fabric of my shirt. “I don’t know why, but I am, in a way I have not been in so very many years.”

She pulled away and looked into my eyes. “Tell me I

don't need to be afraid. Tell me everything is going to be alright, the way you told me that day when you found me in the hull of that ship. Tell me we are going to survive this."

Her words clawed at my heart with blood-red talons. How desperately I wanted to say those things to her, to whisper such reassurances to put her mind and soul at ease. It made me want to weep. I simply couldn't. When I had first rescued her in her Dark youth, I had known I could take her to safety. The world I had been born into and the one I had created for myself at that time had been a nirvana compared to the fear and poverty she had been incepted in. That nirvana had been a lie, however, a mirage attracting those whose own hopelessness gave them the resolution to believe in the words I preached. Though my own physical and mental power now eclipsed the vampire I had been in those times, I had lost the ability to believe completely in my own words. I understood now that a piece of my transformation had been the shedding of my ability, my willingness, to peddle lies to my kindred. My days as a charlatan and heretic were dead and gone.

There was no place in our new world for empty promises of salvation.

I kissed Lillian on the top of her head and whispered into her golden hair, "I wish I could."

She sighed against me, not in exhaustion or defeat, but resignation. Resignation to believe in the illusions we had created for ourselves as Immortals for eons were dying in a way we never would. The subtle gesture nearly broke my heart.

She pulled away from me and walked over to where Tatsu stood, staring at the open door leading to the basement chambers. Her back to me, she lifted her hands to her eyes, wiping them, but when she turned and leaned against the counter beside Tatsu, her face was absent of tears. Tatsu

placed his arm round her shoulder and drew her near. It was obvious they had barely spoken a sentence to each other since they had first met nearly three centuries before, that a bond had been formed between them as they had traveled in the amagin together. A small spark of jealousy panged my heart at the sight of their tender support and I found myself longing for Jasmine's healing touch once again.

I will go to her. I made the vow silently to my human lover. *I will go to her and take her far away from here as soon as this is over.*

I walked over and stood in front of Tatsu. Lillian stared at a space on the floor between us, her expression distant and unfocused.

Folding my arms over my chest I addressed Tatsu. "I realize we all know of Sea's betrayal, but fill me in on the details of what you both discovered."

"We would have contacted you sooner, but we couldn't locate you," Tatsu said, running his hand over his hair and tugging nervously at the section tied up in a topknot. His eyes darted to the kitchen entranceway and back to me.

"It's okay. Whatever you have to say can be said in the open now. I'm sick and tired of the deceit that has burdened us throughout this ordeal." Tatsu nodded his understanding and agreement. "We went back to the bar where you met the Tyst servant girl. Luck was on our side that night when we came across a woman who, amazingly enough, had a rather clear recollection of the man the girl had met with. In fact, the image in her head was near-photographic in quality and the moment Lillian and I saw it, we knew without a doubt it was Sea. Apparently, Sea had been meeting with this Tyst servant every other month or so. The woman said they appeared to be very close, sitting at one of the most secluded tables in the establishment and speaking very quietly. At

times what looked like packets of information would be exchanged, but the woman who told us this said she never paid enough attention to them to know exactly what it was that they dealt in.” Tatsu shook his head with disgust. “That was as much as we could pull from her. We searched, but Sea must have been very good at covering his tracks because the trail dissipated after that. It is absolutely amazing how the people of the amagins simply look the other way in so many matters. I don’t know how they manage to carry on any semblance of life when they are completely in denial of their neighbor’s activities.”

“That is because they are all hoping that their neighbors are also looking the other way from them. Not so different from the way it has always been with human cities,” I said, rubbing my jaw as I thought. I drew a deep breath and exhaled. “Dear gods. What kind of hell has he dragged us all into?”

“One I would rather not be in,” Nahalo’s voice drifted through the kitchen from the entranceway.

All three of our heads snapped up at once. Nahalo paid no mind to our surprise and walked through the kitchen past us to the open door to the cellars. Phelan followed behind, his head hung in defeat, his face partially hidden by curtains of deep red hair. He appeared like a browbeaten child, utterly miserable and without hope. I wondered what the two had spoken of while Tatsu and I had transported Sea into the cell. What fate had been decided upon for Sea without my participation?

Nahalo and Phelan descended the stairs and disappeared from sight. For a moment, none of us dared to move, the very breath in our lungs frozen with apprehension. The silence was excruciatingly sharp, piercing my skull like a shard of ice. I turned back to Tatsu and Lillian. Their eyes were wide

and brimming with pure fear; we had finally come to a time when we would once again pass an impervious judgment upon one of our own, an irreversible decision which would forever alter the future of our associations as Immortals. Only, we did not know what that decision was to be.

Trading uneasy glances, we turned in unison and returned to the basement chambers, quickly catching up with Nahalo and Phelan. Nahalo approached the cell that held Sea and lifted the iron bar from its front. Behind me, I could feel Tatsu and Lillian's wonderment pouring from them like a swarm of fireflies as they found themselves absorbed by Nahalo's new presence. Their dichotomy of terror and adoration was unnerving to me, a dangerous concoction that could easily blind one from the truth. I would have to watch them closely until the glamour wore off and the reality of having an Ancient in their midst became common. When Nahalo opened the cell door and entered, something told me reality was about to congeal in a very grim way.

Nahalo walked to the center of the room and stopped before Sea. Phelan followed, drifting off to the right, a ghost of his former self. He leaned against the wall beside the broken cot, his eyes still focused on the ground in front of him. He could not move himself to raise his eyes to look at the vampire he had created with his own blood who now stood manacled to the wall of the cell.

I had seen that look in the moments before he had turned his back and left me in the same prison. I wondered if Sea felt the same scorching sense of shame that I had felt, that suffocating sensation of obliterating abandonment of the last soul on Earth that held your lineage in their veins turning their back on you. It was a soul-crushing pain I wished on no person, mortal or Immortal. My gaze drifted away from Phelan to Sea's frozen face. I doubted that his spirit moaned

on its knee now, begging forgiveness. Though his features still displayed the shock of his initial encounter, his eyes betrayed his indignant fury, his righteous outrage at his captor's audacity to confine him so.

It was in that instance, the dull glow of the single overhead bulb glistening off the glassine surfaces of his eyes, that I knew he had severed his ties to us all. He no longer believed himself a part of our strange family. He had removed himself, placing himself far above us. We were a means to an end and nothing more.

I felt a sharp pang in the center of my chest as if something were trying viciously to tear my heart from my body; I realized that I did not want to admit that I had lost yet another Brother and the acceptance of the finality of the matter was crushing. An emotional pain I had not allowed myself to feel in over a century rushed to the surface of my being. On the exterior, I struggled to maintain my composure as the bricks I had built up around my soul began to fall, crumbling slowly, one at a time.

Nahalo lifted his hand, waving it in front of Sea's face as he had done to Phelan and I. Instantly, Sea regained control of his body. He slumped forward, as if poured into his own skin, a marionette whose strings had been cut. However, a heartbeat later he regained control and exploded forward, lunging from the wall like a rabid wolf, fangs bared at the vampires before him beneath a disheveled mane of white blond hair. The massive iron chains strained against the wall as he emitted a fierce growl at Nahalo. Thin rivulets of blood seeped from beneath the cuffs around his wrists, staining the dark silk fabric of his sleeves a black. For a moment we held our breath, wondering if perhaps we had underestimated his strength. Spidering cracks formed in the stone surrounding the braces in the wall, but the chains held.

Nahalo was unmoved by the demonstration of fury. He stood before Sea, a silent statue of judgment, until Sea's rage settled slightly, his snarling becoming a low rumble in his chest. He continued to glare at Nahalo, but he stopped straining against his bonds, pressing back against the wall behind him, coiling to lunge again.

"How dare you bind me so!" he hissed through clenched teeth.

"You know why you are here, Seafra." Nahalo's voice was heavy with the knowledge of one who had played both judge and jury to too many such trials over the eons. "You betrayed us. You betrayed your race and the world with your actions."

"Who are *you* to condemn me, you who lied to us all about the very nature of your being in order to make us bend to your desires?" Sea spat. "I have just as much justification for my own actions as you do yours."

Nahalo's head tilted slightly to the side. "You know there is no truth in that statement, Seafra. I am not saying that I did not make the mistake of concealing my true identity to our people for a time, but it was for the good of the Earth itself, for all of Immortality and humanity. Your actions were self-serving, without care to the rest of universe. You acted out of self-preservation." It was obvious then that Nahalo knew the full reason for Sea's betrayal.

I could stand it no longer. I stepped forward and took my place next to Nahalo. "What the hell did you do?!" I demanded, my voice shaking in my throat as I fought to restrain my anger.

I moved to take another step past Nahalo, meaning to grab Sea by the shirt collar, but Nahalo placed a cold, firm hand upon my shoulder, staying me. He did not remove his unblinking gaze from Sea's face.

“What did you do?” I repeated, my words crumbling from my lips, desperate for an answer.

“Why don’t you tell them, oh Ancient?” Sea spat at Nahalo.

“The truth is best spoken from the one who created it,” Nahalo replied.

Sea growled again, straining forward against the chains attached to his arms with a single furious motion. The sound of clanking iron echoed off the stone ceiling, rippling out through the open door and dissolving into the hallways beyond. He cut his eyes towards me.

“You are pathetic,” he said. “You could have anything you ever wanted. You could ascend to so much more than this tragic savior you have allowed them to paint you to be. You once called me Phelan’s lapdog. I’m not so sure that applies to me, does it? You’re the one who has fit so neatly into their plans all of this time, despite all of your useless wailing of injustice. Not I. No, I have chosen to make my destiny my own!”

His face softened slightly, the muscles above his cheekbones twitching, trying to see me clearly through the red haze obscuring his vision. “You still have a chance, Tynan.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I shook my head in complete confusion.

“The Tyst,” Sea answered. “The Vicinus. They’re not what you think they are. They can give us what we most desire...” His voice trailed off as he realized the vulnerability his confessions were creating; he was beginning to show his soft underbelly with each layer of lies he voluntarily peeled away like scorched skin.

I shrugged off Nahalo’s hand and, this time, he did not attempt to restrain me. I walked up to Sea until I stood a

mere two feet from him. My stomach soured as I knew what I had to ask next.

“What did they promise you?” I asked, my voice deadily calm.

For a moment Sea did not answer. He was unable to hold my gaze. It flickered to the ground, to Nahalo, to Phelan and back to me, again and again as if the connection between his mind, mouth and heart had been severed.

I grabbed his chin in my right hand and forced him to focus on me alone. “Tell me, Sea. The time for deceit is over. There is nowhere for you to go now. There is no escaping this.”

His expression cracked, his brow furrowing slightly, his eyes searching mine for some glimmer of understanding. For a fraction of a moment he appeared the man, the vampire, who had accompanied me for so many endless nights, the one soul I had thought would be forever in my life, forever in my heart. I did not even attempt to pry past the barrier around his soul, as I knew whatever words he spoke would be verified by Nahalo. I wanted to hear them spoken aloud. I wanted his confession poured from him like living blood from an open vein for all the cosmos to hear.

“The one thing I have ever truly wanted. The only thing that could ever restore my happiness.” His voice was now barely more than a whisper. “My mortality.”

His words pierced my heart like a flint arrow tip. “Your mortality?” I repeated the words slowly—my tongue felt numb and swollen.

“Yes. Once the Vicinus arrives, my stolen mortality will be returned to me and any of us who swear allegiance to him. I will be able to grow old, fall in love without the fear of having to leave that person before they realized I was not aging as they were, sit and watch the sun rise and set, and

worship the days as we could when we knew there was only a finite amount of them to treasure.”

He stopped the deluge of words tumbling from his lips in a frantic whisper, realizing that he had leaned towards me, imploring my understanding, as if I were the one who could save him from Nahalo’s conviction. He pulled back, sinking into the wall, his eyes darting about the room to gauge the faces of the others before returning back to my own.

“All of those things you once longed for, they can be restored to you, just as they will be to me.”

I shook my head, conflicted, my heart and mind filled with a sour mixture of disgust and bitter understanding. In his own vain way, Sea was merely a reflection of the misery I had suffered before my long Sleep, and still continued to suffer night in and night out. I, too, had been too cowardly to take my life, wanting something or someone else to do it for me.

“You would sacrifice the world just so that you can die?”

“No.” He was trying frantically to make me see the *truth* he had willingly been fed by the Tyst. “The world will not suffer from the rebirth of the Vicinus. He will be indebted to us for releasing him. He will change the world, yes, but by bringing an end to the suffering we have all endured for so very long. It will be a utopia unlike anything this world has ever witnessed before.”

“Don’t you see the lies?!” My voice rose to the point of shouting. “There is no redemption for our kind. Our ‘father’ is the source of our pain, he is why we are what we are. Why in the world would you believe for a second that this creature would give a damn about our pathetic existences?” Spittle flew from my lips as I grabbed him by the wrists, my fingers wrapping around the icy, rusted iron of the cuffs binding them.

“Hypocrite!” he hissed through his clenched teeth, his anger consuming his desire to draw me into his disillusionment rapidly dissipating. “A hundred years ago you would have been down on your knees worshipping anything that would have made you half of such a promise! You think you’ve risen above it now? You think you have no desire for death?”

“I never said that.”

“No, but you condemn me for my own.”

“No, Sea. You condemned yourself by your actions. Your death does not have to mean the death of *life* itself.” I let go of his wrists with a disgusted shake, snapping them back against the wall behind him and stepped back.

Silence rang off the stone walls. I stared into his mismatched eyes, searching for a minute glimmer of something recognizable, something tangible that would remind me of my Dark Brother. The tender pain I had thought to see a moment before was gone, leaving behind nothing but ice. His soul was a barren void of arctic desolation, a mirage to keep me from the bitter black truth beyond.

I was spiraling out of control, my heart racing with adrenaline, my body crackling with electricity.

“Why did you come back to us?” I asked. “If the Tyst are your saviors, why didn’t you just stay with them?”

Sea shook his head, a deranged chuckle bubbling up his throat to his smirking lips. “They sent me back to keep an eye on you.” Just as quickly, the sarcastic smile melted from his lips. “No one ever thought you would get this far. The Vicinus tried, with the help of the Chronous, to kill you. Somehow you survived!” There was true amazement in his voice, amazement and hatred. “It is no matter. He is patient and soon will be strong enough to break free.”

“You bastard!” I stepped forward and punched him hard across the jaw. The sound of cracking bone echoed through

the room. No one behind me made a sound. Sea's head hung down and to the left, hidden beneath a long curtain of white hair.

"You told them where I would be, didn't you?" I hissed through clenched teeth.

"I didn't have to." Sea lifted his head. Using his shoulder, he popped his jaw back into place. He moved it a bit from side to side before turning back to face me. "The Vicinus could sense you without my help. He is listening to you even now as we speak and he is getting stronger with each passing night. You can barely touch the Queen now without feeling his power, can you? He will never let any harm come to her now. You may have been able to overcome the Vicinus when he needed the Chronous to reach this plane, but he has no need of that anymore and soon he will not even need his mortal conduit at all."

"Is that supposed to frighten me?" I growled, concealing my true fear with disgust.

There was a strange flash of pity in his eyes. "It should," he said. "If you continue down this path, you will be killed." His eyes flickered around the room at the somber faces watching him. "You will all die."

Just as my mouth opened to retort, I felt Nahalo's hand rest on my shoulder.

"Enough," he said, causing the words to die in my throat. "Seafra, your deceit has tainted our ability to trust in anything you say so it is pointless to carry this conversation any further. Phelan and I have considered your fate and deemed your actions against Immortality and humanity as inexcusable and unredeemable. No other of our kind has placed so much at stake for their own personal gain. Indeed, the world in its entirety is in peril. Such extreme betrayal is cause for our severe verdict. As you have expressed to us

your desire to die, it should come as no surprise that you are to be put to death.”

Fear and disbelief took hold of Sea’s face, his eyes widening, his lips parting slightly as he stared at Nahalo. “No,” he said quietly, then his voice rose. “No! You can’t! It’s against our laws! You cannot take my Life, or the Life of any other vampire, no matter what our actions may be!” It was obvious that, while he longed for a normal human mortality, the idea of death still terrified him. He frantically thrashed in his chains, straining against the iron cuffs to break free.

“It is time for a new judicial era for Immortality,” Nahalo said above the clanking of Sea’s bonds. He lifted his hand and passed it in an arc before Sea. Instantly, Sea’s body froze, his posture straining forward with his head down and hidden beneath his long white hair. His arms remained raised and bent, fists curled and defiant.

I could not help but gasp as Sea’s thrashing ceased. My heart thundered in my chest as the reality of Nahalo’s words settled like tar over my soul. For eons we had lived with the security of that one ultimate law by which all vampires abided, no matter what their age or power. It was the one law that kept us from devolving into the chaos that governed humanity. Was Nahalo and Phelan’s judgment archaic madness or were such draconian rulings at times truly necessary to maintain order and peace? Nahalo’s verdict would set a new and terrible precedent for Immortality.

I watched Sea’s frozen form. Before I realized it, I felt myself backing away, struggling with the overwhelming desire to turn and run from the room. I stopped beside Tatsu and Lillian, who both stood like frozen deer near the doorway. Phelan moved for the first time since we had entered the cell. He stepped away from the wall and walked

silently to Nahalo's side.

"I'll do it," Phelan said resolutely, his gaze focused on the ground in front of him, unable to raise his eyes to the silent, still form of his Dark Child.

"Are you sure?" Nahalo asked. "It should be my responsibility as the eldest of our race to deliver such a punishment."

Phelan shook his head, finally raising his gaze to meet Nahalo's. "It is only right that I take his life. I feel... responsible somehow. I gave him this life, the life he hates so much. It is only fit that I take it back."

Nahalo nodded, his face grim, but understanding. "Very well."

Phelan's thoughts and emotions were sealed off to the world, but somehow I knew this was breaking what was left of his spirit.

"Please leave," Phelan said, his voice barely more than a whisper. "All of you. This does not need an audience."

Nahalo turned to walk towards the door. Tatsu and Lillian flinched at the sound of the cell door opening and followed Nahalo out into the hallway as though they couldn't escape fast enough. For a moment, I lingered behind, unable to pry my eyes away from the tragic sight before me. I felt helpless, unused to not being the focus of Phelan's disappointment and Immortality's persecution.

"Tynan, go with the others," Phelan said, his voice devoid of emotion.

"My eyes flickered to Sea, frozen forever in his final attempt to escape his bonds. What could possibly be left to say to Sea, if given the chance? Yet, the anger and outrage I had been consumed by only moments ago had vanished, replaced by an overwhelming sadness. Perhaps a part of me still clung to the idea that one day Sea and I could have been

reconciled as friends, as Brothers. Never had I thought I would see such a day when I would witness his execution.

“There is nothing left for you to say or do. Turn and walk away from here and do not look back.” Phelan’s words rang harshly in my ears like a death knell as he asked me to do what he longed to do himself.

CHAPTER 15

With a deep breath, I turned and left the room, leaving the door open behind me. I concentrated on the dull echo of my footsteps, my mind stunned into a haunting silence. In a way, I felt like I was leaving under the persuasion of Nahalo and Phelan and not of my own volition. Several meters from the cell door I broke into a run. I passed Tatsu and Lillian who were walking cautiously down the passageway, arms wrapped about each other, heads bowed in mourning. Lillian gasped, startled out of her grief by the wind stirred by my passing.

Angry tears streaming down my cheeks, I bolted up the stairs, bursting into the kitchen and out the side door into the courtyard. There, I fell to my hands and knees upon the flagstone walkway. I struggled to breathe, my lungs gripped in a steel vice of uncontrolled anxiety. The world was closing in on me from all sides, my sight tunneling down a well of

blackness—my world was imploding at the speed of light, collapsing in on me like a dying star and there was absolutely nothing I could do to alter it.

Just as I began to believe I had finally come to control some part of my newfound life, the Fates stripped my power from me in a new cruel manner. How many times could my world be redefined, skinned alive and left to bleed until a new hide formed, more thick and calloused than the one before? I felt ill. Somewhere from deep within my mind I could hear the faint sound of shattering, like a window was being broken with stones, one pane at a time. Squeezing my eyes shut, holding the last of my breath in my lungs, I clung to the remainder of my splintering sanity.

Behind me, I heard the door open and close. Hands wrapped around my forearms and lifted me from the ground.

“Don’t touch me!” I screamed hysterically. “Don’t fucking touch me!” I staggered backwards, finding my balance again. I gripped the sides of my head, grabbing my hair to rip it from my skull.

“Tynan, it’s going to be okay.” Lillian’s soft, sorrowful voice punctured the wall of silent screaming torment suffocating my soul.

“No it’s not!” I screamed. “It’s not going to be okay!” I walked away from them, my hands still clutching the sides of my head to keep the demons inside from breaking free.

“Phelan is killing Sea while we stand here. We are allowing our entire world to be completely reordered while we stand here. We should be in there rallying against this, forcing them to deliver another verdict on our convicted Brother, but we’re not! Why the hell is that? No, it’s not okay! Nothing will ever be okay again...” I stared out the landscape around us. The feeling of something deadly biding its time amongst the distant shadows was overwhelming.

“You knew Sea was up to something, something terrible! We all knew it,” Tatsu retorted. “How can you be shocked that he has been dealt this sentence?”

I turned to face him, my hands falling to my sides as I stared at him in disbelief. “Whether I hate him or not, whether our paths as Immortals diverged, he is still my Blood Brother!” I hissed. “And it is still the law of Immortality that one of us may not murder another, except in extreme cases of self-defense.” I walked towards Tatsu. “You should have more respect!”

“Respect?” Tatsu spat. “For whom? For the traitor below us? The one who willfully sold his soul for the pathetic ability to grow old?” Tatsu took a step towards me until we were mere inches away. His eyes narrowed as he considered his next words carefully.

“Or for you?” he said, pinning me with his gaze. We stared at each other for a long moment in silence.

“What do you mean?” I asked, my anguish suspended by the terror of what his words might force to the surface.

“You know exactly what I mean.” Tatsu’s voice had reached a dangerously calm note. “Don’t fool yourself if you believe that you haven’t begun to find yourself enamored by all of this new power they have given you. It’s not Sea you’re concerned with, it’s your own perilous place in the new hierarchy of things. Just when you thought you were beginning to regain your former stature in this world, you have found yourself on unstable ground once again. The rules have changed and this time, if you screw up, our race may not be so forgiving.”

His words speared my soul. I took a step back and turned away from him. Tatsu’s honesty was brutal, flaying open my mind to reveal what my subconscious had been secretly coveting. I had been deluding myself with all of my

ranting and raving about freedom from the constraints of the Immortal hierarchy. Deep inside, a part of me still believed the world could be saved, that my Brethren could be saved by a new enlightenment if only given the chance to find my place of power once again. I wrapped my arms around my stomach as a wave of nausea rippled through me.

No, I cannot allow myself to become such a vampire again. My time to make a true change has passed. I must leave this place when this is over.

“You won’t,” Lillian said, her soft voice penetrating the white noise rising about my mind, her delicate hands cupping my upper arm gently. “You can’t leave. It is not your nature to turn your back on what you believe. Regardless of what you scream, we know you now believe in this war, in the salvaging of the remainder of our race. You can’t escape it—it’s in your blood. And besides,” she attempted to force a smile, but her beautiful pale lips merely twitched sadly at the edges, “we need you. The world needs you.”

I turned my face to look at her, considering her words. I felt numb and cold.

An icy wind passed *through* me. I gasped, clutching my chest, a wave of horrible grief wringing the air from my lungs. Every nerve within my body sang as if a razor blade had sliced cleanly through them. Tears streamed down my cheeks and I knew instinctively that the spirit of Seaфра had been released.

“He’s gone,” I breathed through trembling lips.

I could smell him on my clothes, the distinctive scent of his being infused with my hair and skin. I shivered, feeling momentarily displaced from reality. I could not escape him, he was everywhere all at once.

Lillian silently embraced me, not knowing the proper words for such a profound moment. She appeared not to

have had the same experience. Sea's soul must have sought me out alone, a final barb to sweeten my exquisite torment. I did not move to return the gesture, my limbs frozen in shock. I leaned my head back and stared up at the vast black sky above us. A feral howl was trapped in my chest, which I was unable to release.

"How did it come to this?" I whispered to the heavens, not really wanting to find the answer to my question, my eyes roaming through the swimming pinpoints of white light splattered across the universe.

"Perhaps this is for the best? A beginning to a new era of Immortality, one in which we are more...aware of our actions, our intentions toward our kindred and the world?" Lillian's soft voice was muffled as she spoke into the folds of my shirt. She was searching for the glimmer of light amongst the darkness. "Maybe what will rise from the ashes of Sea's death will be a stronger, more unified Immortality, one not so consumed by our individual lives..." Her voice trailed off, strangled by confusion and sorrow. "Maybe a little fear of ourselves is what we need to survive?"

My gaze dropped from the heavens to the rolling black silhouette of the horizon. Lillian's words pulled me back from the bitter edge where I stood, contemplating what might be waiting for me at the bottom of the abyss. I realized that the pain and confusion in her voice was not entirely the result of Sea's execution, but her overwhelming desire for true order and power to be restored to our race. Though we clung together now, the past century of fighting against the Tyst genocide had left our people fractured and cowering, suspicious of everything and everyone. I had missed this part of our history while I Slept. I rallied against the world as if the year were still 2011 and not 2111.

I reached up and stroked the back of her head. I did not

like what her words implied. Were we not already fearful of ourselves? Was fear ever truly the answer?

* * *

A short while later Nahalo came to retrieve us for Sea's burial. In another time, if he had died of another cause, Sea's body would have been burned and his ashes scattered to the wind. However, even though Phelan's powers to cloak our location were immense, he feared the flames of the funeral pyre might be seen and so Sea's head and body were to be buried in separate locations upon the estate grounds. Though his life force, in the physical respect, had been drained and his spirit released from the shell that contained it, Phelan still clung to certain old-world superstitions about our abilities to reanimate ourselves despite death. He dreaded the idea of Sea finding his way back from the spirit world to his body and seeking revenge upon his Maker with a renewed viciousness. Though I had never seen a vampire truly come back from death, I understood Phelan's paranoia and his guilt.

Tatsu, Lillian and Nahalo joined Phelan over the burial plot where Sea's decapitated body had been placed, but I could not bear to follow. The idea of staring down at a mound of freshly turned earth and forcing centuries of emotion to funnel down into a single rushed goodbye was a horrifying thought. I was not ready to make peace with Sea's ghost. I was not ready to make peace with the new judicial order Nahalo and Phelan had created.

I returned to the rooftop to be alone. There I stood and silently watched the ragged remains of our Immortal troupe begin to arrive, those faces I had seen gathered on the night Phelan had first enlisted us into his war. I wondered what had become of the missing ones, what kept them from returning

to one of the few safe places that remained for them in this world? Perhaps, as I had desired to do, they had chosen to leave, to turn their backs on Phelan and his world and take their chances in some distant land. Perhaps they had had the courage that I had lacked.

I perched upon the railing, the chill wind whipping my hair across my eyes, and peered down at them like a gargoyle, prying at their souls with my mind for the truth of their intentions and their previous whereabouts. Though nothing I plucked from them was malicious or suspicious, I did not know these Immortals intimately and, thus, I could not trust them. If my closest kindred had betrayed me, strangers deserved even less of my acceptance or respect. I turned my pain to preservation, my heart a brick of arctic ice within my chest to freeze the hissing serpents of anger and spite.

I counted four Immortals, four of the some twenty that had originally gathered at Phelan's manor. As the last entered through the front doors I scanned the surrounding landscape, but could sense no others approaching. In the distance, deep beneath the line of the horizon, the sun was lurking, beginning its ascent towards dawn. A little more than an hour remained before the light would stain the sky a deep violet and then pink as a new day began. The Sleep tugged at the edges of my consciousness, tiny threads of lead weaving in and out of the fibers of my body. I looked forward to the Sleep, wanting to lose myself in its oblivion to escape for a time. I only prayed my dreams would not inflict further torment and leave my mind more bruised than it already was.

I climbed down from the roof and reentered the house through the open French doors on the second floor terrace. The newly arrived Immortals lingered on the first floor, talking quietly with Nahalo, Lillian and Tatsu. Phelan was

absent; I lifted from Lillian's mind the image of him kneeling beside Sea's grave outside, alone. The war had finally struck too close to home, its mindless mercilessness claiming one of Phelan's very own. There was not time enough to properly mourn such a tragedy and I wondered if Phelan, as cold and calculating as he could be, would be able to maintain focus for what needed to be done in the nights to come, or whether his pain would turn to a personal vendetta. I worried for Moria's safety while she remained in the house, as she would certainly be the primary focus of his rage.

I left my place near the stairs where I had stood listening to my Brethren below and walked down the hall to Moria's chamber. I had made the choice to take her from her home and bring her here into the eye of the storm. Now it was my duty to protect her to the best of my abilities. I opened the door and slipped inside. Moria was curled into a fetal ball beneath the blanket, her arms tucked beneath her head. As I approached I could see her eyes and cheeks were slightly reddened from crying. I felt a fissure open in the ice that had formed around my heart. Though I knew that Nahalo would have been gentle in his interrogation of her, as was his nature with delicate things, I still felt I had somehow abandoned her by not being present. Perhaps Nahalo was correct in his observation that I was growing too close to her, but it was a call I could not ignore.

I crossed the room. She did not stir from her deep slumber, too exhausted, both emotionally and physically. I found the remote on the far bedside table that operated the mechanized window shutters. I pressed the button and the black metal panes descended from thin slits in the white molding at the top of each of the two tall windows with a soft metallic hum. The world outside disappeared and the shutters clicked into place, leaving the room ringing with a

strange, sad silence.

I walked back towards the bed, slipping the remote into the bottom drawer of the nightstand so that Moria would not find it when she awakened. Though she knew I Slept during the day, I knew she did not have the understanding of how lethal the sun was to our species. In the haste of our relocation, no provisions had been made for who would be there to tend to Moria if she woke while the rest of us Slept. Perhaps, Phelan would take time to instruct his housekeeper, but somehow I knew it would be the least of his concerns at this time.

Ideas of her fleeing the house did not even occur to me, so secure I was in her new attachment to me. If she awoke during the day and her courage prevailed, she might possibly explore the house, but I knew she would return to the one place she now felt safe: beside me. It was a bizarre sense of both peace and heady empowerment, this knowledge, one I felt oddly comforted by. I sat down on the edge of the bed and rested my head in my hands, my elbows balanced upon my knees. I drew a deep breath, trying to expel the ache that invaded my entire body like a virus despite the cold numbness at my center.

The image of Jasmine leapt like a flame to the front of my mind. I closed my eyes and lost myself within the memory of our last embrace. How perfect and genuine each gesture had been, our unspoken commitment to one another in spirit negating the need for the limitations of human speech. I prayed for her, prayed for hers and her brother's safety. I knew the cities were now overrun with Tyst militia. I had suffered enough wars in my lifetime to know what would happen after such a breach of security. Streets would be cleared by soldiers in armored vehicles and homes would be searched one by one with brutal force until they came up

empty-handed. Only then, when nothing was found, would the generals turn their backs upon interrogations and move on to larger strategies. Jasmine was strong of will. She had successfully survived within the Tyst amagin and prospered. However, the building in which we had lived was riddled with illegal items such as contraband solar generators and computer equipment. Though these offenses paled in the comparison to the abduction of the Tyst Queen, it was more than likely that a Tyst soldier would use such contraband as reason to inflict further pain upon the occupants of the building. My mind ran through these scenarios, my prayers turning from her safety to hoping she would flee before the troops arrived at her doorstep.

I rubbed my face trying to somehow rub away the swarming grief and guilt mercilessly invading my mind like hungry locusts. I had to put those thoughts aside. There was nothing I could do for Jasmine now and if I left to find her, there might not be a world for us to live in. That is, if I found her alive.

If...

It was such an expansive word and one that I felt all too heavily on my shoulders. I hated it with my entire being. Without undressing, I lay down on the bed beside Moria. Aside from Jasmine, Moria was the only other person I had met who I felt would be safe beside me as I Slept. Our bond was so deep that I knew instinctively I would not harm her if she touched me in my unconscious state, that my body might lash out at others in a primal defense, but not at her. In fact, I did not feel comfortable Sleeping in any other place within the house that night.

Folding my hands over my stomach, my fingers interlaced, I stared up at the fog of blue-black shadows clustered over the high ceiling. I listened to the soft moaning

of the house settling, the creaking of eaves, the subtle shifting of brick and mortar as the Earth sighed beneath it. The rest of the Immortals had retired to their assigned chambers to wait out the day. Only Nahalo remained awake, moving silently from room to room on the ground floor, restlessly casting additional spells of protection and lending his own power to Phelan's to reinforce the invisibility of the manor to the mortal world. I *watched* him for a while, sensing that he was aware of my observation, but unconcerned with it, until he too retired for the day.

As the sun rose outside I let the Sleep claim me.

CHAPTER 16

When the moon rose the following night, I awoke with a gasp. Coughing and struggling to breathe like a man just saved from drowning, I sat up and tried to focus on the dark room around me. My heart raced inside my chest, my frantic pulse so strong that my hands shook as they gripped the bedspread beneath me. The moment I opened my eyes, my dreams dissipated, the images of whatever had been chasing me shredding into a million slivers of torn silk, dissolving as they fell back down into my subconscious. My throat felt raw and parched. Had I been screaming? I uncurled my fists from the blanket and raised my hands to rub my face.

“Bad dreams?”

Moria’s soft voice startled me through the shadows. She sat in a wooden armchair near the windows. The steel shutters were still lowered and beneath the towering planes of gunmetal-gray, Moria looked even more pale and fragile

than the night before, still wearing the gown, now dirty from our night in the cave, her long white hands folded over the swell of her belly. For the first time, I noticed that the size of her stomach had grown considerably since I had first laid eyes on her in Tyst fortress.

I frowned, perplexed by the growth. I needed to mention that development to Nahalo. This couldn't possibly be a good sign.

As if she heard my thought Moria raised her eyes and met my gaze. The will behind her eyes had strengthened from the hours of rest she had finally achieved. I didn't reply to her question, looking away to scan the rest of the room. Though my pulse had slowed, I could not shake the feeling of being chased, of something being close enough to me to breathe on my neck.

"I didn't dream last night," Moria said, her voice tinged with wonder. "It is the first time since I found out I was with child that I have not dreamed or, at least, I cannot remember my dreams."

My gaze returned to her. Her eyes were cast downward to her belly.

"It is this place," she said, her voice barely more than a whisper so that I was not sure if she was addressing me with her words. "It's quiet here."

I slung my legs over the side of the bed and ran my hands through my hair. "It is for the moment. The others will be awake soon and the Phuree leaders will hopefully arrive at some point tonight."

"No, not the house. *He* is quiet." Her focus remained upon her belly. "I'm not sure why, but he feels afraid in a peculiar sort of way. Something has made him retreat so that for the first time in weeks, I feel like I am carrying a normal child within me." She looked up at me. "Can you sense it?"

Her gaze anchored me, chasing away the last of the tendrils of dream darkness that clung to me. In the clarity, I opened my senses, searching for the oily black presence of the Vicinus. Moria was correct. He *was* quiet. Distantly, I still sensed him, like a massive dragon coiled deep within its cave, warily watching us from the safety of his nest. However, the intensity of the frightening power he had exhibited in the previous nights, the tangibility of the primal force of his hatred and anger, had receded.

I could not tell if he was truly fearful of something, whether it be myself, or the gathering of Immortals at such a place of power as Phelan's manor, or whether he was simply waiting, biding his time and reserving his power for a final strike against us. As unique a creature as Moria was with her Halfling bloodline, her body was no match for an ancient force such as the Vicinus and was merely the fragile vessel through which he must communicate until his birth. It was possible the Vicinus sensed he could destroy his bearer if he forced his power through her body in his effort to strike me down. Perhaps he was aware enough of his tenuous situation to reign back in his desire to kill me? Somehow I doubted it was so, but for a moment I wanted to believe it possible.

I allowed myself a small smile. "Yes, I can sense it," I agreed, nodding.

Moria smiled in return. She looked away from me, her attention returning to her stomach, her hands caressing the top of her belly like a truly content expectant mother. I did not know what the future would hold for her or the creature she carried. My desire was to save her somehow, but the outcome of such a rescue, if it would even be possible, would most likely mean the death of the creature she carried. I was worried that, even though she knew that what she held within her was not of this world, her natural instinct to bond

with it and treat it as her child would begin to warp her perception of the situation unfolding around her, causing her to ally herself with the Vicinus and allow herself to be used accordingly. I shivered to think of what might come of such a submission to the Vicinus. At the moment she thought of me as her savior, her protector, but that sentiment could be destroyed in the blink of an eye.

I stood, retrieving the remote for the shutters from the nightstand and pointed it at the windows, pressing the button to raise them. Moria jumped a little at the sound, looking up to watch the panels rise to expose the nightscape outside. I walked to one of the windows. The sky was still a deep navy blue blending into an intense violet along the distant horizon line. Above, fathomless clusters of glittering white stars had begun to sing their eternal song to the universe, oblivious to the chaos that reigned upon the planet below them. The immediate landscape surrounding the estate was still, rolling waves of mesquite and cedar-lined wilderness drenched in mottled layers of shadows. In the distance, I could see the dull orange glow of fires burning, new clusters in different locations from the night before, signifying that the war was growing in its rage. My throat tightened with anticipation.

“Do you need anything right now?” I asked Moria without peeling my eyes off the world outside.

The numbness that had encased my heart after Sea’s execution was still firmly attached to the center of my being. It saddened me that I could not allow Moria the comfort I was sure she needed. However, as I watched the fires on the horizon, I was secretly thankful for the clarity it offered. I would need the ability to focus completely upon whatever plan Nahalo and I were able to devise, whatever miracle we were about to attempt.

I could feel her watching the side of my face for a long

moment before turning her gaze out through the window. “I suppose I am hungry,” she said.

I could tell that she had been hoping to make a deeper connection with me, to bond over our shared realization of the Vicinus’s momentary retreat.

“I will have someone bring you something to eat shortly,” I said, turning away from the window and walking to the bedroom door.

I needed distance from the emotional vortex that swirled around her, drawing me in with every breath I took. Her plight appealed too greatly to my reckless romantic aspect, the one that wanted to sink into the sorrow of the moment and to break free from Immortality’s grasp to run to the edges of the Earth with her clasped tightly in my arms. It was a dangerous intoxication, one that distorted reality because something deep within me craved it so intensely, craved it like a drug I could never be rehabilitated from, craved it like a limb separated from my body that I could never reattach perfectly. I could not allow myself to be swayed by those weaknesses. No matter how much I would like to lay the blame, the responsibility, on the ones who had facilitated my placement in that moment, I knew that I had made my choice to wage a war, not only with the Tyst, but with the Vicinus itself. I had to see it through to the very bitter end.

My hand rested on the doorknob for a moment. I spoke without turning to look back. “If you need anything else, please let us know. We will tend to whatever request you have, within reason.” My voice sounded cold when I spoke the words aloud, though they were uttered with the best of intentions.

A second ticked by.

“Thank you,” Moria said simply.

With a curt nod I left the chamber.

* * *

With long strides I made my way down the hallway of bedroom chambers and descended the stairs to the first floor. The house was gradually coming alive again, Immortals beginning to awake and emerge from their rooms, pale ghostly creatures with faces full of brooding fear and apprehension that caused their pallor to appear drawn and sickly. I said nothing to them as I passed, though their eyes surveyed me suspiciously until I was out of sight.

There was no time for cordial greetings; I needed to find Nahalo and tell him of the change I had noticed in Moria's condition. He alone would know what these things meant. While I longed to take comfort in the retreat of the Vicinus's presence, something within me coiled tightly and hissed with dread. I did not trust what my senses told me. My instinct warned me that everything the Vicinus created was a twisted illusion and, thus, this too was most likely a mirage created to distract us from the god's true whereabouts and intentions.

I felt Nahalo's aura within one of the chambers below the manor. However, as my feet left the last stair, I felt a tug on my mind from the direction of the library. Though he was not reaching out to me directly, I sensed Phelan, alone, somewhere within the room. His energy was tucked in tight around his body, soured with a bitter, overwhelming sadness.

I waited, my fingers still lingering on the banister, and bowed my head, finding that the anguish of my Maker dominated even the dire urgency of my need to alert Nahalo. While the sorrow and anger I still felt were encased by a survivalist numbness, I could not imagine what Phelan now felt. The sensation of my festering hatred for him was gradually dissolving, settling through me like sand pouring through an hourglass. The slaying of his Son had brought

him back to the gritty plane of existence where the rest of us dwelled, the place where we were humbled and hindered by our demons, where pain and loss was, at times, the very mortar that held our lives together. He could no longer look down on us from the lofty heights of his self-positioned throne of Immortal royalty. Though, there was little I could do for him to ease his pain, the sharp resonance of its existence was impossible to ignore.

Whether it was out of genuine concern or mere selfish curiosity, I turned and walked towards the library. The right side of the two massive doors was closed, the left only slightly ajar. Warm golden light pooled out into the hallway. I placed my hand on the open door and pushed it slightly so that I could peer inside.

The room was empty except for Phelan, who sat in one of the sumptuous leather armchairs near a roaring fire on the far side of the room. He had turned the chair so that he faced the hearth, his body slouched down, legs sprawled out before him, one foot propped up upon the wall beside the ornate mantel surrounding the fireplace. His head was bent to one side, his cheek resting upon his right fist, red hair made molten by the flames, unbound and spilling over his shoulder to drape the arm of the chair.

He did not seem to notice the door open behind him, or perhaps he simply did not care. For the first time in ages, he seemed completely uncomposed, a creature devoid of the regal power he had cultivated for centuries and used to sculpt a façade of infinite perfection. I opened the door further and stepped inside. I approached him warily, for I was uncertain what his reaction would be to my intrusion. I stopped halfway, wondering if I should continue or whether I should turn and leave. His thoughts were sealed within his mind though I could sense them growling like an angry wolf

hidden in the undergrowth of an ancient forest.

“Have you come to gloat?” Phelan’s voice sliced through the space between us. He did not turn to look at me, but continued to stare into the fire.

“No. Not at all,” I answered sincerely, insulted by his assumption. I wanted to say I had come to offer some sort of condolence, but the words died in my throat. Part of me felt that Phelan’s pain was a just sentence for him for. In truth, his lie to me about Moria’s identity was in some ways as great a betrayal as Sea’s own selfish actions.

“Then why are you here, Tynan?” His voice sounded dead and exhausted of the agony from the night before.

Why am I here? I wondered to myself.

The bridge between Phelan and I had burnt to cinders and blown away. There was no repairing the damage that had been done. Whatever lay ahead for us in the future as Maker and Dark Child would be of a completely different make and mold than our previous relationship, if one ever formed again at all.

“I... I just wanted to let you know that we are prepared to do whatever is necessary to finish this.” I fumbled humanly with my words, every syllable resounding like an inappropriate lie. When he did not respond, I closed the space between us, moving to stand to the right of his chair. He did not move as I approached, continuing to glower at the fire as if he longed to punish it.

“Phelan, I—”

“He was my Son.” Phelan’s expression changed as he spoke the words aloud, his features softening slightly, his brow furrowing, he was struggling with his attempt to make peace with Sea’s ghost.

“For four centuries I have thought of you and Seaфра as my children. My companions and kindred yes, but also my

children. I was, *am*, your Dark Father. It was my responsibility to guide you and protect you.” He shook his head, lifting it away from his fist. He drew a deep breath, laid his hand on the arm of the chair, and exhaled slowly. “I have failed you both so miserably. One Son is now dead and the other sees me as his eternal enemy. And the only daughter I have is a stranger to me, a stranger I sent my Son to kill. What kind of father have I been, in either respect?”

I was stunned by his confession, unable to move or speak. Any moment before that night, I would have taken his sorrow as mockery of my own, a vicious sarcasm to further wound me in his attempt to put me in my place, beneath him. Now, however, I could not bring myself to react in such a hasty and childish manner. There was no denying the pain and regret in Phelan’s voice and it left me speechless.

He turned his head to look at me. For a long moment he remained silent, staring up at me as if I were an abstract painting he was trying to define after seeing it in a new light.

“I know you judge me, Tynan. You always have, just as you have judged our entire species, pointing out all of our flaws and our vices like they were sins that needed to be flogged from our hides.”

I felt humbled by his honesty and his brutal evaluation of my attitude towards my own kind. It was the truth, plain and unarguable, but no one had ever said it aloud and directly to me. I bowed my head, looking into the center of the hungry yellow flames.

“I am not saying that you are wrong for this. You have every entitlement.” He looked away, his gaze returning to the depths of the flames.

My body felt made of marble, the limitless weight of my existence pressing down on me as if it were attempting to break apart the very molecules binding my spirit to the

Earthly plane. I was weary of harboring anger and resentment for Phelan, yet I was not quite ready to let go of it, for I was not sure what I would replace it with. For years it had festered and mutated within me until it filled a very large part of my soul. In a strange, perverse way I had gained what I thought was strength from it. Like dandelion seeds, each betrayal, each angry encounter had caused a wind to scatter a new crop of animosity and from those seeds had sprouted the weeds that now dominated my spirit. Perhaps one night, when all of this was behind us, I would be able to release the darkness. For now, I needed it to remain whole. I needed strength, in whatever form it came to me. I heard the settling cease within the fall of the final grain of sand.

I looked back at Phelan. He somehow appeared far older, a memory etched in stone and left to weather in the rain. For the first time, it was I who worried for his mental state. I placed my hand on his shoulder and squeezed it gently. At the gesture, he hung his head, his right hand moving to cover his face.

“I believe it is time to begin anew...Father,” I whispered. “Somehow.”

He lifted his left hand and covered mine. He nodded, his face still obscured by his hair. “Yes. Somehow.”

CHAPTER 17

I closed the door to the library as quietly as I could, but the sound echoed harshly through the first floor of the building. I left Phelan to his self-loathing and hurried to find Nahalo. I could not allow myself to be sucked down into the vortex of my Maker's anguish, as eager as my soul was to delve deep into such painful history, drawing the blades of festering resentment across his heart until I was satisfied that his regret was honest and true. Along with my harrowing grief for my Brother's demise, I forced my emotions down deep until they were safely locked within the box that contained the other howling demons I refused to acknowledge or feed.

It was a strange feeling, such numbness; it was a state of being I had longed for throughout my life, the sensation of truly holding the world and my own heart at such a distance that they ceased to hurt me. No fear, no pain, only a resounding hollowness through which the cries of the world

echoed like water in a cave. Though I had wished for it in a zealous manner now that it had settled over me like a mantle of dense black wool, the weight of it caused me to wonder if I would ever be able to remove it.

Outside the estate grounds, faintly in the distance, I could feel the approaching presence of several members of the Phuree, though I could not pinpoint the exact number. Their impression on the atmosphere was delicate, barely distinguishable from the resonation of the Earth over which they moved like whispers of steam. They were heavily cloaked with their magic to disguise their location as they raced to find protection within Phelan's hidden home.

However, Tiernan's strong, determined aura burned bright enough for my soul to perceive. I wondered if Tiernan and his men would be able to find the house, as securely hidden as it was behind layers and layers of ancient wards and seals of invisibility generally only detectible by vampires. Phelan had, no doubt, given them precise coordinates to follow, but if they were not careful they could simply wander right by. I decided I would continue to listen for them and, if need be, go and fetch them myself, though I hoped Phelan would pull himself out of his melancholy for long enough to tend to at least the most urgent of matters in this little war he had helped to ignite.

The sound of footsteps descending the stairs yanked me out of my contemplation. I sensed it was Tatsu and Lillian; the other Immortals still lingered in the quarters upstairs. Wanting to avoid their questions, I made my way through the house to the kitchen, descending the stairs to the cellar rooms. Beneath ground, at the end of the corridor the strange yellow glow of electric light spilled out through an open doorway. I could feel Nahalo's presence within, though his thoughts were tucked away from prying minds. As my feet

left the last stair, a cold hand of dread wrapped around my heart and squeezed hard; I would have to pass the chamber where Sea had been executed. For a moment I lingered, my hand lightly resting on the cold stone wall to my left as I searched for the resolution to force my feet to move over the rough wooden floor.

It is over. It is done. I thought, a mantra of denial to subdue and brainwash. *It is over. It is done. It is over. It is done.*

I let my hand drop away from the wall and walked down the hall, concentrating on the sound of my footsteps and the light at the end. When I reached the door to the cell where Sea had been detained, I stopped. The room was dark. I stared down at the ground beneath my feet, unable to look into the clustered shadows of the room, yet unable to force myself to move past. A residual energy resided within, an echo of Sea's spirit that howled silently against my mind like the ghost of a hurricane. I turned towards the room and took a hesitant step forward into the doorway. The chains that had held Sea in his final moments now hung empty from the back wall. Between them, a sharp spray of blood stained the stone a reddish black.

Why did it have to come to this? I asked Sea's ghost silently.

Nahalo's soft voice touched my mind. *Some questions are better left unanswered.*

I turned away from the cell to find Nahalo standing in the hallway behind me. He watched me with a distant mixture of subtle sadness and concern, as if he privately worried that the frayed fabric that held together the remnants of Immortality would quickly unravel now, destroying us before the Tyst or the Vicinus even had a chance to. His brows drew together and he tilted his head to the side, listening to something

far beyond even my perception. In his arms he held open a large, leather-bound book, his right hand resting with fingers splayed over the yellowed parchment pages.

“I deserved a better explanation from him than what I was given,” I said. “I do not question your ultimate decision. Sea chose his path willingly and without apparent regret. I just don’t understand why the sentence had to be delivered so swiftly?”

“I wish we could have had the luxury of detaining him as merely a prisoner, but we are in a time of war and often extreme measures are required. I’m more than certain that you understand that. There was nothing more we could learn from him, as I had already scoured his soul for the truth. There was nothing left for him to reveal. His presence as a prisoner may very well have endangered us further if he had made attempts to reach out through the wards placed on this house to contact the Tyst.” Nahalo’s voice remained calm, his statements simply matter of fact. “I was not about to risk the lives of the rest of the Immortals, as well as the Phuree, simply in the name of ‘tradition’.”

My eyes dropped from his gaze to the book he held in his hands. The demons within me were clawing at their rotten box, desperate to be free. Their talons dug into the walls of my stomach, puncturing my lungs like bits of tiny shrapnel. I could not give them voice, however, for the very sound would shatter my sanity, or what was left of it. I would rant and rave and scream at the heavens when the war was over, when I could release my wrath against the world around me until I had not a blood-tear left to shed. Until then, I would remain as stoic and cold as the skin and muscle and bone that shackled me to the Earth for all eternity.

“How long have you been down here?” I asked him.

Nahalo drew a deep, somewhat relieved breath, though

he still eyed me with concern and suspicion.

“Well, I don’t Sleep much anymore, so I have been down here for several hours now,” he said with a weary sigh.

“How so?” I asked, looking up, curious.

“You will discover this yourself, if you reach such an age as myself. The older we become, the more control we have over the Sleep. Eventually, as is the case with myself now, rest becomes an almost voluntary action, much as when we were human.” He turned a page of the book he was holding, reading through its contents contemplatively.

“Something to look forward to, I suppose,” I said.

“I suppose,” he replied, looking up again. “On the heels of every blessing is a curse equal in its weight. When I was human, the older I became, the more quickly the years passed. Now, as I age, the years are beginning to slow, strangely enough.” He paused for a long moment. “Hmm. I almost wish, sometimes, the Sleep still had that terrible hold over me so that I might dream away some of this endless existence...” His voice trailed off.

“What have you found?” I changed the subject abruptly as I felt myself being drawn in too closely again to his world. I was desperate to maintain my numbness, my isolation.

He studied me for a moment, considering his next move carefully. I could feel him testing the edges of my soul, seeking some point of weakness to infiltrate.

“Come.” He waved me to follow him and he re-entered the room.

I crossed the threshold, my breath caught in my throat for a brief moment when a sudden surge of memories flooded my mind. Memories of the fateful night when I had, in my blind desperation, raced to this room, the room where Phelan kept all of his books and tools of ancient magic, in search of his Book of Shadows and the spell that would cast me into

Sleep forever. I shivered, remembering the weight of the old leather-wrapped book, the sound of its crackling parchment pages, the smell of the dust that sifted up from its face when I had yanked it from its place amongst its mysterious cousins and slammed it open on the table.

Nahalo's voice snapped me back into the present moment. "Are you alright?"

I blinked. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine," I said, shaking my head as if I disagreed with myself. "It's just... it's nothing." I dismissed the last of the memory and walked over to the table where Nahalo was standing over a pile of old books he had been studying. Blindly, I stared down at the contents of the table, trying to fight off the memories.

Nahalo gently placed his hand upon my shoulder. "I understand what you have been through." He paused, unsure if he should press too hard with his empathetic offerings. "Know that you always have a listening ear if you need one."

I folded my arms over my chest, continuing to stare down at the books. When I did not respond, Nahalo removed his hand from my shoulder, returning it to the open face of the book now placed before him. Though his mindspeak could still reach me, my soul was completely barricaded against any outside intrusion, including Nahalo's. The power he had gifted to me had allowed me to build an impenetrable wall around my soul. I knew Nahalo's attempt at fatherly solace was genuine, but I could not allow him to embrace me as I had upon first meeting him. His iron dictations had irreversibly altered his place in our world, lowering him from the untouchable pedestal of pristine mystery down to the grittiness of reality in which the rest of us thrashed.

"Very well," he said.

He withdrew, the openness with which he treated me dissipating like tendrils of mist burned away by the morning

sun. He was wary of me now, uncertain of his choice to bring me into his inner circle. He regarded me as an unstable, unpredictable element; this much I could tell from the subtle adjustments to his posture and the motion of his eyes.

“What have you discovered?” I asked stoically. I did not want to be bothered by the intricacies of our strange bond, but rather remained focused on the task at hand: saving Moria and the world.

He looked down at the book. “I have found a great deal, actually. I believe that within the next few nights, we should be able to combine my arcane knowledge with Phelan’s magical abilities to weave an inter-plane separation spell that should allow us access to the dimension in which the Vicinus is trapped. It will be difficult and will require the energies of several strong auras to force the rift open, but I believe it can be achieved.”

“What then?” I asked, picking up one of the books, a thick volume of worn green leather with embossed alchemical symbols encircling a pentagram on the cover. I thumbed through it, my eyes rapidly scanning the pages and absorbing the information with lightning speed.

“Once the rift is opened, you must be sent through the portal. An astral projection of yourself, that is,” Nahalo said. “Excuse me?” I said, my head snapping up. “What do you mean by sending me through a portal?” I had heard that the high priests and priestess of various religions claimed to have the ability to separate themselves from their body through magical rituals and deep meditation. However, I had never witnessed such a feat, nor had I partaken in such an advanced technique. The idea of being separated from my physical self and then transported to some other unknown world terrified me to my very core. I stared at Nahalo, my eyes wide, my breath caught in my throat.

“You must do battle with the Vicinus within his domain. It is the only way to reach him, for there is no way to safely bring him into our world,” Nahalo responded, his voice calm and careful.

“No,” I said, breaking away from his gaze. I picked up another book from the table and scanned it frantically. Absorbing the information nearly instantly, I dropped it and moved on to another. “There has to be another way. We simply need to separate Moria from the Vicinus. If we can sever the tie he has to whatever it is that she is carrying, then we will not need to do battle with him at all.” I turned to the shelves behind me and tore through the books like a madman.

In a heartbeat, Nahalo appeared beside me. He gripped my forearms, holding them still.

“Stop!” he commanded. “You must stop and listen to me.”

I released the spine of the ancient book I had been pulling from the bookcase, though I still found it hard to force my lungs to fill with air. I stared ahead at the spine. Nahalo pulled me away from the shelves and turned me to face him.

“Have you really fooled yourself into believing it would be that simple? Is that why you brought her here, to avoid destroying the Vicinus? Because, if it is, I am afraid to tell you that is not a possibility.” His tone remained even and low, like he was talking a suicidal man off of a ledge. His brows knitted deeply, waiting for my answer.

“I just know that there is a way to separate the two, possibly three if what she carries is in fact a child. Perhaps then, if that can be done, we will not have to combat the Vicinus, but sever his ties to this world.” I shook my head, fighting a swelling wave of anger. Once again, I alone was

being asked to perform the most dangerous of tasks in a war I could not even call my own. The kernels of information which had been fed to me were merely the bait to lure me in and trap me so that they could use me as the weapon they needed.

“If the Vicinus continues to exist, whether in this world or his own prison, the Tyst will continue their attempts to materialize him in order to become Immortal. We cannot allow that to happen,” Nahalo replied.

“Then our battle is with the Tyst and not the Vicinus.” I stepped away from him, pacing around the room like a caged tiger. “Who are we to make the decision to destroy a god? He has a purpose in this universe, does he not? He created us. He is Chaos. He is part of Nature. Without him, how can we be certain that life will not cease to exist, with or without the help of his wrath?”

I stopped pacing and turned to face Nahalo. My words had captured his attention, his expression contemplative. I drew myself up to my full height, regaining control over the storm of my emotions, grounding myself into a stoic calm.

“While imprisoned, the Vicinus has no power in this realm without his connection to a human conduit. This much we know for certain. We sever the link, we sever the power. Then we eliminate the humans who desire to open that connection again.” I spoke with authority, as if my words were non-negotiable, though instinctively, I knew they would be challenged.

Nahalo stared at me for a long while. Above us, the attending Immortals discussed last night’s happenings. The Phuree had not yet arrived, though I could feel their presence growing closer. Nahalo drew a deep breath. I could sense his brooding irritation. Like Phelan, he was not accustomed to being directly disobeyed. However, his profound respect

and fear of the visions that had deemed me the world's messiah kept him from asserting his dominance over my insubordination.

“The Vicinus wants you dead. He wants the world to die. What if when you confront him, he attempts to kill you?”

“I know he will and I will defend myself accordingly. I will cross that bridge when I come to it,” I replied. “In any case, who is to say I would have the ability to win such a battle? I have survived his attacks thus far, but that was in this world and not in a realm where his powers are complete and without boundaries. If you send me into his world, I can guarantee nothing.”

“I am aware of that. I simply do not understand your opposition to eliminating the Vicinus.” Nahalo narrowed his eyes at me.

“Let us simply call it respect. I do not think of myself as a god and, thus, I do not deem myself worthy of killing one,” I replied, crossing my arms over my chest. “I was not asked in the beginning to take on such a feat. I was asked to slay the Queen. Nothing more.”

Nahalo nodded sagely. “Fair enough. But you were unable to complete that task,” he replied.

“You do not have to remind me of that,” I snapped. Closing my eyes, I reigned in the sharp spear of fire on the tip of my tongue. Swallowing hard on my bitterness, I chose my next words carefully. “I do not think that her death is the answer. I truly believe that there can be a way to save her from this evil.” I shook my head, staring at the floor. “She does not deserve to die.”

“Very well. We shall pursue that path if you believe it is the only way.” Nahalo drew a deep breath as he studied me. “I simply hope, for all of our sakes, that you are successful in this new vision you have.”

“I do too,” I replied. “I also hope you have the ability to guide me in developing the magical skills I will need to know in order to perform this ritual for, as you are well aware, my knowledge of these things is fairly limited in the grander scheme of things. My abilities in such magic, while formidable in some respects, are rudimentary compared to what you wish me to do.”

“Yes, I will teach you, as will Phelan. We will need the abilities of at least five parties, aside from yourself, to build the necessary energy for this ceremony. Luckily, we have a bit of time, I believe, even with the war waging outside our doors, before the Queen’s pregnancy begins to reach a crucial and extremely dangerous stage, despite her weakening body.” Nahalo let go of his moment of uncertainty and turned back to the books upon the table. He pulled Phelan’s *Book of Shadows* from its place upon a wooden podium in the corner behind him.

“I’m afraid time is not on our side,” I said, unfolding my arms and placing my palms on the surface of the age-stained table. I hung my head, dreading the information I had to deliver next.

“What do you mean?”

I sighed, lifting my head to meet his gaze once again. “Yesterday, I Slept in Moria’s chamber.”

Nahalo’s brows lifted with surprise.

“I noticed when I awoke tonight that she has changed.” “Changed how?” Nahalo asked warily.

“Her belly has grown considerably since yesterday. I have a feeling that this pregnancy is not going to progress the way a normal human woman’s would. If the development of the child she carries continues to grow as it has just in the past twenty-four hours, we could be faced with her giving birth much, much sooner than we had anticipated.”

Nahalo stared at me, his eyes wide with concern. “I noticed nothing different in her size last night when I spoke to her about Seafra.”

“I know. I didn’t notice anything significantly different either, but her body has definitely changed. You should see for yourself,” I replied.

Nahalo closed the book and stared down at the cover. He drew a deep breath and exhaled sharply.

“There was something else I noticed, as well,” I added, trying to read his body language.

For the first time since our meeting, I believe I could see true fear in Nahalo’s posture. He was beginning to realize that some things were truly out of his control, even as an Ancient. He had underestimated the Vicinus. In his mind he had simplified the war and his plan to a point that eliminated the expectations of unpredictable elements such as this new turn of events.

Nahalo looked up at me and waited for me to continue.

“Since before I met Moria, the Vicinus has been reaching out to me, tormenting me through visions and dreams. He even attacked me, by way of the Chronous when I was inside the Tyst fortress.” I did not elaborate. There was not time enough to spare, I felt. “Yet, tonight, I could barely sense his presence. He has retreated in a way, reining back his powers.”

“Do you think his powers are dwindling?” Nahalo asked.

“No, no. Definitely not dwindling. He’s is conserving his energy. Maybe his domination of the Chronous and Moria has used more energy than he had originally suspected and now he is saving up for one final strike at me,” I replied, tugging at my goatee in thought.

“Or perhaps he simply does not think it necessary to exert himself anymore,” Nahalo countered. “If the pregnancy is

progressing as you fear, the Vicinus may be overly confident that we will not succeed in whatever plan we manage to formulate.”

For a split second I thought I heard a low rumbling laughter roll across my mind like thunder. Chills rippled down my spine, settling into my stomach with a curdling, acidic anger. I looked up at Nahalo, capturing and holding his piercing gaze. The idea of the Vicinus’s smug retreat into lazy observation of our Earthly desperation infuriated me. Deep within my body, the energy of my new powers was swirling like the eye of a hurricane. The ends of my nerves vibrated until I felt my body were numbing from the inside out. The desire to unleash the full brunt of my fury on the Vicinus was dangerously consuming as my patience for his charades wore increasingly thin.

I leaned forward, my fists against the tabletop. When I spoke again, my tone was a sheath of black ice over a molten core. “I believe we must act swiftly if we are to act at all.”

* * *

Nahalo hurried to Moria’s chambers to see for himself the changes I had spoken of. I stayed behind in the underground room, poring over the tomes of ancient knowledge in an attempt to find some kernel of wisdom that might be the key I needed to unlock the door to the world where the Vicinus waited. Meditations and spells, incantations and summonings, mythology and doctrines millennia in the making all swirled like frustrated spirits through the whorls of my mind, snaking in and out, weaving a new and glittering understanding of the arcane which I had never believed possible within myself previously.

I found myself synthesizing the new knowledge with

the ease of drinking from an open vein, the words pouring into me at lightning speed and becoming part of my body, my soul. Though I had marked myself a philosopher and theologian in the early years of my Dark Life, magic had not been of interest to me. I knew it had its place in the great scheme of our existence, but I was far more consumed with the grander all-encompassing ideas of our purpose in the universe rather than our abilities here on the Earthly plane. I had been so young in that time. I never dreamed it would all one day implode before my very eyes. I had convinced myself that one night I would have the luxury to turn towards magic and delve deeply into it at my leisure, as merely an addition to the religion I had created for Immortality. Phelan had tried to guide and instruct me, knowing its importance to our race. I looked back with a faint ache of regret knowing that the knowledge he may have been able to instill in me would have been of a great assistance now. No matter how much I would be able to absorb right now, I would not have the time to master the practices I read of.

My instincts writhed in my stomach, hissing and sinking their fangs into me repeatedly, trying to warn me of an impending doom. I tried desperately to ignore the ache. There was nothing to do but move forward, to flow and adapt with this new terrifying change just as we, as I, had adapted in the nights before. Adaptation or death; these were our only options, and my stubborn will refused to even ponder the concept of defeat. Death was not an option. Not now, not when I had been put through so much, been asked to place my life on the line again and again for another's cause, a cause that had now become my own, whether or not I wanted to admit it at the end of the night.

After a mere half an hour of intense study, I finished the last volume in the room, closing it with a loud snap and

puff of dust. The sound rang in my ears like a gong in the eerie silence around me. Above me I could feel the presence of the gathering Phuree as they began to arrive: the stolid aura of Tiernan; the fierce, fiery spirit of Khanna still heavy with mourning; the Earthy unassuming presences of her two guards Jaxon and Edo; and the cool, mystical sensation of several others with whom I was unacquainted. Returning the book to its spot on the shelf before me, I turned and left the room. With determined strides I made my way up the stairs into the kitchen.

I stood for a moment in the doorway of the kitchen watching silently. Tatsu and Lillian were helping Jaxon and Edo unload several packs from the horses outside, moving the provisions through a side door and into the formal dining room. I was surprised to see the two guards, as I still had only my initial impression of them as worthless and was fearful to judge them by it. Perhaps they were better warriors than I had originally given them credit for. Or, perhaps, they were better personal servants than they were soldiers fighting on the front lines. Either way, Khanna, a seasoned and skilled warrior in her own right, kept them close for a reason and I would not question her judgment in such matters, at least for now. I did not like their presence in the manor, however, as their superstitious fear only soured the air. They disappeared out into the night through the front door once again, followed by Tatsu and Lillian.

Khanna glanced in my direction, catching my gaze. The sadness and anger in her eyes was overwhelming, a hard-packed ice around her heart that might never thaw. The armor encompassing her soul was impenetrable, my tentative tendril of investigating thought skipping off of it like a smooth flat stone over a still lake. I frowned, my lips parting. I longed to say the words, "I'm sorry", as useless as

I knew they would be.

Khanna looked away and returned to aid her guards with the provisions. A cold hand slithered its long fingers of dread around my heart. I feared for Moria's safety with Khanna in the house. I also wondered if Khanna would assist with whatever ritual we divined to separate Moria from the Vicinus, if she was called upon to do so. There was an equal possibility that she could just as easily turn her back on us as capitulate to our requests. If the former happened, I knew I would not stand in her way.

Khanna exited the house, leaving the door open behind her. A group of five women of varying ages stood together near the entrance. Dressed in ankle-length robes of reddish brown, their long hair swept away from their faces in braids down their backs, they silently surveyed their new surroundings with suspicion and curiosity, the older women gently wrapping their arms protectively about the shoulders of the younger ones.

The postures of the group bespoke of a deep strength. Their faces, while weary, were chiseled with wisdom millennia older than their collective human presence. I attempted to read them, to scan their deeper thoughts for some insight into their identities, but my gentle prodding was met with a fathomless, echoing resistance as if I were standing at the edge of an ancient forest staring into its shadows, unable to see what lay within. Again, the sensation of ages past washed over me, a coolness like moss and peat and stone against my skin, the scent of incense and sage smoke within my nose. The women were fully aware of me, yet they seemed unconcerned, their study of the world around them whole, complete, and undesignated at that moment to any one individual or entity. There was an innocence intermingled with their power, a childlike awe at

their new surroundings coupled with a wise reservation. It was intriguing. My experience of the Phuree clan I had been brought to had been limited, and I was eager to learn who these individuals were and what they meant to our mission.

Voices to my left severed my study of the women and my gaze drifted in the direction of the sound. Phelan had finally pulled himself out of his melancholy and emerged from the library. He and Tiernan stood in the middle of the hallway speaking in low, urgent tones. Though Phelan's back was to me, I could tell by Tiernan's haggard expression that they spoke of grave matters. Uprooting myself from my position in the doorway, I approached them. As I did so, both took notice, their conversation dissipating beneath the sound of my boots echoing on the polished floors.

I extended my hand to Tiernan as I said his name in acknowledgment.

For a moment he hesitated, his eyes locked with mine, brimming with a chilling mixture of fear and bitterness behind an icy exterior of road-worn stoicism. There was a deep gash above his right eye that appeared to have only recently stopped bleeding. A thin trail of dried blood caked the side of his face down to his jaw beneath a fine layer of brown dust. He no longer appeared to be my friend or political ally, but a man in the throes of questioning whether he had chosen wisely in his choice of a champion. If Phelan and the others had not been present, I knew by the deadly look in his eyes that he would not pause in drawing his weapon against me. He had every right.

The moment turned uncomfortable, but just when I was about to lower my hand, he reached up and grasped forearms with me. An electric shock tore through my arm, up through my chest to my heart. I suppressed a gasp and steadily held his gaze. Though he had secured his actual thoughts behind

layers of mental steel so that I could not read them word for word, the poison of rage and sadness that coursed through his soul bit through me like steel-tipped arrows, permanently taking with them bits of my heart and soul as they traveled onwards into Hell.

He was struggling not to hate me. He was struggling to believe in Nahalo and his visions. He was questioning everything he had been planning and doing for his entire life and I was at the epicenter of this rage. He could no longer determine if I was good or evil.

“Tynan,” he said curtly, with a brief nod before releasing my arm once again.

For a moment, I could not move, my hand lingering, frozen, outstretched into the empty air between us. The full impact of my selfish actions slammed into me like a meteor.

Tiernan turned his gaze back to Phelan and continued his conversation as if I had not walked into the room. “There are two more groups of my people who should be arriving between tonight and tomorrow night. Primarily higher ranking soldiers and sorcerers. Mothers and their children, for the most part, have been relocated to underground bunkers which can be more accurately cloaked by our spells.”

Phelan nodded, his arms crossed tightly over his chest, struggling to hold at bay the depression that had ravaged him only moments before. “Why did you decide to divide ranks?”

“Though our powers are definitely greater en masse, splitting off into separate companies allowed for a greater chance that one of the groups would make it here alive. Smaller groups of travelers are harder to track, cloaked or not,” Tiernan replied with the crisp shortness of a military sergeant. Whatever had occurred in the past two nights had stripped away all the softer surfaces of his diplomacy.

Phelan nodded again, raising the forefinger of his right hand to his chin in thought. “Well, it is good to see you alive here, my friend.” He reached out and placed his hand on Tiernan’s shoulder.

“If only the same could be said of my entire clan.” Tiernan’s gaze fell momentarily to the ground. He looked up again, squaring his jaw and shaking off the sadness as quickly as it had attacked him.

He looked back at Phelan, his eyes overcast with the cold distance of necessity and survival. “I will need a place to station myself and my commanding officers, a room to make further preparations for the war.”

Phelan’s hand slipped from Tiernan’s shoulder. He gestured down the hallway towards the open doors of the formal dining room where Tatsu and Lillian were assisting Jaxon and Edo with another load of supplies.

“Absolutely,” he said. “I see some of your provisions are already being unloaded into the dining hall. You are welcome to that room and any other you may find need of, with some exceptions, of course. I only ask that you consult with me before overtaking other areas of the estate so that I may make my own preparations. This has all happened so fast and—”

“Of course!” Tiernan interrupted. “Once the others have arrived we will make plans together.” It was obvious I had been excluded from the conversation.

“Yes,” Phelan said, staring down the hall at the group of women still standing quietly. “I will show you what rooms are still available. Unfortunately, I believe that we will end up with several to a room once everyone arrives, even with my spacious quarters. What food supplies have you brought with you?”

Tiernan grimaced slightly, an expression that seemed

unintended for outward show. “We have brought what we could gather in our haste to escape the first round of attacks. It is not much, but we are a people used to surviving on very little. What most would view as barely enough to cover one day, we can make last a week or more if necessary. The other groups will also be bringing provisions with them and, if all goes according to plan, they will have been able to reach out to some of our allies along the way for assistance.”

“I do have a cellar room stocked with food for my human servants and it is well-lined in case of hard times, though definitely not as hard as these. You and your people are welcome to whatever is down there and, when the time comes, we will hunt for more,” Phelan said, watching Tiernan closely, studying his body language and, no doubt, attempting to read his thoughts.

“Thank you,” Tiernan replied drawing a deep breath. He squared his shoulders from the weary slouched position he had begun to sink into. The realization that his people did indeed have a safe haven from the Tyst, at least for the moment, was beginning to sink in and, despite his misgivings towards me, his nerves no longer felt quite as mangled as they had upon first arriving.

Nahalo appeared suddenly at Phelan’s side. Tiernan visibly jumped back a pace, his right hand reaching for the sword at his waist while his left reached for the gun holstered beneath his cloak. I was about to step in to disarm him when Nahalo spoke, unconcerned by Tiernan’s reaction. Tiernan lowered his hands away from his weapons, but continued to stare at the side of Nahalo’s face, still trying to adjust to the appearance of Nahalo’s true vampiric nature.

“Phelan,” Nahalo said in a hushed panic, “we are in serious danger!”

Phelan stared at Nahalo for a moment. “Yes, Nahalo,

we are at war. What did you expect?" He struggled not to sound annoyed. It was obvious that interaction with others was draining him terribly in a time when he desired silence and solitude.

"No. It's Moria. Her pregnancy... I can't explain it. She has progressed to a point already where she could very well give birth any night now." Nahalo's eyes were wild with fear. "Perhaps any moment."

For a minute the four of us stood in stunned silence. The sounds of the movement in the dining room and entranceway died down as everyone in the house perceived the ripple of fear and froze to listen.

Phelan's arms dropped to his side as he turned to face Nahalo directly. "What are you talking about?"

Nahalo's eyes flickered from Phelan's to mine and back again. Even in his Immortal form, I had yet to see him so ghostly pale; I could see right through him if the wind were to blow just so. He swallowed hard, knowing that his voice could give dreaded reality life.

"The Vicinus is coming."

* * *

Time slowed until each heartbeat was a distant echo of hope fading downwards into the pitch of a yawning canyon. The hours that followed Nahalo's statement were a blur to me. I felt disassociated from my physical self, removed from my body as if I were allowing myself to become the puppet both clans, Phuree and Immortal, needed in this crucial, unyielding time.

I chose to let go. I could not hold on any longer, not to my stubborn tenacity to try to control my life or to my own physical body. I realized I was exhausted. As the information

about Moria's condition left Nahalo's lips, I exhaled. I could hear the sound of Tiernan's heartbeat, thundering like a racing horse beside me; I could feel Phelan's sorrow congealing into a dread that had the sharpness and solidity of flint.

I followed Phelan, Nahalo and Tiernan into the library and sank into an armchair near the hearth. Tiernan disappeared into the hallway and ushered Khanna and the strange robed women into the room. Khanna protested immediately, as I knew she would, when he requested her assistance. However, after several heated moments of debate, she finally relented, wanting to be rid of the entire situation, the fight draining from her like tears.

I sat and watched as the room transformed into a living organism of intense discussion and deliberation. I was told by Tiernan that the women were priestesses of high-ranking power called the Soen. Their names were Bela, Charu, Mena, Kikiu and Etanna. They had been brought to facilitate the design of the ceremony we would use to send me into the otherworld where I would confront the Vicinus. They were also skilled midwives and were prepared to assist with Moria's delivery, if there was one, though they, as we, did not know exactly what to expect.

I felt divided in two in that hour when the room swam with talk of magic and war. One stood beside the chair in which I sat, watching with a perplexed awe, soaking in every detail of the moment, from the lines on the women's faces to every slight intonation of each voice, as I sought to capture the true soul within each body. The other sat in the chair, leaning forward and assimilating every note and detail of the plan that was woven for me. That self listened intently, absorbing intuitively the concept of the working that would be divined.

The spell would require five participants, inside a sacred

circle, who would draw down the needed power from the universe while erecting a force from within the Earth. This would then create the necessary concentration of energy to separate this world from the one in which the Vicinus was exiled. My physical self intuited this information easily, perhaps from the rapidly absorbed information I had scanned moments earlier in the secret room below, or perhaps from a much deeper unexplored aspect of my consciousness. Meanwhile, my secondary self grew aware of the fact that I had not fed and might not have the chance to again for some time. Distantly I could feel the Thirst beginning to gnaw within my physical body, whittling away at the edge of my reason.

I pictured myself leaning down to my physical self and whispering my concerns and was, somehow, surprised that I listened to the words of my secondary self and voiced them aloud through my physical body to the priestesses. They seemed undeterred by this, expressing that perhaps this would be a good state of being for me to be in as it would be close enough to a physical fast to allow my soul to be separated more easily from my body. Also, my desire for blood might facilitate the influence of my actions when confronted with the Vicinus. In other words: they wanted me ready and willing to kill. This didn't faze my physical self, while my secondary identity paced erratically, just out of the periphery of my vision, about the room shouting in a voiceless mania about the irrationality of all they proposed. No one listened. Not even my self.

The talks lasted until sunrise. We decided to move Moria to Phelan's chambers, as they were large enough to allow a greater number of people to be present during the coming ceremonies. Still partially separated from my conscious self, I was faintly aware of retiring to a spare room for Sleep

before the sun rose.

When I entered the room, closing the door behind me, the metallic whirring of the sunshades lowering over the windows snared my attention. I realized I had at some point activated the remote and stared down at it resting in my palm for a moment before placing it on the bedside table. I sat on the edge of the bed, unlacing the Tyst militia boots I still wore on my feet, and watched the world outside disappear. It was happening, the fulfillment of their prophecies and their worst fears. Soon I would cross over to battle with a force only theorized about before in the hearts and minds of humanity and Immortality alike. There was no turning back.

I lay back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, crossing my hands over my chest, trying to find some sort of peace in the strange sense of numbness that had overtaken me, the liberating, all-encompassing sense of otherworldliness that had settled over my entire body like the softest gauze. Distantly, I was aware of my mind struggling against the acceptance, the willing relinquishing of myself to the greater cause. I had become both the spider and its prey, and at the center of my web both Moria and the Vicinus waited for me.

CHAPTER 18

That evening, as the sun began to die, staining the world red with its blood as it sank behind the black outline of the hillside, Moria's labor started. Her screams penetrated the lead weight of my preternatural Sleep like the shriek of a broadsword being drawn from its sheath. With a gasp I leapt from the bed, my limbs awkward and heavy as the Sleep still clutched greedily at them. The mechanical steel shutters that covered the windows during the day were still tightly locked in place.

Steadying myself, shaking off the last remnants of the dream world, I ran to the door, flinging it open to a hallway already swarming with frantic midwives, Phuree warriors, and Immortal Elders. Stunned, I grabbed the doorframe, watching the flow of traffic with wide eyes, noting faces and ranks and trying to decipher the true state of things. From down the long hall Moria's cries echoed again, a ghostly

wail of pain and anguish that drowned out every other sound in the manor. My heart clenched, my stomach dropping into a sour anxiety. Without another moment's hesitation, I plunged into the sea of bodies, weaving frantically down to the open door at the end of the hall.

Phelan's master suite had been cleared of most of its ornate furniture with the exception of two chairs and the massive four-poster bed in the center, which faced the gothic slate fireplace on the far side. The priceless Persian rug that had filled the open space had been rolled back and removed to expose the polished wooden floors beneath. The room was in chaos.

The Phuree priestesses that had arrived the night before came and went, making preparations for the coming birth, carrying large ceramic bowls of water and armfuls of clean linens. On either side of the bed knelt Bela and Charu. Their bodies were clothed in identical white linen robes, belted at the waist with thick brown leather tooled with intricate woven symbols. They appeared lost in a deep trance, their eyes closed, their heads tilted back. They knelt motionless as statues, oblivious to the swirling movements surrounding them. Even from the doorway, I could feel the rising arc of protective, shielding energy emanating from the two priestesses, pouring from their bodies as though they were nothing more than conduits.

I moved closer to the end of the massive bed, sidestepping the focused preparations of the midwives. I hovered at the corner, placing a hand on the mahogany post hoping it would anchor me to reality and give me strength, which I felt devoid of. Between Bela and Charu, on the bed, Moria writhed and moaned, propped up on a mountain of white pillows. She had been dressed in a loose robe of the deepest midnight silk, which she clawed at as if it singed her skin. The sheets

between her thighs were wet from where her water had broken, spilling out in a pool beneath her.

I stared at her face unable to breathe. Her delicate features were contorted as she fought the waves of contracting pain that wracked her body. Her pale skin looked sickly, almost transparent, hollow blue smudges bruising beneath her eyes. I knew the Vicinus was draining her of every last nutrient in her body, pulling from her very cells the vital energy he needed to force his way into the physical world. I felt helpless watching her; Moria's suffering was entwined within me now. My soul was being drawn and quartered. In my head, I could hear the sound of the mutant child in her womb as it thrashed, its thoughts those of a primordial god. The Vicinus knew we were there, knew our plans to stop him. He laughed at our frantic physical motions that appeared pitifully weak in the face of his omnipotence. He taunted me in his deep guttural voice with visceral threats of annihilation.

I will kill you, I thought, hissing back at him through bared mental fangs.

The laughter only intensified like the din of a tidal wave drowning out the terrified world beneath it.

Someone put their hands on my shoulders and I jumped, weakening my link with the Vicinus. Reluctantly, I turned away from the bed. Nahalo stood behind me, his face drawn tight with strength and power. He was dressed in a linen robe dyed a deep crimson. Its hems had been adorned with detailed gold embroidery of the lunar phases.

We regarded each other silently for a long moment, our gazes locked in a search for strength and understanding. I knew that he could hear the voice of the Vicinus too, though it would reach him more as a disturbance upon the ethers like the shriek of an angry hawk. Only Moria and I had been privy to the true wrath the god held for the universe. Only

I would go to gaze directly into his core and search for the heart of darkness to destroy. I could already feel the icy touch of the souls the Vicinus had consumed throughout the ages, tugging at my own, calling me to join them, begging pitifully for redemption. I steeled myself, locking my soul away and filling my shell with a detached numbness to quell the manic fear and doubt.

“It is time to begin,” Nahalo said.

I nodded and followed him away from the bed. To the right of the towering stone hearth that now roared with hungry flames, four individuals had gathered, each dressed in a simple white linen tunic and trousers. Two Immortals, Lillian and Phelan, and two Phuree mortals, Tiernan and Khanna, stood at the four outer points of a large pentagram, which had been drawn on the gleaming wooden floor in white chalk. The space at the topmost point was empty, waiting for Nahalo to return to where he would oversee the ceremony. Between the points were tall white candles, at least four inches in diameter, in black iron stands. Their flames burned steady and defiant in the still air illuminating the corner with rich golden light.

In a circle, surrounding the pentagram were three rings of symbols. The first I interpreted as an ancient Aramaic text, which I had not seen in centuries. The second I recognized as Latin, written in a flowing longhand form that swirled elegantly in the white chalk. The last was the unmistakable hieroglyphic of the Phuree language. The words were cryptic; a blessing of protection, a spell for strength in battle, and a shield to keep the world from splitting in two.

I shivered.

Nahalo walked round to the far side to take his place. He raised his arm, palm up, gesturing for me move into the center of the pentagram. My eyes flickered to the shadowed

expectant faces awaiting me. In the background, the shuffling of the midwives' feet wove in and out of Moria's constant moaning. From the far side of the room, the sound of the steel shutters hissed as they drew back into their housings at the top of the window frames, the mechanical motors whirring softly like contented cats. The panels rose, revealing a cloudless obsidian sky flecked with the glittering pinpoints of stars. In the center of the wall, the tall, narrow French doors that led to the balcony terrace were still shut, hidden behind burgundy curtains.

Drawing a deep breath, I found myself silently praying to the wiccan Mother Goddess for guidance and protection; I could feel the gods, the Elements, gathering close in expectation of the battle that was about to ensue. I knew that, somewhere within their own realm, they fought to contain the Vicinus within the prison they had created for him. I prayed that our combined efforts would be enough. Bowing my head, I turned back to the circle and entered the pentagram.

As my feet crossed over the chalklines, I felt the gritty essence of the physical world melt, its layers were being peeled away like sleeves of dead skin. With each step, the world purified, the chaos of Phelan's bedroom vanished, replaced with a soothing peace that wisped about me like the rustle of wind through new leaves. I was tempted to remain there within the center of such vast power, as an anchor and a conduit for the universe to use as it would, but I knew it was only temporary. It was only the calm before the storm. I reached the center of the pentagram and felt the center of my being plummet as if sinking through the center of the Earth and locking into place. It was both liberating and dizzying. Up until that moment, I had continued to cling to my skepticism about my role in the war. However, my

doubts vanished when I realized Nahalo had been correct in his choice. I could feel it in the very heart of my being, a resonance that cleansed my mind and soul with the strength of fire and kissed me like the laughter of wind chimes. I knew then that I had come to that moment on my own terms and of my own volition.

I was ready for battle.

I opened my eyes. The world outside of the circle was a blur. Even the bodies of the four figures that graced the lower points of the pentagram wavered intangibly; only their faces held still and solemn, their eyes closed, their expressions calm and focused as they concentrated on combining their energies into the working. There was no true sound and yet my ears were filled with a deafening roar, as if we were being ripped upwards into the funnel of a tornado.

I faced Nahalo. Within the upward rush of energy, his robes contained a lifeforce of their own, rippling and snapping in a silent, perfect rhythm. I knew that I was seeing the pulse of the energy trapped between worlds, the veil that held back what we Earthly beings dared not comprehend. I focused on Nahalo's golden eyes, glowing like suns within the white plane of his face.

I breathed deeply, drawing the energy that rippled around my physical form into my lungs, letting it spread out through the cells of my body, like water filling a glass, until my being was completely saturated. The filling continued on, expanding my awareness, pushing my senses outwards towards the edges of the circle, the room, and the heavens beyond. The physical world raced past me in time with my own furious pulse, a brilliant white steed that traversed the sky before disappearing beyond the horizon of existence, and I exploded. The concept of my being shattered, spreading out into the universe like fireworks, arcing up into the vacuum

of space before descending, shimmering down into the silent drift of the unknown. Yet, somehow, I remained whole, an integral part of the life force that pulsed like ocean waves, rolling through the void.

For a moment *everything* ceased, all movement, time and physical creation—gone, every atom, every quark, every vibration, erased. Neither I, nor the world I fought to save, existed. I felt peace and unity as no dharmic road to enlightenment could ever depict or promise. It was perfect and I understood as I never had before how inconsequential my own heartbeat was.

It was the sorrowful peace of being dropped from a twenty-story building. I felt myself sucked downwards at a terrifying speed. A high-pitched screech filled my ears, threatening to shatter my eardrums, but I could not reach up to cover them. The force of the fall pinned my limbs like an insect on a dissecting glass. As quickly as it had begun, the fall ceased with a soundless supernova of sensation that receded like the tide, leaving every nerve within my body vibrating like a violin string. Faintly, I was aware of the fact that I was standing, for I could feel the subtle pull of gravity beneath my feet. I kept my eyes closed, partially fearing what I would see if I were to open them, clinging to the feeling of embers sifting down on my limbs. Slowly, the cold breath of a strong wind replaced the sensation.

“Open your eyes.”

I recognized the voice instantly, low and guttural and thick with the distant inflection of my ancient warrior ancestors. Fear gripped my being—the spell had worked, or so I perceived. If so there was no turning back.

The Vicinus spoke again, his tone strangely contemplative above the whistle of the wind in my ears. “Open your eyes, my son.”

“As I have said before,” I opened my eyes, “I am not your son.”

The Vicinus was silent. He stood a few meters away, wrapped in the guise of a mortal man. Slender, pale and elfin of feature, his ears gracefully pointed at the tip, he stood no taller than I, long obsidian black hair glistening to his waist, blown behind him like snakes in the wind that was not wind. He stood, dressed in a long-sleeved black tunic and blood-red kilt, with his side towards me, staring at the ravine that walled the lake around the island where we stood, trapped with one another. His feet were bare, his hands loosely folded over the pommel of a broadsword half his height, pointed tip down in the ground in front of him. His expression was one of pure peace as he gazed up at the icy stone walls that towered around us, glistening like jagged opals in the strange gray daylight that poured around the slivers of clouds racing across the sky above them.

“What do you see?” he asked, not turning to face me

I stared at him in shock, taking in the surreal detail of his form. I had never witnessed him as anything other than a demon or dragon. While I worked to relearn how to speak, my tongue feeling thick and foreign in my own mouth, he waited patiently as if he controlled Time itself.

“Mountains. A lake,” I gulped, drawing a deep breath to steady myself and root my center in this new reality. “It looks like my homeland.”

He turned his face towards me and smiled. His eyes, devoid of pupils and rimmed with luxurious black lashes, shifted from a cerulean blue to crimson, shimmering and spiraling like two galaxies on the verge of expanding.

“Does it look real to you?” he asked, his lips barely moving, his words like lava boiling up from the Earth.

My eyes darted about me before snatching hold of his

gaze once again for fear of him disappearing. "I suppose so," I said, uncertainly.

"Is it real, then?" He stared at me, unblinking.

I felt like I was being pulled into the center of his churning gaze. I remembered Nahalo's teaching of how to keep hold of and anchor my essence to my core. I focused on drawing what I perceived as energy from the Earth below my feet, trying to keep myself from vanishing within the Vicinus' illusion.

"No," I said.

"Hmmm..." he murmured to himself and turned his gaze back out across the glistening rippling of the lake's icy mirror surface. "Can you smell the water and the life within it? Can you feel the air caressing your skin, the texture of your clothes, the solidity of the island we stand upon?"

I allowed myself a brief moment to analyze my new surroundings more closely, sensing that the Vicinus would wait for my answer. The wind wove its restless fingers through my hair, carrying with it the sensual decaying perfume of the lake and the late-blooming foliage upon some distant shore. It tugged curiously at my own tunic and kilt, wrapping about my legs and arms. *Ah, home...* I caught myself thinking.

"Yes, I suppose I do," I conceded for sake of the argument. He had chosen this place on purpose, knowing it would snare me intimately with its sirens and its demons.

"But it is not real, you say?" He turned back to face me once again, taking a step back and away from the edge of the island. His hands still rested loosely upon the pommel of his sword. "Why is that so?" He seemed genuinely intrigued by my synthesis of his words.

I stared at the intricate engraving running down the center of the gleaming bronze blade; coiling Celtic dragons tore at one another through a dizzying maze of knot work.

The blade bore the notching of terrible, fierce battles, no doubt in which the Vicinus had ceaselessly been victorious.

“Because it is an illusion you created,” I said.

“Interesting,” the Vicinus replied, tapping his chin with one long, sharp black nail that curved slightly like an eagle’s talon. “And what of the world you come from?”

“What about it?” I asked, trying to keep my tone level and calm though my body vibrated with adrenaline.

“Who created the world you call *reality*?” He returned his hand to cover the hilt of his sword, his eyes analyzing every nuance of my body language.

Was it a riddle? I dared not answer with haste, lest I be lured into the labyrinth of his words. Quick answers were often how bets and souls were lost in dealings with such devils. “I’m not sure I understand what you are asking.”

He sighed, obviously irritated at dealing with such a lowly being. “Who made your *Earth*? How did it begin? Where did it come from?”

“It is part of Nature,” I said simply.

“Nature, eh? And what is this Nature? How did this Nature come to be?” He tilted his head to the side as he watched me pondering his words. “What came before Nature? What did your human family once teach you, your mortal ancestors?” He smiled slyly. “Be truthful with what you believe for I can see into your heart.”

I hesitated once again. I did not like the answer, but it was all that I had to give him. Looking over the lake I mumbled, “The gods.”

“Excuse me?” he said, cupping his pointed ear sarcastically.

“I said, the gods. The gods created Nature and what came after.” I gritted my teeth to keep from shouting, feeling infantile and clumsy.

“Ah, yes! The *gods!*” He smirked, tilting his head to the other side flippantly. “Those elusive, omnipotent beings that shower the devoted with a great bounty while smiting the wicked and evil.” He turned around on the heel of his right foot, keeping one hand on the pommel of his sword and placing his other fist on his hip. “It is a beautiful world the *gods* have created for you, isn’t it?”

I remained quiet, distinctly aware of the fact that I was unarmed.

“If the gods created your world, and I created this one, what is the difference? If you woke up in this world one day, how would you know otherwise?” He turned back to face me. “You see, it is all an illusion, my son. There is no singular reality that defines existence. You are just part of my imagination.” He tapped the side of his head. “Humanity is nothing more than a series of infinitely self-populating playthings. Holograms, to use one of your mortal terms, ripples of energy manipulated by larger sources of more powerful energy, such as myself.” He inclined his head with a sinister smile, splaying the fingers of his right hand across his chest.

He watched me for a moment, gauging my reaction to his words, before straightening once again. He walked towards me, stopping a few feet away. “Why do you sacrifice yourself, a being who is part of such a larger power, now for something that is, in the end, *nothing.*”

“They are not *nothing,*” I spat, my nerve endings crackling painfully with energy. “They think and love and grieve. There are many good souls that deserve to live! I used to be one of them. We, the Immortals, all used to be human.”

His deep, black laugh severed the beginnings of my rant. “Good souls?” He took a step closer, his eyes narrowing.

“You are trying to save them? Or are you trying to save yourself? This is not about saving *humanity*. You despise them. You despise what you used to be almost as much as what you are now. This is about your *honor*, isn’t it?”

“You bastard,” I whispered viciously, the words slipping out before I could stifle them. His words had speared me through the heart, their marksmanship perfect and sharp.

He laughed again, a low rolling rumble that echoed into the sky like thunder. Behind the towering wall of the mountain in front of which the Vicinus stood, the movement of slivers of silver clouds gradually intensified, flying across the sky. “Ah, Tynan. Don’t you see? There is no such thing as *honor*. It is an abstract concept in an abstract of dimension and time. It is a flux of energy moving through you. It is like a flash of lightning, powerful, but disappearing into the greater expanse of the sky. Honor is something you clung to as a human, but you are not human and have not been for centuries. It is the product of an emotion we created for you.”

He took another step closer. “We created what is in here.” He tapped me on the chest, hard enough so that the razor point of his nail pierced the flesh beneath my tunic. “We created what is in here.” He tapped me on the side of the head. “Your honor, just as all of your other programmed emotions were experiments, if you will, to see how our little creations would react. You are much more than that now. You are beyond it.”

He leaned in, staring into my eyes until his nose nearly grazed mine. His breath was strange and pungent like sulfur and sage, his eyes spiraling madly with the chaos of the cosmos. “I left part of myself within you when we sparred in the Chronous, do you remember?”

I remained silent, hypnotized by the beautiful birth and

death of stars in the fathomless depths of his eyes. Deep inside, my soul screamed out to break free of the spell he now wove about me, tethering me to the insanity of his world.

You tried to kill me! I screamed silently.

“My essence runs rampant within your veins. You are no longer part of the world that has enslaved you for so many centuries.” His whispers were liquid, flowing through me like water, filling the places, which had felt hollow and empty for all of my long years. “If you do not want to embrace your new path, I can erase it for you and create a new world. Set things right again. You can return to the way things were *supposed* to have been. You can be the most treasured of your father’s sons, the promising young chieftain, the husband, the warrior. Your family will live full and *honorable* lives. You will have sons of your own. All of this, and all of your many sins, will be gone, forever.”

Abruptly, I was aware of the sensation of letting go, of slipping from my body as if pulled achingly through my navel one thread at a time. I gasped, staggering back, shaking my head violently. Drawing a deep breath, I pulled myself upright. Within my mind flowed the fierce, rhythmic incantations of Phuree magic, my mind racing through the ancient inscriptions, reconstructing the impenetrable wall about myself.

“Do not trouble yourself so with the fate of such lesser things.”

“If they are so insignificant, why bother with their destruction?” His words were a warning, but so were mine. “You said yourself, you can create worlds. Create another and let this one be.”

Lightning flashed across his eyes and he turned away, angered and irritated by the strength of my power and will. He walked to the edge of the small island. I remained planted

firmly on the sand and weeds, watching him silently as he gazed out over the rippling surface of the lake. It seemed, for a moment, that he would answer me only with silence, then the wind changed direction, sending the clouds twisting and turning in and out of one another in a roiling discontent until finally a new order was established.

With the reverse of the elements, came his voice. “Those who thought they could imprison me must be taught a lesson.”

“So why not inflict your wrath upon them and them alone? Why kill an entire world which they do not even inhabit?”

“Because humanity is their most prized possession within *this* universe.” He turned to face me once again. His eyes had darkened, the irises nearly encompassing each orb until there was almost no white remaining.

“If you have not figured it out by now, the world of the gods is a pretentious one. There are very few among them who are not altogether arrogant and selfish, hoarding their creations like spoiled children. They did not take kindly to the fact that I had played with their new toys so intimately, as they had time and time again themselves. They tried to subdue me, teach me a lesson, by locking me away. You cannot control Chaos, however. I am essential to existence. Some of the lesser gods would perhaps go unnoticed far more easily, but without me, the very fabric of reality would disintegrate. The very audacity that they would believe I would be uninterested in the complex little world they had created! I was curious. How could I not be?” He shrugged, raising one jet black eyebrow.

“I am the god of Chaos and Infinity. I am the catalyst, the spark—the infinite ripple in the universe that makes it completely uncontrollable and indefinable. It is in my nature

to test, to tease, to experiment. The world that had been sculpted was fascinating to me, so ripe with passion and so easily corrupted. It was the perfect place for Chaos to reign, for me to dig my talons into the Earth and test the limits of my will in a new dimension. Nature and Chaos walk hand in hand. One cannot exist without the other. I cannot help that my little experiment went awry.” He chuckled to himself softly, enjoying his private memories.

My throat tightened as my disgust for him rose like bile. “You speak of our kind, vampires, don’t you? We were your failed *experiment*.”

The Vicinus drove the tip of the sword he still held in his right hand into the sandy ground beside him and crossed his arms over his chest. It may have been my own imagination altering my reality, but a strange, heavy silence settled over the lake for the length of several heartbeats, calming the winds to a deathly still, the clouds ceasing their movement in the skies, the lake smoothing into a perfect glassine mirror, before rising again with a low howl. He turned back to face me. His eyes had altered again, the color shifting into the luminous cerulean blue of the ocean depths.

“I would not call you a failure,” he said smoothly, smirking. “At least, not completely.”

“Well, I certainly would not call us a success,” I spat.

The Vicinus inclined his head, his obsidian hair falling forward in thick curtains to either side of his face. “I do not think that you truly believe that. You are a brilliant example of my power. Your race is closer to the essence of the gods than I had anticipated in all of the infinite possible outcomes of my interaction, you more so than any, thus far. Your kind is very close to breaking through the illusion the others have created for you to dwell in. They are coming into their powers at a rapidly increasing speed, even despite the recent

genocide.”

He thought to himself for a moment, pondering the future. “Perhaps in a generation or two the Immortals, as you call yourselves, will truly cross over into the higher plane of energy that is just beyond your reach, and evolve into the dominating force you are destined to become. Yes. Perhaps I could bring you all here, to this reality to begin anew?” He tapped his chin with his index finger for a moment before pointing at me. “And you, *you* will be their leader.”

The intense adrenaline was beginning to make my hands shake; I curled them into fists at my sides, tight enough to draw blood from my palms with my nails. I shook my head, trying to focus on the illusion of reality around us. My consciousness clawed at my reason, trying desperately to not shatter into irreparable insanity. The primal part of my being was slipping into a numb acceptance that the world within which we stood at that moment was real, while my intellect railed against the illusion frantically like a rabid beast against the bars of a cage. Yet, the wind carried within its cold breath the damp smell of water and earth and life so sweetly, sensuously undeniable and real. The sun, though vague and indirect, hidden behind the racing clouds, felt good. I wanted to drop to my knees and lie beneath the sky, staring into the light that I had not witnessed in centuries.

No! You cannot weaken or you will be trapped here forever! But... would that not be a good thing?

I was beginning to wonder how I would escape from the Vicinus’s world. Everything Nahalo had taught me was slowly dissolving from my memory to be carried away upon the wind. I dug my nails into my palms until the muscles in my forearms ached. I uncurled my fists again, exhaling to steady myself. I felt the cuts on my skin knit together and vanish, a more grounding sensation than that of the

pain itself, for I knew that I was truly still myself within the Vicinus' illusion.

I settled, the aspects of my identity reconciling for a moment. "We are destined for nothing but more misery. We are a dismal race, one that does not need your help or intervention."

"You only believe you are such wretched beings because you believe you are damned. Even you," he said pointedly. "Despite all of your philosophical meditations and esoteric religion, in the end you gave up hope because you cannot rid yourself of your desire to believe that you are creatures of a mortal Hell. You are not damned, but you are born of Darkness and Chaos. It is not a curse you were born into, but a great blessing you have taken for granted because you were unenlightened. Your pathetic human roots blinded you, and without my guidance, you have stumbled through the ages. Your kind's creation was proof, at least to me, that there is yet another way to bridge realities. Your existence is a new level of energy in the universe between that of the gods and the ripples we create around us."

"But *why*? Why would you create us at all? All we have ever been are predators and scavengers of a world that does not belong to us." It was not often one could ask the very god that created them such a profound question and I regretted it as the words left my lips. To wonder was one thing, to hear an irrefutable truth from the very lips of your creator was another. My heart careened against my ribs, struggling to free itself from the torment of expectation.

He tilted his head to the side slightly, his brow furrowing as he considered me, intrigued by the genuine hurt and scorn in my voice. "Your creation was not my intention. I was simply experimenting with the world as a whole. I had no intentions when I took that mortal woman, no great plan or

scheme. Although,” he smiled evilly, “it was fascinating to watch.”

He stepped towards me, raising his left hand, palm upwards and flat before him while he circled the air above with the fingers of his right. “Would you like to see?”

I held my ground, saying nothing as he approached, watching the space between his fingers and his palm grow opaque with a swirling matter that sparkled like stardust. He stopped a couple of feet away so that I could see clearly what he conjured into being. Gradually the figure of a pregnant woman solidified. Lying on her back within the curve of his cupped hand, she writhed in the agony of labor, her naked body slick with sweat and tears. My breath caught in my throat when I recognized the delicate face, the long silken black hair now matted against the tiny head—the illusion was a perfect recreation of Moria. Was it a portent of what would become of her if I failed? In horror I watched, frozen, as silently she threw her head back and screamed, blood pooling beneath her body gushing thick from between her legs.

The Vicinus watched the tiny figure with fascination, his eyes amused, the hologram reflected in the swirling, glistening blue. “The human body is so incredibly fragile. For all of their desire for strength and immortality, the single essential act of giving birth is a gruesome and often deadly process. It is not designed to hold within it powers greater than the sum of its parts. It is unable to contain fierce strength such as my essence; it would be like trying to keep a supernova from exploding by cupping it in your hands.” The figure in his hand convulsed, blood gurgling up through her lips and pouring down her cheeks and chin in steady red streams.

“If you do so, the body will break apart,” the Vicinus

continued, his tone one of wonder and excitement, like a child watching a butterfly pull itself from a cocoon, though his palm appeared to be filling with blood around the tiny being he cradled.

Moria's body began to split, a tear beginning at her groin and fracturing upwards to her sternum like a horrific red fault line. The flesh of her belly burst apart, revealing the decimated gore that had once been her insides and the swollen, shredded uterus where her child clawed its way now out of her body. "It bursts like a seed pod—"

"Enough!" I cried, squeezing my eyes shut to block out the horrendous sight of Moria being butchered. The image, however, still burned in a red halo within my mind's eye.

I opened my eyes and locked gazes with the Vicinus. He curled his fingers over the destroyed carcass of his illusion. He raised both hands in front of him, opening them again to reveal they were empty in a sign of mock surrender, his lips curling sinisterly with pleasure.

"You would murder her like that to get back at your enemies?" The beast within me longed to lunge for his throat like a wolf until the maniacal light faded from his eyes. My upper lip was trembling in a snarl and I bared my fangs instinctively.

"No." He shook his head, his irises shifting from blue to red again. "Her death will be inconsequential. It is a necessary sacrifice for my rebirth. Besides, death is not death, but merely a transference of energy. I am simply rebalancing the scales."

Sensing my mounting rage, he vanished from his position directly in front of me, reappearing almost instantly on the far side of the island where I had first seen him. The power within me vibrated madly; the air around me shimmered with the sharp scent of ozone. The wind teased the tunnels

of my ears, filling them with a strange chanting that echoed hollowly as if emanating from deep within the Earth itself. It was the voices of those behind, within the physical plane, locked together about my form, pouring their liquid energy into the vessel of my body to reinforce my grip on the illusion I was in danger of being engulfed by.

The Vicinus faced me, his eyes narrowing, his sword once again grasped firmly in his hands. He raised the bronze blade and pointed it at me. "I warn you again, Tynan. You and your Brethren are meant for far greater things than the toiling of a mortal race. Step aside now and do not meddle in the affairs of gods or I will have no choice but to erase you as well. It would be a pity to do so."

"Your arguments have been poetic, but you know I cannot do so." A deadly calm settled over me, grounding me until I could not define where I ended and the universe began. At my sides I clenched and unclenched my fists, splaying my fingers until the sensation of my skin being stretched to ripping anchored me to my physical self.

"Very well." The Vicinus arched one eyebrow inquisitively, his tone a strange mixture of annoyance, amusement and anger. "I believe you already know that I can't allow you to leave here." He watched me intently, the wind whipping strands of his jet-black hair across his face.

"Yes." I said, holding his gaze steadily without fear. "I am aware of that."

His right eyebrow twitched slightly, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. Though wary of the power he sensed boiling within me, he still savored the fierce intensity of the tension our opposition created. "Then how do you propose we end this? It seems unfair for me to simply kill you. Such a pathetic waste."

"Agreed," I said, buying time while my mind raced

through the mud and murk of the strategies I had settled upon before entering the Vicinus' realm. The disorientation of the illusion of reality around me and the twisted sentences of his logic worked their destructive fingers through my plans, shredding them quickly, piecing them back together in unrecognizable atrocities. I closed my eyes, encasing my soul in the impenetrable armor I had perfected over the centuries, searching for my slipping sanity somewhere amongst the ruins.

Nothing here is real, Nahalo's voice rippled through my mind. Use that to your advantage. Create what you need, just as he is doing now.

I called upon the elements of Fire and Earth, beckoning them to me from vantage points upon the periphery of space where they watched our cosmic battle unfold. I felt them gather close, a rumbling and hissing that caused the fine hairs on the back of my neck and forearms to prickle in the electrified air. To either side of me, the lake was churning as if something large were emerging, the water splashing in great sheets against the muddy banks of the island. Screeching filled the air, a terrifying reptilian defiance that shook the ravine around us, causing the ground beneath my feet to tremble and shift. I squeezed my eyes shut tighter, refusing to be shaken by the terrible noise. Within the center of my balled right fist, I felt matter begin to congeal, searing hot as it expanded until my fingers could no longer fully contain it. My the skin of my hand burned agonizingly and I was certain that my flesh now peeled away, burnt to ash by the object I clutched. The weight increased quickly and in a flash the excruciating heat vanished, replaced by the cold, dense sensation of metal.

I opened my eyes. In my hand I now held a sword. I stared down in amazement at the weapon. It was an exact duplicate

of the one I had once carried in my youth, the sacred blade bestowed upon me by my father. I lifted the sword in front of me to grasp the hilt with both hands, its point challenging the roiling heavens above as I stared at the sharp detail of the iron blade, deeply scarred from my last mortal battle. Its weight felt good in my hands, solid and real, still singing as if struck against stone.

My reverie was shattered when the whoosh of giant leathery wings beside me caused me to gasp and stumble back. My sword still gripped within my fists, I stared up at the snaking necks of two dragons, one snow white, one crimson, twisting upwards over me from either side of the island. Two sets of glowing golden eyes dilated as they stared down at me like owls waiting for a mouse to flee. The red dragon raised his wings again, backing slightly into the water as he lowered his head and turned his attention to the white dragon. He lunged forward, his massive jaws snapping at the white monster's exposed throat. The white dragon did not move from his position, but twisted his neck to avoid the deadly strike. He hissed, baring his long saber fangs at his opponent.

“What is the meaning of this?!” the Vicinus shouted angrily from the far side of the island, his guttural voice rumbling beneath the hissing of the dragons, who had already forgotten us entirely.

I stared up again at the creatures that had haunted my dreams for the past year. Had I, in fact, summoned them? As the initial shock and fear subsided, I smiled, gazing up at the massive beasts of glistening scales and leather, water still pouring from the bends and folds of their ridged backs in waterfalls as they shifted back and forth anxiously. My eyes fell from the dragons to meet the Vicinus' gaze once again. I transferred the sword to my right hand and walked forward,

between the beasts.

“They are ready for the battle to begin,” I said, my smile widening wickedly to show my fangs that now burned in my mouth, eager for the taste of blood.

The Vicinus snarled, “So am I!”

With a roar he lunged towards me through the air. The bronze blade of his sword swung up in an electric, singing blur. I braced myself, raising my sword above my head to block his blow, hearing the dragons screech again around us. He descended upon me, his elfin guise dissolving as he moved, white flesh peeling away to reveal the obsidian scales below. In a blinding blur of howling black and red he fell from the sky. I felt the impact of his blade as it struck mine with a single piercing note. The illusion around us shattered like a stone being thrown into a massive mirror. Razor shards of reality ripped through me, around me, spinning out into a black void of nothingness and yet, in the midst of it all, I could still feel the pressure of the Vicinus’ blade grinding into mine above my head, the sound of metal upon metal screeching like the fading cry of the dragons as they were ripped apart and returned to the land of dreams.

With all of my strength, I pushed back, feeling the very atoms of my being vibrating with the effort, the particles themselves threatening to explode. I could no longer see the Vicinus, nor could I see anything else around me, lost in the crushing tsunami of sound and movement. Trying desperately not to lose my footing on ground which was no longer beneath me, I closed my eyes to block out the disorienting whirlwind of chaos, summoning the strength of the elements I had called to my aid moments before. They came willingly, lending their strength to my own, a fierce welling of energy from my core that radiated outwards through my arms until I felt them rising, pressing back the Vicinus’ blow.

I shoved upwards, a soundless roar ripping from my lungs. Instead of feeling the resistance of the metal blades, I felt a slipping like slicing into soft flesh. I tumbled forward into the blackness, the sword vanishing from my hands. I suddenly felt a form slam against me, tiny and fragile and quivering. It clung to me, terrified, and yet, even when I opened my eyes, I could not see what or who it was, though it felt like a human infant.

The universe convulsed around my body and the strange thing I cradled, bending forth like bamboo reeds in a storm until I believed it might snap free of the rules that bound it. I instinctively clutched the creature in my arms as if we were the very luminescent fibers that strung time and space along the barbed wire fence of eternity, as if it were the notes we needed desperately to complete the symphony of quickening life we could not stop. Blinded by the light that was not light which promised both life and death in the same swift reckoning, the deafening thunder of our own hearts remained the single constant.

I felt my soul separate from my body, stretched like a rubber band outwards into a vast wasteland of nothingness. I screamed in terror, but the waves of sound were lost in the ruthless magnitude of the universe. My horror and fear was frozen and dissipated for a moment as the separation slowed. I saw the stars in the vacuum of space, the single-cell amoebas of first life, the ephemeral flawless dance of life and death as it wove silken threads through my weightless transparent form. For a fleeting moment, I forgot Moria and the Vicinus, the war, the pain, the hope of an entire world that hinged on this single moment. For a fleeting moment there was nothing, there was everything, there was peace.

Without breath, I sighed.

In an instant, the entirety of existence snapped inwards

upon itself. Immaterial wind howled like a pack of banshees in my ears. The physical world crashed down on my being like a tidal wave. It pulled me under and into my physical form violently, raping my insides as my soul found purchase once again and shredding my fragile sanity, which was scrambling to comprehend and cling to the separation that had momentarily brought me such peace and complete understanding. My body fell to the cold wood where I had stood within the circle drawn on Phelan's floor. I had won. Had I defeated the Vicinus, or merely driven him away? I was too weak to wonder any further.

For a long while I lay, unable to move or open my eyes. I was not sure if I even drew breath anymore. Somewhere far away in the uncomfortable pitch behind my eyelids I could hear Moria sobbing, a victorious song to the heavens that she had survived. Her cries were delicate and beautiful like the whisper of a gentle summer's rain. I wanted to comfort her, to steal away her pain, her grief and hurl it back in the face of the universe, but I was lost within the fathomless void behind my eyes, helplessly unable to move my limbs.

Hands wrapped gently about my arms, lifting me to my feet. Gradually, the sensation of gravity anchored my body, pulling oxygen and blood through my cells to stabilize me once again. Breathing deeply, I opened my eyes. The room had grown heavy with a rich, velveteen darkness. It poured over the walls, kept at bay by the two tall tallow pillar candles that burned on a far bedside stand. All of the other candles had been extinguished. To my right, on the far side of the room, the glass doors leading to the balcony appeared to have been blown open with great force. Shards of glass glittered amidst splinters of painted wood in the moonlight outside. A strong wind had risen, billowing the curtains that still hung from the doors. The clean perfume of coming rain

poured in, purifying the lingering scent of blood, sweat and melting candle wax.

Three of the priestesses huddled around the bed, their strong, shadowed backs to me, blocking my view of what lay upon it. In silence they worked furiously for some minutes, their young assistants frantically moving from one side of the bed to the other with gleaming porcelain basins and towels. Moria's soft sobbing continued, her labored breath escaping in quiet gasps. She cried out, a single, sharp rising sound like the call of a crane above a twilight pond. My heart stopped and I made to move towards them, to push them aside and take Moria in my arms, but the cool, slender hands that still rested on my arms suggested I stay still.

Not yet, Nahalo's cool and soothing voice breezed through my mind.

I looked over to where he stood beside me. His preternatural gold gaze sparkled liquidly in the shadows beyond the reach of the candlelight, holding my own with a steady and unbreakable weight. I couldn't breathe. The room around me melted as the ancient clock above the fireplace mantel clicked softly until there was only sensation—the sound of the midwives' feet shuffling on the hardwood floor, Moria's weeping, the icy sensation of Nahalo's smooth Immortal touch on my arm. And then another note pierced the symphony, slicing it in two with a sharp, defiant cry. It was the unmistakable wail of new life.

I gasped. Nahalo's hand dropped away from my arm. He extended his left hand with palm up towards the bed. Now. I frowned at him for a moment, my mind reeling. He reached up and placed his right hand upon my shoulder, giving me a soft push, a knowing smile stretching his pale lips. I left the sacred circle, slowly crossing the room, my bare feet noiseless on the cold wood below them. The midwives

seemed not to notice me as they worked. Moria was silent in the wake of the newborn's yowling shrieks. There was so much power and will within those tiny lungs that I was stunned.

Softly, I touched Mena upon the shoulder. Her plump, heavily lined face snapped towards me in surprise. She had not heard me approach. Sweat beaded her brow, damp strands of gray hair escaping the long braid.

She smiled and nodded, an answer to my unvoiced questions. "They are both alive. It's a miracle if I ever saw one."

She turned back to the bed and lifted the newborn to her bosom. With steady, strong hands she handed the infant to me swaddled in soft white linen. I stood in silent shock staring at the bundle of life before me, unable to move as the rest of the midwives bustled about, tending to Moria and taking away the soiled, bloodied bedding and afterbirth. I felt lightheaded. What was this creature that had managed to survive the destruction of the Vicinus? Surely its soul had been obliterated with the death of its preternatural father? What would it grow to become now?

"It's a boy," Mena said with a pride I could not share in. "And a healthy one at that. He'll be a fighter for sure." She chuckled under her breath. "Absolutely amazing," she whispered in Phuree.

I protested weakly, fearing my own inexperience with infants. I could not remember the last time I had held a child in my arms. I was exhausted from my battle with the Vicinus and did not want to take responsibility for such a helpless creature.

"Hush now. Let go of all that has just occurred. It's over and you are alive. The Tyst Queen is alive. Be here now, with your child. There will be time soon enough for rest and

for all of the work that is to come.” Mena tucked the linens closer in around the baby as she positioned it in the crook of my arm.

“B-But this, this isn’t my child...” I stammered. She patted me gently on the shoulder. “It is now.” She smiled, the same knowing smile I had seen upon Nahalo’s lips moments before.

I frowned in confusion, feeling my heart begin to race. In my arms, the child’s wails quietened. I looked down at the tiny creature. His cherubic face was calm as he stared up at me with huge hazel eyes flecked with green and gold.

“Who are you?” I whispered.

The child opened and closed his fists, stretching his impossibly small fingers towards my face, and cooed softly. The soul that lingered behind his eyes was so aware and *intelligent*. This was no ordinary infant. I could sense it immediately—our souls were connected. This was a child of magic, the product of an otherworldly struggle beyond comprehension of the common man. His heritage was evident in ears that tapered slightly at the ends with an elfin grace. I reached up and gently ran a finger over his round cheeks, soft as the finest velvet. The child held my gaze unwaveringly, wrapping both of his tiny hands around my forefinger.

“He is beautiful.” Nahalo had approached silently and now stood admiring the child with an expression of weary peace.

I nodded, completely absorbed in the infant. “Yes, he is.”

I broke my reverie for a moment and turned to Nahalo. “What did Mena mean by he is mine?” I shook my head. “How can that possibly be?”

Nahalo sighed heavily. “Honestly, I am in just as much

awe as you are. Somehow, while you were in the ethers with the Vicinus, your souls became entangled for a single crucial moment just before the massive implosion of energy. While yours and the child's essences melded, something happened, something I cannot even explain, that caused the Vicinus to disengage from the physical form of the child and in its place, a part of your own being entered him. Your soul and Moria's blended and formed a new one, saving the child from a stillbirth. I watched it all from within the circle..." His voice trailed off as he shook his head in amazement. "This is your child now Tynan. Yours and Moria's." Nahalo chuckled softly, patting me on the shoulder. "Ha! He even looks like you. He has your eyes."

I stared at Nahalo for a long silent moment as he walked to an armchair in the corner of the room and sat down, sinking back into it as if he might melt from exhaustion. My mind wrestled with the concept of being a father, a position in existence I had forsaken and erased from my mind with my Immortal blood. How could I possibly care for a child? I did not want this. I had been promised freedom if I completed this mission, and I had emerged victorious from my battle, and now I faced an obligation of a much different sort.

The infant tugged on my finger, pulling it into its tiny mouth, and I felt an involuntary smile touch my lips. A feeling of overwhelming protectiveness washed over me and I knew in an instant that I would defend this child without question whether I wanted to or not, and possibly, against my better judgment.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Mena approach me once again. Without a word, she guided me to the side of the bed. The remainder of the midwives ceased their work for a moment, retreating a few steps to allow a respectful room for my approach. Moria lay propped on a mound of white

pillows and fresh linens. Her original ceremonial robe had been replaced with a simple clean white shift. Her sweat-damp black hair was combed back from her face and fell to either side, over her shoulders. She smiled wanly as our eyes met. Her face, now serene with peaceful exhaustion, was absent of the terrible agony that had tortured her only moments before.

Gently, I sat down on the edge of the bed, reaching out with my right hand to take hers. Beneath my palm, her slender, pale hand felt incredibly fragile and weak. Even as I smiled at her, my brow knit again with confusion.

“We have a son?!” My voice was full of amazement and quiet fear.

She smiled, tears brimming at the edge of her eyes. “Yes, I know.” She squeezed my hand softly, her eyes dancing over my face as she searched for answers I did not have.

“I’m scared,” she whispered, and the tears broke free and slipped down her pale cheeks. I realized that she was just as terrified and confused as I was. She had not expected to live through the ritual.

I reached out and wiped the tears away, cupping her delicate chin in my palm. I wanted to console her in some way, to dismiss the fear that chased away the joy and relief I knew she longed to feel, but I could not. Even through the cloth that covered him, I could feel the heartbeat of the child I held in my arms, its tiny beat quick like a sparrow’s. An eerie sensation rippled through me suddenly like *déjà vu*, though the ghostly memory behind it evaded me. My vision blurred slightly—reality was still congealing about me, shifting subtly in its instability.

I shivered and glanced about the room half expecting a rift to form in the shadows and the Vicinus to step forth and destroy me. All was quiet though. The priestesses, with the

exception of Mena and her main assistant, had silently left the room. The cool night breeze was lifting the long curtains nearby. It was like my great battle with the Vicinus had never occurred and the world outside the room did not burn with war. For a moment, I thought that perhaps I was dead or dreaming.

I handed the infant to Moria, nestling him in the crook of her arm against her breast. She did not take her eyes off of me, her wide green gaze scrutinizing my face, searching my soul. I could not meet her eyes and continued to watch the child clinging sleepily to her, exhausted from its first few moments in this new world. I needed to be alone for a time in a private place where I could process the events of the past few hours. My mind felt like a scratched CD, catching on one sliver of information, a flash of scrambled images, without being able to process it. Though my muscles ached as if the battle had been real, I could barely remember it now, the scene slipping from my mind like a dream upon waking. Fragmented pieces swam in and out of my vision, behind my mind's eye, accompanied by the hellish screech and roar the Vicinus had made in what I could only suppose was his death throes.

I didn't want to forget. I needed to remember, to covet what I had experienced and try to make peace with it. There was not room enough in my fragile state of mind for the idea of fatherhood, not yet.

I leaned forward and placed a kiss upon Moria's forehead. "Rest," I whispered against her pale, satiny skin.

I still could not meet her eyes as I turned away and left the bed. I could feel her gaze on my back, following me like a searchlight, even as Mena swooped back in to finish tending to Moria and the child. My limbs were leaden; I knew I needed to feed soon and the residual smell of birth

blood in the room made my veins ache. The battle had taken every ounce of my strength from me.

Near the destroyed French doors, Nahalo dozed peacefully in his chair. If it were not for the subtle rise and fall of his chest and the breeze that lifted strands of his hair about his face, one might have mistaken him for a sculpture. I paused, feeling lost, to watch him. I envied the peace that seemed to come so naturally to him with knowledge that we had emerged victorious from our battle. Did I not deserve such peace?

Phelan approached and I turned my gaze towards him. His deep emerald eyes looked past me at the still figure of Nahalo with the same wistful longing. He drew a deep breath and exhaled. The flawless façade I had come to abhor for its utter lack of empathy had vanished. In its place hung the true face of an Immortal who had witnessed a millennium of blood and death, experiencing each and every note of his violent existence with an excruciating clarity. There was nothing left to be boasted of, nothing left to be declared. We had returned to the simple place of Master and Darkling.

His gaze slowly transferred to me, his eyes full of a profound understanding that could only be expressed in the Blood. There was simply too much to be said, too many apologies that would be butchered if breathed aloud. He reached out, placing his palm lightly against my back, between my shoulder blades.

“Come with me,” he said and I followed him silently into the hall.

The manor had grown deathly still in the wee hours before dawn. Halfway down the long corridor, Khanna and Tiernan sat on a bench near one of the narrow archers’ windows that decorated the outside wall. Tiernan held Khanna close, his arms wrapped protectively round her slender frame. Their

eyes were closed, their heads bowed. At first I thought they were sleeping, but as we approached, our soft footfalls caused them to stir, their faces turning to regard us wearily. Khanna leaned her head against Tiernan's chest again and closed her eyes.

Phelan stared at Khanna for a moment, an expression of genuine concern nesting across his brow. "Is she well? I was worried this working might be too much for her."

"Just tired," Tiernan said. "We both are."

"You should get some rest." Phelan took a step closer and placed a hand on Khanna's head. She did not stir.

My job was far from over, as I had hoped it would be. The war was only just beginning. The dream I had had of returning to a silent life of anonymity had been shattered with the wails of the newborn. There was a child now who was inexorably tied to each side of the war, but he would grow knowing himself as Phuree and, perhaps, Immortal. Only time would tell if he would inherit his father's darkness. I shivered thinking of the power I had felt radiating from the infant. Choking back my anxiety, I pushed the thoughts to a place where they could be tamed for another time.

Phelan and I walked down the hall to the winding marble staircase. As we descended like ghosts towards the ground level several new Immortal faces, who had apparently arrived during the night, began to emerge from the library. They had convened there, along with several Phuree warriors, to continue with strategic applications for the days to come. Like mice, they tentatively stepped into the hallway, their pale faces a collage of varying emotions. I kept my eyes focused upon the floor in front of me, on the soft pad of my bare feet over the tile, knowing that eye contact with any one of my Brethren would release a deluge of questions. I could all but hear the words poised on the tips of their tongues,

their breath caught in their throats.

The house around me felt artificial, like it was a construct of someone else's imagination and would disappear if I looked directly at it for too long. After the sensation of being so close to the pure truth of the universe and then of nearly having my soul shredded in the ethers, the manmade walls around me seemed pointless, constrictive and uncomfortable. The floor felt too hard beneath my feet. The recycled air hurt my lungs, the artificial illumination from the lights causing my eyes to ache and burn.

We walked past the hovering Immortals and through the kitchen to the back door in silence. When my feet touched the cool, damp slate of the courtyard, I sighed, exhaling the breath I had been holding. The crisp autumn air was sweet with the fragrance of the white flowers of night-blooming jasmine vines that wound their way around the parameters of the yard, through the branches of the live oak and cottonwood trees. The soothing melody of crickets accented the air like violin notes, soaring upwards to blend with the towering black heavens above our heads. Though the sky was absent of clouds, the clean scent of rain in the distance accosted me with occasional pulses of wind. I tilted my head back, closing my eyes, and stretched out my arms like I was embracing the world for the first time.

Never before had I ever felt so truly alive and so completely aware of my mortality. It was something I had begun to take for granted as the years waned and as I cheated death. However, that night I had faced not only the human concept of death, but also the annihilation of my essence into absolute nothingness. It was beyond survival; it was a rebirth of my very soul.

I opened my eyes and looked across the yard to where Phelan stood gazing over the stone wall at the sloping hillside

of velvety shadows and moonlit planes, his arms folded over his chest. In the milky luminescence of the moon, his pale features looked chiseled from marble, his expression distant and unreadable, but calm. I approached and took my place at his side. For the first time since my fledgling years his presence felt *right*, as if a void within my life had been filled once again.

The anger and resentment I had clung to so feverishly had vanished. In the space between worlds where time had lost its meaning and true evil had shown its face, all the old battles I had fought on Earth had disintegrated and returned to the dust and shadows in which they had been born. The ghosts that had kept me company for so many centuries were sighing in the wind, releasing their tenacious grip on the physical world to be carried away to the peace they truly deserved. I shivered at the emptiness of the night when I finally sensed the last wisp of soul caress my cheek like a gentle kiss goodbye.

“For the first time I can feel my years. Each and every one of them,” Phelan said softly, continuing to stare out over the abstract hillside of moonlit green and black.

For some reason his words brought a smile to my lips. “That is strange.” I laughed a little under my breath. “For the first time in my life, I don’t feel mine.”

Whether it was exhaustion or euphoria, I could not distinguish. I simply felt lighter than I had before, stronger and more peaceful. Removed from the walls of Phelan’s manor which housed so many twisted old ghosts, my soul sighed and reflected, no longer skulking in the dingy corridors of the past or tucking tail and running from the future.

That night, in the last hours before dawn, Phelan and I hunted together as we had when the world was still new and

he had all of it to teach to me. We were no longer Teacher and Student, Master and Darkling, Maker and Fledgling to one another. At last we stood as equals beside each other, our debts erased, our loyalties and our strengths proven. We were the Elders of a preternatural race clinging to existence in a brutal new world. The survival of our kind depended on our leadership now, to rebuild what had been lost in the Tyst genocide and our own selfish pride. A new hierarchy had blossomed in the war we waged. Humanity now knew of us.

We were no longer the romantic myths of fog and shadow we had hidden behind for millennia, but a cold, lethal reality. In a desperate moment, the Phuree and the Immortals had allied, but what now of our new knowledge of one another? How would predator and prey adapt and rebuild the world? I prayed that the hope of thousands of expectant souls would be enough to carry us to a harmonious future. As the sun began to rise, however, I knew in my heart that hope would never be enough.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Acclaimed horror author, indie songwriter and artist Gabrielle Faust is best known for her vampire series ETERNAL VIGILANCE. Her previous work has also included three collections of poetry, BEFORE ICARUS AFTER ACHILLES, CROSSROADS and THE BEGINNING OF NIGHTS, the novella REGRET, the novel THE LINEAGE and the celebrated dark fantasy adventure novel REVENGE. She was also the chief editor of the vampire anthology HIGH STAKES and has contributed to a variety of publications and anthologies over the years. Her work has appeared in the sites SciFi Wire, Fatally Yours, Examiner, Doorways Magazine and Fear Zone, as well as various anthologies and magazines.

Faust was the Guest of Honor at the Queen of the Damned Vampire Ball in 2008. From 2009 to 2011 she was a Special Guest of the Endless Night Festival in New Orleans and was crowned “New Orleans Vampire Royalty” by the Vampire Lestat Fan Club at the Tru Blood & Gold vampire ball in 2010 alongside Charlaine Harris. Faust was the primary graphic designer for the 2011 World Horror Convention and was the co-crew chief for the International Housing Program for the SXSW Music Festival from 1994 to 2010. In 2011 Faust was awarded the Texas Social Media Award by the Austin American Statesman. She is currently a Staff Writer for Gothic Beauty Magazine and the owner of Nightshade Productions.

More information about Gabrielle Faust and her work can be found on her various social media pages:

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Gabrielle Faust

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