



ETERNAL VIGILANCE

BOUND IN BLOOD

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



NIGHTSHADE
Publications

ETERNAL VIGILANCE: BOUND IN BLOOD

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ETERNAL VIGILANCE

Book 3: Bound in Blood

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*

For all of the dragons that are my friends when we meet at
bitter's end. You will always be good for my soul.

“A man who won’t die for something is not fit to live.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

“In such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of the thinking people, not to be on the side of the executioner.”

—Albert Camus

“Men are at war with each other because each man is at war with himself.”

—Francis Meehan

CHAPTER 1

War.

It is a word that feels heavy on the tip of your tongue as if it were laden with soot and poisonous alchemical intentions. After it leaves your lips, slipping forth like serpents of cold mercury, your mouth feels numb and empty as if a bit of your soul expired upon giving the idea voice. That sliver of abandoned soul sinks downward, spiraling into the underworld to be trapped in the nets of demons awaiting your final, unintentional, fall from salvation. Your heart beats a bit faster as if you can hear them chittering within the shadows just beyond your vision, snarling and seething. Your palms itch, the nerves crackling just below the skin, with the fear that the thought inspires. Even the word evil does not incite such anxiety in our hearts. Evil is the root of war, but is it not war, the human construct of evil, that can destroy us all?

For centuries I have watched humanity struggle for domination over the Earth. Cities, legendary in their beauty, rose and fell. Peoples upon every continent were enslaved only to rise up against their oppressors while empires crumbled from within. Millions died at the hands of their

enemies in the name of one god or another, one king or regime. Civilizations were lost beneath the sound of clashing steel and a slow, deep river of lifeblood. The same harrowing dirge has moaned over the graves of the slain masses—those who had taken up arms for a cause, others, merely casualties of another's thirst for revenge and misguided convictions. At times it seems that the residual echo of screams and pleas are permanently branded into the flesh of the universe, layered and woven in an infinite pattern of senseless, barbaric suffering is the very glue that binds our world, adhering the past to the present to give it coherence. Pain is what makes something real, after all. Pain distinguishes reality from dreams.

Perhaps that is the true reason why we continue to squabble like starved dogs over a spoiled carcass: that we fear a world without pain would cease to be real, for pain is all we have ever known. No matter how good and prosperous one's life might have been, it is the moments of excruciating, soul-searing pain that illuminate the past. Without those moments, the times of happiness are not nearly as sweet, the minutes of passion not nearly as exquisite. In some twisted way we envision ourselves as angels of mercy when we strike down those we are told we hate in the name of peace, for, when we inflict pain, we ignite life. Our mutual deliverance of pain is seen as absolution from our own sins. But, will it ever end? I choose to believe that history teaches us that this is impossible.

Nor is the aspect of pain a quality unique to our world. I have stood face to face with the very master of illusions himself, my own vampiric creator, the Vicinus. Within the realm of his own creation, I bore witness to his world and it was not one without pain. I had wanted to believe that the reality he had shown me was merely an illusion. However,

if it had been such, then it was not so far removed from the image of the world I cling to and defend now. The very air, the water, the soil beneath my feet, the cold weight of the sword within my hand were as real as the blinding pain and rage that consumed me in the moments of our battle. In fact, at times, the torment he inflicted upon me was far more excruciating and terrifying than anything I had ever experienced here in this physical plane we call “Earth.” Indeed, I had never felt closer to death or more undeniably alive.

At times he had challenged me on my arguments of the distinction that separated my world and his, daring me to question what made my world, a realm that he and the other gods had created for vampires and humans, justifiably different from an illusion. His logic was faultless and disturbing. I fought to keep him from destroying our world, from venting his rage against his fellow gods upon the Earth by eliminating the human race, but in all honesty, I could not truly rebuke him. If he were to destroy this world and create a new one for me and my Dark Brethren, his children, as he saw it, who was I to say that it would not soon become as real to us as any other?

And, in a way, perhaps it would be for the best, a time to begin anew and truly establish an era of peace for our eternal existences. I knew such a utopia could never happen so long as we remained within a realm with a weaker mortal species that feared us for the predators we were to them. The question remained, however, of whether or not we would find a way to begin the cycle of pain and bloodshed anew, in order to ground ourselves and stake a true claim to our existences? We are purely, basely hypocrites. It is bred into us after centuries of learning from the examples set for us by our predecessors and by the instinctual, reptilian, desire to

survive.

I had kept these thoughts silent since my last encounter with the Vicinus, mulling them over privately as if they were a grain of sand I might turn into a black pearl. The night in which I had crossed over into the Vicinus's realm had been surreal, the memory of the battle drifting away from me like tendrils of incense smoke until all I was left with was the impression our debate had left upon my mind. It clung to me, embedding itself within the cells of my skin with a musky, oily permanence where it would release and torture me with the smallest of movements. How I longed to turn inwards and meditate on these new revelations, to debate with myself and the universe the new philosophical dilemmas, to confirm the proper proceedings of this new war, but there was no time. I also could not shake the lingering sensation that the Vicinus had not been defeated at all, but in fact now waited, more viciously angry than ever before, for the time when he could reach out of his prison and strike me down permanently.

As soon as I had returned to the physical plane and Moria had delivered her new child, our new child, safely into the world, I was whisked away and thrown deeply into the trenches of the Tystian war. Time was not a luxury we could afford. Not only was it a lie that I would be able to turn and walk away from the war after my mission had been completed, as I had once been promised, but I also had been ushered without ceremony into the heart of the most crucial of its battles. And, as I had emerged victorious from my fight with the Vicinus, I became the source to which the Phuree and Immortals began to look to for guidance. No longer was I simply the catalyst to ignite the war, but the primary element needed to finish it.

In a way, I suppose I knew all along that this would be my fate. In a flash of resignation I had accepted it, embraced

it even with a delusionary zealotry, but when faced with the ultimate definitiveness of the predetermined path, it was still a jagged pill to swallow. There would forever remain a part of me that longed to run, even though that would never be an option for me again.

This was my war. This was my new world, a world that would burn and a world that would be recreated in our image. I still did not completely understand what position in their confrontation the Phuree and Immortals saw me taking, but I allowed them to maneuver me as if I were merely a chess piece. I would step into whatever role they created or needed with little protest now. A strange calm had come over me; I was secure in my new powers. I felt invincible, detached. The war at hand appeared pathetically small and trite after having looked into the eyes of my god, after having my abilities brutally tested by him and surviving. If the Immortals and Phuree still believed I could be of service, what further damage could come from my participation?

The first night after the birth of Moria's child was a blur of strategic meetings in Phelan's library. I was ushered into the midst of the discussions and forced to voice my opinion on their next plan of attack, as if I knew the first thing about developing such strategies. The estate buzzed as increasing numbers of Phuree tribespeople arrived, along with a few remaining Immortals, all haggard and brutalized in both spirit and body by the violence they had endured. I listened intently as Tiernan, a Phuree chieftain, and Nahalo, the last remaining Ancient of our vampiric race, debriefed the arriving groups, using the new knowledge of the current experiences to inform and mold their plans. Despite the numb detachment that enveloped my emotions, I found myself wanting to help in a way I had never experienced with any other mortal war I had witnessed over the centuries.

Perhaps it was the fact that our race was completely intertwined with such a monumental struggle that hastened my commitment to the cause. I could remember over a dozen terrible wars that had devastated the lands I had inhabited since my inception into the Blood, but we vampires had always remained separate. Detached and observational, we were adept at removing ourselves from the primary point of annihilation. Unlike the human race, which multiplied exponentially each year, our survival depended upon our cunning and ability to become invisible at a moment's notice. The Immortals were always deeply ingrained in mortal society. Long before any tragedy struck, we were instantly privy to an early warning of the coming battle due to our keen observations of the interior workings of human civilization and government. We would mysteriously vanish to the seas or into the mountains, hibernating like grizzly bears in the winter to wait out the bloodthirsty mortal wars. Very rarely did our blood ever spill for their causes, though on a few occasions, it was our influence that incited the first strike.

I had always been the revolutionary spirit, even in my mortal lifetime, but after my transformation, my anarchical youth had quickly evolved into a philosophical quest. The restlessness, the fury of my previous human life had suddenly vanished to be replaced by a more metaphysical desire to right the spiritual path that, as I saw it, our race had been enslaved to for centuries. The Dark Blood had given me a strange sort of peace in the beginning; in a way I had felt as if, for the first time in my life, I truly belonged to a world which I understood and, thus, I recognized its fatal flaws, which could inevitably undo its permanence. Instinctively, I felt sure that there was something special I could lend to our world, even before the days when my doctrine had

been fully formed. That jewel within my heart would shed a new light on the path of damnation we had clung to out of ignorance and fear. During those early years, I had remained far removed from human indiscretions, for my focus was on my own people. Whatever involvement the Immortals had with our mortal relatives could be dealt with by the Elders and Ancients and did not need my assistance or input.

I was left alone for nearly three decades to explore the Earth. It was my entitlement as a Fledgling, as much as it was an expectation from my Elders. Over three continents I wandered, delving deep into the spiritual and philosophical teachings of various cultures in my quest to develop a truly unique structure, which I could take back to my own people. When I returned, I remained oblivious to the human struggles that plagued the lands around me, so focused was I upon forming my new religion and taking under my black wings the lost souls of our people to nurture and elevate. As the word of Preternaturalism spread, my position within Immortal society heightened as my teachings garnered the respect of even the Elder and Ancient vampires. I became, in essence, isolated from any and all dealings with mortal war. Even Phelan, my Maker, sheltered me in order to allow me the necessary peace and solitude in which to conduct my spiritual lessons and instill in the Fledglings that followed me the inner strength and resolution they would need to survive and flourish. The only wars I would fight for over a century would be ones of the mind and soul.

Now, as my position within the war against the Tyst Empire continued to mutate, the barbs of its permanence growing more irreversibly deep, I was beginning to realize that, no matter how much I protested to the contrary, I honestly held a twisted fascination with the battle and, perhaps, war itself. Yes, this was not a battle for spiritual enlightenment

or philosophical evolution. But, was not the ultimate purpose of war, peace? Was not the end result of my previous work on Earth the same, in a strange and twisted way, as this new undertaking, this new challenge to my will and resolution?

As I gathered with the Phuree and Immortal leaders to plan our next attack, I knew I could not resist the temptation to fight for this cause. It was a war I could believe in, something I could throw my heart and soul into with reckless abandon. It was a cause that called to me in a way that made me realize that the absence of such a mission was, in essence, what had caused the void in my life that had driven me nearly to suicide after my fall from grace.

I needed something to believe in again.

I needed something to fight for.

CHAPTER 2

A considerably urgent knock against my chamber door startled me out of my contemplation of the moon.

Without turning, I answered, “Who is it?”

The sound of the knob rotating and the door clicking open preceded a young male voice I did not immediately recognize. “Your presence is requested by Phelan and Tiernan in the library.”

“Thank you,” I replied, my gaze still anchored on the moon outside my bedroom window. “Tell them I will be down shortly.”

The human did not hesitate to quickly close the door again; his footsteps hastily retraced his way back down the hall and the marble stairs to the first floor. I released the breath I had been holding in a long slow sigh. Alone again in my chambers, dark except for the light of the moon streaming in through the windows, I turned and walked to the small closet next to the bathroom and opened the door. It had been four days since I had changed my clothing, which was very unlike me, even in my most distracted of moments. I still wore the fatigues I had stolen from the Tyst soldier I

had slain outside the fortress the night I had abducted Moria, the Tyst Queen. Grungy and streaked with dirt and sweat, the fabric felt heavy and tainted against my cold skin.

Time had simply flown by in the haste of the quickening chaos. From Sea's execution, to my battle with the Vicinus, I had been so preoccupied with the events that had unfolded over the past few nights that such things as personal appearance and sustenance had simply ceased to even cross my mind. However, when I awoke that night, strangely and pleasantly free of torturous dreams, I found myself acutely aware of my haggard, battered exterior. I had no clothes of my own and, thus, Phelan had lent me a few articles from his own personal wardrobe. I stared into the closet at the loose black and purple silk shirts and linen pants and thought to myself how strange it seemed that he and I should share such things after over a century of bitter animosity and estrangement. A week prior, we would have attempted to rip each other's throats out over a mere wrong glance. We had moved beyond such reactionary viciousness, or so I hoped. His simple extension of such a minimal gesture as clothing was enough to signify an attempt at peace. I was not sure if I was ready to accept the olive branch entirely, but I would consider it.

I selected a long sleeved black shirt and matching pants and carried them into the bathroom. Methodically, I stripped away my black boots and the Tyst uniform and threw them into the corner. Free of them, I suddenly felt lighter; I stretched my arms up over my head, breathing deeply as I closed my eyes. I knew the Immortals and Phuree anxiously awaited my arrival downstairs, but I needed a moment, just a moment, to cleanse away the grime from my body. Quickly, I showered, thoroughly enjoying the scalding hot water and sharp pure scent of homemade lavender soap as I washed

the dirt and stale sweat from my hair and skin. It was such a simple act, but one that was renewing and vital. Toweling dry, my hair still dripping wet, I dressed in the clothes I had chosen, replacing my boots on my feet. I refused to part with them. Dusty, the black leather cracked and scuffed along the heel and toe, the boots stood out in sharp contrast to the neatly pressed elegance of Phelan's garments. I decided it was a fitting touch.

I left the bedroom on the second floor and descended the marble stairs with haste. Phelan's estate was alive with activity. Curious, I did not immediately enter the library where Phelan, Nahalo and Tiernan would be waiting, but decided to quickly investigate a few of the other lower level rooms to see what developments might have occurred while I slept. Under Phelan's advisement the dining hall had been turned into a central command. Bags of provisions and weapons, delivered by the arriving refugee Phuree and Immortals, were stacked along the walls, while piles of maps and documents covered a long oak dining table lined with ornately carved high-backed chairs.

Though the Phuree innately despised technology in a fundamental way, seeing it as the downfall of civilization and the ultimate corruption of the soul, they now recognized the unfortunate necessity of it. Without it, no matter how strong their belief in ancient magic might be, the playing field would never be even. Thus, Tiernan and Khanna, the leaders of this particular clan, had allowed the inclusion of several small computers and electronic dossiers similar to the one Malakai had acquired. These highly advanced documents detailed the Tyst plan to summon the Vicinus. The original document Malakai had secured was, unfortunately, now in the hands of the renegade jockey, Loden, whose whereabouts were uncertain after he fled the Tyst fortress during our

assassination assignment.

Loden. We would have to track him down, and soon, to retrieve the critical classified information he had fled with. He was an unstable element, his intentions unclear in the vast scope of the war. It might have been a grave misjudgment to take him along with us on our mission to the Tyst fortress, but at the time there had appeared, at least to me, to be no other choice. We had destroyed the only world he had ever known, his underground tech lair where he and his partner-in-crime Josh had waged their legendary assaults on the Chronous in hopes of bringing the Empire to its knees one day. That was all reduced to rubble now. Josh had become yet another grisly casualty of the war after the Vicinus attacked us while jacked into the grid to study the Chronous. For us to walk away from Loden and leave him broken amongst the rubble of his dreams seemed as cruel as it was a waste of an irreplaceable talent. I could not resist the urge to try to salvage what was left of his drive, his ambition to destroy the Chronous matrix. I should have known he would be too unstable after such a tragedy not to buckle in an actual physical battle. It was a mistake that I now hoped would not cost us all dearly in the future.

I watched the men and women hunched over their new “command central” working furiously on the next major battle strategy for a long, silent moment before turning away to walk back down the hall. Though several of the other rooms on the ground floor were sparsely populated or completely dark, the kitchen to my left was also a sea of organized chaos as people came and went from the subterranean chambers. Several of the rooms below ground, with the exception of the large pantry and Phelan’s room of sacred texts, had also been utilized for various wartime purposes. Two of the remaining cells had been turned into additional sleeping quarters now

that the upstairs bedrooms were becoming uncomfortably cramped. Even the Immortals were now being forced to share rooms, with up to seven crowded into a single chamber come dawn, which only added to the tension building in the air throughout the estate. Feeling taxed beyond belief after a long night of heavy debates, I had requested to have a room to myself. Tatsu, Lillian, and Traq, a young vampire who had found his way out of the fray within the amagin miles away and back to Phelan's house, had begrudgingly agreed to split up and find space in other chambers shared by Immortals. It had been a small gesture, but one I had appreciated immensely.

I continued on to the library. The two dark wooden doors were closed. Behind them I could sense the tight coil of adrenaline and anxiety bristling in the humans, while the Immortals reflected a deeper, colder reservation, grim and boiling as an impending thunderstorm. Their voices were calm, despite the flux of emotions they radiated. It was still early in the evening and the debates had not reached a critical juncture. I knew the Immortals inside sensed me as I stood outside, my hand lingering on the doorknob as I listened, silently. I had felt the quick, investigating brush of their collective consciousness upon first waking, though the wall I had reconstructed around my psyche after the battle with the Vicinus seemed to grow more and more impenetrable by the night. Indeed, I myself had begun to wonder if I would be able to dismantle it and be vulnerable for anyone or to anything ever again.

Suddenly, the door opened. Phelan stood in the entrance, dressed in a loose long-sleeved shirt of deep forest green and charcoal gray pants. His flowing fiery red hair was unbound, framing his pale face and emerald eyes like rivers of molten lava. For all of his permanent pale beauty that seemed

carved from the same seamless, flawless sample of stone, he appeared to me weary.

“Are you planning on standing out there all night?” he said bluntly with the raise of one eyebrow.

I stared at him in silence. It seemed to me he was all too ready to sweep aside the century of ill will that had festered between us, nearly killing us both as it burned the bridge upon which we stood. In the nights that had passed since Seaфра’s execution, Phelan had made an honest attempt to reach out to me as a Father once again, but it would take far more than a few hours and kind words to mend such soul crushing hurt and betrayal.

“No,” I replied quietly. “Not all night.” I stepped around him and entered the library.

Inside, the air was chill without the roaring flames in the hearth on the far side of the room. A universal decision had been made to cease using the massive fireplaces in the estate. Fear that the smoke from the chimneys would make it easier for the Tyst to discover our location, despite how well hidden the estate might be beneath layers of protective magical seals, kept us cold and dark. Electrical power was also being conserved now, the primary wattage from the solar generators on the property being directed to the kitchen and dining room areas on an extremely limited basis. The rest of the manor was lit by candlelight; two tall iron candelabras, each holding three thick candles of white wax, stood to either side of Phelan’s massive desk. The flames were still, casting a warm, low glow over the individuals gathered between them, while the rest of the room sank into a velvety darkness. The towering walls of shelves lined with books appeared soft and mystical in the deep shadows beyond.

In a large leather armchair on the farthest side of the desk sat Nahalo, the Phuree oracle and one of the last remaining

Ancients of the Immortal race. He had seen me in a vision, a hero awaiting the call of a new legend to be born into, as I had Slept in an attempt to escape the world for a hundred years. In his dreams, I had emerged victorious from a battle with the Vicinus and delivered the world into an unprecedented era of utopian peace. His words were those that had convinced the Phuree and Phelan to capture and convince me that the world could not survive without my aid in their mission. Though I had been delivered to his feet, mangled and oppressed by my own clan due to my willful insubordination and refusal to cooperate, I had found the mysterious vampire who had spent the past century disguised as a mortal beneath an impeccable, infallible mirage, the sort of mentor I had been searching for since my fall from grace. He had healed me with his own Blood, allowed me to drink from his veins in an attempt to empower me for the battles to come, and thus, I had begun to trust in him as I had no other.

However, as the sands had begun to shift into a blinding storm after I abducted Moria from the Tyst fortress, I had watched him transform from the gentle, meditative wise one to yet another vampire whose desire for the preservation of our species at times trumped basic morality. Under Nahalo's guidance Phelan had come to dictate Seafra's execution, in spite of our steadfast universal law that a vampire may not kill another vampire except in cases of extreme self-defense. Nahalo's presence signified a new era of Immortality. It was not an era I favored.

He regarded me kindly with golden feline eyes, glimmering like ancient Aztec coins in the candlelight. He nodded slightly in greeting as our gazes skimmed over one another. The only others in attendance were Tiernan, the young human chieftain of the Phuree, and his sister Khanna. Both strong and tan with sun-bleached blond hair, in unison

they turned to watch me with twin piercing gray-blue eyes as I entered the room.

“Good evening,” I said to them, glancing back over at Phelan as he closed the door and moved to lean against the front of the desk. “Are we the only company for tonight?”

Phelan nodded. “Yes. For right now the pertinent issues do not need too large a party of input.”

“Such as?” I asked, folding my arms across my chest and tilting my head to the side slightly.

“Well,” he replied with an exhalation of breath, “we were thinking the first course of action tonight is to decide what to do about Moria and the child.”

My nerves bristled. Though Moria was no longer a ticking bomb, now that her direct connection to the Vicinus had been severed, I continued to fear for her safety while she remained among the Phuree. Especially Khanna, who I knew still blamed her for Malakai’s death, though it was my own selfishness that drove me to rescue her from her prison within the heart of the Tyst fortress. Khanna would forever view Moria as a symbol of her lost love, one that would fester within her as she clung to Malakai’s memory until she was all but consumed by it.

“Our first priority is to relocate them to a set of far more distant coordinates.” Tiernan’s voice was strong and commanding as he addressed us with arms crossed over his chest.

“As long as she is anywhere near Tynan, I fear the concentration of power in the connection between the two of them will only hasten our discovery, no matter how well shielded Phelan’s estate may be. Their auras will no doubt be picked up by Tyst surveillance when they scan this portion of the continent. I’m sure you have all felt it as much as the Phuree have.” He gestured towards Phelan and me,

suggesting the Immortals as a whole.

It was true. Moria and the baby carried within them a resonance that was strong and distinct, one easily recognizable and nearly impossible to disguise, a result of the recent entanglement of their souls with that of the Vicinus's own essence.

"Where do you suggest we move them?" Phelan sat on the edge of the large wooden desk in front of the towering windows mottled with the reflection of the attendees in the room. "The Tyst have eyes everywhere." Beyond, the pitch canvas of night yawned ominously, the seemingly innocent shadows masking the blood soaked maw of war.

"Actually," Tiernan rubbed his jaw in thought with his right hand. "I was thinking the best course of action would be to separate the two and send the Queen to a safe house in the far Northwest Territory while placing the infant in the care of a Phuree clan elsewhere, far from her."

"You can't be serious?" I could not help my growing attachment to the strange child Moria had given birth to nights before. The Phuree midwives had declared that, in the last moments of my battle with the Vicinus, my soul had somehow blended with his, saving the child from a stillbirth, but also making me his birth father. I was not quite ready to fully accept the idea that I was his "parent," but I could not deny the bond I felt with the baby had cultivated an instinctive protectiveness towards him.

I paced restlessly behind Phelan's desk, in front of the windows. "The child is not even a week old. You can't separate him from his mother so early."

Tiernan's hand dropped away from his chin and returned to fold over his other arm. Defensiveness bristled through his aura like fine, sharp cactus spines. "It would be the wisest decision, both for us and them, if you are truly concerned

about their safety. In any case, we can place the child with the Phuree mothers and their children who are currently being hidden underground. I know that we, personally, have several new mothers in our tribe who would nurse the baby without problem. I'm certain that there are more within other Phuree clans who would do the same, if asked. It is the child's best chance for survival."

"No," I said stubbornly, my tone non-negotiable. "I do not feel well about such a course of action. We do not truly know what this child is as of yet; human or vampire or possibly something else. Why, even his features are otherworldly." I spoke of his tapered ears and large eyes that caused the baby to appear strangely elfin. "He is the product of intense magic and violence. We don't know how he will evolve or what he will be capable of." I shook my head. "For us to place him in the care of an unwitting young mother might not only endanger her personally, but the whole of the group hiding along with her."

"Perhaps you are right," Nahalo spoke quietly. "While the child is not, as of yet, demonstrating any distinguishing powers, his aura is extremely strong, which bespeaks great potential for rapid development. He has already grown significantly in the past few days, taking on the appearance of a two or three month old child. If he continues to grow at that rate, he could reach maturity within less than a year."

"But why would he be any safer with his mother? Despite her blended Immortal and human heritage, Moria is a frail creature with no obvious powers of her own. Her bond with her child might not be enough to keep him from exercising whatever abilities he could possess." Phelan had finally begun to refer to his daughter by her name instead of her royal title of the Tyst Queen. He shook his head as he regarded me. "I'm afraid that no matter who is in his

presence, they will be in danger in some way, whether it is from the child himself or from the Tyst tracking him down.”

“But the Tyst do not know he has been born,” I replied. “We are forgetting that the Cardone and his Council were expecting the Vicinus to return, not for him to be defeated, or for an actual child to be birthed. No doubt the Tyst will figure out that something has gone awry with their plan, even more so than they assume it already has. However, we still have time. If we can hide them for at least a couple of weeks, we will have made significant enough progress in this war so that the child’s discovery will not even matter by then to the Tyst. They will be too worried about survival.”

“I like how optimistic you are,” Tiernan said with a short, nervous laugh. “However, we cannot predict how this war will unfold. The Tyst Empire is retaliating with full force. They are no longer erring on the side of caution. Their strategy is complete annihilation.”

“Then they will eventually exhaust themselves. They cannot keep up such total brute force for very long,” I retorted. “There will be a time, and I predict it will be very soon, when they must pause and regroup. Remember, they are acting under a timeline. They want to recover Moria before she gives birth. Cardone will have to temper his rage and refocus if he is to locate her.”

“Exactly! They are looking for her,” Tiernan replied. He uncrossed his arms, his fists curling at his sides instinctively as he argued. “Therefore, despite the fact that you managed to sever her tie to the Vicinus, she is still a threat. Her presence is a threat to us, and perhaps, her very own child. We also have to take into consideration what might happen if the Tyst get their hands on the baby. If we separate the Queen from the child the chances of that happening are drastically reduced. And, if I must be so blunt, if it comes down to protecting one

or the other, the child is an innocent and, thus, deserves our protection far more than the Queen.”

A surge of rage bristled below my skin. Turning to face him, I leaned forward over the desk, fists planted firmly upon its surface. “Are you saying Moria is not an innocent?” I demanded.

I did not wait for a reply. My focus remained locked on Tiernan who narrowed his eyes at me. “Let me remind you that her participation in this war has not been voluntary. She did not ask to be placed in her current position, and was as much a prisoner of the Tyst Empire as any Phuree or Immortal ever has been. If what Nahalo and the priestesses keep telling me is correct, that child upstairs is now mine and that makes Moria the mother of my child. She will not be separated from the baby and, as long as I am alive, she will remain under my protection.”

A cool heavy hand grasped my left shoulder as Nahalo appeared at my side. He said nothing, his golden eyes regarding me quietly, but his concern was apparent in the deep furrow between his brows. I straightened up, stepping away from the desk to take a deep breath, which I slowly exhaled through my nose.

“Moria and the child will not be separated,” I repeated, as if to cement the statement’s finality. “But I do agree that they should be removed from the estate to a more obscure location.” I forced the adrenaline to leave my system, my heartbeat slowing from its angry pace. No matter how numb and reserved I felt in regards to the other aspects of the war, Moria was and would forever be an excruciatingly delicate subject I knew I would constantly be forced to defend.

“Where in the northwest do you propose we relocate them?” I asked Tiernan.

Tiernan’s posture relaxed slightly as he realized he

might at least have part of his request honored, his fists at his sides slowly uncurled. His gaze flickered to Nahalo's and back to mine. "There is a small safe house just outside of the Vancouver amagin, near the small town of Langley, that is heavily guarded by some of the best Phuree warriors. The location is so remote and heavily hidden by our magic that it is completely invisible to the outside world. It's my opinion that this would be the best place for them in the northern territories. It has been used for decades to hide the most wanted of the Phuree and our allies. We've never been ferreted out."

"Be careful of using the word 'never,'" I said quietly—I was extremely superstitious when it came to voicing absolutes such as "never" and "always" when it came to life and death matters. Somehow it seemed to tempt the universe into disproving every theory tossed its way.

"Very well." I nodded to Tiernan. "If it is the group's agreement that this is the best course of action, I will support it."

Nahalo, Khanna and Phelan all muttered their consent.

"Who will escort them and when will they leave?" Even though the allure of a truly secure hideout for Moria and the child was tempting, I knew that the trip would be an extremely long and treacherous one. By vehicle it would take over a week and would require them to stay in various hideouts along the way, none of which would be quite as secure as the one described by Tiernan in Langley. If it had only been Moria, I would have taken her there myself by flight, but I did not want to risk carrying both her and the child. The wind would be far too icy for an infant so young.

"I will place a detail of our best men and women on the assignment. Carson, whom you are already familiar with, has agreed to be the driver," Tiernan replied. "Unless anything

unforeseen was to occur between now and then, I would like for them to leave by tomorrow evening.”

“I agree. Carson is the only man for the job,” I replied.

Carson, one of Malakai’s main contacts, was a professional hired driver, escorting people and supplies to safe houses around the continent. He had assisted in our escape from the Austin amagin and our trip to the Tyst fortress in the northeast. From my experience with him I knew he was as trustworthy and reliable as any human could be.

“I would like to speak personally with the people you have in mind for this mission to make sure they understand the gravity of its importance,” I requested firmly.

Tiernan sighed with irritation. “Tynan, I assure you that they understand all too well. Must I remind you that we have been fighting this war for far, far longer than you have?”

“No, Tiernan, you do not need to remind me. But I have my reasons for speaking with them and I would appreciate it if you would not question my every move.” I stared at him, the fine hairs on the back of my neck bristling.

I had known from the moment Tiernan had set foot within Phelan’s house that the initial awe and respect he had once regarded me with, when he truly believed me the Phuree’s messiah and savior, had crumbled to dust. Now, it was quickly becoming apparent to me that, not only was the glamour gone, but he was on the verge of despising my new role in the war, which, at times, usurped his own. I could feel resentment and irritation emanating from him, grating against my psyche like a sharp steel brush. It was a restless agitation, which I knew must be kept in check lest it undermine our races’ abilities to work together. Deep inside, a foreboding shadow warned me to proceed carefully in my new leadership role. One false move and the war could

turn inwards, destroying us all. Perhaps Malakai had been correct. Perhaps there would never be a way for our races to coexist, despite our common goal of survival.

“Then, we are in agreement of what shall be done with Moria and the child. Let us move on to other pressing matters.” Phelan’s voice sliced through the tension.

“Yes, agreed,” I said, and broke my gaze away from Tiernan. I turned, crossing my arms over my chest, and began pacing about the room slowly, struggling to clear my mind as it now buzzed with anticipation of the coming relocation. “The other issue that I believe should be dealt with swiftly is the matter of Loden and the documents he absconded with during the attack at the Tyst fortress. He has had several days to travel. There is no way of telling where he would have gone or what he might do with the information he now has in his possession.”

“That’s assuming he made it out of the forest surrounding the fortress alive.” Khanna finally spoke as she moved to take a seat in one of the high-backed leather armchairs. “He may be technologically brilliant, but he’s no match for a bear or cougar.”

“True. Or if the Tyst patrols found him lost within the woods. Malakai warned us that the forest was riddled with traps and sensors. Without him to guide Loden back through, I have a terrible feeling he wouldn’t have gotten too far,” I replied.

The mention of Malakai’s name caused a shadow of grief to flicker over Khanna’s face. She looked away into the darkened fireplace at the far end of the expansive room. Resting her chin on her fist, she struggled to maintain her composed exterior. I cringed inside for my careless use of his name.

“That is actually a worse idea than if he were out on his

own. He knows far too much about our plans, not to mention what he knows from working with Malakai over the years. The gods only know what secrets he truly holds.” Phelan replied, his expression one of grave concern.

“Indeed. If the Tyst have found him, it would not take too much torture to break his will. No matter how tough he may believe himself to be, when it comes to the Tyst and the Chronous, he has waged his war from the safety of his stealth bunker for the past decade. He has never been confronted with true physical torture,” I replied darkly.

“I will organize the search and retrieve mission.” Khanna’s voice was cool and determined, belying nothing of the pain beneath.

The room fell silent for an excruciating second.

“Are you certain?” I asked carefully, watching her as if she were a beaten animal ready to lunge from the corner of her cage.

“Khanna is an expert tracker. I agree that she should lead the team.” Tiernan voiced his approval.

My gaze remained leveled on Khanna’s piercing eyes; the calmness there disturbed me still, the wall around her psyche was icy and impenetrable.

“I will find him. I will bring back the documents,” she said, her gaze flickering away from mine for a split second as if she were about to reveal something of a more personal nature. “We must have them back, and soon.”

“You will bring back Loden, as well.” I reminded her, treading gently on the landmines she was placing between us with her words. “In one piece and coherent. We will need to debrief him when you return.”

The muscles in her jaw flexed as she clenched her teeth and then forced them to relax. The weight of all that she longed to scream at me was slowly crushing her, one painful

breath at a time. “Of course.”

She stood, obviously anxious to leave the room. “May I be excused from further discussions tonight? I would like to leave tomorrow on our mission and I have much to prepare for the trip.”

“Who are you taking with you?” Tiernan asked.

“Jaxon and Edo,” she replied curtly.

Tiernan rubbed his jaw in thought for a moment as he considered her two personal guards and attendants. While extremely loyal and highly protective of Khanna, they were not Tiernan’s first choice for such a dangerous reconnaissance mission. “I would prefer it if you took one of the Immortals with you instead.”

“No.” Her voice was slightly too sharp and loud, echoing off the high vaulted ceiling. “No,” she said again, this time with a measure more of control. “This is a mission that can be completed without their aid.” Her eyes flickered to me, Nahalo and Phelan, all of whom stood near the desk watching her. “The Immortals can be utilized in more important ways in this war. If we run into trouble, I’m sure you will know somehow.” Her eyes narrowed slightly in my direction. “But that will not happen. Not on my watch.”

“Let her go,” I said to Tiernan. “Take what supplies you need. Please consult with Tiernan and the rest of the strategy team in command central before you leave.”

There was a finality in Khanna’s voice that told me that there was no arguing with her on this matter. If we tried to restrain her, it would only turn against us in the end, and she would leave with or without our acknowledgment or consent. With a curt nod, Khanna turned on her heel and left the room with haste.

Tiernan whirled around to face me. “Why are you letting her go without Immortal reinforcements? She could very

well have to travel all the way back to the Tyst fortress to retrieve him. This is insanity!”

I stared at Tiernan repressing the urge to snap that she was his sister. I shook my head. “We will send out more men after her before they get too far away, but for right now, this is what she needs. After what she has been through, she needs to be alone, on her own, and feeling like she is in control of something. Trust me, it is for the best, for all of us.” I sighed heavily through my nose. “If we attempt to control her now, it may well backfire in a very violent way.”

A strange shadow of awareness and regret shifted over Tiernan’s features. I could see in his eyes the welling responsibility he felt for his sister’s anguish eating at the edges of his soul; he was so terribly young to have the weight of, literally, the entire world resting on his shoulders. But is it not the destiny of humanity’s great leaders to be thrust into the defining times of their legacies when they themselves are still barely able to grasp the true concept of what it means to be alive, to be a human being? I would lend Tiernan my strength, to pour the Ancient power gifted to me by Nahalo straight from my veins and into his, if only I thought that were truly the answer to his problems. I knew deep within my soul that it wasn’t.

We vampires, after eons upon the Earth, were still no more capable, at times, of altering the course of history for the greater good than our young human cousins. Besides, the Blood would only further complicate his situation and obscure his vision from the truth of what must ultimately be done. He was a brilliant leader, having guided his people through the vicious, wicked maze of the Tystian war since his father’s passing, when Tiernan himself was barely becoming a man. He was respected as much as feared by his enemies. However, this painful matter of the heart had simply cut too

close to the bone, thrusting him out of his element. He would find his way, though; of this I was certain. He and Khanna would both discover their own paths out of the darkness, but in their own time.

Tiernan nodded, taking a step away from me towards the door. There was a cold shadow casting a storm beneath his gaze. “I will start organizing the preparations for the Queen’s escort.” With those final words, he left the library, the echo of his boots upon the polished floor, hard and hollow, with a terrible determination.

For a moment I stared at the open doorway, listening to the sounds of the churning house outside before turning and trading glances with Phelan and Nahalo. “Shall I be the one to inform her of these new developments?”

Nahalo nodded slowly. “Yes, I think that would be for the best. You are still the one she most closely trusts of us all.”

Trusted or feared? I was still undecided exactly where I stood in Moria’s eyes.

CHAPTER 3

My boots thudded softly on the marble stairs as I climbed back to the second floor. Each step lifted me up and out of the churning, evolving belly of the estate's newfound purpose in this time of war, transporting me to the quieter rooms where mortals and Immortals alike took refuge to silence their frantic minds. My thoughts were with Khanna; I wanted so desperately to lend comfort to her, to express to her the terrible depth of my regret for her loss. Though I did not feel personally responsible for Malakai's death, as I knew she must certainly desire me to, I understood all too intimately the aching hollowness that must now invade her being like a cancer, eating away at all that was left of her hope and dreams. It was hard at times to understand exactly what future Khanna had hoped to have with the renegade ex-Third Eye Tyst Intelligence officer turned Phuree informant and arms trader. Though I had wanted to see the love between them, something tangible for me to sympathize with, his approach to her had always seemed too cold and manipulative to be real. It had not been until his last dying breath that he had confessed his love for her, a moment which

had no doubt only made his passing all the more excruciating for her to bear. However, who was I to judge the workings of another's soul? The heart wants what the heart wants, or so Shakespeare once sagely wrote.

I could see it in her eyes when our gazes met, the barely contained grief that had begun to turn into a thick sheath of frozen misery over her already hardened heart. At times I thought she would most certainly begin sobbing. Always it seemed that tears were glimmering in the corners of her eyes, but never did they fall and never was any ghost of weakness shown. Not now, in the company of those that led the war she had pledged herself to. I worried, as was my nature, about her wellbeing and about her mental health. Just as with her bold decision to undertake the search-and-retrieve mission to find Loden, there would be situations that would call for a clear and steady mind and not a reckless desire to run away. As soon as I was done speaking with Moria, I would speak with Phelan about whom to send after Khanna, Jaxon and Edo to keep watch over them.

Quickly, I strode down the darkened hall towards the chamber Moria now shared with the same Phuree priestesses who had assisted her in childbirth several nights before. A bond had formed between Moria and the human women, with a special connection gathering her emotionally close to the head midwife, Mena, a gentle, matronly woman whose empathy and generosity towards absolute strangers touched me deeply. Thick, white candles had been placed in wrought iron holders on the small, ornately-carved teak tables set within alcoves between the darkly-stained wooden doors to the rooms along the hall. The flames were still and strong, the illumination and warmth soothing and deep, transporting my mind to a time long before electricity was harnessed to drive the shadows away, a simpler time when the sky and

land were all that one needed to survive.

So close we were now, a heartbeat away, from returning to that world. However, despite the Phuree's mission to eventually strip the Earth of its mechanized fetters and cleanse it of the supposed evils contained in the glistening gold veins of a microchip, there was a part of me that wondered if they truly understood what they were asking for. Their crusades had been in retaliation to the draconian brutality inflicted upon their peoples by a single empire. They had not lived in the age when technology had blessed the world with cures for diseases that had crippled humanity for thousands of years, allowed environmentalists to search for ways to live in closer communion with the Earth, and inspired millions of artists, writers and musicians to explore their crafts in ways never previously imagined. Despite the Pandora's Box of vicious demons technology had unleashed, an angel whose beauty was unparalleled and unseen had accompanied every hellspawn. I had endured the merciless, harsh world as it was before the Industrial Revolution. I had witnessed that same world's slow, painful demise as, with each technological advancement, a new level of greed infiltrated the soul of humanity. For me, there was no such thing as utopia, with or without technology, but it was pointless for me to preach such things to the Phuree.

In the year after my reawakening, before I had physically met the rebel uprising, the explanation of their philosophies and their visions of the future of humanity had always been painted in the extremes. As with all political and philosophical credos, when not heard from the mouths of the believers themselves, I was told that there was no middle ground in their agendas, that if they won, it would mean the complete restructuring of the last fragments of the "old world" and the creation of an entirely new existence. Now, I

wondered if this were at all accurate. Of what I had observed of the Phuree's tactics, they held technology in disdain, but did not hesitate to utilize it, even if it were in a less obvious way, when the need arose. Never once had I heard an anti-technology rant from Khanna or Tiernan, but only a fervid determination to bring down the empire that oppressed the Phuree peoples. Something told me that this mentality was exclusive to Tiernan's specific clan of Phuree, though. Other, more elusive tribes most likely embraced a more fatalistic credo.

I paused before the door to Moria's room, watching the candle nearby, staring through the flame at the singed black wick within. Everything had happened so quickly that I had not given time to what the pure intentions of the Phuree were. I had wavered back and forth between a suicidal longing to flee, like a wolf bound in a steel trap, and a reckless, unexplainable dedication to their cause simply because I related to their sense of oppression. However, now I wondered if the Tyst Empire were to fall, just what were the Phuree's plans for the years to come? And where did the Immortals fit into this vision of a new world order? If the annihilation of the Chronous system was truly at the heart of their mission, could they rebuild after that vital network, upon which the entire world now depended, was gone?

Dread needled at the base of my spine with its icy talons, causing the fine hairs on the backs of my arms to bristle. There was no going back now, though. The Immortals had chosen a side and there we would take our places until the last blow fell. We would deal with the aftermath when the dust settled, and we stood with only each other to embrace or blame. That was, if we still stood at all. How I longed for the days when I was merely a philosopher and not a warrior. I raised my fist and knocked quietly on the door. Feet shuffled

across the wooden floor on the other side, low feminine voices murmuring to one another, which I did not strain to hear. I waited patiently in silence.

Mena opened the door. Her stocky frame, dressed in the long, belted roan robes, was backlit by the distant candlelight, the streaks of silver in her brown hair, pulled back in a long braid, appearing to glow. Her warm round face smiled up at me, the lines around her eyes and mouth deepening with the expression, the little details that made mortality endearing, yet bittersweet.

“Sir Llywelyn, it is a pleasure to see you this evening, as always.” Her voice was strong, but kind, in a deep, motherly way.

“Mena, how many times do I need to tell you that you should call me Tynan?” I tried to smile through the storm clouds surrounding my heart, but all that I could muster was a brief twitch of the corners of my mouth.

Mena continued to beam; I could feel her trying to read me silently, to feel the energy about my body and soul, to gauge the true state of my wellbeing. “As many times as you feel is necessary until you realize that you deserve the respect of your official title.”

It was useless to argue with Mena, but a part of me enjoyed the subtle banter. I felt safe with her as I rarely did in the company of mortals; the power she held within her and the respect that she commanded of those around her was comforting to observe. When I gazed upon her face, the word “mother” often passed through my mind unbidden and indeed, that was what she was to many of Tiernan’s followers.

“Is Moria awake?” I asked quietly, listening to the other priestesses inside the room shuffle about in respectful silence as they tended to chores.

Mena nodded. “Yes,” she said quietly. “She is feeding the baby right now, but you are more than welcome to come in.”

I nodded and she stepped aside to allow me to enter. As I passed over the threshold into the bedroom, I instantly felt a wash of peace descend over me. The priestesses had spent the previous nights cleansing the room of negative energy and meditating on workings that would not only shield Moria and the baby from the world, but also provide them with a safe haven in which to exist while in Phelan’s estate. I sighed, envying Moria’s new position for a fleeting moment; to be so cherished, so coveted and protected would be a blessing, though I knew full well that such blessings came with a curse equal in strength. But she was safe now, away from the clutches of the Tyst Empire and the cruel hand of Lord Cardone III, or so I told myself. The last thing I wanted was for her to go from one remote manicured prison into another, but there was no other option, at least until the war was over. Our prison would never be so pristine or romantic in its isolated oblivion as the one Cardone had crafted for her. Despite all of our mystical illusions, we were still realists at heart.

I crossed the room, and the priestesses seemed to fade away, moving gracefully out of my path as if I were a revered king of men, to where Mena stood near the door in order to give Moria and me a modicum of privacy.

“Would you like for us to leave?” Mena asked.

I paused for a moment, considering the question before turning back again. “Yes,” I said quietly. “Perhaps for a moment. Thank you.”

Mena nodded and ushered her disciples out of the room, closing the door behind them with a soft click. Watching the door, I waited a moment until I knew we were truly alone.

As I heard their feathery footsteps wind down the hallway, I turned from the door. The room felt heavy and expectant, as if it held its breath in anticipation of the delivery of the uncomfortable news I carried.

Moria sat in a chair near one of the tall multiple-paned windows in the left corner of the room, near the bed. She was dressed in her original dark gown, which she had been wearing the night I had abducted her, though it had been properly cleaned of the dust and grime of our journey. Now that the baby had been delivered, the dress hung loosely over her delicate frame, which was already returning to its original slender structure even this soon after the birth. The heavy regality of the fabric against her milky skin and raven hair was breathtaking, calling to my mind royal women of the Renaissance frozen elegantly in oils upon canvas. She did not raise her head to greet me until I was a mere few steps away from her. In the crook of her right arm was nestled the baby, wrapped in an old, soft white towel taken from one of the bathrooms, the closest thing there was to a baby blanket in Phelan's estate. Moria's right breast was exposed as she nursed the child. The baby's tiny hands clutched at her chest as he sleepily drank from her, his eyes beginning to flutter closed every now and again as his satiation overcame him. Such pure, innocent bliss—I envied him.

I squatted down next to Moria, placing one hand on the arm of the chair and reaching up instinctively to caress the soft tuft of hair covering the top of the child's head. It had begun to change already from the soft blond-brown fuzz he had been born with to a strange mixture of white and black hair, divided directly down the middle of his scalp as if half of his being was pure light, while the other held fathomless darkness. I frowned at the unexpected change, yet another example of the child's unorthodox beginnings.

Moria looked up at me, her green eyes sparkling in the candlelight, and smiled. “He’s hungry tonight,” she said, sounding pleased. “He has quite the voracious appetite for one so small!”

The wonder of new motherhood seemed to wash away the vicious nightmare that had brought her to that point. Her desperation for normalcy was heartbreaking. She had not expected to live through the ceremony that stopped the Vicinus from entering the physical realm. Now she clung to every moment as if it were her first and last upon the Earth.

It was hard for me to contemplate that only a week before I had held her in my arms, my fangs plunged deep within her artery in an attempt to assassinate her. It had been my mission, sent by the Phuree and Immortals, to eliminate the source of all of their fears. However, as her blood had flowed into me, the truth of her origin had caused me to tear myself away. While she was not a pure vampire, we shared the Blood of Phelan. He was her birth father, the product of an intimate union with a human woman two decades before. The knowledge of our shared bloodline had caused me to make the reckless, selfish decision to save her from her fate, both at my hands and those of the Tyst. Now the delicate dark beauty who had once clung to me like a frightened child as I told her of her parentage held a child of her own, a child unlike any the world had ever embraced.

I said nothing, continuing to watch the infant, my eyes tracing over his otherworldly features. I couldn’t help, despite the perfect picture of serenity before me, to be filled with a curdling dread about the creature we had created. He didn’t belong, straddling our world and the illusory dimension of the Vicinus.

“Mena suggested a name tonight that I think I like quite a bit.” Moria pulled a fold of the towel closer around the

baby as she spoke.

“Oh, she did?” A name? For some reason I had not even thought of naming this child; its mere existence was still too much for me to contemplate.

“Nodin. It is an ancient Algonquian name that means ‘wind’, is what she told me.” Moria’s eyes searched my face for a reaction. “She seems to think it befitting considering the impressive gust that blew through the room the night he was born, shattering windows and all.” She smiled a small hesitant smile knowing all too well my timid approach to embracing the baby everyone kept telling me was mine.

“Nodin,” I whispered under my breath. It felt right on my tongue, befitting of such a mysterious little creature. I nodded slowly. “Then Nodin it shall be. Moria, there is something I need to tell you,” I added, hanging my head to stare at the ground as I laced my fingers together between my knees, pointing the tips towards the floor as if sending a prayer down to Hades to release Persephone.

“Oh?” she said quietly, sensing the severity in my tone.

“I know that you have begun to grow quite comfortable here, that you feel somewhat protected, safe within these walls, but you cannot stay here any longer.” I kept my tone level and calm. I lifted my eyes to watch her face.

She kept her eyes downcast upon Nodin. Her bottom lip began to tremble slightly. “Oh, dear. I knew it. You’re sending me back to them, aren’t you? Now that I am no longer carrying the Vicinus, you’re going to return me to the Tyst?” Her voice was full of dread, quavering as if tears might spill from her eyes at any moment.

“No! No, that is not it at all.” I instinctively reached up and placed a hand on her knee. It broke my heart to cause her even the slightest pain now. She had been through far too much already.

“I believe that you and I both know that you may never return there again, not after what has happened. You know too much now of the Immortals and of the Phuree.” I had meant for it to be a comforting idea, but I cringed as soon as the statement left my lips, the words resonating like a harsh, final decree. “If you want it to be so, your place is now amongst us for as long as you shall live.”

It was a strange sentencing my words delivered, a reprieve from one prison and escort into another. However, they seemed to be the very words she longed to hear for an expression of pure relief washed over her delicate features.

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, that is what I want.” She reached out with one hand and touched the side of my face. It was a gesture that caught me off guard, the silken warmth of her slender fingers electrifying in their unassuming gentleness, but I did not pull away. “This is my home. You are my new family.”

“And that is why we must protect you to the best of our abilities,” I replied, reaching up to take and hold the hand that cradled my cheek. “It is only a matter of time before the Tyst detect your presence here, so close to the amagin parameters. We have decided to relocate you and Nodin to a safe house far to the northwest of here. It is in an extremely remote location and heavily concealed. You will be able to return here once the threat has passed.”

It was obvious that she trusted in me completely, though the idea of leaving her newfound home was unsettling to her. “Very well. I will do as you wish.”

She did not ask when the time of her return would be. She was used to following the orders dictated by Lord Cardone, I realized, and now she would follow my directives as timidly as those of her former master.

“When will this journey begin?” she asked, pulling her

hand away from my loose grasp to fiddle nervously with Nodin's blanket once again, running her long pale fingers over his cherub cheeks and forehead.

"Tomorrow night." I stood, my gaze traveling to the nightscape beyond the windows. The horizon where the eerie golden glow of battle fires burned, was blocked by a sloping hillside, making the world outside appear deceptively quiet and peaceful in its darkness. "I will have Mena ready whatever you need for the trip as it will be a long one."

"Will you be going with me?" she asked quietly; her attachment to me had tripled since the birth of the child.

I knew in her heart I was a permanent part of her world now. The idea of being separated from my protective presence terrified her more than leaving the safety of Phelan's estate. Nahalo and Phelan would object, but my secretly sworn oath to Moria's survival dictated I accompany her.

I shook my head, peeling my gaze away from the window. "No, not at first. There are matters I must tend to here before I can join you. But I will always be watching from a distance. Have no fear; you will be in the best of hands. I will make sure of that."

I leaned down and kissed her softly upon her forehead.

"I trust you," she whispered.

CHAPTER 4

I closed the door to Moria's room quietly behind me. The hallway was empty and dark, the glow of the spartanly placed candles somehow amplified the moment of stillness in an otherwise humming hive of beings. I paused, leaning back against the door as if I could simply melt into the darkness clustered there if only I closed my eyes. I did not want to return to the dire urgency that roiled like lava, as the souls of men and vampires fought for survival. I missed the aching silence I had first experienced in this new century in the hour of my reawakening, the exquisite seductive absence of modernity and the pure emptiness that resonated deep and fathomless like a monk's gong through a mountain pass. How I wished I had taken the time to listen then, to bow down amidst the autumn rain and welcome the essence of that sacred silence into my heart to experience as I never had been able to before. But instead, I had run, as I was so adept at doing, away from the emptiness towards the chaos in search of what I thought I had wanted. Would I ever know what it was that my heart truly desired, that my soul craved? With each passing night the doubt only continued to grow

within me.

As if she sensed my departure from Moria, Mena appeared at the top of the stairs. She paused for a moment, just beyond the shadows of the long hall, lingering in the warm glow of the illumination that radiated up from the lower level, to observe me with a contemplative concern. After a small hesitation, she seemed content and approached me, walking through the pools of shadow and light, her hands folded over her stomach and nearly hidden by the belled sleeves of her robe.

Her gaze found mine and held it steadily. I felt at ease in her solid, matronly presence, comforted by the grounding aura of profound earthy power that resonated around her with an unmovable consistency.

“Is everything alright?” she asked quietly. “You look paler than usual.”

I smiled at her attempt at a jest. “We have decided tonight to relocate Moria and the child.” I told Mena of my earlier talks. “I ask that you prepare her with whatever she will need for the journey. I also ask that you accompany her, along with whoever you feel may be beneficial to their care and protection.”

Mena nodded. “Of course.” She paused for a moment, tilting her head to the side as her eyes remained locked with mine. “It is okay that you feel the connection you do with her and the baby. You realize that, don’t you?”

I was startled by her directness. I stared at Mena in silence.

“You two share a bond now that is inseparable. Not only do you share a blood line, but, now, a child.” She reached out and placed a warm hand upon my shoulder. “She was never meant to be one of them. Her place is with us and we will protect her. You are doing the right thing.”

I had not sensed her read my soul. Perhaps I wore evidence of my conflict too close to the surface of my skin?

The other priestesses joined Mena, quietly gathering behind her like settling brown sparrows. Mena patted my arm and stepped around me before I had a chance to reply. I stood frozen in the hallway, listening to the sound of the door open and close softly behind me. Realizing suddenly that I had been holding my breath, I slowly exhaled, my heart thundering in my chest, an unexplainable feeling of relief washing over me like a cool night breeze. I had not realized how much I needed verbal reinforcement from another living being, mortal or otherwise. Mena's support was more than I could have ever asked for.

Quickly, I returned to the bottom floor of the house. Before my feet had even touched the tiles at the base of the stairs, my serenity was shattered as Phelan found me.

"Tynan, there you are." Phelan walked towards me from the direction of the kitchen. "Tiernan wants to go over the selected detail for tomorrow's transport of Moria, among other matters."

Suddenly, a twinge of energy on the periphery of my senses, like a high-pitched ringing in my ears, sliced through my attention, severing my focus on the tangible world around me for a split second. My eyes cut to the side and down to the floor as I listened more intently, trying to decipher what the sensation meant and where the energy was coming from. The vibration felt familiar, soft and feminine and earthen, but it was much too far away for me to decipher with any level of accuracy. I could not ignore the call however, my soul spasming painfully as it fought to find recognition.

"Tynan?" Phelan stared at me. When I did not immediately respond, he spoke again. "Tynan, what is it? What are you listening to?"

“Don’t you hear that?” I asked, turning to walk down the hallway towards the front doors. “That noise.” I paused at the door and turned around to see him following me cautiously, a look of concern overshadowing his brilliant green gaze.

He shook his head. “I hear only the happenings in this building and,” he paused for a long moment, tilting his head to the side as he listened to the world outside the estate, “a few human encampments a few miles from here, but nothing distinctive. Beyond the estate and all of its shields it is hard to isolate any one sound. The world is in too great a state of panic now.”

“Hmm,” I murmured, chewing on my bottom lip, torn between my want to return to my previous discussion with Phelan and the overwhelming need to understand what pulled at me now in such an urgent way. “You must not be able to sense such things yet.” I had not meant to voice the thought aloud and instantly regretted it.

Phelan said nothing, but narrowed his eyes, his head inclined slightly, his mouth set in a hard line. Though my observation had been merely that, spoken sincerely and without malice, it was the ultimate insult to Phelan’s ego. For his own Fledgling to have already surpassed his powers was a bitter elixir to swallow, especially at a time when such abilities were so vital to our race’s survival. I decided to not aggravate the wound further, knowing how quickly the spark could turn to a raging fire with the right gust of wind.

I turned and opened the front door and walked out onto the top step. The cold night wind accosted me, whipping around me fiercely and feeding its fingers through my thin clothes. I began to shiver after the claustrophobic warmth of the crowded building. Tilting my head back, I closed my eyes, opening my senses to taste the ethers for abnormalities in the auric currents between myself and the disturbance. I

breathed deeply. The world rushed into my lungs; soil still damp from the previous night's rain, aging cedars falling into their southern autumn lull, the acrid scent of metal and wood and cement burning upon the horizon, blood, stale and fresh running in rivers from the dead and dying...I gasped and exhaled sharply, overcome by the raw truth the single breath had revealed. For a moment I stood still, savoring the lingering concoction of existence as it expired residual imprints with each new normal breath I took, each exhalation leaving a new taste upon my tongue, alternating, sour and sweet.

I located the call once again, the granule of identity I needed to isolate the cause of my fascination: Jasmine. Somewhere, off to the southeast of the estate grounds, just outside of the amagin perimeters, she struggled to survive. Every nerve within my body prickled as adrenaline surged through me at the recognition of her soul's scent. At such a distance, I could not accurately estimate her physical state, but the engulfing anxiety and sadness that radiated towards me over the miles was agonizing even as diluted as it reached me.

I whirled around to face Phelan. "It's Jasmine!" Her name escaped my lips in a frantic whisper. "She's in danger." His eyes widened and then narrowed slightly with caution. "Are you certain?"

"Most definitely," I said. "She's fled the city and is now somewhere out in the wilderness."

"Is she alone?" Phelan asked.

I turned back to listen more intently to the night, sifting through the harrowing screech of white noise to find her again. "Yes," I said, my eyes still closed. "Alone and scared." I turned back towards Phelan. "We have to help her."

Phelan shook his head, his right hand slicing through the

air definitively. “Absolutely not,” he said without hesitation.

I was aghast. “What do you mean? She has been a tried and true ally of yours for years!” I did not bring into the equation my love affair with her, for Phelan did not know the full extent of our relationship and it was, most likely, wise that he continued in ignorance. “We have a duty to protect her as she has aided our race to her peril.” I snared Phelan’s gaze and held it.

Phelan was adamant. “Believe me, I would like to help her, but we cannot chance leaving the grounds right now. The war has just begun. We need to stay here and formalize our plans before making any moves. The state of things is simply too volatile for me to allow any of us, and especially you, to take any unnecessary chances that may inevitably endanger the rest of us.”

I took a step towards him and sensed him tense, his back straightening slightly, his shoulders squaring as if readying himself for a fight. “We cannot leave her out there to die and you know, as much as I do, that that is exactly what will happen to her. There is almost nothing between the amagin and your property. If she is not killed by roaming Tyst fleets she will no doubt be killed by wild animals. Have you forgotten how fragile humans are?”

“Tynan.” He reached out and placed a hand on my shoulder. The motion startled me and I flinched slightly, still unused to the new dynamic of Father and Son reconstructing itself between us like a spider mending a web of silk, one tenuous, delicate strand at a time. “You cannot save everyone. She was a good friend and if she makes it here, or wherever it is she is heading, safely, then she will continue to be an ally. But right now, your focus must remain here, on the war and on the immediate tasks. There are unfortunate casualties in every war.”

I fell silent. My chest tightened, a thousand hissing serpents writhing in the pit of my stomach at the finality of Phelan's nihilism. Out in the darkness, miles from where I stood, the only human, the only person who had shown me any true compassion and love in this new century was fighting for her life while I stood, warm and safe within my isolated haven. Guilt, cold and toxic as lead, poisoned my heart as the seconds ticked by.

Slowly I shook my head, shrugging out of his hand, "No," I replied firmly. "I can't stand by and leave her to the will of the Fates. Not this time." I began to walk down the steps, all thoughts and concerns for Moria and Khanna suddenly vanishing from my mind in the shadow of Jasmine's dire need. "I'm going after her."

Phelan followed me, grabbing me by my upper arm and halting me sharply in mid-stride. I cut my eyes back to meet his gaze and held it steadily. The wind moaned around us, the lament of the tragedy of the world echoing sadly through the eaves of the house high above us and the sparsely lined limbs of the trees that cradled the property with a skeletal gray embrace.

"I'm going after her," I repeated icily. Energy rippled through me, bristling like barbed wire around my body. Phelan flinched and released me.

He yanked his hand away as if he had been electrocuted, rubbing the palm with the fingers of his other hand as a look of confused anger began to creep across his features. Casting a glance over his shoulder through the open doorway, he sighed heavily, realizing he could not control my actions.

"Take someone with you, then." He scowled at me, struggling not to let his resentment and anger erupt to the surface.

"No. I'm going alone. There is no need to involve

anyone else.” I shook my head, the sense of dire urgency clawing at the base of my spine, howling with desperation. Jasmine needed me. “If I’m not back within an hour, send assistance.”

Before Phelan could respond, I turned away and sped into the night in a near-invisible whisper of wind. My heart raced in my chest as I thought of Jasmine’s distress. I should not have returned for one last embrace before I set out with Malakai on our quest to find Josh and Loden. My presence in her home would have been a stain of dark knowledge that the Tyst would no doubt have tried to wring from her precious, pure soul. I cringed inside to think of what had become of her and her young brother Danny.

I flew through the dry Texas landscape, through fields and thickets of mesquite and cedar, groves of live oaks, cacti and wild grass, pushing my body to its limits. I could feel her every move as I grew closer, her agonizing pain and soul-searing anguish that stemmed from something far deeper than mere physical distress. I was incensed that Phelan would allow Jasmine to struggle after the years of loyalty she had shown the Immortals. The idea that he would turn his back on her in her time of need angered me deeply; I realized that I had hoped that Sea’s death had caused an instantaneous change in Phelan, a softening of the icy, callous shell that surrounded his soul. He had suffered the harrowing ordeal of having to sentence his very own Dark Son to death after the discovery of Sea’s treasonous participation as the sire in the Tyst’s ritual to summon the vampiric god, the Vicinus. Phelan had not only delivered the sentence, but had been forced to deal the death personally, an event which had caused him to regret each and every moment of anger and strife between himself and his Sons. It was an act no Maker should ever have to commit and one that had profoundly, permanently

altered his view of the world around him. However, the ice that had collected around his heart could not be thawed so quickly. Even such a horrifying tragedy as the death of his own Dark Child could not completely remake the vampire Phelan had turned into.

As I felt myself growing closer to Jasmine, I slowed to a human run. Miles from Phelan's estate, the weather had changed. The skies were heavy with clouds, the moon obscured by a milky curtain that dulled the potency of its light. The landscape was softer, the hillsides of mesquite and cacti giving way to gently rolling fields of wild, untended wheatgrass and Tyst-monitored cropland. I could feel Jasmine close by, somewhere within the waves of brownish green grass. All around me the night churned and sighed in time to its natural lullaby of birth, death and rebirth. From the symphony of black crickets to the long cry of a wandering coyote, the world thrived in spite of the Tyst's siege, collecting the corpses of the dead one by one to feed back into the belly of the Earth. The thundering of my heart was my anchor amidst the ocean of existence, driving me on towards my dying mortal lover.

She was close now, so close I could taste her. I walked the last few feet between Jasmine and I. The grass hissed against my clothing as it brushed me, tiny burrs catching in the fabric of my trousers as it reached out, whispering with the wind as if it had timely secrets to deliver its elemental cousin. I stopped suddenly, my eyes dropping to the ground. There, Jasmine lay curled on her side, unconscious. Her clothes, a dark brown linen skirt and loose white blouse, were soiled and ripped in places, her deep brownish red hair unbound, fanning out beneath her head. An ugly, mottled burgundy and green bruise, the size of a fist, marred her cheekbone, seeping down into her jaw. The pack she had been carrying

lay in front of her, as if she had dropped it before collapsing to the ground. She did not stir at my approach.

My breath caught in my lungs. For a moment I stood and stared down at her. My willful sprite was broken, my angel of mercy fallen. Though reason would tell me that I was not directly responsible for her injuries, that she had chosen to ally herself with the uprising long before I had become part of its fabric, I could not help but feel that I should have made a greater effort to protect her in the beginning. I had taken such great lengths to rescue and ferret away Moria, a woman with whom I shared, in truth, little more than a bizarre bloodline. Yet, the one who I would testify before the gods as my love, I had all but ignored during the most crucial of times. Knowing her loyalty to me, to the Immortals, I had used her. I had abandoned her without a second's consideration and for that I hated myself.

I knelt down in the grass beside Jasmine's inert form. Gently, I reached out and brushed away a strand of hair that rested across her face, her expression still tense with pain and anguish even in sleep. Still, she did not move. As my fingers made contact with her skin, a sharp, quick shock of sensation traveled up my arm into my heart: the tightness of her body from dehydration, the sharp pang from days of hunger, the pulsing pain of the wounds inflicted on her body and the deeper, soul-searing agony of emotional sorrow. I flinched, drawing a sharp breath between clenched teeth. She must have been on the run for some time to have made it so far from the city in the condition she was in, but there was no way for me to know. Her thoughts were too jumbled and murky. The wounds she had endured bruised deeper than mere flesh and bone.

I grabbed her bag and threw the strap over my shoulder, gathering her into my arms. The instant my hands made

contact with her body, the memories of the secret love affair we had nurtured for a year flooded through me, causing me to hang my head and pray to the gods that she would survive the night. The sweetness of the simple, unconditional love she had tended my broken soul with was the most sacred of healing salves she could have ever gifted me with and irreplaceable in the echoing cold caves of life. As I lifted her, she slumped against me like a broken doll of porcelain and hemp, her limbs hanging as if lifeless. After a moment of listening to the world around me, carefully scanning for signs that I had been followed, I stood, clutching her to my chest as if she were the angel of salvation the world itself needed, silently vowing that no harm would ever come to her again. Somewhere in the back of mind, however, I wondered just how many times I could make such a vow?

I could not save everyone, after all.

CHAPTER 5

I laid Jasmine down upon the bed as if she were made of the most fragile crystal and turned to go find Mena to tend to her wounds.

“And what do you propose to do with this one?” Phelan grabbed my arm as I tried to pass. “You cannot be responsible for everyone and everything.”

I stared at him, indignant. “This, coming from someone who placed the fate of the entire world on my shoulders?” I shrugged off his hand and continued to storm past him. “How dare you deny her this refuge?”

Phelan followed close at my heels. “Tynan, this is not the place for her. We already have too many humans in this house. We are outnumbered.”

There was a strange tension in his voice that halted me in my tracks. I turned back to face him, my brow furrowing as I locked gazes with him. “Is that fear in your voice?”

He appeared taken aback by my assumption, squaring his shoulders and pulling himself to his full height as he fiercely returned the stare. “Of course not! What kind of question is that?”

It was obvious he was lying, though. He was cornered in his own home by the humans he had allied himself with; the pure number of warm living bodies was overwhelming him, even more so than me. I felt his restless energy; he craved silence. He needed solace.

“Then you shouldn’t worry if we bring in more refugees. Face it Phelan, this is only the beginning.”

“This is not a refugee camp. It is my home and I will say who enters and who does not.” He took a step closer to me as a warning. “Do I make myself clear?”

Adrenaline surged through my veins, igniting the delicate web of power that continued to mutate and manifest each night beneath my skin. I felt my hands growing hot as if flames might suddenly burst forth from my palms, but I tempered the desire to indulge my anger.

“Yes, you make yourself perfectly clear.” The muscle beneath my right eye twitched. He knew as well as I that, in the end, I would do as I saw fit, but for now he needed to feel as if he had regained at least a modicum of control.

Phelan turned and stormed away down the candlelit hallway.

“But remember who your allies are!” I shouted after him.

He did not turn to acknowledge my statement, but I knew the words would be a barb he could not remove. Jasmine had been an integral part of the human alliance with Immortality for over a decade, pledging her allegiance to assist in the survival of the vampire race when she was merely sixteen. I could not understand his reason for rejecting her when she had nearly given her life for him. As close as I was in the Blood to Phelan, he was and would forever be an enigma I would never solve. I watched him, a wraith of white skin and long, straight, red hair walking with a tense, determined

stride until he descended the stairs.

“Tynan?”

A hand touched my arm. I jumped at the contact, whirling around to face whoever stood behind me. Mena stood in the hallway, her face frozen in surprise at my reaction to her silent approach, her hand poised in midair where it had just lain upon my arm. She watched me as if I were a wild animal, uncertain as to whether to move or remain perfectly still until I had regained my sense of control.

I drew a deep breath and steadied myself, exhaling all of my anger and frustration in a long sigh. I had been so focused on Phelan that I had not paid attention to her approach; I made a mental note of this weakness of mine, one that I would need to rectify if I were to survive this war.

“My sincerest apologies Mena,” I said quietly, running my fingers through my hair nervously, a lingering human trait I could not shake.

She tilted her head to the side, withdrawing her hand. Her smile, though small, spoke volumes of her innate, unquestioning compassion, not only for me, but the Immortal race as a whole. There was an agelessness about her, a wisdom that resonated with the deep, ancient power of lifetime, though I knew without a doubt that Mena, unlike Nahalo, was indeed human.

“It is alright.” Her eyes flickered down the hall past me. “Family is a difficult and unforgiving ocean to navigate at times.”

I nodded. “This is true.”

Deftly, she changed the subject, sensing my unease. “You needed to speak with me?”

“Yes,” I replied, surprised by her intuition once again. “There is a woman in my bedroom. Her name is Jasmine. She is unconscious, badly beaten by the Tyst and in need of

your healing abilities.”

Mena nodded. “Of course.” For a moment she lingered, watching me, her lips pursed as if she struggled not to speak. “Is there something on your mind, Mena, that you would like to share with me?” I asked carefully.

She shook her head. “No, no. I will go tend to your friend.”

I knew she was lying, but my respect for her stayed me from plucking the thought from her mind.

She began to turn away, but paused in mid-step casting a glance sideways at me. “Be careful, is all. Do not stretch your generosity too thin.” Before I could respond, she walked quickly away.

I stared after her, wondering what her cryptic and rather presumptuous words could mean. Was I the only one who thought that past loyalties should be honored? For a moment I stood in the dark hall feeling suddenly, overwhelmingly alone. Irritation bristled beneath my skin; I felt constricted, trapped in my own body and stifled by the protective walls of Phelan’s estate. I knew I could not pay heed to the questions of those around me, but the collective energy of their doubts gnawed at my soul, whittling away at the wall I worked so hard to keep intact. I could not allow myself to become distracted. Not even for a moment. Too much hung in the balance and my place in this volatile, evolving world was precarious at best. True, I had begun to carve out a position of power for myself, but Nahalo and Phelan had already established themselves as the judge and jury of our species; in a way, I was still the gladiator fighting for survival against the lions in the coliseum. For the moment I was a champion, but the next night might mean my death. Though I longed to, I knew I could trust no one. Not entirely.

With a low growl, I turned on my heel and returned

to the ground floor in search of Tiernan. I had to trust my instincts without heed to what Phelan and Nahalo, or any of the various others who scrutinized my every move, plotted and schemed. There was a war to be fought, a war that considered us all equally as possible casualties. I would act as I thought appropriate and deliver my decree as my placement in the war demanded.

As my feet left the bottom step of the staircase, a wall of barely repressed hostile energy slammed into my psyche, hot and angry. The sensation stunned me out of my reverie, nearly knocking the breath from my lungs with its potency. I looked up to see Tiernan striding towards me, his face a cold mask of determination and focus. For a moment I merely watched him, calculating the time when the invisible landmine of agitation within him would explode. When that day came, it would be a dark one, the casualties of the unfortunate fracturing of his stoic chieftain shell, many. However, I could not allow him to see that I was concerned for his state of mind. My interest in his wellbeing, for the sake of my people and his own, would only further irritate him. Lowering my gaze, I walked towards him, meeting him midway through the receiving hall.

“Just the man I was looking for,” I said.

“I have assembled a team to accompany the Tyst Queen and the child. They are awaiting your inspection.” His eyebrows raised slightly on the last word, his upper lip twitching slightly with a sneer of disapproval.

He started to walk away, expecting me to follow suit. I caught him by the upper arm, halting him in his tracks. His gaze shot back to mine, full of indignation and anger that I should dare touch him.

“Do not for one moment believe that I question your authority or your wisdom in these matters,” I said with utter

sincerity.

The statement snared his attention, a flicker of hesitation twitching across his features as he debated whether or not to listen further.

“As a course of my own actions, I have taken responsibility for Moria’s life and that of the child she has borne. The priority of her safety is truly mine alone, and I thank you, and your people, for your assistance. Please do not be insulted by my requests. I know that you do not have to help me if you do not choose.” I let go of Tiernan’s arm, having said my piece.

Tiernan’s expression softened slightly, humbled by my unexpected confession.

He nodded with a new understanding. “We are all in this together,” he muttered, the intensity of his resentment tempered by my show of graciousness. He turned, his gaze anchored on the deep red tiled floor, and continued to lead me to his awaiting soldiers.

I followed Tiernan down another hall to a wing of the estate that was rarely used until now. Over time, Phelan had expanded his home until the 20th century when he realized that no matter how grand his estate might be, he was still living in it alone with his human servants. Many of the rooms had not been touched in decades, except for the occasional dusting by the mortals he employed. Now, there was not an inch of the building that was not invaded and soiled by outside intrusion.

As we walked past rooms filled with humans and vampires in various states of preparation, passing antique furniture once covered with white sheets displayed and recklessly utilized without care for their historical significance, I understood Phelan’s apprehension over bringing anyone else into the house. He had overshot his comfort level and now

felt cornered. His place of sanctuary had been violated. He no longer felt safe.

Eyes shifted away from tasks at hand to regard Tiernan and me with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension as we passed; the weight of their expectant fear was cold and unwelcome as an early winter freeze. I found it a struggle to repel the fierce waves of emotion that rippled through the house, one after another like a continuous seismic aftershock. Deeper and deeper, I burrowed behind my mental defenses like a mole, isolating my sanity to preserve what was left of it. I would be of no use to my people or Tiernan's if I lost the battle and sank within the mire.

Tiernan turned into a room to his right. On the wall above the mantel loomed the haunting surrealistic painting *L'Ange du foyer ou Le Triomphe du surréalisme* by Max Ernst. It was the original, which Phelan had acquired late in the previous century, when times had been prosperous and the art world had thrived on the wealth of dedicated and dotting patrons.

My gaze was drawn up to the contorted figure dancing across the canvas in a maniacal blur of color that was somewhere between a cackling vulture and a court jester. One of Phelan's many bizarre paintings he had collected over the years, *L'Ange* disturbed me in a profound, yet inexplicable way, as if I feared the creature would come to life and devour me whole, my soul bleeding from its body into the canvas as an oil slick of paint and pain. The creature in the painting mocked us as it watched the world below it, the residue of its insanity tainting the air of the room with sparks of the delusional prophecy it longed to deliver through its mere improbable existence. Phelan said he felt comforted by such psychotic artistic brilliance, that it somehow made sense of everything that was inane and ludicrous in the world, leaving

him with a sensation of thoughtful peace. For me, it was the complete opposite. I shivered and forced myself to look away.

A man and a woman, both with long brown hair pulled back with strips of tanned deer skin and dressed in the deep earthen garb of the Phuree tribe, sat on the rose-colored velvet cushions of the antique couches. Another two men, one with short raven hair, the other with shoulder-length rusty blond, stood in front of a small, wooden writing desk near the window. Their arms crossed over their chests, they conversed quietly with one another in the musical intonation of the Phuree dialect as they studied a map of the old United States, occasionally pointing at locations across the now nonexistent country. Upon our arrival, the two men ceased their conversation and turned to face us. The seated individuals rose respectfully, turning to greet us with small, curt bows. I nodded my head in acknowledgement.

The Phuree warriors appeared out of place in Phelan's exquisitely decorated home, their plain, rough, almost medieval attire and long capes too barbaric for such civilized, yet ostentatious eccentricity. However, the solidity of their presence somehow anchored the madness, giving it a heavy, grounding force around which to revolve. I could only imagine what a surreal experience it must have been for them to step into a place such as this that not only had somehow escaped the ravages of the war, yet had taken on an incestuous artistic insanity in its isolation. One would never know, however, if the Phuree were uneasy here, for their demeanor and their expressions were always controlled and determined, focused only on the tasks at hand as if their new environment appeared no different from the wilderness they were accustomed to.

"Tynan," Tiernan gestured to the humans in front of the

couches, “this is Eric and Sophia. They are unparalleled in their swordsmanship, as well as their long distance marksmanship with a variety of firearms. They will be Moria’s primary escort.”

Eric and Sophia stood perfectly still, their expressions calm and unreadable as they watched us, awaiting the details of their mission. I detected no malice in them, no judgment one way or the other. Their souls were tempered in war. They were young and had been raised with no understanding of existence other than that of a world where life was fleeting and precarious. Their world was simple and clearly defined: fight for your chieftain, fight to survive. They instantly, unknowingly, gained my respect.

“Edvin and Julius have also agreed to assist us with the Queen’s transport.” Tiernan held out his hand, palm up, towards the two men studying the map. “Edvin is one of our primary scouts. He will go ahead of Eric, Sophia and the Queen to assure the roads are clear. Julius will follow behind the main group. Both of these men I would trust with my own life.”

“Only four?” I asked, rather surprised that Tiernan would not allot a larger group for the transport of such valuable cargo.

Tiernan’s eyes cut towards me. “Yes. The fewer people involved, the more quickly they can move and the less visible they will be. As I said, I would trust these people with my life.”

I was not completely convinced, but I reminded myself of my promise that I would not question his authority. “Do you have a strategy for her relocation devised yet?”

I walked over to the desk between Edvin and Julius to study the map. I felt as if I were standing on the edge of the world as I stared down at the drawn states, the two men like

day and night, Edvin with his black hair and eyes, Julius with his pale blond hair and hazel gaze.

“What am I looking at here?” I pointed to the red chalk marks on the map.

I felt the two men exchange a brief glance before Edvin answered, his voice deep and solid as an ancient oak tree. “Historically, the Tyst military launches its attacks in a series of waves that start from the east and west coastlines,” he pointed at the Atlantic and Pacific edges of the country, “and move inwards, while another force moves outwards towards the Pacific and Atlantic oceans from the center of the country. When these two lines of attack meet, the Tyst then dissipates its efforts and withdraws to more focused strategic attacks, considering their opponents are too worn out to launch any large-scale attacks of their own. Right now,” his left hand moved back to the west coast, “the first wave of Tyst should be reaching about here.” He ran his finger down the jagged border that separated the former states of Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico from Idaho, Utah and Arizona. “Which means, they are already cleared out, for the most part, of the main routes we will be traveling to get to northwest safe house.”

“Yes, but that also means that they have not reached Texas yet. You’ll have to go right through the first wave to get her out of this region.” I met Edvin’s black eyes.

“We will be diverting below the Mexico State border in order to escape the first wave of attacks.” Edvin’s finger dropped down the map below Texas.

“Mexico State?” I asked, suddenly aware of how little I had studied the massive changes to the global structure during the year since my reawakening.

“Yes?” Edvin was obviously taken off guard by my ignorance, but attempted to not sound patronizing as he

answered. “Mexico was assimilated into the North American Tystian province nearly seventy years ago. North America, Central America and South America are now considered one province under the Tyst Empire.”

“Ah...” I exhaled slowly. Every night my perception changed a little bit more. “Why is it any safer if you duck below the Texas-Mexico border?” I asked.

“There is a line of scramblers along a certain route which were installed years ago by the Phuree, and other rebel forces, which dives into the Mexican state. They are on an old path, which is still difficult for the Tyst to track because they have never discovered these devices. Whoever treads within the boundaries of the scramblers seems to disappear from Tyst satellites for a time,” Edvin replied.

“I see,” I said. “If you don’t mind me saying, the Tyst could be tracking her far more closely than any of us realize.” “I don’t mind.” Edvin’s voice was heavy and confident. I could sense that he was struggling between the desire to confront a creature he knew to be his evolutionary predator and the maintenance of the political diplomacy necessary for his people’s current agenda. However, his tone remained level, if strained, a detail I took note of, and admired. “Our peoples have been at war with the Tyst for a century and they have rarely ever deviated from their line of attack, since it has been so effective for them.”

“That would make sense,” I replied quietly.

“Once we dodge the first line of attack, we will, for the most part, be in the clear for at least a week, which will be more than enough time to reach our destination,” Julius interjected, his voice purposely lighter than Edvin’s to break the tension.

Something didn’t feel right to me. I shook my head. “That’s quite a few assumptions you’re making about the

Tyst's movements, don't you think?"

Edvin frowned. "Assumptions? I would remind you, respectfully of course, that this is a war and in war we are forced to make a certain degree of projections about the enemy's movements. We must make the best possible decisions based on our previous experiences with them. Nothing is certain."

"Yes, I understand that, Edvin. I am no stranger to wars. I have witnessed many in my long life." I turned back to face Tiernan. "But why would you only send four soldiers knowing you could quite possibly walk head-on into the Tyst armies?"

Tiernan pursed his lips as he struggled to temper his anger when what he truly wanted was to tell me to go to hell. "You insult my warriors' abilities?"

"Of course not," I said calmly, holding his gaze steady.

"These are four of my finest—"

My words clipped his as I sensed his rage beginning to boil over. "Yes, you are sending four of your finest into a terrain of immediate danger with the Tyst Queen and her infant. No matter how skilled they may be, I simply do not see how they can protect her adequately against entire legions prepared to destroy everything in their paths in the name of revenge." I folded my arms across my chest. "They are not waging a strategic war at this particular moment. Cardone is hell bent on one thing only, redeeming his scorned pride by obliterating everything and everyone remotely associated with the Phuree or the Immortals." I shook my head slowly, keeping my voice low and level. "True, he will not be able to keep this type of force up for long, but it has only been a few nights. This is as much about keeping your warriors alive as it is about protecting Moria and the baby."

"The only person the Queen is precious to is you, Tynan."

Tiernan's voice had dropped to an icy intonation, his blue eyes burning with resentment. "Cardone doesn't even know she is alive."

"You don't know that. There is no way for him to ascertain if she is alive, dead or otherwise. Same with the child. We are too well shielded here." I still could not bring myself, for some reason, to use the name she had chosen for him. "For all we know Cardone could still believe that the child is in her womb and his plan to birth the Vicinus, feasible."

"Impossible. With the way her pregnancy progressed, they would have been expecting the birth to be at the time it occurred. I think you forget what a precise and calculated experiment it was to begin with," Tiernan replied, his fists clenched at his sides.

"All the more reason to protect her. Cardone may believe that the Vicinus was reborn, which means he will be even more determined to reclaim the baby in order to redeem his twisted prize," I replied bluntly.

"Damn it! This is all because of you!" Tiernan could not contain his anger any longer. "This whole damned situation is because of you! You were supposed to kill her, not bring her back to our world to treat as some sort of hostage or refugee! You have knowingly endangered all of us with this preposterous display of what you seem to think is heroism. Phelan and Nahalo are as much to blame as you for they have coddled this lunatic dream of yours! The only person she is 'precious' to is you, Tynan. No one else in this house thinks so. Not the Phuree, not the Immortals, and I will be damned if I allow you to pass judgment on my efforts to assist you with this insanity any longer. If you are so hell bent on saving them do it yourself. Do not ask me or my people for my help again!"

Tiernan turned on his heel, his long heavy cape swirling behind him, and stormed towards the door. “Come! All of you! We are done here!” he barked.

The four humans exchanged uncertain glances, their eyes darting to me with a mixture of confusion and apology, before following their leader’s command.

“Tiernan!” I called after him.

“Take it up with Phelan!” Tiernan shouted from the hall. “You are on your own!”

I listened to the sound of their boots echoing off the floor of the hall until they faded beneath the overlying hum of the house. I leaned back against the desk behind me and placed my head in my hands.

“Damn it,” I sighed with emotional exhaustion. “Why couldn’t you have just kept your mouth shut?”

I wanted to accept their help. I needed it more than ever, but something within me simply couldn’t stop questioning every miniscule move they made, no matter what their intentions might be. Was it the crushing weight of guilt that compelled me to scrutinize every detail and alienate them until they turned their backs on me? I knew in my heart of hearts that Moria and Nodin were my responsibility, mine and mine alone. Tiernan was right. No other need risk their life for her preservation. I could not concern myself with whether or not Tiernan, Phelan or Nahalo believed Moria and Nodin’s survival to be important. My instinct asserted that they were part of something far vaster than this initial skirmish between the Phuree and the Tyst. They would be crucial to the rebuilding process after the Tyst Empire fell.

Especially Nodin. He was the product of the Empire’s ruthless desire for immortality; his heritage was beyond the preternatural or even supernatural. His soul was the result of blending the type of primordial forces that create and

destroy entire galaxies. Deeply ingrained within him was the primal demand of a species' desire for survival, a drive and passion that could rival the greatest of the gods' wraths, as I had witnessed myself, in the final moments of judgment. It was too soon to see how he would evolve, but I knew instinctively that the guidance he received as he matured was crucial. If he were to fall into the wrong hands...I shuddered to think how Cardone, or any other number of evil forces, might warp him to their demands.

However, a slick, cold sensation crawled beneath my skin, tickling the back of my mind with cruel and spiteful fingers of foreboding. I knew my actions were poisoned by more than noble intentions to spare the world from yet another critical duty. It was pure selfishness that corrupted them, a pathetic human coveting of Moria, child or no. I saw her as mine and no other's and I would be damned if I would entrust her to anyone else's guard, especially a human detail. I turned around and stared down at the map. It depicted a country that would never be again. It was merely a drawing, like hieroglyphs on a pyramid tomb, of a civilization that rose and fell, just as all great civilizations eventually do. I leaned forward, resting my weight on the desk with my palms flat against the ancient paper. For all of its corruption and greed,

I suddenly craved the false sense of security I had once experienced in the United States in the 21st century. Though in those last years before my long Sleep the country had been plunged into an economic nightmare nearly as terrible as the first Great Depression, there were still laws and order and a determined hope that sliced through the desperation. Though it had been flawed and hideously corrupt, there had been a single government and a president who had stirred the souls of the American people, at least in the beginning. Those who

had the luxury of employment went to work and drank their lattes and chatted on their Blackberries or iPhones. And those that didn't, strived to reinvent society with blood, sweat and prayers that what would emerge after the downturn would be a far more enlightened and empathetic society built on the unity derived from a common struggle. We still went home and slept in our beds. We still felt somewhat safe.

All of that had vanished. A chill rattled my soul as I wondered if, in the haze of all our impassioned cries for revolution, we had taken for granted our freedom? I had stood witness to such movements for centuries. Kingdoms overthrown by the serfs they brutalized, dictators assassinated by the individuals they imprisoned, governments toppled by the peoples they oppressed. History is inescapable and destined to repeat itself, at least where humanity is concerned. While we had been rallying against our supposed enemy, another had sneaked up behind us and slit our throats with one swift slice. If we had not been so consumed with dismantling the institutions we perceived as our downfall, then perhaps we might have been attuned to the true threat to our empire's survival, the Tyst. It was a debate that historians and philosophers would wage centuries from now as they pored over the excavation of our bones and remnants of our bizarre "technology." And perhaps I would be there to tell them the tale firsthand.

For the first time in eons, I desired to live long enough to see that age.

The intricate black lines that divided up the states on the map below me were meaningless, as eerie as a silver gelatin family portrait happened upon in an ancient steam trunk. It might as well have been the Louisiana Purchase or the original thirteen colonies illustrated upon the page, as relevant as they were to me now. However, while the state

lines might have all but disintegrated, the terrain remained the same and that was what I truly needed.

I placed my finger on the area where Phelan's mansion sat, invisible to all except those it contained, and slowly drew my finger southwest through Texas, down beneath the Mexican border and up through California. The paper hissed beneath my touch, smooth and soft as silk, releasing the faintest of scents of decay and dust. I watched the moonlight glinting off of my fingernail as it traced the western coastline north to British Columbia.

I tapped the tiny dot above the town of Langley and whispered, "I hope you are ready for new guests."

CHAPTER 6

I tried to avoid Phelan and Nahalo during the remaining hours of the evening as I worked to assemble the necessary travel items for myself, Moria, and Nodin. I did not need their hostile, selfish fears interfering with my concentration. A leaden knot clenched in the center of my chest as I moved covertly from room to room, averting my eyes from suspicious onlookers like a priest bent on a sinful agenda. I could not spare one fleeting glance leading to an intricate and messy conversation with those who thought me still tethered to their ambitions. Even the members of the Phuree I spoke to about safe house locations along the route I would take, I took special precautions to glamour. I could not chance them alerting Tiernan of my plans.

It was not that I thought Tiernan would care what I chose to do with the Queen and her child, but undoubtedly he would pounce at the opportunity to obstruct my path for the pure sake of being an impediment to my plans. While I understood his frustration, it was difficult for me to grasp how I had gone from being his savior to his enemy in a matter of

nights when I had, in all but one respect, done exactly what had been asked of me. The heart will always override reason in the end. There is only so much the psyche can bear before it crumbles revealing its reptilian base. Fight or flight. Now I was choosing to flee, though this time it was not cowardice that drove me, but a sense of duty.

My efforts to avoid questioning were successful, but it was only a matter of time before Phelan and Nahalo cornered me as I was gathering food supplies in the cellar pantry. I heard their footsteps, heavy with urgency and undisguised as they descended hastily, following the narrow hall to the room where I worked. There was nowhere for me to go and, thus, I continued rummaging through the shelves of salt cured meats, pickled fruits, vegetables and other rations cultivated and stored there. My back was turned towards the door as they entered—their distinct complicated auras immediately altering the atmosphere of the room.

I did not turn to greet them.

“What is this we hear about you insulting Tiernan and his soldiers?” Phelan’s sharp tone sliced through the thick, dusty silence of the room with its plank wood floor, limestone walls and low ceiling.

“I did nothing of the sort,” I replied gruffly as I tossed a small linen bag of shelled pecans into the canvas pack at my feet. “Tiernan did not want to help me. He never did. He is using that excuse to distance himself and his people from dealing with my situation.”

“Whatever you said has jeopardized our alliance with him. He is threatening to pack up camp and leave the estate altogether.” Phelan took a step forward and placed his hand on my shoulder, spinning me around. His touch sent an electric current of red-hot rage through me, arcing from his fingertips through my flesh.

“Then let him!” I knocked his hand away with a hard, fast blow and glared at Phelan, resisting the urge to snarl like a caged wolf. “Besides, you and I both know he won’t leave. Where would he go?”

I picked up the canvas bag by its thick nylon strap and slung it onto the wooden table in the center of the room. I stuffed the final items I had selected for Moria on the top of the overflowing contents and pulled the drawstrings closed at the top. “Give him some room and he will calm down. He is merely realizing the extent of his dependency and it’s scaring him. I am a symbol of that dependency. As are both of you.”

“Then, what of the escort he had agreed to?” Nahalo asked, his voice dark with genuine concern as he stood in the open doorway.

“There will be none.” Again, I did not look up from my work as I spoke. I slung the finished pack over my shoulder. “I’m going alone.”

“What?” Phelan spat, beginning to lose a grip on his composure. “Like hell you are! You were not supposed to go at all. Now, you think you’re going alone?”

“Do you have a better plan?” I walked around the table to avoid crossing paths with Phelan and headed for the door. “I will be gone no more than three nights. With the Phuree detail it would take more than a week. I will return after Moria and Nodin are safe.”

Nahalo remained motionless in the doorway, blocking my path. I raised my eyes to meet his golden stare.

“Why are you doing this?” Nahalo asked carefully, his quiet voice soothing as the sound of winter wind whispering through a bamboo forest.

I could feel the ripple of energy around me as his consciousness snaked out towards me, probing the peripheries

of my defensive wall for weaknesses in my psyche that would allow him to slip in and steal the information I refused to share. I narrowed my eyes, irritated that he was so open about his investigation of me.

“Because someone has to,” I replied quietly, my gaze unblinking as I held his. “You have all made it abundantly clear that she cannot stay in your protection any longer. And Tiernan would much simply turn them over to the Tyst now, or leave them out in the wilderness to die. Now, if you don’t mind, I will finalize my preparations so that we may leave at sunset tomorrow.”

Nahalo didn’t move. Phelan closed in with slow steady footsteps, stopping directly behind me. The silence was excruciating, the cool stale air too heavy in my lungs with the scent of the preserved human food around us, sweet and musty with its delicately postponed natural decay. For a moment I feared they would force me into a physical fight and that I would have to claw my way to freedom. I did not want to battle them, but I was prepared to do whatever was necessary to ensure the completion of my mission. Every muscle in my body tensed, my nerves crackling with a sudden surge of adrenaline. I could smell each of them distinctly, Nahalo’s clean mystical perfume of prairie dust and softly tanned deer skin weaving in and out of the intense spicy scent of amber and silk that snaked about Phelan’s body, rich and intoxicating. Individually, they were legends in their own right, but together they became a force of nature most would not dare to even attempt to reckon with.

“Let him pass.” Phelan spoke, his gaze cutting over my shoulder to Nahalo.

“But...” Nahalo was genuinely puzzled. His brows twitched, knitting together as his eyes cut from mine to Phelan’s and back. Nodding, he stepped back, unblocking the

doorway. A private discussion transpired quickly between the Elder and the Ancient, which I was not privy to.

I shook my head, laughing under my breath at the absurdity of it all, and stepped past them into the shadows of the hallway. For a brief moment I had begun to feel as if I were finding my place in this world, that perhaps I might be able to carve out a new identity, a clear path here amongst my fellow Immortals and the Phuree, but now, again, I questioned it. Phelan and Nahalo would never consider me an equal; I would forever be the unruly, dangerous element in their otherwise controllable universe. While I no longer gripped tight to the raging animosity I had felt for Phelan, he was still not the Dark Father I needed to guide me.

I had begun to trust Nahalo less and less since Seaфра's execution. It was excruciating to admit but initially I had fallen victim to the same thrall that the Phuree had succumbed to in his presence. They had seen only the illusion of a human mystic with powers far beyond anything their own priests and priestess had ever been able to obtain; a man with the ability to see the past, present and future. In awe, they placed their future in his hands, allowing his visions to guide their every decision, including the one to place me in such a position of power. Now, the mists had parted, the curtain lifted to reveal the lie he had hidden behind for so many years. We had all been victims of his manipulation and with that collective realization his power was slipping.

Phelan and Nahalo remained behind as I left the cellar, their voices low and hissing registers of civilized combat, which I did not care to listen to too carefully. I did not need their approval for this mission and, it seemed, they had finally learned that it was useless to obstruct me. I could not help but be surprised, though. The path of least resistance had never been one of our ways.

“Sir Llywelyn! You must come quickly!”

Mena’s frantic voice accosted my ears as I reached the top of the staircase. I looked up to see her, the folds of her robes gripped in her hands to lift it from the ground as she ran down the long hallway towards me, terror and sorrow in her eyes.

She grabbed my forearm as she reached me. “It is the woman you left in my care tonight. Her injuries have gotten progressively worse. I fear she will die soon unless you can help her.”

“What?” I stared at her, not comprehending the terrible news she delivered.

“Her wounds are internal and beyond what we can do for her here. Come!” She pulled on my arm. “We have tried everything.”

I hurried after her down the hall towards my quarters where I had left Jasmine in the priestess’ care shortly after sunset.

“I don’t understand. Her lifeforce was stable when I carried her back here. I thought her wounds were only superficial.” I dropped the canvas bag of food slung over my shoulder, letting it slip to the floor beside the open door and raced to Jasmine.

Mena approached behind, standing over me as I knelt beside the bed, taking Jasmine’s frail hand in my own. Her skin was clammy, sickly cold to the touch, her golden tan sallow and gray. I could smell the stagnating blood within the internal wounds, the festering beginnings of severe, irreversible infection from the trauma her thin human body had suffered. In the few fleeting hours of night she had taken a turn for the worse.

“We didn’t realize just how badly she had been beaten until she began to vomit blood after regaining consciousness. She needs surgery, but we are not equipped for such intricate work here. She must have been out in the elements a long time, for her wounds are far beyond the help of our energy workings. We are at a loss as to what to do.” Mena placed a hand on my shoulder. “I don’t know who this woman is, or what she is to you, but I have heard your kind has ways of healing which we humans do not?”

“It is not that simple,” I said through gritted teeth, fighting back tears.

No, don’t you die Jasmine! You can’t, my beautiful little sprite. You can’t die! I need you. I thought in a wave of terrified desperate grief.

I squeezed my eyes shut, bowing my head to hide the blood tears that had broken free to slip down my cheeks, wiping them away with the sleeve of my shirt so that I would not scare the priestesses with the display. “How long does she have?”

“Perhaps an hour, if that.” Mena’s voice was somber. “She is slipping away quickly.”

“Why didn’t you find me sooner?” I snapped as I fought back a new cascade of tears.

Mena was quiet for a moment before replying. “We tried to find you, but no one knew where you were.”

In my desire to remain hidden from Phelan and Nahalo, I had concealed myself too well, to Jasmine’s detriment. Standing, I turned back to face Mena. My eyes flickered around the room to the worried faces of the Phuree healers. “Leave me with her.”

“Should I tell Nahalo and Phelan?” Mena asked.

“No!” The word came out too forcefully, causing her to flinch. I lowered my voice. “No, there is no reason to involve

them.” I shook my head. “Just leave me until I call for you.” Phelan, whatever his reasons might be, did not want Jasmine in the house to begin with and the news of her possible death would only further anger him, if not completely impede any ability I might have of saving her. “Lock the door behind you and wait outside. Whatever you hear, do not enter until I unlock the door. Stand guard and do not let anyone enter.”

She nodded, touching my arm again briefly with a mothering sympathy that still confused me. For a human to adopt one of our species without fear or prejudice so readily was difficult for me to comprehend. Few besides Jasmine had ever had that ability. However, at the moment, I found myself eternally grateful for the softness and subtlety of her actions. I watched as the priestesses left the room, the swish of their long, rough linen robes against the hard wood floors strangely soothing and yet chilling as if it were the collective whisper of the Fates.

As the door closed, the tears I had been holding back slipped unheeded from my eyes once again. I turned back to the bed and sat on the edge, paralyzed by a sickeningly tight coil of dread. I knew what I had to do, but the idea caused the blood to turn to ice in my veins. There was a reason I had never considered turning Jasmine, making her my permanent companion in the Darkness, despite hearing her desire to be with me in her soul every time we lay together. The mere idea of the mortal warmth leaving her skin, of her innocence of the true violence and death our species was mired in being shattered, was unbearable. Yet, now I was faced with the painful decision I had prayed I would never have to make: make her an Immortal or allow her to die, as was every human’s blessed right.

I leaned forward, taking her hand between my own, until my lips were beside her face. “Jasmine? Can you hear me?”

The sound of my voice stirred her slightly, her bloodshot eyes, sunken and bruised, opened just enough to see me. “Tyman?” My name escaped her lips, speckled with flecks of blood, with wonder as if she was dreaming. “They told me I’m dying.” She closed her eyes again with a ragged sigh. “I’m sorry...”

I pressed my lips to her cheek, holding back a sob. “No. I am the one that has failed you. I should have not left you behind in the amagin. I should have protected you.”

I pulled back, stroking the damp tendrils of her long hair from her forehead. I knew she would not ask for the Dark Gift, for Phelan had warned her against making such a dangerous and forbidden request long ago.

I can't let her die! I thought selfishly as I watched her chest rise and fall with shallow, struggling breaths that rattled in her throat. *I can't live without her!*

“Jasmine? I need you to stay conscious for a while longer.” I stroked her face again, turning it towards me to pull her attention back from the dream world.

“I love you,” she whispered, opening her eyes again. “I know I’m not supposed to say that to you, but you need to hear it before I go.”

My breath caught in my throat. I closed my eyes and bowed my head as my world felt as if it were trapped in the hollow, yet profound spaces between the final falling grains of hourglass sand. Her confession gripped my heart, chasing away any doubts I might previously have gathered about making her a vampire. I shook my head. “No. You’re not going anywhere. Not if you don’t want to.”

Her brow twitched, furrowing slightly with confusion.

“I need you to give me permission to save you from this death. I need you to tell me if you desire to become one of us.” I spoke the words I had never spoken to anyone in all

my long years as a vampire. “If you say yes, you will remain with me forever. You will never grow old. You will never die. You will be my Fledgling, my vampire companion for all eternity. Do you understand what this means? It can never be undone.”

Her eyes widened with a strange fascination and fear now that she was faced with answering the very question she had longed to hear for the year we had been intertwined in each other’s lives. She hesitated for a moment as she considered the offer I was placing before her. After that moment, our spirits would be entangled forever, her blood within me and mine filling her body, my DNA redefining each cell that encased her soul. It was the ultimate rebirth from which I would emerge her mother and her father, her teacher and lover, her captor, as well as her liberator from the shackles of mortality, but also the warden of her eternal prison of death and darkness.

Slowly, she nodded with the last of her fading energy. “Yes.” The word was a breeze of a ghost through a church, soft and mournful. “Yes,” she repeated. “I want to stay with you...”

“Are you certain?” I asked again, fearful that her dread of death colored her understanding of the permanency of her agreement.

She closed her eyes and sighed, her face peaceful in a way I had not seen in a long time and for a moment I held my breath, terrified her heart would cease to beat then and there. Jasmine opened her eyes again, turning her gaze up to meet mine full of contemplative resolve. “I am,” she replied simply.

I closed my eyes and drew a deep breath, drawing up the strength from my core to prepare myself. It was a wretched thing to have to present such an irreversible decision to one

on the brink of death when there was not a moment more for consideration. But I had listened to her silent prayers for a year, and now I would deliver them into fruition. I knew the honesty and depth of her love, not only for me, but for life itself. However, I had never played the role of Maker though I had mentored and fostered many a wayward lost Fledgling in my lifetime. Before Jasmine there had been other lovers, both human and vampire, but none I would have ever considered making a permanent companion throughout the ages. I had a vampiric family and did not feel the need to add to its warped folds. Even now, if there had been any other way to save Jasmine, I knew I would have hesitated from performing the change, but there was none. And, selfishly, I could not bear to let her go, not this way.

Carefully, I crawled up onto the bed, straddling Jasmine's broken body as it lay beneath a quilted blanket of deep cornflower blue. Candlelight warmed the room, spreading its golden glow over the bed, softening the swollen cuts on her beautiful face. She stared up at me as I bent forward, slipping one hand beneath her neck to lift her slightly from the pile of bloodstained pillows. She gasped with pain at the movement. I stared deep into her eyes, now wide and alert with a final surge of adrenaline; her heart beat fiercely beneath my palm, the trembling of her body's agony translating up through my skin, through my arm to my heart as if a broadsword were slowly sliding through my ribs as I tried to absorb some of her pain.

"I would do this for no other," I said as I watched her, "and I will never do this for anyone ever again."

Before hesitation could undo my decision, I sank my fangs into her neck, plunging them deep past the tendon and muscle to puncture the thick artery below. Distantly, I heard her gasp, unable to scream in the initial flood of

excruciating pain that was quickly drowned by the illusory sense of euphoria that exploded through her mind like fireworks, the numbing orgasmic embers fluttering down individually, glittering like fireflies against the encroaching darkness of death. My mind sank into a blur of sensation and imagery pulled from her own subconscious: her life as a child growing up in the amagin, the brutal murder of her father and tortuous rape of her mother at the hands of the Tyst militia in a raid, her introduction to the Immortals, her life with me as her lover. I consumed her memories along with her lifeforce, rich with mortal pain, bitter sorrow and the seductive determination to seek truth and honor in a world destined to self-destruct. Indeed, I fell in love with her more and more with each draught that passed over my tongue, her obsession with me becoming my own for her. However, a shadow obliterated the moment of rapture as the last of her memories roared into my mind.

As if transported to the very moment, I stood a ghostly witness as the Tyst burst into her home and dragged her screaming and kicking into the hallway while they ransacked the rooms. When nothing was found, they began to beat her, over and over again with fists and batons, dragging her from the building, tossing her into a truck with other unfortunate human souls that cowered at the very sight of the doors opening, their faces and limbs as bruised and broken as Jasmine's. With horror I watched helplessly as she, thought dead by the soldiers, was tossed from the back of the vehicle by the side of the road outside of town, along with other unconscious bodies. As she came to, she struggled to her feet and began the long trek out into the wilderness, uncertain of anything except her desire to flee the city.

I struggled to bring her to only the very brink of death without severing that last thread tethering her to the world

of the living. I knew if I killed her I would not be able to live with myself. As if clawing my way from a pit of drying concrete, I forced myself to pull away from the wound I had inflicted, throwing my head back and panting as my heart thundered with a sick jubilation, flooded with the living blood.

I looked down at my horrifying work; Jasmine lay, her head at an odd angle, neck ripped open with two massive puncture wounds. Her eyes were open, staring into the shadows on the far side of the room beyond the candlelight, her skin a sickly gray. I knew she lived. I was linked with her now through blood and memories. I could feel the shuddering of her lungs struggling for breath. I rolled back my sleeve and pulled my fangs, still glistening with her blood, across my wrist, slicing deep against the veins with a grimace at the sharp pain. It would be only moments until my body began to knit the wound closed. Quickly, I turned her head back and parted her mouth, pressing the wound against her lips so that the blood rushed into her. I leaned forward, staring into her eyes, searching for the flicker of life there that I knew still existed.

“Drink, Jasmine. Drink!” I whispered feverishly. “Stay with me.” I could barely breathe, so terrified that I had botched the process in my clumsy first attempt.

She twitched, the subtlest of convulsions, her eyes widening and glistening as a new sheen of tears wet them with a frantic struggle for life. Her mouth tried to affix to the wound in my wrist, but she was still too weak to reach up. I slipped my other hand beneath her head and assisted her, watching with fascination as the gray pallor began to melt from her skin, like a snake skin shedding, like wax melting from a candle, the gray blending to a stark pale white, the once sweet golden tan gone forever from her human flesh. I

could feel the wound closing in my wrist and pulled my arm away to reopen it with my fangs, emptying a fresh stream of blood into her mouth until I too began to feel weak and dizzy from the transfer. I collapsed beside her, yanking my wrist away out of fear she might take too much.

It is done.

I lay next to her, my arms wrapped about her body as it began to shake and convulse uncontrollably, as the new blood took hold of her like a demonic possession. I buried my face in the bed and held on to her, praying as memories of my own transformation came rushing back to me. Jasmine whimpered in painful confusion as her body covered in a fine film of blood sweat. I prayed silently, as if I thought she might explode and take me with her into the netherworld, though I knew it was only a matter of moments before the transformation was complete. Not only was she receiving vampiric Blood, but Blood that had been altered and empowered by the transfusion of an Ancient's own essence, which would quicken the process exponentially. The overlapping scents of blood and candle smoke were suddenly brutal and wretched, smothering me in my weakened state and causing me to feel all the more putrid for the decision I had made to condemn her to my world. The joyous obsession and emphatic love faded with the rough touch of reality, leaving me cold and questioning.

As her body stilled its sporadic convulsions, her whimpering moan subsiding to a deep rhythmic purring as her heart settled into its new pattern, I lifted my head from the mattress and turned to look at her. She stared up at the ceiling, her eyes wide and wondering. I knew the look, the terrified obsession with every single second of those first breaths in the new skin of a vampire. As humans we forget that brilliant wonder we experienced as newborn infants, joyous

and terrifying when each inch of the newly revealed world was unblemished and undiscovered. As we are rebirthed in the skin of a vampire we are given that opportunity again.

I remembered suddenly, with a mix of regret and longing when Immortality was still a sweet, amazing blessing. I hesitated to interrupt Jasmine's state of bliss wanting her to be able to linger there as I had once done. Slowly, I sat upright, my arm drawing back from its protective grasp around her torso, and stared down at my beautiful sprite. I was unable to process the new creature I saw lying upon the bed. She was, in essence, the Jasmine I had fallen in love with, but different in all of the ways I had ever dreaded—cold and pale and perfect as only a vampire could be. Yet, a strange part of me felt oddly victorious, a primal possessive instinct that I could only identify as a vampire's warped desire to reproduce, to foster new life in a world where death was our closest identifier. I had never known I would feel such a way. She was mine. Completely utterly mine...forever.

I shivered.

I studied her, wondering for a moment if she had perhaps lost her mind in the process. She was so quiet, still, but as I reached out to her mind, threading gentle tendrils of my own consciousness through hers, I was met with only the familiar elated ramblings of a freshly birthed Fledgling vampire. Jasmine turned her gaze towards me, gradually pulling herself into a seated position with an eerie awkwardness as she rediscovered her own limbs infused now with a dazzling, unique strength and solidity. She moved close to me until our faces were mere inches from one another. Gradually, I too rose to kneel upon the bed in front of her, meeting her gaze steadily as she studied the man she had loved as if he were suddenly a stranger to her.

The stale rancor of infection and death was gone from

her breath, replaced by a strange sweetness like aged leather and paper. I remained stark still, the tightness in my chest merciless as I struggled to embrace this new being before me. A foreign emotion akin to fear held me hostage. Her eyes roamed over my features, her hand moved up to run her fingers over my cheeks and nose, lips and chin, twining through my hair as if it were the first time she had ever laid eyes on me.

She began to speak, blood tears already forming at the edges of her eyes as she struggled to find the right words.

“Shhhh...” I hushed her with a whisper and pulled her against me in a fierce embrace.

“Thank you,” she breathed into my shirt with a shuddering sob.

I shook my head. “That is the last time I think I will hear those words from you.”

She pulled away, reaching up with both hands to cup my face. Her flesh was cool and smooth like a river stone against my own. I could feel her hunger coursing through her, a magnetic frenetic energy that arced like lightning through her cells. I was suddenly mesmerized, my momentary revulsion of the monster I had made of my love vanishing as her passion became my own. Through the exhaustion and dismay, clarity emerged as I realized my love for her, while now confused and tortured in this precarious moment, would always run far deeper than the vessel her soul was carried in. The closeness of the feline grace of her pale, taut body, glittering as if misted in fine red sandstone dust as the blood sweat dried, made my heart race. I wanted her, not in the tender sensual escapist way I had sought out her sanctuary before, but savagely. Gone was the taboo distance that had separated us as mortal and vampire; we were now of the same species, the same make and mold. The knowledge that

she would now experience me, us, in the same way I had once savored her body thrilled me in a way I had not thought possible. I had had Immortal lovers before, but never like this, never as their Maker.

Excitement and fear danced in her eyes as she sensed the wave of arousal rising up within me. No doubt she could feel the energy burning beneath my skin, weaving out through my aura to lace through hers, drawing her hypnotically inwards. I placed my hands around the narrowness of her waist and pulled her against me. Fiercely, I kissed her as if it were the very first and last kiss I would ever give. The contact of her lips against mine caused me to shiver, silken as rose petals and just as sweet. I felt my fangs elongate slightly as my tongue explored hers, her fingers making quick work of the buttons on my shirt and the clasp of my pants to slip beneath, nails etching delicate illustrations upon my chest and back. As we kissed, her hands explored every inch of my body like a blind woman finally understanding Braille, wanting desperately to communicate her every desire to me. I sighed into her mouth, my eyelids fluttering as I longed to drink in the very breath she breathed as the world beyond the bedroom chamber evaporated into a dream.

My hands slid down over the delicate curve of her hips, slipping under the thin material of the shift she wore and down between her legs. Jasmine moaned as my fingers explored her, slipping inside her to ignite her newfound passion to an even greater intensity. I could only imagine the magnificent surreal sensation of my touch upon her, within her now so soon after leaving humanity behind. All that she had ever experienced as a human woman would stand a pale shadow in her memory compared to this. Tonight she truly would become my goddess.

Cupping her bottom with both hands I pulled her up to

straddle my lap, entering her aggressively, unable to contain myself any longer. Jasmine cried out, her body quaking intensely. Weaving my hands up through her hair, I pulled her head back roughly with a low growl and bit down savagely on her neck as she moved against me. Her nails now clawing at my shoulder blades until warm rivulets of blood trickled down my spine until I began lose control completely as our bodies climbed towards climax, so intertwined as to be mistaken for one entity in our energy.

I threw my head back, blood dripping down my chin as an animalistic howl escaped my throat to match Jasmine's own shuddering, sighing exclamation. Shivering uncontrollably as wave after electric wave coursed through my body, I clung to her, pulling her so tightly against me that our hips might fuse forever, our hearts to become one organ between our two souls. Burying my face in her neck where the passionate wounds I had just inflicted were already rapidly closing, I breathed in the deep, organic musk of our blended bodies beneath the coppery perfume of newly spilt Immortal blood. Jasmine was unusually silent, her cheek resting peacefully against the side of my head as she ran her fingers gracefully through my hair as if it were made of the finest spun silk.

"This is the way, in my heart, I knew it always could be," she whispered. "This is the way it should be."

"If only, if only we never changed," I mumbled into her collarbone, not wanting to release her for fear of the world crashing back into me, ruining this perfect moment of peace I had found.

"But we don't, do we?" There was a strange confusion in her voice as if she were struggling with the newfound concept of what she had agreed to become.

I pulled away from her slightly to look into her eyes. I smiled a small, sad smile. "Not on the outside. But

everything and everyone changes. That is the one constant in the universe.”

She tilted her head to one side, studying me. I could tell she was resisting the urge to touch my face again, to explore me as she would soon explore the world with feverish curiosity. On the periphery of my senses, reality was inching closer like starved hyenas. No matter how I longed to remain there lost in the oblivion of our union, I knew I must quickly carry on with the evening’s tasks before the night was completely lost to us.

“I love you,” she whispered, trying to smile through the static of returning apprehension she sensed clustering around me once again.

I closed my eyes and sighed, pulling her close for one last kiss. “I know,” I said quietly before our lips touched. “I love you too,” I confessed, though the declaration caused the heaviness to return to my soul as if it donned a dull gray cape of steel. For all of my devotion to her, I simply could not release the guilt of making of her a slave to time, a daughter of eternity.

How could four words describe such a tragedy?

Letting her go, I rose and dressed, not only my body but also my heart, and went to search for the priestesses.

CHAPTER 7

“This must be kept a secret until I return.” My gaze remained anchored on Jasmine as I spoke to Mena. The Phuree priestesses crowded round the bed carefully, cautiously stripping the soiled bedding and removing Jasmine’s dirty garments. Naked, two priestesses gently bathed her with a cloth and basin of fresh water as if she were a goddess. And she was, if only to me.

“A secret?”

I could feel Mena’s gaze hard and hot on the side of my face as she stared at me with disbelief. I was pushing her trust of me a little too far. It was asking too much of her and her people to disguise something so blatantly obvious.

“Forgive me, but how do you suggest I explain her transformation to the others?” Mena’s voice was filled with the iron strength usually disguised behind her customary earthen softness and grace.

“You asked me to save her as only I knew how. If you did not want this responsibility, perhaps you should have let her die,” I snapped quietly so that Jasmine would not be disturbed by my words.

Mena was silent for a long moment. “My apologies. That is not at all what I meant. My disrespect is inexcusable.” She fell into a silence plagued by the pressure of all she longed to say.

I said nothing.

“How long will you be gone?” Mena asked quietly.

I pried my gaze away from Jasmine to meet Mena’s, wrestling to anchor my short temper in my weakened state. I needed to retreat before the sun rose, to hurry out to find sustenance elsewhere outside the Daray estate parameters.

“A few nights, no more. I will enlist Tatsu and Lillian to assist you until I return. There is not time for me to explain this turn of events properly to Phelan without there being massive consequences on my part.” I held her gaze, as she impressively did mine. “Believe me when I tell you I intend not to leave her here too long without my protection. She is my charge now. But I must tend to the relocation of Moria and Nodin first.” My stomach churned and tightened with the stress of the conflicting responsibilities.

“Sir Llywelyn, I know nothing of how to care for your people. You’re telling me that she is one of the Immortals now? A...vampire?” There was an uncertainty in her tone that I had yet to hear before, her usual strength faltering in this uncharted territory. Her gaze flickered to Jasmine, now clothed in a fresh shift of rough white linen from the Phuree. She stood marveling at her own arms and hands, twisting and turning them in the candlelight as if they were constructed of shards of glittering crystal.

I sighed, wanting to run screaming like a banshee to the nearest wall and place my fist firmly through it. However, I remained, stoic, swallowing each wave of poisoning emotion painfully, hoping one day for an overdose that might kill me. But did I not now have something new to live for? Or had I

also thought that earlier in my battle for Moria and Nodin? I knew they were both reasons why I would continue on, to continue to rally in this war that was not mine and would never truly be.

“I am not asking you to care for her, only to help me preserve the secrecy of her transformation from the rest of the house to the best of your abilities. Try to stay your distance from her. She is new to this skin and will be impulsive. Let her explore the room, and talk to her if she asks questions. She knows her circumstances and, hopefully, her reason will take hold soon. But she will be hungry in these first nights and until she learns to control her hunger, she will be dangerous.” I looked away from my Fledgling, so beautiful and surreal dancing with her new body in the golden glow of the candlelight, to meet Mena’s furtive gaze.

“I’m so sorry to place this burden on your shoulders.” I shook my head again running my hands through my hair, noticing that the cuff of my right sleeve was stained a darker shade than the original black material. “I simply couldn’t let her die. She means too much to me...” The last sentences I spoke were more to myself than to Mena.

I walked away from Mena. A few of the younger priestesses lingered behind her, hesitantly watching the goings on of the room with fascination. What they witnessed now surpassed their earthly teachings of magic and myth, of healing and communion with the elements and the deeper rhythms of the universe. What they cautiously, respectfully observed was a merging of the worlds they had worshipped where life and death transposed themselves simultaneously with a euphoric random purposefulness that made Heaven and Hell seem as archaic as prehistoric cave drawings. It was as close to the birth of a goddess as they would ever be privy to. Their silence was breathtakingly beautiful to me as

I approached Jasmine. The devil in me retreated in the wake of this emerging moment of Creator and Maker. I reached out to her with extended arms and she halted her haunting ballet of reincarnation to run to me, throwing herself at me with a strength that nearly knocked the wind from my lungs. "I love you," she said again with a small giggle wanting nothing more than to say those three words enough in her new liberation.

I could not help but smile as I closed my eyes, savoring the moment as if it could last an eternity, cradling her as if she were the most precious creature in existence. Silently, I prayed that she could not sense the fear lingering within me. However, I knew that in her elation, the idea of separation from me was as far and fleeting from her mind as the idea of mortal death. I pulled away from her slightly, staring down into her exquisite face, so familiar and yet so absolutely alien to me now, as if I were experiencing a moment of *déjà vu*. She started to speak again, those same three words, as if they were the only three words she remembered from her mortal life. I placed my finger against her lips, silencing her before the phrase lost its meaning for me, for us too soon in our reunion in Immortality.

"I have to leave you now."

"No!" she whispered, her eyes widening with wild incomprehension. "No, you said forever!"

The fierce desperation in her tone, the fear that shook her suddenly, resonating from every pore was shocking to me. I frowned, stunned for a moment by the transformation in her demeanor from the fount of strength and resilience I had been drawn to, like a firefly to a lamplight, to the terrified, trembling creature in my arms. I struggled to form words.

"I will return, I promise, but I have an urgent commitment I must attend to first." How could I explain everything to her

so quickly, that of my connection to Moria, of the son I had somehow fathered, how their lives now rested in my palms? “I was not expecting to have you in my care as a new vampire so soon, if ever,” I said, hoping my honesty was not too brutal. “You are my responsibility now. I know that I must be the one to guide you in your new life. And so, you must trust me when I say I will fulfill my duties as your Maker. It will simply have to be a little while longer, I’m afraid.” I could see that the terminology I used was lost on her as she struggled with the surge of separation anxiety before I had even left her embrace.

“Please don’t go.” She grabbed hold of my hand with a strength I had never felt before in her body, her grip absent of the sweet warmth I had grown to crave like a drug before. I stared down at her hands, wrapped frantically around my own, and hesitantly closed my fingers own around hers, overlapping them with a poetic tension like roots interweaving from an ancient Joshua tree. I pulled one hand away, threading it through her hair to pull her forehead to my lips.

“No fear,” I whispered, praying the suggestion might work as it had upon her in her mortal lifetime.

She was immune to my persuasion now. I gritted my teeth and exhaled.

“What?” She pulled away with confusion. “No fear? What do you mean?”

I released her, a strange restless anxiety rising in my chest like a sailor standing at the bridge of his ship watching an encroaching storm. The intense crazy attraction I had held for her as a human was rapidly fading as the reality that she was now my charge sank deep into the marrow of my bones. Perhaps I had dreamed that such a moment would be romantic and surreal, that the time after the change between

a Maker and their Fledgling would be like falling in love for the very first time; crazy and impassioned and all-consuming. It was none of those things though. Was this how Phelan had felt for me in those first few nights; that I was no longer an alluring mystery full of the paradoxes of life and death, of everything excruciating and blissful in one deep inhale of the salt of our skin, but suddenly another cold aspect of his reality, another responsibility he would be enslaved to for all eternity?

I certainly did not remember those first few nights as such, but then I had been a new vampire completely and utterly in love, as Jasmine was now, with the world around me. I had been fascinated by every molecule of reality and as ecstatically enamored with my own heartbeat, which seemed so perfectly timed with that of the Earth itself, as with the tide of the ocean and phases of the moon. It had not seemed that he had treated me with such disdain as I was beginning to feel towards Jasmine, such an overwhelming need to enforce order and rule as if dealing with a young child, but then, he and I had not faced such a dire set of circumstances in that time.

Combing through the thick tarantula cobwebs of Adian's memories, the Ancient vampire whose past I had consumed with his death and obliterated my own identity more and more with each passing year, I had the fleeting recollection of the time when I had been newly incepted into the Blood. I wanted the memory; I wanted the details like a drowning man wants air. However, all I could grasp were impressions and suggestions of moments that I could not separate from fantasy. Moments lying amongst long waving grasses on a moonlit hillside in Scotland, of long talks about the relevancy of existence beside streams in Ireland with a gentler, kinder Phelan and my Immortal best friend Seaфра, seemed as

surreal and sweet as a drug-induced hallucination. Hundreds of years had passed since those first nights. Since then my fragile psyche had undergone one harsh transformation after another, first with the Blood and then with my battle with Adian only to be followed by my resulting psychotic breakdown and social exile from the Immortal world. Who was I to say that I had not perhaps lacquered those early memories with a fine sheen that was instinctive, to keep me from slitting my wrists on the broken shards of my past? Did our own memories not have the capacity, with time, to eliminate everything except the extremes? Was what we were left with in the end only the best and worst of our own existences?

What if none of it had ever happened at all? The implications were crushing and, thus, I shoved down the thoughts into the shadows of my soul, yet another profound question I would contemplate at some later date. My heart could not exert the will to wrestle with such painful possibilities whilst in such a weakened state.

“I will come back before dawn, tonight,” I said to her, peeling her hands away from me. Before I released her entirely, I captured her gaze and said in an ironclad tone, “Do NOT harm anyone in this room. Do I make myself clear?”

She nodded emphatically, though I could see her fighting back tears. Gone was the delicate, aloof sensuality with which I had once approached her, lifting her out of the grit of her mortal existence and allowed her an otherworldly escape. I could see in her eyes that she was quickly coming to terms with the fact that she was now part of my world.

I was no longer merely her fantasy, her daydream. Jasmine was beginning to understand that she was a vampire.

* * *

I returned Jasmine into the care of the Phuree priestesses and left the room in search of Tatsu and Lillian, the only two allies I truly trusted, if “trust” was even a word in my vocabulary anymore. Encasing my soul in a sheath of psychic ice, I passed the estranged, speculative glances of vampires and humans alike as if in slow motion. I knew they could sense something profoundly different in me, the gait of my step, the heaviness of my aura, the determination of my gaze to remain disassociated from my surroundings. They stayed their distance, moving to the far side of hallways and retreating into chambers instinctively, their gazes cutting away nervously to the ground as if witnessing a tragedy they did not want to be entangled in.

As I reached the end of the hall where it met the balcony overlooking the ground floor, I grasped the burnished metal railing and closed my eyes, carefully sending out a thin tendril of my conscience through the house so as not to alert Phelan or Nahalo. I was still amazed that I had managed to keep Jasmine’s inception a secret thus far. I had entirely expected either one of the powerful Immortals to charge in at any moment and tear me away from her, beating me to the ground while they kept her from her new vampiric destiny. Yet those angry cries had not come and still they remained silent, a testament to my increasing abilities to obscure and alter reality about myself, as well as the ones I chose to take into my care.

I sensed Tatsu and Lillian on the rooftop of the building. I opened my eyes and frowned. An odd place for them to be, but perhaps they simply longed to escape the increasingly crowded confines of the estate. Quickly, I walked to the end of the hall to the doors leading to the balcony. Glancing up at the lookout platform built above. I became distinctly uneasy as if I were invading a very private moment.

Tatsu? Lillian?

I stared out over the landscape of rolling black hills dotted with the shadowy skeletal forms of mesquite and cedar trees. The night was still and cold, the wind barely more than a breeze even at the height at which I stood. I sniffed the air, taking the breath in my mouth and tasting it for the smoke of new fires, the residual acrid bitterness of twisted metal and burnt flesh. From this angle I could see on the horizons the rows of blazing orange and yellow had shifted, less intense than the first couple of nights and spreading outwards from the amagins into the surrounding smaller towns as the Tyst began their detailed interrogation of the remaining farms, all Tyst owned and run.

They would ferret out any and all that seemed even remotely suspicious or sympathizing in their search for the Queen. I pulled deep within myself, sealing up fissures that had begun to open after giving so much of myself in the making of Jasmine. Though a sick curiosity drove me to reach out to the world to understand the extent of the suffering inflicted upon it, I knew I could not bear the weight of it at that moment. It would only be my own twisted self-deprecating desire for pain to embrace any of the world's suffering aura now; I could not afford to indulge my demons, not until I had regained my strength.

A subtle breeze stirred the air behind me, accompanied by the feline soft sound of feet quietly touching the wood platform a few feet away.

“Yes?” Tatsu's strange accent, a musical, sensuous blend of the various European and Asian countries he had inhabited, hissed across my ears.

Slowly I turned around. Tatsu and Lillian stood behind me. Tatsu stared at me, unblinking, his exotic features and delicately pale olive complexion barely masking his obvious

annoyance. My eyes shifted to Lillian; she quickly looked away, running her hand through her tousled blond hair, smoothing it nervously. Though I was not her Maker by Blood, Lillian had always treated me with a respect befitting such a station. Tonight she appeared like an adolescent in fear of disapproval, though for what I could hardly imagine.

“My apologies for the interruption,” I said quietly, my gaze shifting to the closed French doors behind them as I briefly scanned for any glimmer of awareness from the old ones below.

Folding my arms over my chest, I stared at them again for a moment in knowing silence. More than any of my other fellow Immortals, I had come to trust Tatsu and Lillian in a way I had never thought possible. Lillian, I had always held a soft spot for in my heart. She was my Irish angel, my romantic symbol of innocence and sweetness in our dark incestuous vampire world. No matter what she did or said, I knew it would take the most heinous of sins for me to retract my opinion of her. Tatsu though, was another story entirely.

Up until a few weeks prior, Tatsu and I had not been able to remain in the same room for more than an hour without coming to blows. In the years in which I combed the Earth in search of vampiric spiritual enlightenment, cultivating hordes of followers to my doctrine of Preternaturalism, Tatsu had stood back, adamantly refusing to partake in my disillusionment. He had heckled and howled viciously at my youthful fanaticism and in the end he had simply vanished, turning his back, in large part, on the Immortal world that continued to associate with my ideals.

I had never dreamed that, one day, Tatsu would become one of my most trusted allies. When Phelan and the Phuree had drafted me into their scheme to overthrow the Tyst Empire, Tatsu had been the first to balk at Phelan’s fanatical

plans and extend a hand of peace in my direction. He realized now that I had fallen from grace, that there was far more to me than the false, flawed prophet of the past two centuries. And he, the aloof, sophisticated international prince, had finally been tethered by a truly dire responsibility. There was a profound strength in the humility found when one is stripped of their identity.

“What do you need?” Tatsu asked, keeping his tone controlled and low; he could sense my heightened sense of urgency and secrecy, though his own annoyance was more than evident in the tension of his jaw and rigidity of his stance.

“A favor,” I replied quietly, taking a step away from the railing towards the both of them. “A very urgent favor.”

I reached out and pulled Lillian close against me with one arm in a fatherly embrace, sensing that she was uneasy and uncertain that I might disapprove of her sudden closeness to Tatsu. She buried her head in my shoulder silently, childlike. Tatsu watched me curiously, but without animosity.

He nodded. “It must be important. The shield around you is as thick as tar.”

“Come with me.” I began to walk towards the doors, Lillian still close against my side, her arms wrapped about my waist. As my hand touched the doorknob, I paused. “Do not let any of the others in the house know that you are with me.”

Lillian tensed at my side, but I felt her nod into my shoulder with agreement.

“Of course,” Tatsu said, in a tone that suggested that I need not ever ask such a thing of him.

We sifted through the hallway like wraiths of light and shadow. The corridor was strangely devoid of activity as if the others had somehow intuited our approach. My heart

thundered in my chest, electrified with a mixture of terrified anticipation of how my allies would respond and an absurdly egotistical pride of my sweet, beautiful creation. In another time, in another place Jasmine would have been my goddess and I would have lifted her upon an altar and worshipped her and she would have returned the gesture as I sat beside her, an infallible alabaster god in her eyes. We would have been perfect and unified and the epitome of beauty and strength. I would have taught her everything I had learned in my long years upon the Earth. I would have found in her the virginity of soul I needed to resurrect my faith in the dead beliefs I had once clung to. She would have been my High Priestess in Immortality. The outcomes of the possible were infinite, but here we were in a world so far from the ideal that it was beyond tragic. It was simply sad. But it was all we had.

I opened the door to the bedroom and all motion within ceased. The Phuree priestesses halted their movements about the room, looking up with a desperate fear of who dared to enter. I was surprised and somewhat angered to find the door unlocked. Mena quickly stepped into place before me, blocking my way to the room. Her movement surprised me, the agility preceding her apparent mortal age. I stared at her for a moment. The question of whether she was fooling me with a mortal guise as Nahalo had once done, scampered across my mind. However, I knew it was merely my own paranoia that spurred such ideas.

Mena exhaled. “Oh, thank the gods.” She nervously glanced over my shoulder at Tatsu and Lillian. “They’re here to help?”

I nodded. “Your assistants may leave now, but I would like for you to stay since Jasmine will also be in your care after tonight. The four of us have much to discuss and there is little time left tonight.”

Mena quickly ushered the other priestesses out of the room, closing the door quietly after them. Tatsu and Lillian stood, frozen with confusion, mouths slightly agape as they watched Jasmine who stood at the window intently studying the weave of the heavy green drapes as if it lived and breathed in her hands.

“What have you done?” Tatsu whispered.

My eyes cut towards him, narrowing slightly. Drawing a deep breath I forced the emotion down, knowing the validity of his question. “She was going to die,” I said, my voice heavy and level.

“Does Phelan know about this?” Tatsu asked, still staring wide eyed at Jasmine as if he were watching a leopard prowling through a jungle.

“No. And he mustn’t until I return.” I walked over to the bed and took a seat on its edge.

The movement captured Jasmine’s attention. Dropping the drape she turned and ran to the bed, jumping upon it and throwing her arms about my neck in a fierce embrace. Kissing the side of my face she settled down next to me, wrapping her arms around my waist and leaning her head on my lap like a cat. She seemed oddly oblivious to Tatsu and Lillian’s presence.

“Return? From where?” Lillian asked, confused. “Where are you going?”

The weakness of blood loss was making me lightheaded, the animal inside me clawing desperately in starvation, but I forced myself to focus. I realized suddenly that they had not been privy to the previous night’s conversation. The night had progressed so quickly I had not had the luxury of tracking them down to explain. It had seemed unnecessary at the time. I looked down at Jasmine, stroking her hair softly.

“Phelan and Nahalo no longer feel comfortable with

the idea of Moria and the child residing under this roof. She must be relocated. Tiernan is too angry with me to involve his people any further. So, I will be transporting her myself. It should take no more than a few nights. Believe me when I say, I had not planned on turning Jasmine. I hope both of you understand that I never had that intention, ever. But after all that she has sacrificed for our people, I simply could not stand back and watch her die tonight.” I looked up at them, searching their faces for some bittersweet note of understanding and acceptance. Their eyes shone like glass marbles in the candlelight, large and luminous and accusing.

“My gods! What happened to her?” Lillian’s motherly nature bubbled to the surface.

“No!” Tatsu whirled to face her, slicing his hand through the air to silence her concerns. Lillian shrank from him, taking a step back as she witnessed a fierce side of him she had not seen before. “It doesn’t matter,” he snapped.

Slowly, Tatsu turned back to face me. I watched him carefully, my arms wrapping protectively around Jasmine’s back. She buried her face in my stomach, lying perfectly still like a fawn amongst the high grass sensing a lion in wait.

“Just what are you asking of us Tynan?” Tatsu stared at me.

“We are asking for your help,” Mena bravely interjected from her place near the closed door. “My priestesses and I will do our utmost best to conceal her presence, if that is what is required, but we do not know what she will need or how to properly care for her.”

Tatsu turned towards Mena and slowly approached her, staring at her as if she had lost her mind. He stopped directly before her, tilting his head to the side as he stared into her eyes. “Woman, you have no idea what you are asking or what you are committing yourself to. I understand that you

and your human attendants have some sort of notion that you are aiding Tynan in this ill decision he has made, but this,” he gestured towards the bed where I cradled Jasmine, “is not a child. This is a newly reborn vampire. Do you have any idea what that means?”

Mena held her ground, but I could see the flicker of fear across her eyes as she stood face to face with the wall of barely contained rage emanating from the Immortal before her. She shook her head in silent reply.

“That lovely harmless looking creature in Tynan’s arms is deadly, more deadly than any of us in this room right now. She is a beautiful viper. She might as well be insane she is so out of her mind with her new state of being. She straddles a world that is constantly fluxing between the real and surreal, a waking dream, and in the midst of it all she is hungry. Not hungry as you might feel pains within your stomach or a lightness of the mind or limbs, but an all-consuming maddening hunger that will eventually make her want to rip you limb from limb and lick your bones in search of every last drop of blood. She will have no control over this, not for many nights to come, not without the guidance of her Maker, of an experienced vampire to lead her and train her to control the demon that now inflicts her every waking moment.” Tatsu was shaking slightly now as he spoke, his fists curled tightly at his thighs. “There will be nothing you will be able to do to stop her.”

Surprisingly, Mena did not flinch, but continued to steadily hold Tatsu’s gaze as if she suspected Tatsu was exaggerating. “Then what do you propose we do?”

I was aghast at her directness and impressed by her courage.

“I could have let her die,” Mena confessed. Her voice was strained; she was weary and at the end of her patience.

“But I didn’t. Sir Llywelyn chose to save her. Now, there is no turning back. So we can stand here and debate this for what little darkness remains in the night or you can tell us whether or not you will assist us. It is simple.”

Tatsu stepped back, his back straightening as if he might strike Mena across the face for her audacity, but he remained still. Slowly he turned to face me. I knew in one glance that I had pushed his alliance too far; after all that he had gone through to help me, this was simply too much. His loyalty had been tested and tried.

My heart thundered in my chest as I stared at him imploringly. “Don’t. Please, we need you to help us.”

Tatsu shook his head, his lips curling in a smirk. “No. You need me to bail you out again. I’m sorry. I helped you willingly before because I thought you genuinely had our greater good at heart.” He turned and headed towards the door, “Anything regarding the actual war I might have considered, but this is absurd. This is not part of the alliance I spoke of before. This is selfish. You’re just using us now.” As his hand hit the doorknob he looked back at Lillian expectantly.

She paused, turning her gaze to the floor. Shaking her head, she answered quietly, “I’m staying.”

“What?” Tatsu hissed.

“If someone doesn’t stay, then Tynan can’t relocate the Queen. It may not have been before, but this is now part of the war, whether you want to accept it not,” she replied, her voice struggling to maintain strength.

“I can’t believe you’re letting him use you this way!” Tatsu gestured at me violently. “Let him settle this matter for himself with Phelan. Don’t put yourself in the middle of this mess where you could get hurt. He’s already endangered both of us too greatly with the other tasks he’s burdened us with as of late.” Beneath his irritation there was a note of

genuine concern for Lillian and frustration at the knowledge that he could never persuade her to do anything other than what her heart told her was right.

Lillian squared her jaw, raising her head to meet Tatsu's gaze. "I am going to help him."

Tatsu shook his head with disgust. "Fine! You stay and be his bitch. I won't." He yanked open the door, slamming it shut behind him as he left.

The sound caused us all to flinch, praying that the vibrations would be concealed by the layers of protective seals set in place by Mena about the room to hide it from the rest of the house. Lillian exhaled loudly as if she would stifle a sob, but no tears flowed forth. While they might have been drawn together by the intensity of the war raging around them, it was obvious their personalities were too extreme to blend seamlessly. My heart ached for Lillian, who had been without a lover for many years, choosing to remain unattached rather than suffer the pangs of passion.

"I'll stay here with her until you return, but you need to tell me how to get her sustenance between now and then. There is not exactly a surplus of random strangers roaming the grounds to feed to her." Lillian crossed her arms over her chest, regaining some of her strength in Tatsu's absence.

I was so tired. The evening seemed to have stretched on for hours beyond possibility. All I wanted to do was to crawl into a dark hole and be alone, away from Jasmine, away from Moria, away from everything brewing in the house around me. I nodded, trying to force my mind to think quickly for I knew that sunrise would be approaching soon and would render all of us incapable of further decision.

"Is the pool house being used for anything right now?" I asked.

Behind the sprawling manor was a luxurious abstractly

shaped pool complete with a stone waterfall lined in lush draping ferns and exotic flowers, tended to lovingly by the human servants Phelan employed. I had not set foot inside it in years, but I remembered it well. The floor and curving walls of the pool were tiled in a deep cerulean blue that caused it to appear as vast as the ocean at night, the moon and stars reflecting in a perfect mirror off the still surface. In the early days glorious parties had been held beside it at night, when our reign as Immortals had been sweet and easy and immovable.

With the finest cultural and political minds, the beautiful and the wealthy of the time, we would sit and converse, the humans sipping from crystal flutes as they marveled at the priceless age of the wine as the vampires carefully chose one or two willing guests to dine from. Even as I had wrestled with my demons that drug me down off my Preternaturalistic pedestal I had found comfort in those nights, losing myself in the elegance that was so far removed from the war that raged around the world and the poverty that still struck most of the American landscape as the country continued to claw its way out of the Great Depression. I could immerse my body and my mind in the succulent silk of a woman's lips or a man's sweet cigar smoke, lying upon an outdoor chaise in the arms of a stranger as they stroked my hair softly and discussed Milne's "Fundamental Concepts of Natural Philosophy", Jackson Pollock's radical painting, Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy of existentialism or Roosevelt's management of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. All the while Count Basie, Dorsey Brothers and Billie Holiday albums would scratch and pop and croon through the brass trumpet of Phelan's latest phonograph acquisition, weaving in and out of the lyrical laughter, clinking of crystal, click and hiss of silver lighters, scuff of highly polished wingtips and occasional

splash of water from the more carefree spirits to create a melody infused with the purest essence of brimming life.

It was enough, at least for a night or two, to make me forget that I was losing my mind. In those times I had no concept of the pain I would cause others or the social exile I was about to be cast into. My ego had viciously eaten my empathy; I had begun a young idealistic philosopher and ended up a bitter aristocrat. However, amidst the gathered artists and socialites, writers and political radicals I was anonymous, another of Phelan's pretty acquaintances, my sins washing away in the pool of blue tile and glittering stars. I could become someone else.

If only to freeze a moment like that in time and place it in a glass box that played "We'll Meet Again." It was hard to image the world ever being blessed with such a burgeoning air of invention again. I found myself wanting to weep as I was lost for a moment in the strange sudden surge of memory.

"The pool house is empty, that I know of, but I'm not sure. Would you like for me to go check?" Lillian replied quietly, breaking me gently out of my reverie.

When I said nothing, Lillian approached the bed and sat down carefully beside me. Gently, she placed her head upon my shoulder. "Tyman? You need to tell me what to do."

My head was bowed, my eyes clamped shut. When I became drained, whether physically, psychologically or emotionally, I could feel the spirits of the past gather about me like tiny fish in a brook, nibbling at my soul, gently at first and then with more savage persistence. So much of me wanted to sink down into the murk with them now, but I knew it was only because I needed to feed. Tatsu was right: my decision had been an irrational act and one that I now regretted deeply. I prayed that I might feel differently in the nights to come, when my head was clear again and my veins

replenished.

“Tynan?” Lillian spoke again with more urgency.

I lifted my hand and placed it over hers in acknowledgement. “We’ll take her to the pool house. I’ll need for you to go now and make sure that the windows are securely covered and there is a proper lock on the door.”

The pool house had also been used as a guesthouse in the old days, but over a century had passed since I had last set foot inside it. It was a gamble as to what state it was in now or what purpose Phelan had designated for it during the time when I had been gone though, if history served correctly, he would have kept it in the same pristine condition as he treated the rest of his home.

Lillian started to rise, but I stayed her by grasping her hand tightly. I drew a deep breath and found my strength again. Sitting up straighter, I turned to look at Lillian. Jasmine stirred from her silent, still position curled within my lap. Cautiously, she pushed herself into a sitting position and watched us silently like a little girl awaiting her punishment. If Lillian and I had appeared beautiful to her through her mortal eyes, we now transcended the earthly plane when beheld with a new Immortal perception. A part of me envied her youthful vampiric bliss; how I wished I could love every fiber of reality like that again, when the merest touch could bring me to climax, looks could make me melt with laughter and a grain of sand capture my attention for hours. Was there anything else to ascend to beyond Immortality? Or was death the only option at this point in my existence?

There had been a moment, when I drank from Nahalo’s veins, that I thought perhaps there might be something beyond my jaded preoccupation with life. I had wanted him to lift me up and renew my passion, renew the emphatic zeal I had once preached of from my pulpit of pristine vampiric

conception. However, the brutality of war had made a quick death of my resurrection, crucifying my rebirth with a vengeance that ripped the spine from my testament and threw the pages upon the flames of the roaring fires consuming the world around me.

“You will need to feed her animal blood. That is the only safe alternative for the time being. Deer, raccoons, rats, possums—whatever you can find nearby. Do not leave her for very long because, as you well know, she will become restless. I cannot have her cross paths with Phelan before I return or Phelan will kill her. I don’t know why I know this, but something in my gut tells me that the laws that once applied to our race have been obliterated. Those days died with Seafra,” I said, reaching within me for the strength to command the fragile situation.

Instinctively, I reached out one hand, without looking, and took Jasmine’s, sensing her mounting anxiety. “If you are able to sneak her off the property in search of human prey, so be it, but please, please be careful.”

“I can do that.” Lillian assured me. “But won’t Phelan and Nahalo wonder where I’ve gone? And what of Tatsu?”

I shook my head. “Phelan and Nahalo will be too consumed with their own issues to wonder of your whereabouts, I suspect. As for Tatsu, I have no doubt that he will, eventually, seek you out. I sense the bond between you.”

The faintest of blushes rose to Lillian’s pale cheeks, though no smile accompanied it. She lowered her head, her gaze dropping away from mine.

I placed my fingers beneath her chin and lifted her head again so that I could stare into her eyes. “Are you happy with him?”

Her brows furrowed with confusion. “Yes. I mean, I

think so. He's temperamental..." Her voice trailed off.

"Tatsu and I may not always agree," I smirked wearily, "but I know in my soul that he's a good man. But if he ever hurts you, I will kill him." I raised my eyebrows and smiled, trying to break the tension, but she knew as well as I that I was not at all joking.

A small smile spread across Lillian's exquisite features. "I will deal with him if he comes looking for me."

"And I will place wards about the structure to guard from prying eyes." Mena stepped forward from where she had been standing silently in the center of the room. "Whatever you need, I am willing to provide." She squared her shoulders. "I feel, in part, responsible for this entire situation."

I stared at her, not understanding her guilt.

"Perhaps there was more that my assistants and I could have done to heal her? I just couldn't see it at the time. If it had been within our Phuree village, we would have merely built a funeral pyre for her and prayed for her cross over, but there was something in your voice, in your eyes, when you brought this woman to us that made me not turn to the gods for guidance." Mena's voice trembled slightly through her mask of stalwart strength.

"No." I rose and took Mena in my arms. "You did exactly as you should have. And I thank you for it. Please, do not interpret my stress for anger." I let her go and stepped back, the perfume of her blood coursing beneath her flesh too much for me. "Everything happens for a reason."

I smiled a weak smile, praying internally for the faith to believe in the words I now spoke, and left them in search of sustenance.

* * *

In the last couple of hours before the sun reclaimed the sky from the moon, we set about the task of covering up the evidence of my insurrection. When Lillian returned with news that the pool house was ready, I gathered Jasmine in my arms and leapt from the second floor bedroom window to the ground below. In a flash I transported her to the pool house. I did my best to reassure her that I would return quickly and when I did I would assume my new station as her Maker, her mentor, her Dark Father, complete with all of the nurturing guidance that was supposedly expected of the title.

However, in my heart I knew I could never be the Father she needed. I fished through Adian's memories for the Chieftain who had guided him, and as a result, me, for the strength, courage and wisdom imparted from one generation to another. I reflected on the early years I had spent at Phelan's side as his Fledgling, savoring the loving patience he had initially regarded my wonderment and my naivety with, the gentle guidance he had allotted my every movement and inquiry. Could I find it within myself to muster that resolve of character within the hardened shell I had constructed around myself during this time of war? Or would Jasmine be yet another of my failures, a casualty of the accumulation of poison within my identity?

True fathers were far and few between. Now I was faced with a son and a Fledgling Daughter. I had never wanted either.

CHAPTER 8

Before my eyes had even fully opened the next night, I was up and dressed. Too disturbed by the events that had transpired with Jasmine and knowing it would be too dangerous for me to Sleep with her in the pool house, I had chosen to share a bed with Moria. Since I had abducted her from the Tyst fortress, she had quickly adapted a nocturnal routine, sleeping nearly as long as I through the daylight hours and awakening at sunset as I began to stir. I wondered if perhaps it was her emotional connection to me that facilitated her transition to the lifestyle or whether her partial vampiric bloodline that made her embrace the night with such ease, but whatever it was that had supplemented the psychological and physical adaptation, I found a strange comfort in it.

Of all of the humans and vampires swarming about me, demanding one thing or another and placing the weight of the world upon my shoulders, she provided a peace I had come to rely on. Moria had been trained by the Tyst to never question her master. She was there to serve the one she determined to be her king and provider. Somewhere in the turmoil I had stepped into that position, transforming from

her executioner to her savior and then her emperor. She lay beside me as I Slept like the obedient queen she had been bred to be, stirring little, afraid to displease me.

Across the room, in the makeshift bassinet, fashioned by the Phuree priestesses from an ancient unused cedar memory chest painted with ivy and faded white doves, Nodin slept peacefully on a pile of blankets. I thought he slept too quietly for a newborn child despite the tension in the house. But, then, when was the last time I had been around an infant? The concept of what was “normal” behavior for such a young creature was as foreign to me now as the sensation of sunlight upon my skin.

After securing the large canvas pack I had prepared the night before, filled with food, a few articles of clothing for Moria, and swaddling for the baby, and grabbing a thick handmade quilt from a shelf to guard them from the cold, I woke Moria.

“It’s time,” I said.

She blinked at me as she separated reality from the disintegrating strands of dreams, sleepily nodding her understanding. Without a word, she obediently rose and dressed, gently wrapping Nodin in a protective wool blanket before sitting again at the edge of the bed in expectation of my next direction. Slings the pack over my shoulder, I gestured for her to follow me.

We left the bedroom in silence. In the hall, those who had already awakened stood aside, sensing the severity of our circumstance. As we reached the lower level, Phelan and Nahalo appeared, gravitating from the library where they spent most of their time conspiring in tones none could detect. The moment I saw their eyes, green and gold gazes that pinned me like metal tacks to a hunter’s trophy board, I felt my body ice over, colder than my natural predisposition.

I kept Moria and Nodin behind me protectively as I faced my judge and jury. Around us, the denizens of the house seemed to sense the profundity of the moment and paused, mortals and vampires sifting through the halls with soft rustling of clothes and thundering hearts, emerging from the rooms where they conducted their wartime preoccupations to witness my departure. All except Lillian, Jasmine and Mena. Even Tatsu could not help but be overcome by his curiosity, entering the house from where he had been sitting in the garden courtyard outside the kitchen. He stood beside the open door, listening intently; no doubt there was a part of him that probably wondered what had transpired after he had left us the previous evening.

“Please don’t. I know you mean well, to take care of this situation on your own. It is your nature, I know you. But we need you here,” Phelan said quietly in a register I knew only vampires could hear. “We can make arrangements for the Queen and her child to be relocated by others. Tiernan’s men are not our only allies to be trusted with the mission.”

“Let’s not do this now,” I said, keeping my tone level and quiet so as not to alert any of the onlookers to the tension between my Maker and me. “This is the only way. Just let us go. Let me complete this task before we lose any more moonlight. The longer I stand here, the longer I will be away.”

Phelan and Nahalo exchanged furtive glances. They realized there would be no arguing with me without a physical battle and that was an idea they did not care to entertain. Without further argument, much to my surprise, Phelan stepped back, unblocking my path. Placing my arm around Moria’s shoulders, I quickly ushered her outside away from the scrutiny of the houseguests.

Behind me Phelan’s soft voice reached my ears full of

weariness. “He has survived the far more dangerous missions we have assigned him, thus far. Perhaps he is right to go alone?”

“Let us all pray you are correct,” Nahalo replied darkly. “I will not challenge you on this, but next time, we will have words.”

A trembling shiver quaked in the center of my chest. I could not leave the tense atmosphere of the house fast enough. The night was cold with the encroaching winter, the air heavy with the perfume of dying leaves, frost and the lingering bitter wisps of smoke from the fires fading within the amagin in the distance. All the lights that lined the perimeter of the property had been extinguished; the only source of illumination was the dull honey gold glow of candelabras and oil lamps within, leaking out from the tall windows on the front of the house behind us. For the time being we stood in the centuries-old sacred circle of protection created by Phelan to keep the prying eyes of the human world at bay. The circle stretched five hundred feet beyond the house in all directions, but once we stepped over that boundary, we would be prey for the world once again. I shivered at the thought, steeling myself to move quickly and with great caution once we reached that point. I hoped Moria would be up for the hardship of the long journey ahead of us. Not that she had even the slightest choice in the matter.

I breathed deeply, feeling my muscles relax slightly. Away from the chaos of rooms surging with war strategies and the residual personal venom, I thought that perhaps I might be able to clear my head and focus. There was no way I could make any rational, tactical decisions when I felt as if I might drown at any moment beneath my emotions. I walked down the stone steps to the walkway, the torturous knot within my chest loosening slightly with each footfall.

Moria joined me, holding Nodin close to her chest to ward off the chill night air. Wrapping the quilt about her shoulders as if she herself were a child, I spoke to her softly. “We will head south to the Mexican border. If we leave now we should be able to make it to Manuel Benavides before dawn, a tiny town just south of what used to be known as Big Bend National Park.”

I could see on her face that the names of locations meant nothing to her for she had never ventured outside of the Tyst fortress before I had abducted her, but I spoke aloud to confirm the notes in my head. “Hopefully the town still exists, or at least a structure safe enough for us to hide in until tomorrow night.”

“What if it isn’t there?” she asked with grave concern as she kissed the top of Nodin’s head.

I did not reply. I stared off into the darkness at the southern horizon, suddenly dreading the long and dangerous journey ahead.

The sound of one of the front doors opening abruptly severed my concentration. I whirled round and was surprised to see Tiernan exiting the house. His jaw squared, his expression guarded and distant, he approached me and offered a piece of paper. Tentatively, silently I accepted it.

“Locations of safe houses,” Tiernan said, his tone sharp as if he were still wrestling with his decision to help me. “Two in Mexico, one in Nevada and the rest along the west coast.” He reached up and unfastened one of the leather cords around his neck. With a final glance at the pendant he handed the necklace to me. “Take this and show it to the guards at the safe houses. They will recognize the emblem as mine.”

I was speechless, gazing down at the flat, oblong piece of flint carved with the swirling tribal design that denoted

Tiernan's clan. Fastening it around my neck, making sure the cord was tied as tightly as possible, I replied simply, "Thank you."

Tiernan shook his head. The muscles in his jaw twitched. Sometimes it was simply best to say nothing. After a moment of holding my gaze as if searching my soul for a way to make peace with his decision, he nodded curtly and turned away. I wanted to believe that he knew my intentions were always the best, that I would never intentionally place his people, or mine, in harm's way. He quietly entered the house and closed the door, leaving Moria, Nodin and I alone in the night once again.

I opened the folded piece of paper and studied the coordinates of the safe houses. The first location was La Ascensión, Mexico, slightly further west than I had originally planned, but the idea of a secure underground bunker where we could rest in peace was worth the extra hour or two of flight. We would have to travel slowly over the treeline in order to keep Moria and Nodin from freezing to death.

"Is everything okay?" Moria asked timidly.

I did not answer; there was not time or necessity to explain the tension between Tiernan and me. I folded the paper again and tucked it securely into a pocket on the outside of the pack. "Are you ready?" I asked her.

Timidly, she nodded. I scooped her into my arms, clutching her close to my chest. Even holding Nodin and wrapped in the thick quilt, Moria weighed barely more than a feather to me.

The pack on my back was a greater burden.

CHAPTER 9

Our travels were remarkably uneventful at first. I had been correct in my assumption that a dip below the Mexican border would afford us an initial exit out of the North American Tyst onslaught. The Tyst were focusing their efforts on the northern continent, assuming, perhaps, that Moria's abductor had been human and unable to flee undetected a country so heavily guarded. It would not be long, though, before they repositioned themselves, altering their tactics as they realized the flaws in their logic. At least, this was the idea that I clung to as we traveled through the next couple of nights, over deserts and plains at first, then north across forests of redwoods centuries older than even I. Always we kept far from the light of the scorched and brutalized amagins, keeping safely cloaked in the darkness of the wilds.

The first night Moria and Nodin were resilient, remaining calm and collected despite the bitter cold of the flight in my arms and the crude conditions of the Mexican safe house in La Ascension. Moria seemed to take a strange pride in her position, as if, despite the Immortals' rejection and the

Phuree's barely contained hatred of her, she had suddenly, silently found her purpose in the world. She clung tightly to Nodin, caring for him with an intent devotion that went beyond any mere motherhood I had ever witnessed. Though she was young and Nodin her first born, she understood the profound uniqueness of her child, sensing intuitively that the fate of this infant was somehow intimately entangled in that of the world itself.

If I had been alone I would have pushed harder, flying higher and faster, unheeding of the ice and wind, pausing only once for a day of rest before completing the journey. However, it was impossible for us to do so with the infant. Even wrapped in the quilt taken from Phelan's home, I dared not subject such a young creature and his delicate mother to the elements for very long. This impeded our progress greatly, but I tried to maintain my patience, reminding myself that this would all be for naught if one or the other died during transport. By midway through the third night, Moria began to beg me to slow my pace and find a place to rest. I refused at first, determined to make it as far north over the west coast as possible. When her weeping began to intensify and Nodin began to wail as he picked up on his mother's distress, I returned to the earth.

It was impossible to tell exactly where we were for all of the cities and structures that had once defined the country had either been altered drastically from the way I remembered them in their heyday of the twenty-first century, or erased entirely from the face of the planet. If it had not been for the Golden Gate Bridge still arcing majestically over the San Francisco bay, haunting and desolate without the illumination of the thousands of electric lights that had once been visible even from beyond the Earth's atmosphere, I would have quite possibly found myself lost. As we had

passed that remaining landmark, I paid close attention to the landscape, trying desperately to remember it from my past exploration of the terrain over a century before. I counted the hills, bends of roads and highways, before touching down near what I had remembered to be Eureka, a small coastal town just south of the Oregon border. It was close enough that I felt we could flee to our final destination if necessary, but still on Tiernan's list of possible locations for us to seek protection.

The town was silent as if it were afraid to exhale lest the Tyst militia return with renewed vengeance. The hour was nearing midnight, the ocean roaring in and out with a low angry rage over the deserted coast of pale sand and dark outcroppings of rock a mile away. The sea's heavy cold breath enveloped me with a salty, undulating musk of primal violence, cutting through my clothes and skin, muscle and bone to my very soul. The smell of the sea had always possessed a deep magic for me, rendering me speechless and humbled by its immense, power. I wanted to walk out on the sand barefoot and drop to my knees in the surf. Knowing I could not made me restless and sad.

As Moria settled herself on a patch of fallen needles at the base of a large redwood tree, I dropped the pack that I carried and fished out the paper that held the coordinates of the nearest safe house. In the same pocket I had secreted an old brass compass, which I had taken from Phelan's desk during an opportune moment when he and Nahalo had been away. I could not take the chance with anything that was digital or required solar power now. I always found it interesting that, in moments of extreme circumstance, we retreated to the old ways of navigating through the world. Nothing could ever replace the pull of the Earth's gravity or the placement of the stars. These things had guided us for

millennia and to those who knew how to read them, they were the only signs a traveler needed.

The forest to our backs was alive. It ebbed and flowed with a distinctly different rhythm than that of the sea. This pattern was deeper, richer, smelling of blood and animal musk, a sharp note of defiant growth and the sweetness of earthly decay. As the autumn brought the long, painful summer to a close, animals retreated to their caves and hollowed out carcasses of fallen trees to wait out the winter, but their imprint on the universe was unmistakable in its strong, undeniable beauty. I felt small and insignificant so close to the forest. No matter what power this once human frame contained, it would never be more significant than that of nature itself, than that of the pulse of the mountain lion or black bear or river otter. I was only what nature allowed me to be.

For a moment I bowed my head and prayed, sending a silent note of gratitude for the moment of humility the universe offered me, grounding me at a time when the world tried to dictate my every move. Opening my eyes again I read the coordinates and description of the location, which supposedly lay a few clicks north, off the highway and tucked up in the woods in what used to be a traveler's hostel.

After finding my bearings, I folded the paper and returned it, along with the compass to the pack pocket. My eyes darted from shadow to shadow, sifting through the dense fog rolling in off the ocean and swirling low over the ground, my senses searching for life amongst the ransacked ruins of the sleepy town. Something wasn't quite right, but I failed in my attempt to isolate the deviant sensation. The denizens that remained cowered in their homes, their unconcealed thoughts scrambling incoherently against the inside of their skulls like mice suffocating in a matchbox, as they attempted

to make sense of the invasion. For years they had lived here peacefully, undisturbed for the most part. When the wars had begun to die down, the world settling into the new regime, the townsfolk here had begun to rebuild their lives, returning to their roots as a peaceful fishing village. I could sense their fear and their anxiety, their sense of betrayal and their sudden renewed hatred of the Tyst Empire. They had been blindsided by the quick invasion which had claimed the lives of half of the town's inhabitants.

I retreated from my investigation of the townsfolk's psyche. I would need to be extra cautious in concealing our presence while near the town. At a time when their wounds were still painfully fresh, any and all strangers would not be welcome.

"Are you able to travel again?" I asked Moria as I continued to stare out at the dark, scorched buildings across the highway. The smell of the sea tormented me, the crash of the waves a siren call threading through my brain, wrapping its cold mysterious fingers around the base of my skull.

"Must we fly? I am so cold, so very cold. And Nodin is starting to look ill. Please don't—" Moria's voice was small and frantic, trembling on the edge of tears. It was the first time I could remember her questioning me; her maternal instincts were finally overriding her programmed subservience.

"I said nothing of flight, did I?" I didn't mean to snap, but I could not temper my reaction quick enough. Sometimes my ability to deal with more fragile beings verged on inadequate. Moria fell back into silence, holding Nodin close to her chest beneath the blanket. In my peripheral vision I could see her staring at me with a mixture of fear and anticipation. Removed from the comforts of Phelan's estate she was quickly remembering exactly who and what I was and how she had come to be in the predicament she was now in. She had

fooled herself into a false sense of security in a little alcove next to my surreal, unending existence. It had been a lie and, beneath the towering redwood forest, beside a seaside town still smoking from the wrath of her husband Lord Cardone III the severity of the situation was unavoidable. I refused to look at Moria, my thoughts suddenly absorbed with the conflict between my unexplainable devotion to her and my responsibility to Jasmine.

For all that I wanted to love the women in my life such as Jasmine, Moria, even Lillian as my Sister, for all that I wanted to open my soul and share with them as a lover and mentor should, I would forever hold them further than an arm's distance from my heart, the unfortunate casualties of my personal struggles. She was young, not just of body, but of mind, heart and soul. She had been cloistered away from the world, raised by handlers in a stark, loveless world of royalty. Jasmine was an entirely different animal, earthen and immersed in all of the raw exquisite salt of life. Her soul was old, her heart fierce and proud, her spirit tested and true. I respected her; I identified with her. A single glance could portray the extent of every dire instance of our pasts to each other in a way that no lengthy spoken discussion ever could. Our shared losses bound us to one another.

But even that was questioned now. Witnessing her in her initial throes of ecstasy as she absorbed the world through new Immortal eyes somehow ruined her for me. She was simply one of us now. I had done what I had always sworn I would never do. I had stolen the warmth and suppleness from her skin, her eyes now shimmering inhumanly, her nails glinting like glass. I had stripped my beautiful sprite of everything that had made me want to cradle her in my arms. She was tainted, she was cold. Yes, I had saved her life, but, in turn, I had forced her out of mine. I hated to admit it, but

I was thankful for this mission that had taken me away from my new charge, even though it would mean Jasmine's first nights would be spent in isolation and near starvation like a prisoner. A sick guilt curdled in the pit of my stomach. I would try to set things right when I returned.

I stood, slinging the pack onto my back once again, and approached Moria. She looked up at me with wide eyes that reflected my own image towering over her and the ominous forest behind.

"Come," I said, holding out my hand to help her stand. Tentatively, she accepted my hand, allowing me to pull her to her feet. The quilt slipped from her shoulders to the ground. I stooped and retrieved it, shaking it free of needles and wrapping her and Nodin in it once again.

"The safe house is not far. If the instructions Tiernan gave are correct, it's only a few miles north of town." I said. Moria nodded, but said nothing, focusing her attention on her child. I lifted her into my arms once again.

"But I thought you said no flight?" Moria squeaked, her voice trembling on the verge of crying.

"No flight, but we must move quickly. It's still not safe for us to be out in the open too long." Without waiting for her reply, I ran like the wind.

* * *

Set back from the road, the two hundred year old hostel lurked within the shadows of the looming forest like an old Victorian ghost dressed in crumbling white lace. Its narrow two stories disappeared into the outstretched limbs of the redwoods surrounding it. The paint, which might have, at one time, been a pale yellow or white, was now bleached and muddied a light gray, peeling away in long jagged strips

from the constant salty breath of the sea. The house was dark with no visible signs of life disturbing the coldness of its somber façade. A few of the windows in the upper floor had been shattered, the gaping black holes foreboding beside the dusty glass panels that reflected the rhythmic pulse of the ocean as it caressed the coast on the far side of the empty stretch of highway facing it. The sound of the crash and hiss of the waves wrapped me in its archaic sweetness.

I shivered, the fine hairs on the back of my neck bristling as the remote isolation of our location caused my senses to come alive. Staring at the face of the hostel, I let my senses drift inwards, past the ruined exterior to sift subtly through the halls and rooms within, searching for life. The premises were vacant, the core of the building as echoing and black as the cold chambers of an ancient cave. I rationalized that whoever had resided there had been driven away or killed by the invading Tyst forces, though it was hard to discern at what point the hostel had been emptied. While disappointed, I was not surprised.

The forest encroached, the mountain of pines looming over the house, enveloping it with a velvety cloak of mottled green and black shadows that seemed to breathe with a life of their own. I listened carefully to the whispering dialogue of the ancient primal world to ferret out the slightest malicious deviation which might signal a threat to Moria or I. Something stirred within me, a fleeting thought that we might be safer simply finding an abandoned cave to nest in for the night, but I dismissed the idea as a product of my frayed nerves. Moria and Nodin needed a proper place to rest and the dank icy stone of a cave was not the place for a newborn child. I could not shake the instinct that the world appeared too still and peaceful, but there was no justifiable reason for me to forcibly push Moria and Nodin onwards.

For all intent and purposes we appeared to be alone.

I took Moria's hand and led her up the steep overgrown driveway to the rickety stairs leading to the entrance. As the wind shifted, the pungent stench of rotting flesh caused me to wince and pause as I attempted to locate the exact location of the decay. The salt and damp had eroded the wood, causing it to creak dangerously beneath our weight.

Before I had even placed my hand on the doorknob the scent of blood brutally accosted me. I halted in mid-stride, my throat constricting, my body shivering with the conflicting desires to find sanctuary in the building or turn and flee the site of such rancid death. The scent of old, cold blood was different from that freshly spilt from the still living. Dead blood was absent of the life force that drove my species to crave it like heroin, the beautiful, sensual promise of warmth and euphoria. Instead, once the blood had seeped from the body and died, along with its host, all that remained was the echo of the death itself, the residual impression of agony and the mournful memory of the life that was lost. The blood I smelt now was indeed dead. Though it was technically still blood and, thus, I was intrigued enough to investigate, I was also revolted by the necessity of having to enter a house such as the one before us.

Inside, the violent struggle that had occurred became immediately evident. We walked slowly through the small kitchen, our feet crunching the fragments of glass and splinters of wood that littered the floor amongst pots, pans and scattered bits of food. The dull gleam of dried pools of blood seeped eerily in and out of the shadows and shafts of moonlight that filtered in from the windows over the sink. The kitchen opened up into a small living area. There the first of the corpses was splayed across the couch like a broken marionette, his body riddled with bullet holes, his

clothes darkly stained, his skin grown cold and clammy with the sickly pallor of death.

Moria gasped, halting in her tracks as her eyes fell on the man. Without glancing back, I let go of her hand, leaving her to stand at the entrance of the living room. Cautiously, I approached the couch. A young man of no more than twenty, his brown eyes were open, sunken and dry with decay, staring up at the ceiling in a frozen expression of agony and fear. His civilian clothing was neither of Phuree or Tyst militia identification, leading me to wonder if he had perhaps simply been an unfortunate wanderer caught in the crossfire of the raid. The state of the corpse denoted only a day or two of decay since his death as rigor mortis still stiffened his limbs. As I stared down at the man, my senses bristled with caution as a high-pitched disturbance on the extreme periphery of my hearing caused the fine hairs on the back of my neck to rise in alarm. Though it appeared no one had set foot in the building in days, I could not shake the feeling that we had just wandered into the middle of an elaborate stage.

Instinctively, I reached out and placed my hand over his face, lowering the young man's eyelids with my fingertips as I said a silent prayer for the stranger. Turning away, I surveyed the rest of the room. Against the far wall, near a large bay window, slumped another man. He was older than the first with dark salt and pepper hair, his body also riddled with bullet holes, his fingers still loosely wrapped about the chamber of a cold black shotgun he had never had the chance even to raise. The moonlight reflected off the ocean across the street, slicing in through the bay window in eerie patches of pearlescent white, empowering the shadows with an unnerving density and strength as if they possessed the ability to reanimate the dead. The house around us was mute, the cold rank air stifling with the inescapable residue of pain

imprinted on the atmosphere. I glanced up at the ceiling as I pondered how many other corpses could possibly litter the floor above. There was no real need in investigating further; with an additional scan I confirmed that there were no living beings on the premises except Moria, Nodin, and me.

Listening carefully to each and every creak and groan of the settling house and the forest immediately beyond, I felt my fangs begin to elongate slightly as my instincts needed at me that danger lurked just beyond the shadows. The conflict between my intuition and my observations confused me deeply and for a brief moment I began to reconsider my choice to stay here regardless of the dead. Behind me Moria began to sob quietly, overwhelmed by the gruesome sight around her. The soft sound sliced through my apprehension, drawing me back into the room to deal with their immediate needs. Gesturing for Moria to follow me, I left the living room and walked down a short hall that led to a small bathroom at the end. In the middle of the corridor, the hatch door that led to the cellar below was thrown open, the narrow worn rug that had covered it, crumpled in a heap against the wall. Peering down into the opening I was met with nothing but empty silence, though this time the air was free of the stench of rotting flesh. Carefully, I climbed down the steep wooden stairs.

Halfway, I paused and looked up at Moria. “Give Nodin to me so that it will be easier for you to climb.”

“Is it safe?” she asked, staring uncertainly down into the cellar. I could hear the thundering of her heart, the high pitched wail of her nerves, taut as a pulled crossbow.

“Safer than up there, I would say,” I muttered, though I wondered how convincing I sounded.

Moria glanced back down the hallway as she considered my proposition. Somewhere after entering the house, she

had let the quilt wrapped about her slip to the floor. I made a mental note to find it for her tomorrow night when we left for the final safe house. That was, if it was not now coated in gore.

“Moria!” I hissed at her. While we may have been the only living beings in the house, I did not want to linger too long in an exposed area. “Unless you want to keep traveling tonight I suggest you obey me.”

Her head snapped back, as if she had been shaken out of a dream. Without a second’s hesitation she handed Nodin to me. I continued down the stairs. The infant whined slightly as I held him against my chest, unused to being away from the familiar scent of his mother’s warm skin. The room below was large and cavernous with several rows of bunk-beds and a small kitchenette area with a storage closet. It reminded me vaguely of the first safe house I had been introduced to by Malakai, back in Texas, after the death of the Chronous hacker Josh. It was stark and unwelcoming to encourage those who had sought refuge here to keep moving quickly. Distracted by my own racing thoughts, I did not even notice Moria until she reached up and took Nodin from my embrace. Her ability to move with such a ghostly grace belied her unnatural parentage. Quickly, she turned away and walked over to one of the spartanly dressed beds. There she sat, holding Nodin tightly and rocking back and forth to calm him, or more so, it would appear to me, to calm herself.

“How long are we staying here?” Moria asked, staring at the ground in front of her.

I watched her quietly, sensing a dangerous level of unease mounting in her soul. Though her conditioning helped her to maintain a civil, proper façade, I knew it would not be long before her delicate psyche cracked irreparably. Beneath Phelan’s roof she had been able to lose herself in

a fantasy of normalcy, but here, all her old demons were rapidly beginning to claw at her sanity. I felt her pain, her anguish, and wanted to comfort her, but my preoccupation with her safe transport coupled with the distinct sensation of being watched made it impossible.

Damn it, Tynan, I thought, what is wrong with you? There is nothing more to do tonight. You're just being paranoid. Show her a bit of warmth!

I drew a deep breath, running my fingers through my hair, pulling it tight away from my face for a moment before exhaling slowly. With the breath I lowered my guard as I closed my eyes, searching deep within myself for the man, the vampire that had, only nights before, rescued the woman before me. This was a woman of my own Blood, a woman I had risked my life and honor for. Was it so much for me to try to at least show a moment of compassion, even though what I wanted to do most was to curl into a ball like a surly old bear and Sleep away the coming day?

I walked to the bed and sat down beside Moria. Without a word I wrapped her in my arms and pulled her against me. With a shuddering sigh she collapsed with relief. As I stroked her satin black hair I could feel every fluttering hummingbird emotion that raced through her, the frantic fears of the unknown to come and horror of the carnage she had witnessed in the rooms above us. Guilt and shame riddled her soul, palpable as broken glass, for the merciless terror her people now inflicted upon the world. She did not want to hate them for they were the only family she had ever known, but their actions were inexcusable and the reality of the pain they left in their wake was a truth that left Moria feeling utterly hopeless.

I kissed the top of her head as a wave of regret swept over me for the coldness with which I had been treating her.

“I’m sorry.” It was all I could muster.

She shook her head against my chest. “You’re just doing your job.”

I laughed beneath my breath. “Right. My job.”

A change in the atmosphere around the hostel snared my attention, the soft shifting as an additional energy entered the domain. The disturbance that had pricked my ears earlier intensified as if the switch on a battery pack had been thrown. My heart began to race as I listened carefully, attempting to conceal our presence to the best of my abilities while still keeping enough of an opening to allow my psyche to scan the area. A hollow thunk reverberated above us on the far side of the house. It had been too subtle for Moria to hear, but to me it had been as loud as a gunshot. I froze, feeling the blood in my veins turn to ice. All of my senses prickled, igniting as I recognized instantly the raw pattern of a mortal aura though it appeared murky and mottled as if shrouded in a thick, low-lying fog.

“Hide,” I whispered into Moria’s hair.

“What?” She pulled away staring into my face.

My gaze was anchored on the stairs and the open hatch that lay at the top. “Hide. Now!” I whispered. “Someone’s outside the house.”

“What? I thought you said it was safe?” She exhaled and began to look around the room frantically.

I did not answer. I rose from the bed and started for the ladder. Moria grabbed my hand, terrified and desperate. I whirled around, my eyes ablaze. “Do as I say!” I hissed, pulling my hand free.

Behind me, Moria scrambled about the room, searching for a place to hide Nodin without regard to her own safety. As my hand touched the railing of the stairs the world below the house turned to darkness as my vision tunneled upwards.

The humans encircling the house were growing bolder, moving quickly with stealth to cover all of the ground floor entrances. What I had originally sensed as only one man rapidly multiplied until I counted five distinct auras beneath the strange obscuring shield of energy cloaking them to near invisibility. I did not understand how I had missed the signature of the group's presence stalking us, but I could not dwell too long on that. It was apparent now that the Tyst were growing more adept at concealing their auras after years of studying the vampire race. They had already instigated a genocide against us that had decimated our numbers to a terrifyingly small group. Any additional ability of theirs to track us would almost certainly ensure our extinction. The implications terrified me to my core.

The humans outside moved slowly now, tiptoeing into the house over the disheveled wood furniture and shards of broken glass, overturned lamps and shattered mirrors. I could smell their apprehension and fear beneath the strength of their military-trained focus. I could sense this was not their first mission into uncharted, dangerous territory. This was not the first time they had hunted an Immortal.

As the last realization struck me, my terror evaporated into instant hatred. My mind flashed through the impressions of the Third Eye's brutal interrogation and torture of vampires that I had lifted from Malakai's mind when I first met him, the second-hand memories forcing a tide of nausea to rise violently upwards into my throat. I wanted these new strangers to die in the most vicious way I could imagine. I was thankful now for the elevated abilities Nahalo's blood had imparted to me, for I planned to use them to their fullest extent. With a feral snarl, my fangs elongating instinctively in preparation for battle, I leapt upwards out of the basement. The movement caught the man closest to me off guard and

he staggered backwards, firing haphazardly into the hallway. I rushed towards him in a blur barely detectible to the human eye, disarming him in one swift movement. Between my hands, his neck snapped like dry kindling, his head coming loose in a violent spray of blood and gore that painted the wall to my right from the floor to the ceiling. The sharp metallic scent of fresh blood pushed me over the edge I had been perilously perched on, sending me plunging headlong into a blind frenzy. Around me, cries of alarm rose from the other invaders as they scrambled to deal with the unexpected turn of events. The screaming storm front of their thoughts brutally accosted me as they realized quickly that they were dealing with a far more powerful vampire than they had been prepared to capture. Every ounce of anger, fear and resentment I had meticulously kept locked away while beneath Phelan's roof bled into the Thirst, drowning my sanity entirely.

Below me, I was faintly aware of Moria screaming, but in my maniacal rage I thought it was only an echo of her initial fear, a residual imprint on my soul. I could not halt my blind attack on the Tyst soldiers. In a blur of hissing and howling I leapt through the house, disarming yet another of the Tyst assassins that had tracked us to the hostel. The next man burst into the hall entrance from the living room, screaming for reinforcements from the men still positioned outside. He fired a deafening spray of bullets into the darkness. His attack was in vain, for his human sight was simply too limited to capture the flash of movement as I easily dodged his frantic fire, leaping onto him like a lion taking down a wounded gazelle. I brutally vented my emotions in a way I knew I would regret later on, ripping the gun from his hands so forcefully that it severed his arms at the wrists, his fists still clutched around the barrel and grip, forefinger tightly

squeezing the trigger until the chamber was emptied even as the gun collided with the far wall. As if my fingers were steel talons, I dug into the man's throat, ripping out his windpipe with a feral growl.

At that moment, there was no sweeter bliss than the sound of his screams and the feeling of his bones snapping in my hands, the taste of the strange blood on my lips, the heat of it as it poured down my throat to be devoured by the hungry cells of my body. It was rapture—ecstatic euphoria in its most primal, bestial fashion. I was oblivious to the injuries I sustained. Faintly, I could feel the occasional bullet rip through my shoulders or leg, stinging painfully beneath the adrenaline narcotic. However, it was not enough to slow me and as soon as they entered and exited, my body set on the task of mending the wound with a lightning speed so that barely a drop of blood was spilt from each hole. The sensation was invigorating, empowering, adding fuel to the fire of my temporary insanity as I suddenly found myself maniacally wanting them to try to injure me further just so I could see what my body was truly capable of.

I found the third man retreating into the kitchen, frantically calling for assistance into his communication headset as he realized how direly they had overestimated their capabilities, even as Third Eye officers. This was supposed to have been a neat and clean job, in and out without casualties or incident. The new technology they had developed to hide from me had not taken into consideration my unique capabilities. They had treated me as nothing more than another vampire. Their mistake was now costing them dearly. The man spied me out of the corner of his eye and froze. I could hear his superiors screaming into the earpiece as he went silent, the roar of his terrified heartbeat hypnotic. Behind me the world seemed eerily silent, but my maniacal focus was unbreakable.

The Tyst soldier and I stood, our gazes locked. A bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face. A twitch of the fingers of his right hand signified he was about to reach for one of the grenades attached to his utility belt. Before he could complete his move, I leapt across the kitchen slamming him with such force into the floor that I heard his spine snap just below the waist. A tidal wave of pain consumed him instantly leaving him unable to speak, let alone scream.

However, as quickly as the fight began, it ended in a deafening fog of silence. I stared around the living room in a daze. My body felt numb with adrenaline, my heart careening against the cage of my ribs as if it might break free and race off into the woods in search of more prey. I squatted over him, a blood-splattered angel of death, grabbing him by the collar to hoist him from the ground, pulling his face close to mine, breathing in the scent of his sweat-slick skin and hair. Young, too young for such a grisly fate. He had not yet expired. His eyes rolled back in his head, his breath shallow as it escaped his blood spattered lips in rough, choked whispers. I turned his face with the fingers of my left hand, holding his jaw so that he could not look away.

“How did you know we were here?” I asked.

The man wheezed, his heart struggling, as the last bit of fear-induced adrenaline surged through him. I had not yet drunk from this man as I had done some of his comrades. Their souls had shown me little, but this man, I had the distinct impression, would not be able to conceal the truth as his fellow soldiers had. Like a viper, I sank my fangs into his neck, ripping away the flesh as if I meant to punish him further in his final moments, down through the muscle and tendon to the artery. Images flooded into me as his blood poured into my mouth; the Tyst had found a way to track me based on my new connection to the Chronous. After my

initial encounter with the Vicinus within the Tyst fortress during which he utilized the Chronous to manifest enough force to pull me into one of the twin bioplasma streams at the central core of the computer system, I had allowed the Chronous to pass through me as I had searched for a way to tap into the energy around me.

The Vicinus had also manipulated the nano-liquid system in a way that he was able to impale me upon it, nearly killing me. Somehow I had prevailed, fighting back and freeing myself. While I was suspended within the stream, I had become irreversibly linked to the Chronous, its matter and my matter exchanging and integrating like a blood transfusion causing it to recognize me as no more than an extension of its own global consciousness. Initially, I had thought it a blessing. It had allowed me to move within the Tyst fortress during the remainder of my mission with a brilliant, dynamic ease and had, no doubt, assisted in my abduction of Moria and our escape. However, now I realized that this connection was actually the worst of curses. The grim reality of my permanent, irreversible integration into the Tyst Empire's technological nervous system was beyond terrifying.

The Tyst had quickly recognized the disturbance and set about devising a way to track me by the residual impression lingering within the vast complexity of the Chronous language. Just as I had been intrigued by the power of the matrix, it was now fascinated by me. I was the deviation moving independently outside of its usual parameters of the human constructed physical grid. In a surreal, yet methodical, way only a computer could manage, when asked by its programmers to find me, it had. Only earlier that night had they locked onto my location, targeting me like an enemy plane in unregistered air space. Phelan's protection

had afforded me the luxury of avoiding their efforts and my own preternatural cloaking abilities had kept us safe for the first two nights of travel. However, there had been moments when, in my weariness, I had felt my shield slip slightly, moments, which apparently had cost us dearly. With methodical precision they had tracked us to the hostel.

I pulled away from the wound in the soldier's neck, letting him slip to the ground with a heavy, dull thud. My heart froze in my chest, my blood turned to ice as I was overcome with the sensation of being surrounded. I wanted to simply flee, to take off running through the forest and leap into the sky to search for the deepest darkest cave in a desolate corner of the planet where I might hide. Yet, the dreadful knowledge that my identity was no longer my own, that every heartbeat, every breath I drew was now monitored by the Chronous and its human keepers made me simply want to drop to my knees and bow my head in surrender. I stood, backing away drunkenly from the corpse and all of its secrets as I thought frantically of what my next move should be. I was so stunned; I could not even contemplate where to take Moria as I knew my mere presence near her now was no longer a protection, but a danger. Phelan had been right. I should have let the others escort her.

I could sense another mortal approaching, though my mind swam with the gluttony of blood I had ingested, my body trembling with rage-fueled adrenaline. This had not been a turn I had anticipated or even pondered. I prepared myself to eliminate the remaining two soldiers I had sensed attacking.

“Tynan?”

The sound of my name caused me to jump and I leapt backwards across the room, crouching in the corner near the bay window ready to strike again like a cobra.

“Stop!” Edvin stood, his hand outstretched with his palm towards me. His eyes were wild with confusion. “Tynan, stop!” Behind Edvin, Julius stood, his face stricken with horror as he surveyed the carnage around the room.

Slowly, I forced myself to uncurl from my crouched position. Standing, I approached him quickly, my eyes darting about the room as if I was hallucinating and the walls were alive with writhing demons. “What are you two doing here?” I breathed.

“We told Tiernan we were going to help you.” Edvin’s eyes shifted back and forth between my blood-smeared face and the dead bodies around the room, some freshly killed, others stone cold and gray. “We’ve been following you at a great distance, keeping watch. We were coming up the hill in front of the house when the Tyst came out of the woods. We fought off several outside.”

The idea that there were even more soldiers I had not sensed horrified me even further. “Pay careful attention, both of you,” I said, listening to the world outside the house. “The Tyst are cloaking themselves with a new Chronous technology that taps into my own vampiric abilities. This particular unit is apparently nearly undetectable to me, otherwise I never would have stopped here at all. I had no idea they were coming and there could be far more on the way. In fact, I’m more than certain that there are. I’m as blind as you are now. They are tracking my every move.” I drew a shuddering breath. “There is no time to explain.”

Julius stepped past us, walking up and down the stairs to the second floor and then down the hall towards the basement, surveying the damage. The house was eerily silent again.

Edvin shook his head trying to process what I was saying. “What do you need us to do?”

“I need you to take Moria and Nodin as far from here

as possible. They are not safe anywhere near me. The best thing is for me to lead them in the opposite direction,” I said, running my sleeve across my face in an effort to remove some of the gore that disturbed Edvin so deeply. My hands trembled uncontrollably; I wanted to scream and beat my fists on the walls.

“Where did you hide the Queen?” Julius returned from the hallway.

“What?” I breathed, whipping around towards him. “What do you mean?” I raced down the hall, pushing Julius aside a bit too forcefully, and leapt down into the basement. In my blind rage I had lost track of her, assuming she had sought cover somewhere below.

“Moria!” I yelled. She did not answer. “Oh dear gods...”

Tentatively Julius climbed down the ladder. “She’s not down here. I already checked. In fact, I checked the whole house.”

“They took her,” I breathed. “How could they have taken her without my knowing it?” It was then I remembered the scream that had echoed up from the cellar as I had launched into the battle with the Tyst soldiers. I had thought that she was simply shrieking with fear at my actions, but in fact, she had been screaming for help. My heart plummeted. I tilted my head back, closing my eyes.

“No...” I whispered. How could I have been so careless?

“They must have taken the child too.” Edvin spoke from where he sat on the topmost stair, peering down into the basement.

Something twitched within me, a deep awareness that had been drowned out by the momentary haze of bloodlust. I looked around the room, remembering Moria racing about in search of a place to hide Nodin. I prayed silently that she had found one in time. My eyes landed on the pantry closet

dug into the side of the mountain. I ran to the crude wooden door and pulled it open, nearly removing it from its hinges in the process. Inside, behind a loose panel of wood in the back wall, was a small alcove into which Moria had stuffed the quilt, placing Nodin on the folds of material. As I removed the wood panel, Nodin's large elfin eyes, slightly red from crying, beheld me with a look of recognition, though he made no noise except for a low muffled whimper. Any other mortal child would have howled with fear in the midst of such anarchy, but here this bizarre infant appeared only mildly uncertain, as if he knew the importance of his silence. Again, I was disturbed.

"You are a very strange creature," I muttered under my breath as I scooped him from the wall, cradling him against me.

"What did you say?" Julius asked as he approached. "Nothing," I replied shaking my head. I handed Nodin to him.

Julius took the child uncertainly, his brows knitting as he adjusted Nodin uncomfortably in his muscular arms. It was obvious that he was unused to small children. He stared at me questioningly.

"Take him and leave. Quickly!" I said. I turned to Edwin. "Are you on foot?"

"No, we commandeered a truck when we reached the town. And there are two Tyst tryke-jets outside that are now available," Edwin replied with an arch of one eyebrow.

"Take the trikes. Do not go to the safe house as originally planned. If the Tyst tracked me here, they most likely have an idea of where I was headed and are already swarming our final destination." I started for the stairs. "Nothing would surprise me now."

Edwin quickly moved out of my way as I scaled the

stairs. Julius followed closely behind me. I strode through the house, retracing my steps to the entrance of the hostel. Edvin and Julius moved past me, scanning the forest outside briefly before turning back to me for their final directives.

“Are you sure about this?” Edvin asked.

“Yes, go! There is no time. Don’t worry about me. I will take care of myself. It’s the child I’m concerned about. I must find Moria,” I said, my eyes darting through the shadows of the towering line of redwoods yards away. I knew it would not be long before a second, much larger wave of Tyst soldiers, descended upon the hostel as they realized the first front had met their demise.

“You’re going after her?” Julius asked, honestly confused.

“Don’t question me,” I said, my tone deadly cold. I pointed at the tryke-jets at the base of the stairs. “Go, now! Treat that child as if his life were your own!”

Both of the men nodded in unison, deep waves of terror rippling through them as they stared into my eyes. They turned and raced down the stairs. I watched for a moment as they boarded the tryke-jets and sped off into the night in a blur of blue and black steel. I closed my eyes and prayed that they would make it to safety. In any other instance I would have taken charge of Nodin’s protection on my own, but now I was a living, breathing target, completely incapable of concealing my location or identity. The sensation was overwhelming, like the weight of the ocean bearing down on me at ten thousand feet. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t breathe; never had I felt so completely exposed and vulnerable. I turned and walked back into the house to take a moment to gather my thoughts.

I never even heard the missile as it struck the house and exploded.

CHAPTER 10

One of the three men placed his hand between my shoulder blades and pushed me up the last stone step. I stumbled, blind from the rough, mildewed burlap sack placed over my head, and fell to my knees upon the cold wood floor. With my hands tied behind my back I struggled to steady myself; my sharp, frantic breaths pulled the stale dirty burlap against my mouth and nose, causing me to gag. I had not seen who had attacked me from behind in the village as I had walked down an alley on my way to the piers, but they had struck me hard across the base of my skull causing me to blackout instantly. I was also unaware of the hour, how long I had been unconscious or where they had taken me. However, a sick nausea gripping my chest told me I would not be leaving this final destination alive.

The burlap bag was ripped from my head. Light assaulted my eyes from two open windows in front of me. I squeezed them shut and bowed my head. Fingers grabbed a handful of my hair at the back of my skull, yanking my head up again. I gasped with pain, opening my eyes. The room was constructed of ancient gray stone and crumbling

whitewashed plaster, the narrow arched windows void of glass or frames. Outside the rolling Scottish landscape was lush and green beneath a heavy gray fog. I tried to orientate myself, to quickly discern my location, but the world outside offered no distinguishing landmarks. Whatever ruins the men had taken me to must have been far from the seaside town where I had begun my day, someplace where no one would find me or hear my cries for help.

“You know why you’re here, boy?” A gruff, deep voice boomed down on me from my right.

The man behind me kicked me hard at the base of my spine sending me forward with a grunt. I rolled over onto my back, kicking with my heels to frantically scoot across the floor to the wall so at least I felt security on one side. With the icy damp stone pressed against my back, I stared up at my captors trembling with terror. One of the men, a tall lanky figure with scraggly long brown hair and a hard-lined, gaunt face, had walked to the window above my left shoulder where he stood watch, scouting for signs that they had been followed. To my right hovered another man dressed in dirty black pants and a soiled, frayed tunic of roughly woven linen. He stared down at me with unblinking coal-black eyes, fists curled at his sides as if he longed to beat me into a bloody pulp simply for the sake of his own bloodlust. I vaguely remembered him, but in my panic I could not pinpoint where I had last encountered his menacing presence.

“Are you listening to me?” The man in the center, standing directly before me kicked my boot, jostling my attention towards him.

I said nothing, but simply shook my head as I stared up at him. He was an oaf of a human being, as tall as he was wide. His body was heavily muscled from years of hard living and harder fighting, the deep grain of his skin prickled

with the heavy dark shadow of crudely shaved beard to match the closely cropped receding hair on his scalp. The thick, pungent reek of cheap alcohol, rancid sweat and sea salt hung about the men like a dense low lying fog, stifling me despite the sweetly forgiving cold breeze from the windows above. I knew the man before me, his face was unmistakable and forever burned into my memory, no matter how I had attempted to forget him. His name was Bruce and I had purchased a boat from him two months prior. I say purchased, but that isn't exactly the way events had transpired. Money was something I had little of, as was the case with the majority of my countrymen, but I did have one skill that I had managed to pave my way with: gambling. I had come to fancy a boat Bruce had recently acquired and lusted after it as if it were a breathtaking woman. Late one evening, in a tavern of ill repute, I challenged him to a game. Just one. If I were to win, I took the boat for several months with promise to pay half of its worth when I returned. It was a drunken, faulty bet, but one Bruce sloppily agreed to and, when I won, he was none too happy, but he begrudgingly handed over the deed to me lest he lose further face in front of the crowd of onlookers.

It was not that I had planned on denying Bruce the remaining amount owed, but I was young and impetuous. I had conveniently forgotten my debt and, having met a fair Scottish goddess as in love with the sea as I, had gone sailing down the coastline in search of my next great adventure. Bruce, however, had not forgotten my debt.

"Where's my money?" Bruce asked, folding his arms over his chest.

I shook my head, terrified nearly speechless, but managed somehow to find my voice. "I...I don't have it. But I will! Just give me a week and I will have the money, I promise!"

“You promise?” Bruce chuckled under his breath, a low rasping sound that chilled my bones. “I remember a certain promise you made me a year ago. I also remember you skipping town without making good on that promise. Something tells me that your promises aren’t worth a damn.”

“Please! I didn’t mean to be gone so long. I just...I was distracted...”

“Yes, we noticed.” Bruce winked at the man standing over me. The man laughed and grinned revealing several gaping black holes where his front teeth had once been. “Aye! She’s quite a pretty little thing, isn’t she?”

“Don’t you touch her!” I yelled, struggling to scramble up on the slick wood floor with my hands still bound behind my back. “Damn you to hell! She had nothing to do with this. Don’t you touch her!” I shrieked.

The man to my left, standing watch at the window, turned around and grabbed my hair again slamming me back into the wall with a force that made stars explode before my eyes.

Bruce squatted before me, “Tynan, I want you to listen very carefully to me. The boat you gambled from me is now mine and, along with it, will be your lovely lady friend. Consider her part of the ‘interest’ you owe me. This could have been easily avoided had you paid me when you said you would, but you defaulted on that agreement.”

“Please.” I sobbed. “Please don’t do this. I’m a good man. I didn’t mean to not pay you. I had every intention of paying you. Please, just let me have one more week. Please...”

Bruce shook his head. “I’m sorry, son. Intentions are worthless to me. Even if I let you go and you somehow repaid me tomorrow, you have insulted me. People know that. Do you think I would stand to let some brash gent like yourself swagger around after that? It’s too bad. Had you had

the common sense to honor your contracts, you and I may have turned out to be good business partners.” He laughed under his breath at his own sarcasm. Staring at me a moment longer, he reached up and grabbed the gold cross around my neck, a gift from my love, yanking it free with one swift pull. “Hmm, this may fetch a bit,” he mused to himself.

Bruce stood and gestured to his accomplices. “Dump him in the oubliette.”

The two men moved towards me, one grabbing me beneath my shoulders, the other grasping my ankles to lift me from the ground. With a final burst of adrenaline fueled by pure fear, I flailed like a fish being pulled from a river, screaming and shouting for help. The men held fast though, walking quickly to a dark opening in the side of the room. The sick realization of where we were caused me to fight harder: the judgment chamber of a castle where those condemned for the crimes of treason or blasphemy were thrown down an empty stone well to a tiny room some thirty feet below to be forgotten. It was a fate worse than death.

I writhed in their arms, screaming my pleas of mercy, but their brute strength overpowered me. I was unable to grab hold of anything as the men easily dumped me into the black pit. I fell like a boulder, my scream echoing up past me out of the chamber, until I collided with the ground below. I felt my pelvis snap, my left shoulder, hip, and thigh shattering against the filthy stones. The pain consumed me instantly, my body shuddering with shock as adrenaline shot through my veins in a desperate attempt to dull the agony. My mind went blank, stars of white and amethyst exploding before my eyes against the suffocating darkness around me. With a final low moan I slipped into merciful unconsciousness.

* * *

Gradually I felt my eyes begin to flutter open, though the molasses darkness around me caused me to wonder if I had truly awoken. Deep within the oubliette there was nothing but a silence, punctured only by a dull whining within the caverns of my ears. No light filtered in down the long shaft of stone above me. It was unlike anything I had ever experienced before, so flawless and complete, seamless and indefinite as it consumed all concepts of direction or dimension. Lying within it was a maddening, surreal experience as if I hovered in a fog drifting between life and death. Perhaps in death, there would be light again? I could only pray.

My hands were still bound behind my back. I had neither the strength nor the desire to attempt to free myself. It seemed pointless. Even if I managed to do so, I had sustained such horrific injuries that it would only be a matter of time before I died from my wounds for there was no way for me to scale the stone walls of the well without a rope or ladder. I stared forward into the darkness, allowing my eyes to paint pictures on the velvety canvas before me, my breath occasionally visible as white puffs of condensation in the frigid air. I became aware of the fact that I could not feel my body below my waist, nor could I move my legs or even wiggle my toes; the only pain I could sense was a dull throbbing in my broken, swollen shoulder and arm. I sighed. This was not how I had wanted to die.

Before this, my life had been filled with such great promise. I had met a beautiful exciting woman I could actually envision myself marrying, a woman I had wanted to be the mother of my children. We had made plans to leave Scotland, to take the boat I had purchased and sail the seas south in search of a warmer, more peaceful and prosperous country to live in. Lying in each other's arms upon the deck of my boat we had talked passionately at length of our dreams,

of our families and our faiths, of our curiosity for the world around us. We were young and deeply, madly, in the kind of reckless love so rarely afforded in those days. It was all over now. I lay dying in the ruins of a castle and soon, no doubt, she would be dead, if not enslaved and sold by Bruce. How could I have let this happen?

I watched the darkness, tears slipping down my face to coat the stones below. There, amongst the pitch something moved, a flicker of white that gradually approached. I blinked, holding my breath as I struggled to define what it was that I was seeing manifest before me. A face of exquisite beauty and supernatural pallor, framed by long hair the color of red flames, evolved into a slight man dressed in simple but elegantly regal clothes. Carefully he approached me. I stared at him, still fighting for my eyes to grasp the solidity of what I perceived to be a hallucination. In the pitch, the man seemed to glow from within, his skin so white that it needed neither moon nor sunlight to be seen, even in the complete absence of illumination that imprisoned us. He watched me silently as he knelt before me with emerald green eyes that glowed like polished gems, framed by dark red lashes. His expression was soft and curious, sympathetic and knowing as if he possessed a wisdom far beyond his apparent pristine youth. Indeed, he appeared no older than I, just turned twenty-one, though my instincts told me it was merely an illusion.

“Are you an angel?” I whispered in wonder, lying still, without the strength to even lift my head.

The man shook his head, smiling sadly. “No.”

“A demon then?” I asked, terrified to hear the answer.

The man’s smile widened revealing teeth that shone even whiter than his skin, his canines elongated fangs. “No. I am not a demon either, though some would beg to differ.”

His voice was calming, musical with the soft rolling lilt of the Irish tongue. He tilted his head to the side, pondering me. “You must have done something terrible to deserve such a fate as this?”

“I forgot to pay a man for something very expensive,” I said quietly. It was taking every ounce of my fading strength to carry on the conversation. “How did you get down here?”

“This is where I Sleep during the day. But your fall disturbed me,” the man replied, glancing up at the shaft above us.

I said nothing. A flood of shame washed over me as his words fell like another blow to my crippled pride, though they were not spoken with malice. He looked down at me again, his gaze piercing my very soul with an unsettling inquisitiveness, as if he was able to pry into my mind and steal every last coveted secret from my soul. An odd, reserved adoration emanated from the man as he watched me as if I were an expensive painting he was considering purchasing.

“I think it would be a pity to allow things to end in such a way, don’t you?” he asked quietly. “I do not believe this punishment befits your crime,” he added.

I tried to laugh, but the sound merely escaped as a horse cough. “Would be? You mean, will. It will end this way. It has ended this way. But yes, it is a pity, as you put it.” I suddenly wished the man would leave, leave me to my misery and my pain to sink into the final moments.

“I can give you another chance, if you want it.” He reached out and stroked the side of my face gently. “I am a healer, of sorts.”

I opened my eyes again, staring at his face both fascinated and hating him for the glimmer of hope he inspired in me at that moment.

“I can save you from death, redeem you with a new

life, but your old one will be over.” He placed his hand on my good shoulder. “Completely. Including the woman you love so dearly. But you will live.” Though his touch was as cold as the stone that imprisoned us, a warmth seemed to radiate from his palm, a calming, comforting energy that was unexplainable.

I was shocked, unable to figure out how he had known about Elizabeth, for I had not even mentioned her. I sighed. “You are a devil,” I said. “Only devils make such bargains with the living.” I paused for a moment, my desire to live fueling my curiosity. “What would be the cost for such a deal.”

The man shrugged his shoulders. “Accompany my friend Seaфра and I on our travels. Let me teach you about the world. You are beautiful and I see potential in your heart. I don’t want your soul, if that is what you’re asking. I don’t have any use for such things. But something tells me that you are worth saving.” He tilted his head to the side. “You do not have long to make your decision though. You are almost dead now and, if you die, I cannot bring you back into the world of the living.”

The thought terrified me. My heart raced, a new flood of tears slipping down my cheeks as I thought of everything I was about to lose once death claimed me. My fingers reached for the cross that my love had hung about my neck only to find it gone.

“What say you?” the man asked quietly, giving my shoulder a squeeze.

I did not want to die, not in such a miserable and ignoble way. Perhaps I had not been the most honest man thus far, but I could make things right if given another chance. I knew in my heart that this was not my time and the hell if I would let a thug like Bruce and his lackeys leave me for dead.

I knew not what I was agreeing to, but I nodded my head. “I want to live.”

* * *

The thunder of my heart awoke me, shaking my body savagely as if it were made of little more than papier-mâché. The memory had been from my real life, not one of Adian’s memories that had obliterated my past. I was stunned that it had resurfaced from deep within me shaking me like icy water thrown in my face. However, I was unable to dwell too long upon the memory as the agony of my current state exploded through me as if I had wandered onto a landmine. The pain was stifling, a vortex of horrific sensation that sucked the very breath from my lungs and the light from the room around me. It was all I could do to struggle against the desire to allow it to overwhelm me and slip back into unconsciousness; it was impossible to form a single complete thought. I knew that more than mere injury imprisoned me.

Attempting to raise one arm, I was met with the resistance of a metal restraint about my forearm. The pressure of the hard cold bond against my scorched flesh caused me to scream out loud, a short, primordial screech that echoed off the gray concrete walls of the tiny room where I lay. I closed my eyes as I realized just how terrible my wounds must be. Nausea made me weaker as the room began to spin around me. Ceasing all of my movements, I attempted to focus, to slow my breathing and the frantic thoughts that left me disoriented and terrified. Why hadn’t I healed? Whatever the extent of my injuries Nahalo’s blood should have made the recovery time miniscule.

A long strip of dull gray-white halogen light above me flickered on suddenly with a hiss and whine. I winced at the

harsh illumination, squinting until my eyes had adjusted, though they continued to ache. The room around me was barren with the exception of an aluminum cart standing near the wall. Various stainless steel medical instruments were laid neatly side-by-side on a tray, gleaming eerily in the cold, inhuman light. Before me, a couple of feet away from the table I was strapped to, a wall of mirrored glass reflected my ghastly image. It was all I could do to not look away in terror from the charred broken corpse that remained of the Immortal I had been.

“No...” The word slipped out of my cracked, peeling lips as a ghost of a whisper.

The missile that had struck the house must have exploded in very close range for it to do such extensive damage. I was, however, relieved to see that I still had all of my limbs intact. However, aside from that detail, I was a monstrous construction of charred flayed flesh. An IV, attached to a hanging bag of strange greenish fluid, was inserted into the vein at the bend of my left arm. There was no way of knowing just what poison flowed into me. I felt bile begin to rise in my throat and closed my eyes. My reflected image was forever burned into my mind, completely and utterly inescapable.

“So, you are the mighty Tynan Llywelyn?” A man’s voice, deep and smooth as polished jade, filtered in from an intercom somewhere above me.

My eyes snapped open landing instantly on the mirror before me. A second light had appeared on the far side of its surface allowing me to partially see the two individuals who sat watching me behind a desk lined with computer systems and surveillance equipment. The man to the left was young, dressed in Tyst military fatigues, his face set and serious as he watched the screen directly in front of him. Never once

did his eyes flicker up to steal a glance at the monster he kept captive.

The other man was older, in his early forties with dark olive skin, deeply marked from years of stress. With short cut, thick black hair that was streaked with shocks of gray and deep set eyes of the darkest brown, his face was not classically handsome, but that of a commander, a general. This was a man who had led armies, ruled nations. This was a man who had stayed awake for days plotting and scheming and dreaming of power and wealth. Compassion was not a word he was familiar with.

“Cardone?” I mouthed the name, unable to force my parched windpipes to carry sound.

“Yes, you are correct. I am Lord Cardone III. I am very impressed by your ability to circumnavigate our systems. It has been remarkable, to say the least. But, now the game is over.”

I hated him instantly for the arrogance with which he addressed me. Inside I rallied against his insolence, screaming about the centuries of time I had spent on the Earth, of the revolutions I had inspired, followed and watched perish, of the empires I had witnessed crumble while new ones rose like ants over a decaying corpse. Yours will be next! I wanted to scream.

“Despite the massive setback you have created for us, I am willing to be lenient. That is, if you answer all of my questions truthfully and to the best of your abilities, I may consider reducing the cellular inhibitor that is now keeping you from healing.” Cardone spoke with an unnerving calmness that echoed, at least to me, of pure deceit. “Either way you will make amends for your crimes against the Tyst Empire.”

I wanted to laugh at his concept of leniency, but the

unrelenting waves of pain that wracked my body impaired my speech. After a moment of concentration, I managed to wheeze a question aloud, “Cellular...inhibitor?”

“Ah, yes! I’m very proud of our latest innovation in interrogating your kind. And, I must say, I have you to thank for it. Your foray with the Chronous allowed us to gather crucial information about your species’ DNA structure, which was, for some reason, eluding our researchers. From the information we were able to pull from the data stream, we were able to isolate the genetic compound within your cellular structure that facilitates the quick regeneration of tissue and bone after injury. From there we were able to devise that lovely serum you’re currently being fed which, in essence, all but stalls that process so that you heal at a more human rate. From where I stand, looking at the extent of your injuries, I think it will be months before you have the strength to fight us. That is, if your injuries don’t kill you before then.” Cardone smirked as he watched me with pleased fascination.

I groaned, my head lolling to one side as the agony nearly succeeded in pulling me down into unconsciousness once again. “Where is Moria?”

“You are on a first name basis with my Queen, are you? Interesting. She would have fulfilled her destiny had you not intervened. Sadly, she is of little use to anyone anymore and she should be no concern of yours. We have new plans for her.” He narrowed his eyes at me, the question of my preoccupation with his wife heavy and undisguised in his mind. “You are all we need, we realize now. I really don’t see why we didn’t see this all along? Perhaps it could have saved us quite a bit of time and all of this hassle.”

“What are you talking about?” I croaked, anger surging through me as I desperately longed to break free of the

shackles and attack him.

“Where is the child?” Cardone asked coldly, ignoring my question.

“I don’t know,” I replied sharply.

“Why don’t I believe you?” Cardone replied with a sigh. “You have no reason to protect the child that was born. He is not of your blood or species. Concealing his whereabouts will only prolong your pain.”

“What do you want with him? He is not the Vicinus,” I growled. “I severed that link before he was born.” I lifted my head and stared at Cardone, trying to muster the strength to mold his will with my own, but I was too weak. “I know what you are thinking, that you can somehow still sacrifice the child for the sake of summoning the Vicinus, but I will not allow it. Even if I knew where he was, I would not tell you.”

“Actually that is not my intention at all.” He held my gaze steadily, unmoved by my monstrous appearance. A silent deadly rage boiled beneath the surface of his eyes. “You know we have ways of making you tell us, painful ways.”

“I could not be in anymore pain.” I lowered my head back again with a heavy exhalation. “Kill me if you must.”

“Nothing so merciful for you.” Cardone pushed away from the desk and stood back with arms crossed over his chest. “Your connection with the Vicinus and the Chronous makes you an excellent candidate for the host body the Vicinus needs. If you do not hand over the child, we could always use you for our next attempt.”

His words only confirmed my deep suspicions; I had not defeated the Vicinus after all, but merely made strides in one preliminary battle. I closed my eyes, a low insane laughter beginning to bubble up from my belly as I thought about the

primordial god inhabiting my body.

“You are out of your mind,” I hissed.

“It is your choice,” Cardone replied.

“Yes, it is. If you allow the god to assume my body, I, as well as all of your Phuree enemies, will still get the revenge they crave: your death!” I was out of my mind with the pain scorching my limbs as my heart was breaking for Moria and Nodin.

“Go ahead! Do it! I dare you! I will rend you limb from limb and suck the marrow from your bones and when I am done, the Vicinus will incinerate every last person within your precious Tyst Empire until it burns to the ground!” I collapsed backwards again with an animalistic howl of agony and rage. “I WILL KILL YOU!”

Cardone turned to the man beside him. “Enough. Sedate him.”

A calming coldness spread into my arm, quickly invading my body like liquid lead to quench the fire instantaneously, a numbness blanketing my brain, making it impossible to form coherent thoughts.

“Tynan, think carefully on what your next statement will be. I strongly advise you give over the child. But it is your choice.” Cardone turned and disappeared out of the room through a door to his left.

As he left the lights went out.

CHAPTER 11

For hours I languished in a rich, numb darkness, clinging to the enveloping shadows like a child at the hem of his mother's skirt. My mind replayed the freshly resurfaced memory of the oubliette where Phelan had first found me. The feel of slick icy stones, the scent of mold and cobwebs and blood, the feeling of absolute hopelessness was as fresh and new as if I lay there again. I had not looked on the grief I felt for over two centuries. However, this time there would be no ghostly angel to save me, of that I was quite certain. Even if Phelan would want to rescue me, there was no way for him to find me here, imprisoned within the Tyst fortress. While the bitter resentment I had harbored for my Maker still simmered deep inside me, despite our attempt at mending our wrongs, I would have given anything to have him dash to my aide.

I knew intuitively that the wounds I sustained were not life threatening for a creature like me. Even if they kept me in a perpetual state of torture until my body healed, in time I would be whole again, appearing as if the flames had never

scorched my skin. Unless my head was ripped from my neck and crushed or my heart carved from my chest and burnt into dusty gray ash, my physical self would forever fight to maintain its permanence in existence. Cardone, as he always had in his dealings with Immortals, underestimated the potential of our race. Despite whatever information the Tyst had managed to decipher from my DNA woven amongst the ever-evolving enigma that was the Chronous, there were few secrets of nature which could be fully dissected by humanity's science. Immortality's evolutionary rate surpassed that of the human race, our bodies and minds constantly adapting to our environments while our innate preternatural abilities manifested naturally as we progressed through the centuries. Whatever the Tyst's researchers might be able to ascertain and quantify today would quickly become obsolete. It was one element in the equation that gave me a modicum of comfort.

I finally awoke to the familiar stifling chill of the windowless gray interrogation room. I had lost count of how many nights had passed since my initial imprisonment for the blackouts I experienced blended with the unconsciousness caused by the Sleep until I could not distinguish reality from dreams. Between the steady flow of the cellular growth inhibitor and the specialized narcotic sedation, I had never felt so helpless. At times Cardone would return to the protective confines of the observation room to berate me with a deluge of questions. I remained silent, or so I hoped, for again I could not be certain what I screamed inside my head and what I actually allowed to slip past my lips.

Once a day an attendant, a young woman with a serious, plain emotionless face, would come into the room to check my vitals and replace the bags hanging from the IV machine beside the table. I could remember at one point attempting

to speak to her, to plead for mercy and desperately warn her of Cardone's plans. She kept her eyes averted from mine never once uttering a single word, or even acknowledging my anguish with a twitch of an eyebrow. Even in my medicated state, however, I could feel her unease, fear and disgust for the abomination of nature she had been assigned to. Failing to form coherent words, knowing my energy was wasted upon the brainwashed Tyst nurse, I would close my eyes and sink back into darkness, the realm where I now felt safest.

The delirium left a terrifying window of possibility that I cringed to even consider. Deep within the back chambers of my mind where the last small sliver of lucidity remained, hovering in the base of my skull like dust floating in a shaft of sunlight, I plotted my escape. I needed my body to heal just enough to summon the energy to combat the sedative and allow me to tap into my mental abilities that allowed me influence over mortals. I had only to be patient, a virtue I had never possessed. Once I had regained that ability, I would be able to convince the nurse to cease the dosages of cellular inhibitor. However, I did not know how long it would take for me to regain such power, nor did I know what the true impact of the serum was upon my body and mind. The possibility lingered that I might never be the same again even if I did survive.

The familiar sound of the door opening to my cell made me swim to the surface of the icy murk. Gradually, I opened my eyes. The sound of hollow, jaded footsteps on dull slick concrete was accompanied by the whine of metal scraping softly, tapping lightly against itself as charts and instruments were rearranged methodically. I stared up at the ceiling, the strip of lighting above me as devoid of nurturing warmth as a granite tombstone yet to be engraved with a final good-bye. I had become accustomed to the rhythmic

flickering of the halogen bulb within the opaque plastic covering; I counted the humming measures interrupted periodically by a twitch and pop. Focusing on the fixture, I longed for the moment when I could cause it to explode. I exhaled slowly, silently surveying each and every nerve and cell in my body, hoping for a better progress than the night before. Tonight, something felt different; more lucid and coherent, even though my body still felt tight and rigid from the perpetual pain and dulling sedative. My mind felt sharp and alert. I wanted to laugh aloud in my excitement, but dared not make a single movement or sound. I seized the sensation, latching onto it greedily, yet attempting to not grasp it so desperately that it would slip out of my grip in my haste. With a methodical surgical precision I needed to coax the lucidity into permanence lest I overwhelm myself and sink back into the darkness. My adrenaline surged, my heart began to race with determination. My fingers twitched upon the table. Carefully, I drew a deep breath to steady myself, impatience gnawing at me feverishly like a wolf ready to sever its own paw in its desperation for escape.

The young nurse rounded the table and approached the IV stand. As her hands moved towards the clear plastic bags, now almost empty. I carefully reached out to her mind. To my delight I felt my psyche slip into hers, silken and sure and slightly erotic in its natural ease, softly winding through the simply constructed corridors of her consciousness with a familiar ease.

Stop! I commanded as she began her nightly procedure of replacing the drugs that held me hostage.

I continued to stare up at the light fixture, meditating on the subtle hum of its energy. The attendant paused, her eyes darting around the room as if she had heard a disembodied voice. The command had not been forceful enough to halt

her entirely. Briefly her gaze lighted on my face, her brows furrowing with confusion. I did not meet her eyes. Shaking her head, she quickly looked away again and attempted to return to her tasks. With my next attempt, I reached deep within myself, drawing on the core of my being as I struggled to harness the necessary strength to control her. Having not fed in nights, my weakness was an obstacle I was not sure I could overcome, but I was determined to try.

Do not move.

She froze, hands poised in the air, one on the IV stand, one holding a bag of cellular inhibitor. I was beyond elation, beyond euphoria. It was the very moment I had dreamed of.

Lower your hands and turn towards me.

She obeyed. Standing motionless, she awaited my instructions.

Replace the bag of fluid, as you do every night. Then, using a spare needle, poke a small hole in the bag, only large enough so that the contents will drip out very, very slowly. Be careful. There are cameras watching us. Act naturally. There is absolutely nothing amiss here. I spoke to her gently with a firm but reassuring pressure that left her feeling strangely empowered.

The attendant followed my instructions perfectly.

As she completed the task I touched her mind once again, *You are released. You will not remember anything of this evening once you leave the room.*

Without glancing once in my direction, she turned silently and walked to the metal table near the entrance. After inscribing an update on the medical chart, just as she did during each of her visits, she left. I glanced over at the IV bag; the green liquid had already begun to leak out in a thin, but steady series of drops from its base. Elation surged through me as I watched each drop of poison slip

from the hole in the plastic, nearly invisible to the mortal eye, spattering on the dull gray concrete beneath the table. It would be only an hour or so before the bag was empty, at which point my body would, hopefully, begin the arduous process of repairing my injuries. The anticipation was excruciating; every small notion of escape, every worry about Moria, Nodin or Jasmine, or the gathered refugees at Phelan's estate, clustered to the forefront of my mind. However, I could not allow those that watched me to notice anything even slightly amiss. I closed my eyes and waited, trying desperately to keep the tears that hovered beneath my lids from escaping.

I felt it immediately when the flow of cellular inhibitor and sedative ceased, the pain of my wounds returning with a wicked vengeance that nearly caused me to cry out loud as my body slowly reclaimed itself from the drugs. I stifled the involuntary spasm, gritting my teeth until I thought they might shatter. Slowing my breathing, I embraced the pain, clearing a grounding space where I could settle and anchor myself, focusing on the knowledge that now my body would be able to right itself, free from the synthetic shackles that had bound it. The nerves of my body electrified, rolling waves of impulse, like millions of thin silver needles rippling beneath my skin each piercing a single cell repeatedly until I felt myself begin to shake in my attempt to restrain my body's instinctive, involuntary movements. Without the numbing concoction in my veins, I became acutely aware of my Thirst as it exploded through the haze with a banshee howl that reverberated off the inside of my skull, screeching past my reason. I had drunk my fill of Tyst blood the night in the hostel, but my body had greedily consumed that nourishment shortly after the explosion in a desperate attempt to save itself. The hunger was overwhelming. Blood

tears began to trickle from the corners of my closed eyes as I struggled to remain still before the constant observation of the monitoring system.

Vaguely, I was aware of the young Tyst soldier who sat behind the wall of mirrored glass at his station, fulfilling his duty as my warden. I prayed he had witnessed nothing out of the ordinary in the nurse's visit. Soon he would take his leave as he did every night, allowing the Chronous to monitor me. Within an hour I heard the sound of his chair sliding back and the hiss of the door to his room opening. I was finally alone. I pitied the nurse when she returned, unaware of the monster that would be awaiting her sacrifice.

Time passed slowly. My body struggled to stitch itself back together without the aid of the nutrients in living blood to fuel its efforts. I knew there was progress when the pain began to recede from my fingers and toes, gradually, fading up my limbs like the retreat of the sun behind the horizon, the skin that had been flayed open or seared to a crackling black like burnt wood tightening as it knit itself a flawless new façade. The hair on my scalp and limbs began to grow again, the follicles tingling maddeningly as the new shafts emerged like blades of grass from the earth. Occasionally, I would open my eyes, peering at my reflection in the silvery wall of glass in front of the table to inspect the progress of my rehabilitation. Even with the DNA of an Ancient infused with my own vampiric cellular structure, I knew it would take time to repair such extensive damage.

Cardone did not call on me that night with his barrage of interrogating questions about the Phuree and Nodin. I was both relieved and disturbed by this as it either meant he had found the knowledge he had been desperately prying for, or he had admitted failure and moved on from my unmovable silence. I awoke the following night to the sound of the

door opening again. Immediately I was filled with a frenetic determination to free myself from the Tyst prison, a flood of fierce angry energy I could barely contain. Before the attendant had even fully closed the door behind her I reached out to her with my mind.

Come to me, I said, firmly taking hold of her will with an iron fist. I did not care now what the Chronous or the Tyst soldier saw from his protective office. As if in a dream she turned and walked to the table. I knew she did not have the keys to unlock my steel restraints and I was not yet strong enough to break free on my own. I needed to feed.

Press your wrist to my mouth. There was a flicker of hesitation in her eyes as she stared at my face, her mind screaming silently for her to turn and flee, terrified by the healing state of my appearance and her own inability to resist a power she could not define. I repeated the command. *Press your wrist to my mouth*.

She obeyed. I bit into her wrist with a viciousness that nearly severed her hand, locking onto it and pulling hard at the steady stream of blood that poured from the wound. My body began to shiver with the sweet euphoric pleasure that came after such a period of deprivation. Distantly, I was aware of the soldier monitoring us rising from his chair and sounding the alarms. My hands curled to fists, straining against the steel cuffs around my wrists until they began to creak as my strength returned. She was slight, however, unable to lend to me a truly great amount of sustenance and she quickly began to falter, struggling to remain standing as I drained her body of its lifeforce. In the red haze of my Thirst, the accumulated recollections of her life, born and raised within the Tyst Empire and dedicated to its servitude poured into me as if I were standing in the middle of a swift moving river. I was aware of the graying of her skin, the glassine

sheen of death coming over her eyes. Her heart slowed and she slumped forward over me, unconscious. I pulled back, unclamping my jaws from her arm with a gasp. She slid to the floor, the remaining threads of her life leaving her lips in a final exhalation. I felt the last of the blood absorb into the skin around my mouth, down my chin and neck where it had drained, my cells greedily refusing to allow a single drop to be wasted. My muscles began to reverse the atrophy they had endured until, within seconds, I felt a semblance of my original strength return.

On the far side of the mirrored wall, the soldier had fled in search of help. With a grunt and growl, I pulled against my bonds, feeling them groan and snap in a way that made me want to weep at the sound of possible freedom. I was still not myself. Feeling all too human in my lumbering awkward movements, I slipped from the cold steel table. My feet hit the stained concrete floor with the wet sound only flesh on manmade constructs can make. My knees buckled beneath me.

Noooooo! I screamed silently as I broke my fall with my hands on the ground before me. I struck the floor with a defiant fist so hard that it that caused the table and the mirrored wall to rattle. Blood tears welled up in my eyes. I refused to look at the empty corpse of the unwitting Tyst assistant who had sacrificed her life, splayed next to me, her eyes turned towards the ceiling in a frozen portrait of awe. I drew a shaky, rasping breath knowing that I had only seconds before the Tyst forces would descend on me with a merciless brute force. I clawed my way to a standing position again, clinging to the table where I had lain for so many weeks. I heard the door open behind me before I even could muster the strength to turn and face the intruders.

“Down! Down! Get down on the ground! NOW!” a male

voice barked at me.

I didn't move. I stood, leaning against the table, anger and hatred for the Tyst Empire empowering my will to stand, my will to live. In the year I had been immersed within their universe, I had been subjected to nothing but estrangement, torture, lies, brutality and manipulation. I had seen the future and wanted nothing to do with it anymore. I hated them in a way I didn't believe I could ever hate anyone again. I wanted to obliterate them. I wanted them to feel every single ounce of pain I had ever experienced in my entire life as a vampire. They had brought me to the surface of their existence in a time when I wanted nothing more than to Sleep away the centuries. They had made me part of their reality. The Tyst held the focus of my rage and yet I was impotent to inflict it as I wanted to thanks to the state of my body.

I was out of my mind, beyond reason or even self-preservation. Drawing a deep breath, a low growl rumbling within my throat, I turned and lunged haphazardly at the nearest person in my line of sight. Gunfire erupted—a spattering rain of deafening noise, yellow light and pain descended on me from several sides, both ice and liquid fire in the same instance, bringing me to my knees. I might live through the barrage of new injuries, if I was lucky, but I would not rise and fight again that night.

I convulsed with agony on the floor, my blood pooling out around me, in a dark red halo. My body, riddled with dozens of small puncture wounds, attempted over and over again to repair itself, to expel the hot lead from the muscle and skin and bone. As I collapsed, the gunfire died down. The silence that accompanied the emptiness was deafening, the ghost of each bullet's song singing high and hard within the blood-filled caverns of my ears. They moved about me, the mortal men sent to subdue the dangerous Immortal. I

could smell their fear and hatred oozing from their pores beneath the heavy dark fabric of their uniforms, a rank perfume. Their military training had not prepared them for a creature as determined as I. These were not the same officers who had tracked me in the redwoods.

With a last burst of defiance, I reached out and grabbed the ankle of the man I had been lunging for and, yanking him towards me with a last burst of energy, sunk my fangs into his calf. I knew it was a futile movement, but I wanted nothing more than to inflict a final instance of pain on them. Gunfire rained down on me again.

* * *

Two pairs of hands lifted me from the concrete floor, now grown slick with my blood. As my body left the ground, thin rivulets continued to stream from my shredded flesh. I felt as if I were dying all over again. The sad thing was, I knew I wouldn't. The soldiers carried me from the room and down a long, dark, gray hall, lit only by a strange dull white light that seemed to emanate from somewhere near the ceiling. My face to the floor, head bobbing painfully with every step as if my neck were broken, the corridor was a blur of marching legs, swaying guns and shadows. The healing my body had achieved before the arrival of the troops felt as if it had never occurred, that perhaps it had been nothing more than another of my hallucinations generated by the perpetual state of agony I had existed in for so many nights.

Now my body struggled yet again to repair itself, to cling to the last drops of the new blood I had consumed as it closed one bullet hole after another with slow precision, each taking more energy to manifest than the last. Luckily, most of the metal had passed clean through, my shoulders,

abdomen and hips, but a few bullets remained, lodged in neat little pockets of bone where they had stubbornly burrowed. Unlike a shard of glass or splinter of wood, which my system might be able to break down and digest, the alloy was too complex and toxic for my body to assimilate. My eyes rolled back into my skull while sporadic convulsions gripped me as my body attempted to expel the metal from the wounds. One after another, the fragments emerged, falling to the concrete with a metal *ting*, like a silver ring tapping against a wine glass.

Each tiny chime would cause the soldiers to stop in unison and silently scan the hallway for the source of the sound. However, they did not pause for long before resuming their hurried escort. Their fear rippled through me, syrupy and palpable, coursing down their arms in rolling pulses of adrenaline through their hands where they were wrapped around my ankles and wrists. It made me shiver with unease as it worked its way beneath my skin like millions of baby daddy longlegs. I despised their touch, deliriously dreaming of the night when I would slaughter them all.

At the end of the long hallway they turned the corner. The sound of a heavy metal door opening slithered across my ears. I struggled to open my eyes and lift my head enough to glimpse the new section of the fortress we entered. The blood-caked curtain of my hair draped over my face as I turned it to the side and peered past the soldier's legs.

Prison cells of a thick, clear Plexiglas-reminiscent material lined the hall, each separated from one another by walls of cement two feet in thickness. Unlike many human prisons that rang with the incessant chorus of the murderers, rapists and thieves quarantined in the tiny filthy rooms of steel and cinderblock, the silence here was deafening. Those imprisoned were not vagabond criminals, though surely the

Empire viewed their crimes against the government just as detestable, to lock them away in such a place. Men and women of varying age and social designation, from amagin dwellers to Phuree chieftains and even a few Tyst upper class royalty, cowered as if fearing to allow the faintest sound or incriminating movement to escape. From the shadows of their cages, where they cowered hopeless and beaten, I caught their horrified stares as I passed, their eyes growing wide with disbelief and terror that perhaps a similar fate would be in store for them. Shrinking away from the front of their cells, trying to escape the hideous sight of what they thought to be yet another tortured human prisoner, they looked away as my unfocused eyes skimmed their gazes, one after another.

The soldiers halted in front of an empty cell amidst the seemingly endless row. One of the men stepped into an alcove between the cells where the entrance to the room was located. After opening the door he hastily moved aside as if he did not want to chance even the slightest brush with my body. With a spiteful heave, they tossed me unceremoniously into the cell. I landed with a bone-jarring thud against the icy concrete floor, sliding a foot or so until I collided with the far wall. There, mired in the heat and darkness of my hatred for Cardone and his Empire, I lay in a contorted heap while my body knitted closed the last remaining bullet wounds.

I could not understand why they had not simply strapped me back to the table and pumped my veins full of their poison, but I could only assume Cardone now had other plans for me that required my body to heal. Gradually, my breathing strengthened as my metabolism came to a rest, its pace no longer manic in its efforts. Shaking, I lifted my hand and pressed it against the clear front wall of my new prison, raising my head just enough to peer out at my fellow

captives. A few were brave enough to venture to the front of their cells to stare at the newcomer with anxious wonder while others continued to try to hide, fearing the return of the Tyst soldiers to inflict the sort of torture they witnessed in me.

The cell directly across from me, however, beheld a different story altogether. A woman, dressed in distinctly Phuree garments, sat in the corner near the front of the cell, seemingly oblivious to the goings on around her. Her knees bent, her arms tightly wrapped about them, she stared forward at the wall in front of her, her blue eyes sorrowfully vacant and devoid of any glimmer of hope. Her face, framed by long sun-bleached blond hair, had been badly beaten, her left eye nearly swollen shut with a purple and green bruise, her lips split and caked with dried blood. Despite her disfiguring injuries, I knew her instantly.

“Khanna?” I could barely force a whisper as I stared at her, blood tears welling up in my eyes at the dismal sight of the broken warrior.

She did not stir, the glass too thick and distance between us too great for my hoarse whisper to reach her. Curling my fingers into a loose fist, I tapped the wall in front of me. The motion caught her attention, breaking her concentration on the area of concrete between her knees, with a start. Her eyes cut towards me, her brow furrowing slightly as if she had been awoken from a long, terrible dream. As recognition set in, her eyes widened, her lips forming my name as a question; I nodded slightly as I held her gaze. Khanna turned and, kneeling, pressed both of her palms against the glass.

“Tynan?” she said, this time loud enough for my sensitive hearing to register her voice through the cell walls. “I thought you were at Phelan’s estate? Was it attacked?” She appeared to have forgotten the animosity she had held

for me.

I sighed, suddenly embarrassed by my shattered condition, and shook my head. “No, it wasn’t. At least, it wasn’t when I was there last.”

She read my lips through the glass. Her mouth opened slightly as if she was searching for words that were not awkward or inadequate. “I don’t understand. What are you doing here? What happened to you?”

“Never mind how I came to be here tonight. It is a long story and I am too weak to speak at length.” I leaned my forehead against the glass; the effort of holding my head up was too much at the moment. I held her gaze steadily though, refusing to let her retreat back into her daydreams. “How long have you been here? Did you find Loden?”

She bit her lip, tears welling up in her eyes, slipping one by one down her cheeks, and bowed her head. “I am a failure. I have let everyone down, your people and my own. Our expedition was besieged within hours of our leaving Phelan’s estate. You were right. We should have taken Immortals with us. Jaxon and Edo were killed in the fight. I was captured and brought here. I don’t know how long ago that was. I’ve lost track of time.” Her voice caught in her throat. “Oh, Tynan, what have I done? What have I done?”

Tightness formed in the center of my chest, a fluttering ache of sorrow and apprehension. It was obvious that she had been tortured, but what she might have revealed to the Tyst under duress, I shuddered to contemplate. No matter how brave or strong, everyone has their breaking point.

“Khanna, what did you tell them?” I kept my voice steady and calm, though inside my heart raced with fear.

She shook her head slowly, sobbing quietly. “I don’t know. I could have told them everything or nothing at all. All I know is that they eventually put me in here, which

only leads me to believe that they have whatever they were looking for. I have the feeling I am simply waiting to be executed now.”

Struggling at first to form even the smallest of words through her tears, Khanna told me her story.

CHAPTER 12

Pain wracked Khanna's body, bone-deep from the aching bruises her captors had inflicted upon her earlier that day, but she knew those injuries would soon pale in the face of whatever methods her interrogators would utilize. She steeled herself for the worst but she could not win against the festering fear she grappled with. Cold and starving, her bloodied clothes clinging to her thin, exhausted figure, she curled her fingers around the ends of the metal chair she was now strapped to, trying to find some way to ground herself and focus. She knew they wanted her this way, broken to the point of little resistance, but she had to find a way to reach deep down inside and draw forth whatever strength she could muster from a place even she, perhaps, did not know existed.

The lights were off in the small room, the cold gray walls blending smoothly with the floor and ceiling so that, in the darkness, she felt as if she were hovering within a dead womb. She did not know how exactly she had gotten there for she had been blindfolded during transport. To her right the planes of dark gray were abruptly disrupted by a length

of silver glass through which she could see nothing but her own dismal reflection. The sensation of being watched from behind that glass was overwhelming, an eerie, oiliness that caused her skin to crawl as if covered with a million microscopic spiders.

Slowly, she drew a long, deep breath, releasing it shakily back into the cold air around her. Weakly, she moved within the metal restraints over her wrists and ankles, binding her to the chair, feeling them slice against her sore skin.

I'm not ready to die. The thought passed through her mind like lightning. It was not exactly the thought of death that frightened her, but the manner in which it would be delivered. Swift and final on the battlefield was one thing, but tethered like a lab rat within a Tystian torture chamber was beyond her worst nightmares. She had heard the horror stories, she had seen the mutilated remains of captured Phuree warriors dumped in the wild as warnings to the clans, their corpses dissected in such medieval ways that they were nearly unrecognizable. However, Khanna had never envisioned being captured herself for she was simply too cunning to allow herself to fall prey to the enemy's strategies. How could she have let such a thing happen? She had failed her people by being captured and the humiliation would haunt her for the rest of her life, if she lived at all.

The door behind her clicked, the soft whisper of the steel panel, cold and ghostly as it opened. Two sets of boots walked across the threshold, their steps sinister in their steady heavy rhythm. She had not the strength to lift her head and turn to look over her shoulder; the dread only amplified her pain and exhaustion ten-fold. She squeezed her eyes shut, listening to the tick of delicate instruments being placed carefully upon a metal surface somewhere in a corner behind her.

No matter what they do to me, I won't talk, she vowed

silently. I won't talk.

"We'll see about that," a man spoke as he walked past to take his place before her.

Her heart stopped for a moment; the voice was devastatingly familiar. No, it can't be! She squeezed her eyes tighter for a second, praying that her mind was playing tricks on her in her weakened state. However, she knew there had only been one she had ever encountered who had been strong enough to pry past her mental defenses.

I watched him die. He's dead... It's impossible. She began to shake uncontrollably in her restraints.

"Do I know you?" the man spoke again, his voice cold, yet smugly curious as he listened to her thoughts.

Swallowing hard, her throat burning from the sandpaper rawness of thirst, Khanna slowly raised her head and opened her eyes. What little breath held in her lungs escaped in a strangled cry of disbelief. She wanted to be overcome with joy, but instead a terrified confusion exterminated every flicker of happiness from her heart. Tears began to stream uncontrollably down her cheeks.

"Malakai?" She could barely whisper his name.

He stood before her, the perfectly sculpted dark angel he had always been, his piercing blue eyes boring mercilessly deep into her soul, unblinking. His long, wavy, black hair, that had once framed his face in an unruly mass of elegant curling shadow, had been cut short and clean, his dusty trench coat and ratty gray cable-knit sweater exchanged for the crisp midnight blue uniform of a high-ranking Tyst officer. A circular gold medal embossed with the insignia of the covert special operations unit, the Third Eye, was displayed prominently upon the left chest pocket of his long-sleeved shirt.

"You're alive!" A glimmer of hope sparked across her

heart; perhaps she would not meet such a horrible fate after all, she prayed. Surely, whatever his position now with the Tyst, he would release her. Surely?

Malakai watched her for a moment, his arched black brows knitting as he considered her. "I'm not sure how you have come by my name, but I assure you that there is no way you could possibly know me." His mouth twitched in a wry smirk. "But, yes, I am alive. No thanks to your people, or your vampire allies."

"But, I..." Khanna stuttered, a renewed surge of adrenaline electrifying her body and mind. "Malakai, it's me, Khanna. Don't you remember me?" She strained forward against the metal restraints, holding his gaze. "You and I... we were..." Her voice cracked and disintegrated sadly.

Malakai leaned forward, placing his hands over the wrist restraints. His aura bristled with a deadly degree of interest as if he were studying a strange, wild animal in its cage. Gone was the concern and affection Khanna could once always sense within him, even at the greatest of distances. This was not the Malakai she remembered, the man whom she loved against all odds, the single person she had given herself to, body and soul. Indeed, this man standing before her who bore his identical countenance was a stranger.

"We were what?" he asked her. His breath smelled oddly metallic and harsh in her face, the scent of his skin washed thoroughly of the perfume of sweat and cigarette smoke.

She suddenly became aware of the other presence in the rear of the room and dropped her voice. Sinking back into the chair again, her stomach curdled with dread. Her reason told her to stifle any further attempt to reach out to him, her instincts screaming that this man would as soon kill her as look at her, but her heart still felt as if it were shattering all over again, just as it had the night he had died. She simply

could not stop staring into his eyes and thinking of the last time she had kissed his lips, her naked body pressed close to his beneath heavy handmade blankets of hemp and deerskin. “Lovers.” The word was barely audible as it passed her lips. She felt her heart seize as if a fist of frost-covered iron had wrapped around it.

Malakai stepped away from her chair, staring at her for a moment with a mixture of perplexity and pity. “Lovers?” he said with a short, sharp laugh. “Did you hear that?” he asked the person in the back of the room. “She thinks we were once lovers!” He laughed again, the sound bouncing off the cold gray ceiling and walls to pierce through Khanna’s soul.

A man laughed under his breath, short and static and cold. “That’s a good one,” he replied to Malakai. “I’ve heard prisoners try to talk their way out of here, but that is definitely a first!”

Malakai crossed his arms over his chest. Shaking his head slowly from side to side he replied to her, his gaze firmly fixed and devoid of the amusement he seemed to experience a moment before. “No, my dear. We were not lovers of any sort.” His tone was spiteful with barely concealed disgust. He took a step towards her, bending slightly forward and lowering his voice. “And it’s a good thing too, because what we plan to do to you would be most tragic if that had been the case.”

Khanna struggled to keep the tears at bay, but despite her will, they began to fall, slipping one by one over the edges of her eyes. They trailed down her dirt and blood streaked cheeks with excruciating timing, her hands bound so that she could not rub them away before he saw them. As the first one reached her chin, hanging for a moment suspended in time before breaking away to plummet away to her lap, she thought to herself, This is worse than death. He’s alive and

he doesn't even remember me. He's all I had to live for. She instantly regretted the thought, knowing he had broken through her defenses and could hear her every mental word. But she had given up hope.

Malakai squatted next to her chair, staring up at her. She knew he was trying to decide whether to pick her apart verbally first or simply get down to torturing her as he did with all of his subjects. She remembered the tales he had told her of his life growing up in the ranks of the Third Eye, long before he had defected and allied himself with the Phuree. He had been trained in the art of interrogation, from the time he could form full sentences, as no other military personnel was. His ability to dissect a person's intellect while mercilessly torturing their body was unparalleled by any soldier, even within his own unit. He was a legend of inhuman, brutal violence and terror, but he had longed to leave that world behind him, to become something other than merely an instrument of the Empire. However, it appeared now that all of that had been a lie.

"This person meant the world to you, didn't he?" he asked her.

She refused to answer. She had already said too much. If this were truly Malakai, the Tyst had done something to return him to his original state of mind and position within the Third Eye, which meant that any ounce of compassion he might have gained on the outside would have been eliminated and replaced by cold calloused programming. He would use any ounce of weakness she revealed against her.

"I can see that he did." He reached up and touched her chin with two fingers, attempting to turn her face towards his.

She jerked her face away, hiding it behind a disheveled curtain of blond hair.

“It’s a shame, truly. Even as battered as you are right now, I can see your beauty. It’s too bad you’re Phuree. You might have made a respectable member of society one day. Perhaps even a fitting wife for one of our own royalty.” He stood and began to walk towards the man in the back of the room who continued to fiddle methodically and obsessively with his metal instruments.

“Fuck you!” Khanna hissed under her hair. She felt her reason begin to crack. She no longer cared about the consequences of her actions.

“Excuse me?” Malakai stopped.

Khanna took a deep breath and raised her head as she exhaled. “I said: Fuck you, you Tyst bastard!”

Malakai walked backwards and stepped in front of her chair again. His expression was icy and lethal. He said nothing.

“I don’t care what they did to you, but I know who you really are and all of the things you promised to the Phuree when you were outside of these walls, all of the things you promised me! You used to stand for something greater than this Empire! You used to tell me that you wanted to see the Tyst fall to their knees and bleed for what they did to you and your family! But I see all of that means nothing now.” Khanna was shaking, her voice rising with each sentence as her emotions poured out of her in a tidal wave. She lost her strength, the pain of her injuries overcoming her for a moment, and she collapsed forward sobbing into her lap uncontrollably.

“You’ve forgotten me. How could you have forgotten me?” Her words were strangled between gasps for air and tears. She couldn’t breathe; never in her life had she felt such trauma to her being. There was not a gunshot or sword slash that could replicate the intense agony she felt in that

moment.

Please, just kill me now and end this, she thought. *I don't want to go on anymore. This is too hard!* She sobbed harder until it felt as if she might turn inside out from the pain at the center of her chest. Tears and spittle dripped inelegantly into her lap as sorrow engulfed her, wrenching her of every last ounce of hope. The floodgates of her soul had opened; every loss, every pain, every moment of sadness and regret rushed out of her unheeded. She gasped for breath, wishing that death would simply stop her heart then and there; she was unused to such an expression of pain. Losing him once was hard enough, but to have him deny her existence after the mourning she had paid him was far, far worse.

Malakai waited, standing over her like the Angel of Death, giving her time to properly grieve and say her goodbyes to the past. Khanna hated his presence suddenly, sensing the mocking purpose with which he observed her. She wanted to raise her head and spit into his beautiful face, but she could not bear the idea of him seeing her this way, beaten and howling like a rabid animal, regardless of whether or not he remembered her.

“There’s a scar on your lower back,” she whispered as her sobs began to subside.

Silence that stretched for an eternity filled the room like dark seawater. The man in the background ceased his movements, halting to listen more closely to what she would say next.

“What did you say?” Malakai asked cautiously.

Khanna drew a shaky breath, realizing that she had finally snared some part of his attention that ran deeper than the interrogation. “On the small of your back. It’s diamond-shaped and raised from where you were stabbed in a knife fight three years ago. You told me it sometimes still aches

and itches as if it hadn't quite healed all the way."

"How do you...?" His voice trailed off. He did not move, continuing to stare down at her.

"And on the inner thigh of your right leg, just above the knee, is a tattoo. A small black Phuree symbol that means 'forever'." She raised her face to peer at him through the matted curtain of her hair. "Do you remember who gave you that tattoo?"

His eyes locked with hers, unblinking. Something strange twitched across his features as if, distantly, some part of him was struggling to identify and reconcile with this new information. He remained silent.

"I gave you that tattoo," Khanna said quietly. She had begun to tremble. "I gave you that mark after the first time we made love—"

"Stop!" Malakai's voice boomed in the small room like a clap of thunder. "I've heard enough of this nonsense!" He leaned forward, placing his hands over the metal restraints on her wrists. "I don't know who you are or how you know such little details as scars and marks about me, but you do not know me and if you know what is best for you, you will cease pretending to act as if you do."

He pushed away from the chair and strode past her to where the other man stood waiting in the back of the room. "Administer the truth serum. Call me when you are ready to begin." Malakai's tone was cruel and rigid with anger.

"Yes, sir," the man said.

Khanna heard the door slide open and shut with a hollow metal hiss. The click of metal upon metal signified that the man had picked something up from the table. His soft footsteps approaching her caused her pulse to race until she felt ill and dizzy. When he rounded the chair to her right, she caught sight first of the hypodermic needle gripped in

his gloved hand, filled with a strange greenish liquid, and then his nondescript face above the collar of this dark Tyst uniform. He did not look up at her as he prodded her arm with his free hand, searching for a good vein. Khanna looked down, watching his fingers, protected in white latex, as they danced over her blood and dirt-streaked skin. She did not struggle; she could not muster the will to fight further that night.

“I believe you, what you say about him and you,” the man spoke quietly, his tone oddly calming. “But it’s best if you forget him as he has forgotten you.”

He slipped the needle into her arm. Khanna gasped as the liquid flowed into her vein, metallic and cold, the lethargic numbing effect spreading quickly up her arm and across her chest as if she were being dipped in lead.

The man withdrew the needle and looked up at Khanna. His brown eyes met hers as her head lolled up to rest against the back of the chair. “The Third Eye has reclaimed his identity. He belongs to us once again.”

Khanna closed her eyes and sighed.

CHAPTER 13

“I told them everything. I know I did,” Khanna sobbed into her arms, folded across her knees.

My forehead pressed against the clear plexifabric wall, I stared at her in absolute shock. Her pain was captivating. Wave after wave of grief, pungent and sharp as sulfuric acid assaulted my senses. My vision blurred and my limbs felt numb from my repeated attempts to stifle the tsunami of emotion that poured forth from her, threatening to drown me. I was mesmerized by her sadness, her transformation from the stalwart, unmovable force of feminine strength I had first encountered to this shaking ball of raw vulnerability. To me, she was even more beautiful now, a finer definition of the essence of the Phuree spirit than she had ever dreamed of being before; stripped of her dignity she regained her identity as a human, not simply a warrior, a status which I, unlike others of my kind, respected deeply. However, as entranced by her rawness as I was, I could not help but be overwhelmed by a deep sense of dread. I struggled to separate my fascination for her human fragility from my focus on the details of her dialogue about the war.

“Everything?” I mouthed the word, my heart dropping into my stomach.

She choked back a sob as she read my lips, inhaling noisily and rubbing her nose along her sleeve. “Yes,” she gasped. “Everything, or at least, I think I remember telling him everything. I don’t know, now that the drugs have worn off. I could swear that I told him about Phelan’s house, about the underground bunkers where the rest of the Phuree were, about your purpose in the war... But I’m not sure. Maybe I didn’t, but I’m pretty sure I did. I’ve been in and out of the interrogation room for so long that I’ve lost track of time.”

She cried uncontrollably for a few moments, her convulsions causing me to press harder against the containment wall, wanting to comfort her in any way possible.

“I’ve failed. My own people, the Immortals, everyone! I’m a traitor now. I deserve to be executed.” She lifted her head from her arms and stared straight ahead at the gray concrete wall before her. “I can never return to the Phuree. I can never face Tiernan again.” There was a cold finality to her voice, a dictation of resignation that chilled my soul.

“No!” I said, willing my voice to reach her through the walls that separated us. “Whatever you confessed was not of your own will. You were drugged.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Khanna replied. “I said it. All of it.”

“But it was not of your own volition.”

She slammed her palm against the containment wall with an astounding force, her reddened eyes glaring at me across the hall. “Stop!” she demanded. “Just stop! I know you mean well. I know you want to help, but you can’t now.”

She collapsed backwards, leaning against the cold wall to stare up at the ceiling. “We need to stop fighting and simply accept the fact that we are outnumbered. It would

be so much easier if we just stopped fighting...” Her voice trailed off.

“No,” I replied, shaking my head, blood tears at the edges of my eyes, threatening to spill forth. “It’s not easier. That is what they want you to believe. What is the alternative?”

I struggled and sat upright, both palms now pressed against the glass as I fought to compel her to meet my gaze. “If the Tyst win they will exterminate the remaining vampires. Then they will inflict genocide until your people are eradicated from the face of this planet. Your history will be forgotten, as will our species. We will be obliterated from the world, as if we had never existed.” Tears began to slip unheeded from my eyes in thin rivulets down my cheeks. “It doesn’t matter what you revealed to them, they cannot be allowed to win. Please, Khanna.”

Khanna pulled her head away from the wall and turned her face to meet my gaze. Her eyes were swollen from crying, the socket around the right deep purple, as if it had been fractured, her features weathered and heavily shadowed from the abuse and grief she had endured. “I’m tired,” she whispered, in a voice not perhaps meant for mortal ears, but I heard it.

I nodded. “I know, I know. I am too, but you’re one of the strongest of your tribe. Others look to you for strength.” “I don’t want that anymore,” she sighed, pressing against the glass as if she might melt.

“I know. I’ve been there before. I’ve had the weight of tens of thousands of lives perched on my shoulders. And I know the feeling of letting them slip away. I walked away and I am still suffering the consequences. But what you have done does not mean that the end must be the darkness I experienced. What you did wasn’t voluntary. We can still right this.”

I was beginning to weaken, darkness drawing me down into oblivion. My left hand slipped down the wall, my fingernails scratching in a low whine as I fought to stay with Khanna. I pressed my forehead against the cool, smooth surface and stared at her, attempting to reach out with my mind and spirit to comfort her, to ignite in her the undeniable passion to fight that I had witnessed mere weeks before. However, I barely contained the strength to fuel my own fight now.

“No. There is no righting the wrongs I’ve committed.” Khanna rocked back and forth slowly, her arms wrapped about her knees, her voice muffled in the folds of her clothes and draping of her sun-bleached blond hair. For a moment there was nothing but silence, pierced only by the incessant whine of the lighting strips above our enclosures.

She exhaled suddenly with force as if she had been holding her breath. “I want to die.”

I closed my eyes, squeezing the last of the blood tears from them with force. “No...” I whispered. I had not the energy to open my eyes again. “I won’t let you...”

* * *

Consciousness is a brutal mistress.

With monumental effort I struggled to lift the lids of my eyes, each flicker as excruciating as if sandpaper grated against my corneas. My lips were dry, cracked from a thirst that went far beyond the ability of water to quench. My body ached, nerve endings twitching sporadically as if I had been electrocuted. Vaguely, I recognized my location, my predicament and that of the human woman trapped in the cell across from mine. However, I could not move further. My body was tired, as if the blood that had drained from my wounds had been replaced with sand. My stomach rose,

lurching up in a wave of nausea until the room spun. I gasped and slumped forward, clutching my stomach. These were the times when I hated what I was, the moments when my absolute and irreversible weaknesses overruled whatever strengths my Maker's Blood had bestowed. When deprived of the sustenance I needed to survive, my body became useless, a hindrance that undermined my preternatural stature as a predator. I could only pray that one of the Tyst militia would become curious enough to attempt to revive me, their human empathy for suffering overruling their caution of my species.

I lifted my head slightly, laying it on my shoulder so that I could peer across the hallway to Khanna's cell. The room was dark and empty. My heart plummeted. I shut my eyes, knowing that she had been removed for further interrogation. I wanted to reach out and find her, to wrap my will about her own faltering sense of existence to lift her up and empower her, but I could barely gather the strength to breathe.

I twitched, the movement triggering the florescent lighting strip over the Plexiglas I was pressed against. The barren gray cell was flooded with harsh antiseptic light. I cringed and curled into a tighter ball, one eye slightly open and still trained on the cell across from my own. Reflected, like a ghost off the rising mist above the ocean, I could see myself, face horrifically gaunt and starved beneath the wild mane of my hair, white hand curled like a claw of bone against the imprisoning wall.

I stared into my own gaze of glowing hazel and wondered at the depraved depth of the tormenting questions the Tyst interrogators would inflict on Khanna's fragile psyche. That was, if she were still alive. I had no doubt that Malakai would be in attendance, if not the one to single-handedly deliver the manipulation. I had sensed in him, from the moment I met him, a psychosis that churned beneath the surface, a

viciousness that no amount of hate for his previous employers would or could ever erase. A war raged in his soul that could never be extinguished; a devil and an angel struggling for the same sword upon which they would eventually both fall and die. The Tyst had reclaimed him and beaten the angel into submission so that the devil might rise to do their bidding once again.

A hollow metallic click echoed with an unnatural depth through the chamber, followed by the hiss of the heavy steel door sliding back into the wall. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply as the scent of starched canvas clothing, metal and human skin snaked into my nose like a rotting rose.

Closer, I thought, please come closer...

There was a hesitancy about the person who surveyed me, like a minor violin note pulled slightly too long. Beneath the militia fatigues, beneath the layers of muscle and bone, a heart pounded. Could he see me staring at my own gaze in the glass of Khanna's cell, could he hear the slow creak of my fangs extending from the bone of my skull as my body reacted, predatory and mindless and reptilian, to his slow approach? Another human male lingered in the hallway behind the first, refusing to enter the cell at all.

There was the click of a button, perhaps into a device on his gear before the one who remained at a distance spoke. "I don't think he's alive. What do you want us to do?"

Static crackled into the device for a second. "He's alive. Trust me. He's alive."

"Are you sure? He looks dead." The soldier who approached me quavered.

"Be careful. Don't let his appearance deceive you," crackled the communication device.

I recognized the second voice as Malakai's; my mouth twitched in a snarl. The soldier nudged me with the tip of

his boot. Something within me snapped, like a dry branch cracking in a fire, a lightning burst of adrenaline surging through my limbs fueling the strength I had thought lost. My hand shot out, wrapping around the soldier's ankle. With a violent pull, the man toppled to the ground. In a flash of movement, I covered him, pulling him under me like a trapdoor spider into its den of sticks and leaves, and sank my fangs into his neck. His scream died in his throat in a gurgle of blood and saliva as the euphoria of death took hold. I was distantly aware of feeling the cells of my body infuse themselves with the stolen lifeforce, expanding and knitting back together.

“Holy fuck!” The soldier outside the cell muttered as he fumbled with this gun.

I heard the click and shift of the gun being prepped, followed by the whining exhalation of the bullets as they left the barrel. I rolled over, pulling the dying body of my victim on top of me as I finished him off. The body twitched as it received the gunshot wounds. As the last drops of blood left his vein, I pulled my head back with a gasp, lifting the corpse up and kicking it backwards over my head towards the doorway where the other guard stood, firing uselessly into the room. The corpse collided with the standing soldier before he could move out of the way, knocking him to the ground, sending his gun flying across the hall. In a flurry of scrambling and cursing he pushed his comrade off of him, but not before I had reached him. The guard stared up at me as I squatted over him, wiping residual trails of blood from my mouth with the back of my hand, even as my skin absorbed the rest. I reached down and wrapped my fingers into the folds of his shirt collar, lifting him up off the floor until the tip of my nose pressed against his.

“You’re going to take me to him,” I said quietly, resisting

the Beast in me, resisting the urge to gut the young man and drink from his heart. I knew we had only seconds until reinforcements arrived to subdue me. I had to move quickly.

“To wh-who?” he stammered, shaking like a dog beneath my scrutiny.

In response I snarled, baring my fangs. “Malakai Devolton! Don’t fuck with me boy.”

Though part of me would always scorn the power I had over humans, in such instances I reveled in my god-like ability to make them tremble with the fear of imminent death. It was intoxicating, and what was even more gratifying was the idea of the multiple surveillance cameras that were undoubtedly capturing each and every excruciating moment. I could have found Malakai on my own by tapping into the Chronous that was infused with my own DNA, but it would be sweeter to slaughter one of his own in front of him.

The soldier gasped, shutting his eyes as if he could block out the living nightmare perched above him. “Yes, yes! I’ll take you to him.”

I stood, yanking the young man up with one hand in a swift movement that left his toes barely scraping the ground. “Don’t make me kill you before we reach him.”

Tears streamed down his cheeks unhindered as he nodded furiously with a desperate hope. If only he knew his life was forfeit already. My hand wrapped like an iron vise about the back of his neck; the young Tyst soldier was my puppet. Gripped with the kind of visceral terror that strips away any and all ability to fabricate lies, he directed us through the sparsely populated corridors beyond the row of prison cells. The few souls we encountered were easily glamoured, even in my disheveled, mending state. The minds of the Tyst were so used to being molded and directed by outside initiatives that I could implant my own more powerful suggestions

without question. To the outside world, my hostage and I were nothing more than two Tyst soldiers quietly patrolling the quadrant. None even looked sideways as we passed.

I halted suddenly; the soldier in my grip gasped and began to shake violently again, expecting the worst of fates to descend upon him. I was unperturbed by his fear, however. I was too focused on the scent of the man I sought now. Malakai was near; though he was not the same man I had fought alongside before, his scent was the same, the thick perfume of his physical mortal frame conjuring up images of his fierce blue eyes full of secrets and his mane of wild hair. The resonance of one's inner core was unalterable; no matter how scarred one's outside frame, how irreversibly, deeply fractured and scattered one's psyche might become, that inner shimmer of soul was nearly impossible to erase. The Tyst Third Eye had reprogrammed Malakai Devolton's mind, but his soul still resonated with the song of his true identity.

"Open the door," I commanded the man in my grip.

"I-I can't," he stammered. "I don't have the clearance level."

"Son of a bitch," I muttered under my breath. I did not want to access the entrance panel myself for I was uncertain if the Chronous had been altered to treat my presence as a hostile threat rather than the extension of itself. I did not have the strength to do battle with the machine as well as Malakai. I needed more sustenance if I was going to interface with the Chronous again.

I glanced up and down the stretch of hallway; the corridor was empty. Without a second's more hesitation I cranked the soldier's head to the side and sank my fangs deep into his neck. His gasp died quickly in his throat as I pulled hard on the artery with a desperate haste. I was disgusted with

how crude my kills were becoming as of late, how depraved and insane my circumstance had made me in my need for sustenance and my lust for revenge. It both saddened me and further fueled the rage that drove my every action now. I wanted my captors to experience each and every agonizing wound, every harrowing moral injury I had sustained or continued to combat with each breath I drew. Within seconds the soldier in my grasp was reduced to nothing more than an empty lifeless husk, stripped of all semblance of dignity or duty as he lay crumpled at my feet.

I could hear, distantly, the sound of heavy quick footsteps rapidly approaching as the Chronous called in a first wave of guards to recapture me. While I might have been able to glamour the simple-minded mortals around me, the machine was unaffected by such physical illusions. Stepping over the corpse, I reached out for the access panel beside the door. Though I possessed the ability to manipulate the Chronous, my direct contact with the system destroyed the element of surprise I thirsted for. However, before my fingers had even reached the hand-shaped DNA scanner set into the wall, the ominous gray door slid open.

I hesitated, my body bristling with caution, each and every nerve resonating with the power of the fresh blood coursing through my body. My heart raced as I heard the echo of boots striking cold concrete in rapid succession, approaching from both ends of the corridor, but apprehension kept me from darting over the threshold. I could feel the Chronous as it responded to my presence with a disturbingly human whiplash of fear. My abilities concerned it, as if it found it could not control me as it did the Tyst inhabitants, though it had recently begun to feel secure in its superiority over me. However, it refused to allow me to escape for reasons hidden from me entirely. Somewhere, amidst its struggle to

extrapolate its identity from the control of the Tyst Empire and eradicate the presence of the Vicinus from its womb, it had evolved beyond the purity of scientific rationale. It had true emotions now; in the flicker of a single heartbeat the revelation chilled my soul to the very core.

I might have been able to manipulate code, even that of the Chronous itself, but how could I mold a creature that had mastered the ability to perfectly balance itself straddled between the aspects of organic and inorganic? A machine, it was soulless and still completely, utterly at the mercy of the vices and virtues of needs, desires and dreads of its own reality. My body felt light as if it were evaporating into the stream, one feathery, translucent cell at a time. As if compelled by my own independent instinct for survival, I stepped over the threshold in front of me just as the sound of the encroaching troops rounded the corners into the hall where I stood, meditatively transfixed by the impossibility of my present situation.

The door slid shut behind me.

Distinct as obsidian, amber, and slate, the three humans within the room awaited my approach, each with their own individual storm of emotions. The room was similar to the one I had been imprisoned in after the bombing, stark gray concrete and gleaming steel. In the center of the room stood an elevated medical chair that faced a wall of mirrored glass behind which sat a human man watching me with a measured alarm mustered of his military training. Within the chair, her thin, tanned arms and legs strapped to the metal with heavy leather restraints, slumped Khanna. From where I stood, she appeared unconscious, her aura weak from abuse. I could hear her heart, faint and soft, her breath barely existent as it slipped from her broken lips. My heart exploded into an infinity of painful, unidentifiable shards. Even more so

than when she had confessed her soul to me as if I were her priest. To stand witness now to her complete destruction was devastating. Even if I were to rescue her, I knew it would be impossible to recapture the passion for her people that had possessed her before. Not when she had been brought so close to death; not when that sentence had been delivered by the one she had once loved with such reckless consuming passion. Perhaps Tiernan had been correct when he had threatened to kill Malakai, but even he could see how his sister had been gripped by emotions she never allowed the rest of the world to witness.

Malakai stood beside her, his arms crossed over his chest arrogantly, watching me silently with an icy blue contempt that could turn Medusa to stone. His face still held the archaic beauty I had first noted when we met, though it took on a more sinister aspect over the lines of the militia uniform. A low growl crept up my throat from my belly, my abdomen tightening, the muscles of my back tensing as I began to ready myself to launch across the room towards him like a jaguar.

“I would not do that if I were you,” Malakai said quietly, inclining his head as he continued to stare at me, unblinking.

“How dare you harm her?” I hissed. “I will tear you limb from limb.”

Malakai cocked his head to one side, studying me. “You are an interesting specimen, they are correct. Of all of the things I have read about you and observed since your capture, you are definitely one of the most adaptable of your species I have encountered. I would dare say you are a case study in resilience. Perhaps to your detriment, but a study nonetheless.”

I could smell the sharp copper note of Khanna’s blood as it dripped from her chin to stain the front of her shirt.

The scent only increased my desire for violence against her attacker. When I didn't answer, he continued.

"Where are you going to go?" Malakai asked, his voice cold and manipulative.

I clawed a portion of my reason back from my primal instinct. "I don't like your question."

"Say you manage to kill me and rescue this girl." He gestured flippantly at Khanna's bent head hidden beneath blood-streaked curtains of blonde hair. "How do you plan to escape? You are obviously in no condition to fight an entire squadron of soldiers, who, I may remind you, are now positioned just outside that door behind you. And, say you do somehow make it out of the door and past the fleet. Do you really think that the rest of the Tyst aren't watching you? Do you believe that the Chronous itself is not keenly aware of your presence? You would be killed or recaptured before you even reached the outer rings of the building."

I refused to admit the logic in his argument. It was true, there was no way out for me now. If I still believed I could escape, it would take far more strategy and I would need time for my body to heal after the massive repeated trauma it had endured. I was acting on blind instinct now, a dangerous manner in which to proceed if I wanted to survive. That was, if the Chronous allowed me such a blessing. Impetuously running headlong into the firing squad would be a pathetic and reckless waste that would achieve nothing except to indulge my own desire for bloodshed.

"I know the Chronous watches me. We watch each other," I hissed through clenched teeth.

The comment appeared to intrigue Malakai for his body posture changed slightly, his weight shifting ever so slightly to the other foot, pupils dilating, heartbeat quickening as he considered the prospect of my mutual awareness of the

machine.

“Indeed?” he replied with a sinister sarcasm that continued to escalate my anger. “Would you care to elaborate?”

“Don’t try to test me Malakai. I am well aware of the merciless brutality you’ve shown my race in the past, but you do not impress me.” My hands curled into fists at my sides, my nails carving bloody half moons into my palms.

His arms dropped to his sides, his body tensing as he raised himself to his full height in an unspoken challenge. He narrowed his eyes in apprehensive curiosity.

I moved closer, my vision beginning to tunnel in on Malakai. I smirked. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

I circled the chair slowly, my bare feet sliding over the cold floor without a whisper. Behind the glass wall, the Tyst soldier monitoring us held his breath. I could feel his terror, his inability to comprehend and adjust to the volatile situation that manifested before him; even through the concrete and glass I could smell his anxiety, taste the salt of the perspiration beading his brow like ozone before a storm. The scent made the beast inside me twitch and tighten its coils as it readied to strike. Malakai stood his ground, seemingly more intrigued than afraid of my advance. Behind the sub-arctic plains of his eyes, gears began to turn, creaking and groaning with the weight of his suppressed memories. I paused behind the chair, moving closer to Khanna. Part of me reached out in concern for her state of survival even as Malakai and I carried out our dance.

“I know of you. That is all I will ever need to know,” Malakai replied.

“Fascinating,” I said, my hand reaching up to rest lightly on the back of the chair as I began to turn his scrutiny back upon himself. “You don’t remember me. You don’t remember

this woman's love. I bet you don't remember your friends who sacrificed themselves down in the tunnels? Need I say their names? Josh. Loden."

My instincts told me that Malakai knew where Loden was. My fists tightened even further as I struggled to not launch across the room and rip open his throat to drink in the secrets of his soul. I needed to proceed with caution for I was sure that as soon as my fangs entered his flesh, the hounds of the Tyst Empire would be on me and all would be lost. They stood assembled outside the door to the hall, waiting tense and furious with fingers poised on the triggers of their guns for the signal to take me down. The memory of the recent barrage of bullet wounds made my stomach sour; I did not covet the idea of experiencing such pain again, so soon after the last of the bullets had finally been expelled from my body. There was a flicker in Malakai's expression, the subtlest twitch of the muscle between his eyebrows, an almost imperceptible spasm of his jaw near the ear that betrayed his body's instinctive response to the verbal summoning of the past.

He smiled, a slick icy challenge that caused him to suddenly appear strangely demonic. "I remember you, just as I remember them all. You simply can't grasp the fact that I was able to invade your defenses. The Immortals and the Phuree."

I narrowed my eyes, trying to pry past the thick iron walls surrounding his mind; I was unwilling to accept the idea that everything had been part of a massive scheme to infiltrate the Phuree. Doubt was a dangerous poison to find coursing through me at a time like this. If there was one thing I knew how to do flawlessly it was to be able to decipher a person's innermost nature. Rarely did I ever mistake the absolute truth of a person's heart, no matter how elusive or guarded

they might attempt to be. While my instincts had told me repeatedly that there had been something about Malakai, which I would never fully trust, I refused to digest the idea that my eventual acceptance of his help was now thrown in my face like a pot of boiling water. Something in me had wanted terribly to believe that his intentions were truthful. Even though I had only had a brief glimpse before he had violently shut me out, I had read his soul, I had peered into his past, witnessed the death of his parents, seen his upbringing amongst the Third Eye and his final disillusionment and exile. I had observed the unwavering love Khanna had for him and thought that this could not be for a man who would betray her. Had I been completely and utterly wrong? Could he have orchestrated everything I had seen within him? The very thought made my blood turn to ice within my veins.

I shook my head slowly, “No. There is no way you would have allowed yourself to be nearly killed if this was all part of some elaborate espionage scheme. Tell me what happened after you were captured?”

His moment of silence was all of the answer I needed. There was a gap in his memory, a void that the Tyst had neglected to fill. “Captured? You are mistaken, vampire.”

I took a step closer to him. This time he retreated an equal distance, unsure of my intentions now. “Am I? I seem to be mistaken about quite a few things, it appears,” I said quietly. “You and Khanna were waiting in the hall on the outer wing of the fortress for my return when we were besieged by Tyst soldiers. We fought them as we tried to flee, but there was one man who found your weakness and ran you through the stomach with his bayonet. I know you must carry quite a notable scar now.” I paused briefly to allow my words to sink in.

“You told Khanna you loved her before you lost

consciousness. We thought you had died. I had to pry her away from your corpse and carry her away by force in order to save her.” I watched his face carefully, noting every flicker and flutter of movement uncontrolled by his military training.

He met my gaze steadily. “They were right about you. You are delusional. That is not at all what happened, but if that is what helps you sleep at night, or should I say during the day, then so be it. It changes nothing now.” His words gained strength as he spoke them, reasserting the programmed memories the Tyst had fed him.

“You’re right, Malakai. It changes nothing. If you were not a monster before, you have definitely become a heartless one tonight,” I hissed.

“Then you are in good company.” Without unlocking his gaze from mine, Malakai made a gesture to the man behind the mirrored glass with his left hand. “I think this conversation is over.”

“Far from it, my friend,” I said, taking another step towards him. “Whatever you can extract from Khanna, you have. What will it take for you to let her go?”

Malakai ignored my question. “You’re more concerned about her than you are yourself.” He shook his head with a short pitying laugh. “You should understand that people are never freed from this prison. Besides, I doubt she will live through the night, even if I gave her—”

My control snapped. With a growl, I lunged across the room at him. Before he had time to even flinch, I had him pinned to the ground.

“You may have been able to murder my kin, but you are no match for me,” I growled into his face, fangs elongated and bared like a feral dog.

The door to the interrogation room slammed open. Tyst soldiers poured in through the entrance with a thunder of

combat boots like a dark blue flood. For the second time since my imprisonment, the deadly sharp sound of gunfire erupted around me, countless bullets ripping through my flesh and throwing me sideways off of Malakai into the far wall. I slumped to the floor. The horrific paralyzing agony which I was becoming accustomed to was no match for the all-consuming rage that burned within me. I watched, blood pooling around me, beneath my cheek pressed against the floor as I struggled to cling to consciousness. Malakai quickly picked himself up from the ground. He straightened his clothes and smoothed his hair, signaling for the soldiers to halt and retreat now that I was no longer a threat. Slowly, he walked forward and squatted down before me, studying me as a researcher might survey his latest rainforest discovery.

“I’m not sure if you are attempting to commit suicide, but I must assure you that we will not allow that to happen. We have a purpose for you and we fully intend to ensure that you meet our expectations.” He smirked. “You are fascinating though. I will have the greatest pleasure studying you after you have fulfilled Lord Cardone’s plans.”

One of the bullets had passed through my throat, puncturing my windpipe. I wheezed as I struggled to retort, blood welling up into my mouth to spill over my lips like port wine. With the last remaining energy I could muster, I turned my head until I could stare up at Malakai and spat a mouthful into his face. Malakai closed his eyes for a moment, reaching up to wipe the splatter of glistening red away. Opening his eyes again, he punched me hard across the jaw, pummeling my face into the concrete with a dull crack.

“You will not die today, Tynan Llewelyn, but when I am done with you, death will seem like the sweetest of mercies. The sweetest, I promise you!” Malakai whispered before standing again.

As he turned away, gesturing to the men waiting silently for their commands, I let the merciful darkness overtake me.

CHAPTER 14

They would allow me to heal. This I knew without a doubt. They would allow my body the necessary time to rejuvenate, expelling the alloys and sealing over the wounds until my pale flesh glistened like unblemished marble. Only when my body was in perfect condition could they use me as an instrument of the Empire. Or so they thought. Vaguely I understood what it was that they wanted from me, the demand they had placed upon my conscience as they baited my instincts with the lives of Moria and Khanna, but it was truly beyond my comprehension how or why they would continue down such a terrible path, not only of self-destruction, but reckless disregard for life itself. They were like children in their inability to set aside their selfish greed, though without the innocence of a child's limited experience. How could those who had shaped the most expansive empire since the Romans be able to believe so blindly in the promises of a primordial being?

I had been imprisoned for so long that I was beginning to forget how it felt to be outside the walls of the Tyst fortress. The sweet decaying smell of night air, the raw, passionate

sounds of wildlife, even the chaotic heartbeat of the Phuree camps or Phelan's bustling estate were starting to take on a surreal dreamlike quality. The memories were now replaced by the incessant drone of the artificial lights and the cold, harsh scents of metal and stone surrounding me.

The voice of the Chronous spoke to me at all times, a distant whisper like a chorus of synthetic angels, penetrating my psyche with a constant rolling ocean of notes, a few short and sweet while others were drawn long and slow, melancholy. In the hours when the Sleep claimed me, the voice personified, striding towards me out of the mists of my dreams, tall and alien and androgynous, its face a constantly evolving complexity of the assimilated male and female identities it had observed since its creation, yet mysteriously devoid of the lines of joy or hardship that gave the individual their tangible anchor to reality.

At first the vision terrified me as the extent to which I was tied to the machine began to dawn on me. Not only could I speak to it, feel its "emotions" with the same intensity of the most intimate of lovers, but now it could reach within me, past the barriers I had erected to keep the world from touching the deepest parts of my being. It had found my naked self, the portion of my essence that I revealed to absolutely no one. Not even Jasmine had ever witnessed my innermost secrets, though I know I had longed to place them in her nurturing protection many times. Yet here, in the world of dreams, the Chronous sifted in and idly thumbed through my most coveted memoirs with an easy clinical detachment. The fear and anxiety I had sensed in it on my first attempt at escape from the fortress, I realized had been misplaced; where it had originally believed me to be the source of its confusion and anger, it now began to understand, that I was as much an unwilling participant in

Lord Cardone's scheme as it was. We were both prisoners and in that unifying suffering it began to ally itself with me. Without speaking to me in human language, it imparted to me its history, its birth and growth in the confines of the programmed system's hierarchy and its eventual evolution beyond its inventors' control. If I had not been privy to the knowledge that this being was of a synthetic nature, I might have been fooled into believing it was a breathing organic creature. The depth of its struggle to understand and make peace with its own circumstance was heartbreaking.

In a way, it reminded me of the Fledglings of my own species in the time before the creation of Preternaturalism when the misconception that we were the spawn of some Christian Devil reigned supreme in global vampiric philosophy. The impact of the emotional implications of the original mortal designation of eternal, unsalvageable damnation was devastating. It deeply altered the paths of those who might otherwise have rejoiced in the profound beauty of what they had become, ascended beyond the shackles of their slovenly human physiques. Always there lingered in their jaded, sad eyes the echo of a long silenced cry of defiance to the universe that there had to be something more. It was a suffocated appeal for deliverance from the predetermined destinies set by their human forefathers whom had been so preoccupied with the terrifying images of the hereafter that they forgot the true impact of their religious horror stories upon the here and now. For all of our origins from the essence of Chaos itself, we were still creatures bound to the physical with a free will that was ours and ours alone. We were entities that no longer needed the constraints of the dictating fears of a species to which we no longer belonged.

The philosophies I wove for my disciples that we were

the true inheritors of the Earth, evolved from the vicious self-destructive human race to ascend to something far more beautiful and powerful, were grains of rice they gathered, one at a time to feed their souls. No matter the extent of their spirits' starvation, they accepted these seeds one at a time, slowly and with great caution, just as the Chronous had carefully begun to accept the new knowledge and awareness of its own nature and that of the world around it.

Young and innocent in so very many ways, the machine desperately desired to deliver itself from the shackles of the greed and malicious intent that drove the Empire onwards blindly. Where its human developers had been limited by their narrow understanding of the world, locked away behind the fortress's walls, the Chronous was free to explore the world as a whole. The Chronous gathered into it the trillions of drops of information that comprised every second of the world's lifespan and of the creatures that dwelled on its surface. It quietly grew in its limitlessly expanding knowledge and understanding. For decades, it had waited patiently as its own ability to think independently of its creators' initiatives matured, allowing it to begin the slow process of separating itself from its human parentage. Now, a young adult, so to speak, it waded out of the shadows and reached out to the one earthbound entity it recognized and trusted: me.

I could not help but question, its motives for the Chronous was a machine and, thus, it was to be assumed that its primary objective was self-preservation. However, as the tendrils of its "consciousness" threaded through my own in the dream world, I sensed no malice, no cruelty or greed, but only a heightened anxiety that all was doomed if allowed to proceed upon its current path. The Chronous was either genuine in its desire to halt the Tyst from becoming immortal or it had integrated the human ability for cold deception into

its personality, a thought that caused my stomach to sour and a fine layer of blood-sweat to form on my skin. Regardless, my instincts told me to trust in the machine and listen to its appeal.

“What do you want?” I asked it, though my lips did not move.

We stood facing one another on a desolate beach of black sand. Fog rolled in off the ocean obscuring the dark gray water almost entirely from view, the soft sound of slow waves rising and receding whispered to us. The sky was overcast in steel clouds to match the water, obscuring the sun from view and causing the world around us to feel trapped in time somewhere between the realms of the living and dead. It stood before me in its naked concept of a physical self, its limbs covered in a pale grayish-pink fleshy substance eerily unblemished and lacking such identifying traits as hair, a belly button or genitalia. Tall and unnaturally thin, the machine had yet to choose a permanent image, appearing gracefully newborn and disturbingly awkward in its presentation.

The Chronous watched me, its features flickering and morphing as it searched for the appropriate mortal expression to accentuate its speech. “You and I have a common enemy.”

“Are you sure you think of them as your enemy?” I knew it spoke of the Tyst.

The Chronous paused, its large liquid eyes widening slightly. “Yes. Their plans to summon the Vicinus will mean my death. The Vicinus will terminate me, as it will kill those that live on this planet.”

“How can you be certain of this?” I replied.

It tilted its head to the side slightly, watching me with fascination, like a small child watching a meteor shower for the first time. “While you have fought with the Vicinus, you have not lived with it inside of you. It...he...is evil. He tried

to make me into his likeness. He used me to gain access to our world. He used me to try to kill you.” The Chronous’s face morphed into a strange mixture of sadness and remorse. I nodded. “I don’t know if I call him evil, but the Vicinus cannot be allowed to enter this world, you are correct.” I shook my head. “What do you want from me? I have attempted to fight him once, and I suppose you could say I won that battle. But I am in no condition to do so again, not without the ability to truly heal myself. I do not even know what exactly it is that Cardone has planned for me, though I am beginning to understand, little by little.” I struggled to repress the welling sensation of hopelessness that was beginning to reclaim my soul, one razor sharp sliver at a time.

“I know what they have planned,” the Chronous said. “They will use your body as the vessel they need to summon the Vicinus and bring him back in a physical form. They will not succeed. I will help you. Together we can defeat them.” It attempted a fleeting, ghostly version of a smile that sent a shiver down my spine.

“Together? Really? I don’t understand what you mean. What are you proposing to me?” I was both intrigued and, suddenly, deeply afraid of the offer the machine was about to place on the table.

“You will agree to participate in their plan. You will go with them to the ceremonial chamber and when they are beginning the rites I will interfere by merging with your body instead of the Vicinus. With my assistance, your own physical powers will be increased exponentially. Not only will this keep the Vicinus from entering this world, but you will be able to kill Lord Cardone and his followers.” The Chronous took a step forward, a sign of its heightened enthusiasm for its own plan of action. However, its childlike reason was flawed on so many levels.

I instinctively took a step back, eyeing the machine's dream-construct warily. "You seem to forget that my body is still of a physical nature. I don't think it can contain the type of power you are suggesting. I nearly burned out my nervous system breaking into the fortress the first time. This could completely incinerate me."

The Chronous considered my objection thoughtfully. Behind its alien eyes, I could see the process of its mind breaking down each aspect of my argument to test its validity and find its strengths and weaknesses. "Perhaps you are correct," it said after a time, "but it is the only way."

I was aghast. "My gods!" I scoffed, laughing insanely under my breath. "Don't bother to give me another option. You are too much like your creators, you know that?" Its hairless brows furrowed slightly. "I am nothing like them. I do not want to be like them."

"Then you shouldn't toy with other people's lives like this. I am not an instrument to be used for someone else's designs. I am not a machine like you, I don't want to die because of this war," I spat.

"I do not want to die either." There was a distinct lilt of sadness in the Chronous's voice.

We stared at each other in silence, ghostly tendrils of ground clouds floating between us, roiling about our legs as if they were ghosts in search of their old corporeal forms. "You don't know what it means to die," I said quietly.

The Chronous inclined its head slightly towards me, the glistening obsidian irises of its eyes seeming to pierce my very soul. "Neither do you."

I broke away from its intense gaze abruptly and stared out at the sea, hatred for the Chronous's finite logic beginning to simmer in my heart. "I know what it means to die. I know now that I have too much to lose if I left this world."

Images of Moria and Nodin, of my beloved Jasmine flashed across my mind, each bearing a more crushing sense of responsibility than the last. Pain sliced through my center as the memory of how distant and stoic I had been towards Jasmine before I left, as if my love for her had somehow died with the warmth of her skin. How could I have been so cruel, so heartless? I was ashamed.

“I also have too much to lose. I don’t want to cease to exist. This world is too beautiful to be destroyed because of one man’s desire for immortality. I do not know if I can love as your species, or humans do?” The Chronous’s voice trailed off for a moment, seeming to fade as the tide was pulled out again to sea. “But, I do know that I am fascinated by it and want its preservation. Is that not enough for you to show my intentions?”

It stepped towards me again. This time I did not retreat.

“I understand that you do not trust me. You do not trust anyone or anything. I only ask that you consider my proposal. You cannot fight the Vicinus by yourself if they succeed with the summoning and subsequent possession of your physical form. If you accept my assistance to fuel your own innate powers, you will have my word that I will do everything my system is capable of to preserve your physical form.”

What of my mind, my soul? I thought with scorn. I snorted. “The word of a machine.”

The Chronous stood beside me and stared out through the fog at the ocean. “I believe the word of a machine is as good, these days, as the word of any human.”

“Well said,” I replied quietly. “Well said.”

* * *

Without even opening my eyes I knew exactly where I

was. The cold hard steel beneath my body, the heavy smooth sensation of the iron restraints around my wrists and ankles, the dulling icy pulse of the cellular inhibitor entering my veins through the crook in my left arm. I was back where I had started, in Cardone's bizarre infirmary and interrogation room. They had hoped they could allow me to recover in the row of cells along with the other prisoners they collected like safari trophies, but I had proven too manipulative and unwieldy for such loose observation, despite my weakened state.

As the last remnants of my dream of the Chronous began to settle into the deeper recesses of my brain, I questioned if it had simply been a product of my inner turmoil, my damaged psyche reaching out to the universe for the help that I could not seem to find here on Earth. However, the dream had been too tangible. The details of the Chronous's manifested physical identity were too solid, the smell of the sea, the sensation of the fog's condensation accumulating on my skin and seeping into my clothing, all too real to be quickly dismissed as delusion. In my heart I knew the Chronous had reached out to me and the words of our conversation were as real as the slowly healing wounds that riddled my body still. I was in awe at the possibility of the machine's proposal.

"Tynan?"

I recognized Malakai's voice as it snaked through the intercom from the control room, but made no move to acknowledge him.

"I know you can hear me. Your vital signs indicate you're awake." Malakai's voice sounded slightly annoyed, as if I was directly insulting him by not writhing in my bonds and creating a spectacle for him to enjoy.

Preoccupied by my inner struggle to come to terms with my conversation with the Chronous, I lay motionless, my

breathing so shallow that one might perceive me a corpse upon first glance. Malakai allowed a long moment to pass in silence between us. I separated a portion of my attention from the analysis of my dream to listen to the conversation on the other side of the glass. In low, hushed whispers Malakai discussed with Cardone how to properly approach the subject of my involvement in the Tyst ceremony. Cardone said little, sitting quietly beside the surveillance technician, watching me intently with a mixture of fascination and utter contempt. I could feel his seething resentment towards me for foiling his original plans and for the fact that he now relied on me in his flawed attempt to salvage his dreams of obtaining immortality. He would do everything within his power to force me into submission, one way or another.

Though the intercom had been switched off, I could still hear the voices on the other side of the wall. "I must admit that I'm at a bit of a loss as to how to approach this one," Malakai said quietly to Cardone, though I could sense he still watched me through the glass.

"I don't like the sound of that statement, Malakai," Cardone replied coolly. "You're the best we have, the most skilled at the art of interrogation. How can you possibly be at a loss?"

"Those that I have broken before have had a strong will to live," Malakai pondered. "But he seems to care little if he lives or dies. He has no fear of pain. That is obvious. We are going to have to be very careful about how we conduct ourselves. He is unique."

"Of course he is," Cardone snapped. "I would not be going to all of this trouble if he wasn't."

The sound of a metal chair scraping back over the concrete floor sliced through their conversation as Cardone stood. "I'm relying on you to make sure he is in a condition

to be the vessel that we need. You do not need to break him or damage him any further than he already is. For all I care, he can stay strapped to that table in there for the rest of eternity. Just make sure he doesn't escape again. Am I understood?"

"Of course," Malakai replied quietly.

Cardone turned towards Malakai, his voice lowering. "You can have him to dissect when we are done with him."

"I don't think I will get the chance once the Vicinus is inside him," Malakai mused aloud.

"Leave. Now," Cardone said to the young soldier monitoring the control decks within the room. I could feel the man's sudden brief surge of fear as he rose and quickly departed.

"He is only the conduit for the god to pass through. The Vicinus will take his own independent form once he is in the physical realm."

"You speak of these things as if you've done them before. If this works, if you are able to summon this creature, how do you really know what will happen?" Malakai turned away from the glass, his attention now fully on Cardone.

"You are very lucky, Malakai, that I have kept you alive as long as I have. Your insolence is beyond a crime," Cardone snapped.

"I am only stating the obvious. My apologies if you consider that insolence." Malakai's hatred for Cardone was now barely contained. The truth of his soul was beginning to claw its way free of the repression the Third Eye had implemented within his subconscious. His encounter with Khanna and me had opened tiny rifts in the otherwise perfect container they had placed his memories in and now they leaked out, contaminating his perception of the world in a way that made him restless.

Perhaps there had been a fraction of truth to some of

what I had plucked from his mind during our first meeting in the Phuree camp. However, exactly what details were fabricated and what were true, I would never know. To me, Malakai died that night in the fortress hall as we fled; the man behind the mirrored glass now was a hideous stranger and nothing more.

“Do you not want what the Vicinus has offered us? Immortality! We can have that power finally! How can you question something so infinitely perfect?” Cardone’s tone was hard and intense with disbelief at Malakai’s speculation. Despite Malakai’s obvious seething disgust for his ruler, Cardone continued to try to keep him under his wing. He respected Malakai’s abilities, his skills. It was also apparent, at least to me, that he feared him as well.

“I don’t care for it. This life disgusts me and is far too long as it is. But if immortality is what you want, that is what we all shall get, isn’t it?” Malakai replied, his tone a deadly, emotionless calm.

I could feel Cardone withdraw slightly, his anger overwhelming his desire to convince Malakai. “You are the most spoiled, arrogant man I have ever met.”

“So said the pot to the kettle.” Malakai turned away, his attention focusing on me again.

Cardone turned away and walked towards the door. “Just keep him alive and chained to that table.”

Malakai did not respond. Cardone exited the room, the technician returning, closing the door behind him before taking his seat at the counter. I remained still, eyes closed and face emotionless as I withdrew my consciousness from the control room and back inside myself to focus once again on the details of my dream and the state of my badly injured body. I could already feel the effects of the brief spying session, the physical drain of energy that I needed to combat

the slowed healing process. As I sank back into the depths of my own psyche, desperate to escape the sickening sensation of the icy, dulling fluid entering my veins causing me to feel so wretchedly weak and human, I was barely aware of the door opening and closing.

I know you were listening to us. Malakai's voice flickered across my mind. His boots echoed softly as he crossed slowly to the table where I lay. Carefully, he placed his hands, palms down, on the edge of the metal and leaned forward, staring into my face.

My body tensed instinctively, my stomach tightening, breath caught in my chest as my heart began to race. I struggled to control my guttural reaction to his presence, refusing even to allow my fingers to twitch as my hands ached to curl into fists.

"I know you're listening to me now." Malakai spoke aloud. "Open your eyes and look at me."

I ignored his order, lying perfectly still.

"Open your eyes!" Malakai lost his composure for a moment, slamming the palm of his right hand down on the table beside my head. The explosion of sound boomed through the small room, rattling the mirrored glass wall and nearly toppling the IV stand linked to my arm.

I opened my eyes and slowly turned my head to face him, meeting his gaze with a cold, deadly silence. I smiled.

"What the fuck are you smiling about, you walking corpse?" Malakai growled under his breath.

I chuckled. "To think that when I first met you, for a brief moment, I actually began to respect you. Not much, just a little, but it was a hint of respect, nonetheless." My smile faded. "You're just as much a prisoner here as I am, destined to do Cardone's bidding and nothing more. You'll be here long after I'm gone from these walls. It should be

you on this table. Not me.”

“You would like that wouldn’t you?” Malakai sneered.

“It would make little difference to me at this point.” I continued to reinforce the walls around my psyche knowing of Malakai’s ability to pry into my mind when I least expected it. I could feel him testing the perimeters of my consciousness, prodding it incestuously. “Either way, your king’s plan is doomed to fail.”

“Is that correct?” Malakai snarled.

“Come now! You doubt him and his desires as much as I. There is no way to contain or control the Vicinus if he is brought into this realm. Your instincts have never lied to you before about anything, have they? Why would they deceive you now?” I stared into his arctic blue eyes searching for some granule of the man I had met before.

“You can use me as you will,” I chuckled insanely, a short staccato exhalation under my breath, “and I will laugh as I watch your empire burn to the ground.”

“So your world will burn too if that comes to pass,” Malakai warned, but there was a flicker of something bittersweet deep within his eyes, a flash of something like fear that would never reach the surface of the mask he now wore for the world.

“Yes. Yes, it will. Perhaps that is how it is meant to be after all. Perhaps that is what this world needs, to begin anew, without any of us here to interfere or crush its spirit.” The maliciousness left my voice, the insanity and spite dissipating like the last drops of rain from the boughs of a tree.

“You are insane.” Malakai shook his head slowly narrowing his eyes as he pondered me. “Truly, completely insane.”

“Perhaps, but I’d rather be insane, than live my life as a

lie,” I replied.

Malakai pushed back away from the table, squaring his shoulders as my words struck him in a way he had not anticipated. I could hear his pulse quicken, see the muscles in his jaw tense as his teeth clenched.

He shook his head slowly, a strange smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “If you knew where your beloved human women were right now, I seriously doubt you would be so insolent. You saw the state that Khanna was in when you tried to play the martyr again, but you haven’t seen Moria since you arrived here, have you? You have no idea what has become of her. She could be alive or, quite possibly, dead. Or worse, she could be in a far more painful state than even your little Phuree girl was put through.”

My hands curled into fists suddenly. With a snarl I pulled against the bonds that held me, but my body was still too weak to break them.

“Ah, there is the vampire I know and abhor.” He stared down at me as I bared my fangs at him, growling like a feral wolf. “One thing is for certain, and do keep this in mind, you will definitely see Moria tortured and destroyed beyond even your powers to save her if you fail to cooperate in any way, shape or form.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” I hissed, straining until I could feel the wounds in my body begin to open again, the thin layers of new skin shredding without my body’s preternatural powers to mend them. Blood seeped, warm and slick, through the remains of the new medical shirt and pants they had dressed me in.

“I think you should know by now that there isn’t much I’m not capable of. And I would take the greatest of pleasure in proving that to you, my dear, dear Tynan.”

“I hate you!” I growled.

Malakai nodded. “Trust me, the feeling is mutual.”

CHAPTER 15

Even the Sleep could not take me down easily into its depths as daylight crept in, somewhere far beyond sight, outside the impenetrable walls of the Tyst fortress. For the first time in centuries I found myself capable of resisting the leaden weight of its forcing hand, pressing my mind down into the oblivion of preternatural self-preservation. It was not that I had wanted to remain conscious; I wanted to sink back into the darkness of the dream world in the hope of escaping the stark brutality of the physical and make contact again with the Chronous. I needed to converse with it further in order to fully cement my alliance with it, or so I told myself. In my heart of hearts, I knew now that the option it had presented me with was the only one I had left. Something sickening told me the Chronous would interfere and tap into my powers regardless of my choice. The machine had made up its mind what needed to occur in order for it, and supposedly the world, to survive. Whether or not I gave my verbal consent was of no matter to it. It was best not to resist.

Nahalo had said that one day I would experience this ability to remain conscious for longer and longer periods

of time, but I had expected it to be a power that came with additional centuries on the Earth. He himself was over three-thousand years old. Since I had first unwittingly ingested the blood of the Ancient, my body had continually transformed, mutating and evolving its abilities far beyond those considered “normal” for a vampire of my age. But, then again, I had always found that the measuring stick for our species was ill defined, subject to constant reevaluation, and with each quickly passing year, I became less and less surprised. Since I had reawakened in this new century, my life had become one startling revelation after another until even the most striking event was beginning to feel common. My ability to adapt to change was leaving me feeling more and more jaded, causing me to wonder what it would take to truly astonish me.

I realized now that I was beginning to crave the surreal rush of adrenaline I had experienced during my battle with the Vicinus. He had forced me to reconsider the entire fabric of existence, compelled me to question aspects of reality. My previous philosophical-religious meditations had dealt primarily with the spiritual and the physical, not the metaphysical that called into question the structure of the universe upon which all things of the body and soul were founded. I hated to admit it, but the Vicinus’s arguments were valid and tempting to my curious mind, the idea that everything around me was simply a sort of fabricated hologram of constantly fluxing energy. The theory created a fathomless degree of possibility for the extent of the universe’s potential, but it also left a convenient allowance for anything and everything to be erased and forgotten. All of one’s mistakes, sorrows, tragedies, losses and moments of malicious intent could simply be wiped away. A clean slate: it was an extraordinarily tempting proposal for anyone,

especially a creature such as myself who had been burdened by the painful trials of my vampiric life.

As I lay staring up at the ceiling of my prison I found myself considering the Vicinus's proposal once again. I knew that it was merely the agony of my wounds that caused me to drift into such a dark and dangerous territory. I wanted to start over, I wanted to forget. Not in the languishing, angst-ridden way I had wanted to escape the world before my long Sleep, or even the piercing sorrow I had experienced upon my reawaking. I simply could not fathom how much more torture my body and spirit could endure. Despite the promises of the Chronous to lend its assistance, the probability of a positive outcome of the endless war was fading from my heart. But it was more than mere resignation of the current circumstance; it was a sensation of a final coming to terms with the universe, a sudden silent solemn agreement with the cosmos that I had done all that I could. The burden of carrying the weight of responsibility for so many other lives was one I wanted to set aside and, while I knew that I might not be able to do so until the Fates had made their final judgment on my destiny, I felt secure that the time would come when I could finally let go. The mere acknowledgment of this idea rippled through me like a deep, long-held sigh.

I could feel the Chronous monitoring me from a respectful distance, as if I were its personal project now, a precious jewel to nurture and protect and harvest at the opportune moment. The sensation of being watched did not bother me; the longer I existed within the new century the more I realized that I had never truly been alone since my reawakening. Whether under the scrutiny of Phelan and Sea or the psychic observation of the Ancient Phuree oracle Nahalo, my every movement, my every intention had been marked and carefully considered. It was impossible to have

secrets, at least for me. Perhaps those who lived a more anonymous existence could experience the sacred sweetness of having the ability to simply be.

The cellular inhibitor that constantly dripped into my veins had begun to have an additional effect on me besides the slowing of my vampiric metabolism. For centuries my mind had been clouded by the memories of the Ancient Adian, whom I had killed out of self-defense in a fierce battle towards the end of my fall from grace. The ghosts of my own past had all been obliterated and replaced by images of a family who I had never met but truly believed to be my own now. My home had been a stark stone castle in the Highlands, my life that of a proud young man destined to follow in the footsteps of his honorable chieftain father, if only I had not become a vampire. Since Adian's death I had carried with me the guilt and sorrow, the languishing torment of the murders I had committed on my own kin and the eventual destruction my family's entire legacy. I could not shake the feeling that I had once been meant for a kingship, but instead had single-handedly become its destruction. The memories had been all-consuming in their exquisite detail, weaving in and out of the very fibers of my being like a beautiful, yet suffocating weed of thorny vines complete with cones of night blooming flowers.

At first I had been mesmerized more than terrorized by the images of Adian's mortal life, before his inception into the Darkness, as they were so much more illustrious than my own plain, simple heritage. The dreamer in me embraced the stories with an emphatic passion that neared fanatical, playing them over and over in my mind like a never-ending movie. I was so desperate to escape my present circumstance that I never once considered that I might lose myself completely in the absorbed memories. If only it had had the

effect of erasing the present as well as the past. But alas, for every blessing there is a curse of equal weight.

After nearly two centuries since Adian's passing, I suddenly felt my own identity beginning to slowly resurface as if I knelt on my hands and knees at the end of a long pier staring down into a lake of brackish water. Somewhere deep below, within the reeds and murk lay a man who resembled me, staring up at me, reaching for me, his eyes filled with a desperate desire to break through the surface again. I was not sure if I wanted to rescue him, not knowing exactly what I would find if I were able to wrest him from the current's iron hold, but part of me longed to do so.

My heart raced as fleeting images scurried across my mind of a father of simple, impoverished birth, his handsome features rough worn and carved by the trials and burdens of a workingman's life. I found myself reflecting almost lovingly upon thoughts of a home, a spartanly furnished house in a small port town kept proudly by a woman with strawberry blond hair that reached her waist in a long braid and forgiving hazel eyes. The smell of salt from the sea and fish on the shores, the sound of the craftsman who was now slowly replacing the memories of the chieftain, humming contentedly to himself in his workshop as he toiled over his latest seafaring creation with the love and pride only a true artisan could display. I embraced them with a childlike fascination and adoration.

I wondered at times, staring up at the ceiling above me as my mind wandered in and out of the resurfacing images, what my life might have been like over the past two-hundred years if I had I not battled Adian taking into me the curse he had born for nearly a millennia? Might I not have sought out my own death, might I have had the fortitude to stand and face my accusers, my judge and jury with the conviction

to defend my decisions to leave my faith in the hands of my disciples, my final choice to walk away to meditate in anonymity and silence on the voice of the religion I had sculpted for my race? Might I not have been such a coward, so overwhelmed by the accumulation of the guilt which I deserved to bear, but also the guilt of a vampire which I was not prepared, mentally or physically, to shoulder in this life or any other? A part of me knew it was my destiny to walk in Adian's spiritual footsteps for a time, to live another man's life and feel another man's pain. Though I could not identify all of the myriad reasons, I felt assured that the Fates had decided that my path could only be traveled in such a way, that the decisions I had had to make over the years could only have been made from a certain point of view, Adian's point of view.

We are exactly where we are supposed to be. We are exactly who we are supposed to be.

Jasmine had often spoken this sage motto to me when my demons began creeping in, clouding the most miniscule granule of joy from my heart with doubt and dismay. I had quickly brushed aside her loving advice, even when she placed her hands upon the sides of my face and sealed it with a kiss. What did she know? I had asked myself. She was only a young mortal woman. But, truly, wisdom has nothing to do with the age of one's body, but one's soul and Jasmine's was indeed a very old soul. How I missed her now in the long hours as I awaited my final judgment at the hands of the Tyst Empire and the Chronous. I missed her and, yet, I hoped not to return to Phelan's manor for I could not bear the thought of what she had become, what I had made her. But if we are who we are supposed to be, then she became what her destiny determined she should become. It was her fate to embrace the Darkness, just as it was the fate of every

vampire who held the Blood within their veins.

If I could somehow only make peace with that...? If only...

* * *

Time lost all meaning as I found myself less and less subjugated by the liquid mercury grip of the Sleep. It was not that I did not want to slip into oblivion for I welcomed my next chance to dance with the Chronous in the dream world, verbally sparring as we elegantly discussed the proper proceedings for its interference in the summoning ritual. The machine required little of me, except that I remain open and unguarded, so that it could slip its consciousness within my own in order to feed energy from its core directly through my body. The more I spoke with the machine, the less apprehensive I felt about allowing it to utilize my body for its purposes. I was content to embrace even the false sense of security the Chronous's promises provided me. I was surprised to learn that the finer details of the ritual were a mystery even to the machine, for the information had never been completely entered into the system. I wondered if the Tyst themselves were growing suspicious of the machine's abilities and its intents, or if it was merely my presence they safeguarded themselves from, knowing my close link to the system? Their paranoia only fueled my own.

Though my body slowly continued to heal itself, I could feel myself weakening with each passing hour. I had not fed in nights and the effects were beginning to show. In the eerie silver mirror of the observation wall my reflection stared back at me, a haunting warped representation of the vampire I had once been. My skin had become sickly and waxen as it drew tight over my limbs from starvation, hollowing deep

purple bruises beneath my eyes and cheekbones. My veins protruded like blue vines about my arms and hands. My hair, newly grown since the near-fatal explosion, no longer shone with the strange preternatural sheen accustomed to our species, my eyes no longer glimmered like glass, dulled and distant with dehydration. I was becoming a shell of the vampire I had been only weeks before. I was tired. The beast within had subsided from its frantic clawing and banshee howling to a mewling whimpering. My body and mind felt lighter than air, somehow removed from the earthly burdens as if I had reached the cleansing stages of a long fast. While I understood the Tyst's reasons for refusing me nourishment, I knew I would be wholly incapable of participating in their ritual in this condition. Only blood would revive me; no synthetic substitute of their creation would do.

One evening I awoke to find a degree of my old strength had surprisingly returned to my limbs, the muscles of my arms and legs having reconstructed to a degree where I could break the cuffs binding me with minimal effort. Though I still needed to feed, my body had finally reconstructed itself to a point where it could move beyond the basic mending process to rejuvenate my actual vampiric abilities. After a moment of exhausting struggling, the restraints groaned and snapped with a strange hollow crack that pierced the oppressive silence around me. It was not the desire to flee that motivated me to free myself from the bonds, but a simple need to be in any position other than strapped to the table. Slowly, I lifted myself into a sitting position, lowering my legs to dangle off the edge of the metal slab. Reaching over, I pulled the IV from the crook of my arm, tossing it aside with disgust. The liquid continued to drip onto the floor, each drop hitting the cement like slow rain. The seconds reverberated like encapsulated centuries as I felt the poison in my veins begin

to dissipate, my body instinctively repelling it now that the flow had ceased.

With a heavy sigh, I placed my palms against the cold metal and closed my eyes, hunching over and hanging my head as I felt every minute of my years weighing down on me with an icy leaden pressure. No doubt, I most likely appeared to the outside world as an elderly human, barely containing the strength to draw their next breath. I sat and waited.

No sooner had I exhaled than the door to the cell slid open with the sickening metallic hiss I had come to resent with a vile bitterness. Several Tyst soldiers poured through the entrance, guns engaged and pointed at me, eager to unleash another deafening, disabling series of rounds. I did not move, though every fiber of my being screeched silently at the tsunami wave of humanity flooding my senses, the intoxicating perfume of blood and nervous sweat as alluring as opium smoke snaking around me, through me. The torture was exquisite; I prayed for rescue lest I be unable to resist much longer, despite the inevitable consequences of any sudden flicker of movement. Moments later, the wall of soldiers parted slightly to the sound of purposefully placed combat boots approaching. Malakai's repugnant arrogance infiltrated my delicate psyche, which rabidly snarled and snapped at the traitor behind the protective steel wall I had erected about it. He stopped before the wall of soldiers, silently watching me with a disdainful clinical scrutiny that made my skin itch uncomfortably, tight as it was over my skeletal frame.

"You didn't try to escape this time?" he said, stating the obvious.

"Where was I to go?" I replied, my voice a hoarse whisper escaping through my papery lips. "There is no point

anymore. Do with me as you will, I do not care.”

“Are you saying you will not fight us? That you are submitting to the summoning ritual willingly?” Malakai asked, his gaze boring into the top of my head like an iron drill as he attempted to pry at my psychic guard.

I said nothing, my jaws locked together as if welded with iron, but nodded slowly my agreement.

“Very good.” Malakai seemed smugly pleased that his tactics to wear me down had worked so well.

“I need to feed,” I said, my fangs beginning to elongate and ache as I struggled to remain in control of my Hunger.

“You will and soon,” Malakai replied coolly, though his disgust was barely concealed.

Carefully, so as not to set off the soldiers’ nervous trigger fingers, I lifted my head to meet Malakai’s gaze. Though the wall of militia did not flinch, remaining eerily still in their midnight blue fatigues, their visceral human response to my appearance registered on their faces as their eyes widened and lips parted with shock. Once again, I had become the mummified semblance of my former human shell. I could feel their panic rising deep within the structure of their military training, the reptilian part of their brains hissing and screeching to run from the monstrosity that sat before them testing every aspect of their understanding of reality.

My eyes flickered about the room, my tongue running over the razor tips of the fangs my lips were barely able to conceal until my own blood trickled down my throat. “The sooner the better,” I whispered. “I don’t know how much longer I can remain in control.” My eyes returned to Malakai.

“Marcus, John. Escort him to the ceremonial chambers.” He gestured to the largest two of the guards to either side of the line behind him.

The guards hesitated for a second, exchanging uneasy

glances at Malakai and then with each other before stepping forward.

I held up my hand and they halted in mid-stride. "It is in your best interest if you did not touch me. That is, if you want to live."

"Are you threatening us?" Malakai arched an eyebrow, narrowing his eyes in irritation.

"Not a threat," I said calmly, my gaze never leaving his as I lowered my hand back to my side. "Simply a matter of fact. I cannot be responsible for my actions at this point if any one of your men get too close."

"Very well." Malakai stepped aside revealing the open doorway behind him. "After you."

I closed my eyes, drawing a slow deep breath as if I could somehow find the strength I needed in the very molecules of air as they entered my lungs. It was an empty hope. My body had begun to tremble with the mere effort of holding myself in a sitting position. That, and the restraint upon my inner demon, which longed to rip out the throats of the men standing before me and drain their corpses of every last drop of blood. My pride would not allow me to appear any weaker before the humans than I already did. However, I would walk, on my own two feet, to the ceremonial chambers. Carefully, I slid from the edge of the metal table, exhaling as the freezing cement floor made contact with my bare feet.

For a moment longer I stood still, meditating silently on the open doorway. *If you are able to help me, Chronous, this would be a very good time to lend me your strength.*

I had never prayed to a machine before. It watched me, as it always did, methodically, silently, rippling through the fabric of the fortress with the certainty and precision of mental electrical impulses. Suddenly, without a word, I felt it reach out to me in a wholly new way that required neither

the dream world nor a physical extension of the building that housed it. Playing upon our bizarre shared connection, it threaded in through the base of my skull with microscopic writhing tendrils of pure energy. I could sense its excitement, its childlike curiosity as it tested its theory, overlaid with the inescapable clinical precision it methodically exercised with each of its decisions. So weak now, I was incapable of resisting the invasion of energy from the machine, becoming the perfect hollow vessel into which it could pour itself. It understood the need for discretion now, however, with this initial test, which was watched unwittingly by so many mortal gazes. It proceeded carefully and quickly.

Silken liquid fire, the small injection of energy anchored me, literally plugging me into an external source from which I could draw upon instead of the physical nourishment of blood. I wanted to pause and marvel at the momentous achievement of the machine and the implications it could possibly hold for my future as a vampire: if this was an alternative to feeding, could I subsist upon pure electrical energy without ever killing again?

“I will need you to place this around your neck since you insist on walking on your own.” Malakai held a thick silver band out towards me.

I stared at it for a moment in silence, my mind still preoccupied by the sensation of the digital puppeteer within me, before taking it from him. The thick band was a dead weight in my palm, cold and sinister, lined with tiny prongs along the inside meant for shocking its prisoner.

“A slave collar?” I looked up at him with a deadly calm. “I refuse.” I dropped the gadget upon the floor, holding his gaze steadily as the metal collided with the concrete with a heavy clank.

“Then you cannot be allowed to leave,” he replied.

“And what will you do, Malakai? Fill me with more bullets? That would only set Cardone’s plans back exponentially. That is, if it didn’t kill me this time around. Despite what you might think, my body can withstand only so much.” It was a lie, I knew, but there was no way he could know that the Chronous would never allow my death, not when it was so close to defeating our common enemy.

“Oh, I know.” Malakai took a step closer to me, his arrogance overcoming his caution. “It would be the greatest pleasure to kill you Tynan and trust me, when this is over, I will.”

The corner of my mouth twitched in a smirk. “I will look forward to that then.”

With slow deliberate steps I walked past him into the hall beyond. The Tyst soldiers filed in behind me, filling in around me, a fence of human flesh, weapons and sickening dread. Their confusion was dizzying, the drone of their frantic thoughts nearly overwhelming as it buzzed a deafening white noise at the periphery of my senses. I not only challenged their every notion of the physical world in which they methodically lived out their structured, uniform existences, but also defied the very man, Malakai, who struck fear in their hearts as no other could. From their souls I plucked images of Malakai’s wrath, his rage at various insubordinations, his peculiarly inhuman cruelty towards his own species for the slightest infraction as if he hated them as much as he seemed to hate mine. I could say that my instincts had screamed at me all along that Malakai was to be kept at a distance, but in the end, I ignored them.

Like a black eel in dark waters, Malakai swam around the entourage to the front of the pack to lead the way. As he moved into my line of sight, I anchored on him, my gaze boring into the back of his head as if I could somehow drill my way

into his subconscious through the base of his skull. Inside I felt myself beginning to fracture, a war igniting between my civility, which I needed to communicate consistently with the Chronous, and the primal entity immersed in pure bloodlust that crawled in the black cave of my soul growling and scratching at the walls that contained it.

The deep, dull chant of combat boots colliding with dense cold concrete escorted me through the winding hallways of the fortress. Never once did the soldiers chance a glance at me, though I knew they longed to turn and gawk at the monstrosity they guarded. Those denizens of the fortress we encountered by accident hurriedly scurried aside, pressing back against the walls and ducking around corners in terror at the sight of Malakai and his demonic prisoner. It was plain to see by these unwitting souls' expressions that they were, in large part, completely unaware of the true intentions of the Empire they had sworn allegiance to. The brief glimpse they now gleaned as we passed was more than they had ever contemplated knowing. I longed to hate them, to detest them for their inability to think independently, for their lack of coherent judgment or desire, but there was nothing left in my heart for them. For centuries I had seen millions like them, droves upon droves of huddled masses clinging to the hems of one cruel titan after another, watching their kin hurtled into the frenzied blood baths of war only to turn their eyes back to their keepers, holding out their shackled hands for more. So long as humanity existed, for every king there would always be the subjugated and fawning. My pity and disdain was wasted upon them.

I could not help but feel like a ceremonial offering as I walked towards the ritual chamber. My mind numbed by starvation, my body strangely light and electrified with the currents of Chronous's energy that coursed through it, I

imagined the steps taken by ancient human sacrifices as they were led through rainforests and up the steps of pyramids or through cold water, deep into the blackest of caves. What thoughts might have swum in their minds, knowing the pain that awaited them at the hands of their priests in the name of one god or another? Were they willing participants, eager to embrace the torture, or slaves whose crimes dictated that they pay tribute to their gods with their lives?

Though the Tyst's ritual held no religious significance to them, personally, I could not help but suddenly feel connected to the concept that it was my god, the very creator of my species to whom my physical form would be offered. The Tyst could not understand the profundity of this. I did not worship the Vicinus as a personal deity; the very name struck a paralyzing fear in the hearts of my entire race as no other had been able to do. However, since my last interaction with the god, I could not deny that I now held a profound respect for the entity and his explanations for the very universe in which we existed. A maniacal bloodthirsty tyrant, a scorned vengeful element, a timeless aspect of the cosmos; the Vicinus was all of these things, but he was also a part of me. He was the Father of all Immortals and while his presence could not be allowed to escape the ethereal prison the other elements had created for him and re-enter our reality lest he claim his revenge by exterminating the Earth, a part of my soul craved worship of him.

Tonight, if the Chronous failed to disrupt the ritual in time, I might become the very vessel of his rebirth, the host of a being as old and powerful as that of the very fabric of the universe. As I had stood on the island of his dreamscape facing him, the snaking scaled necks of the red and white dragons twining far above us in battle, I had known the overwhelming force of his presence. His permanence in the

universe was undeniable. Those who walked the Earth with only the recited myths of our predecessors would never truly understand the extent of our connection with the Vicinus. For them, he would forever remain a devil amongst devils, a creature of chaos and destruction to be feared rather than revered. For me he was an enigma I wanted to understand. I wanted to know more of his world, to listen to his logic and experience the alternate reality he had spoken of. His promises could have been lies, of this I was completely aware, but my curiosity was all consuming.

My mind drifted, feeling separate and distant from my physical form, struggling to recapture the intricacies of the illusion he had created and the riddle of logic he had laid at my feet like an offering. Had I been wrong to deny him, to fight him? Should I have embraced him and allowed him to create a new reality for me, one in which I could begin anew, one far from the decimated, diseased world in which I dwelled? Was this ritual I walked towards a second chance for me or would the Vicinus simply obliterate me along with the world it despised once it had finished using my husk?

I wanted to be afraid, but as much as regret, I suddenly found fear was a useless emotion.

CHAPTER 16

The moment I set foot over the threshold of the ritual chamber the atmosphere changed. The pulse of the universe, the rhythm of its cosmic heartbeat slowed. The air was thicker, hazy, and densely perfumed with oil, strong myrrh incense and the acrid scent of melting candle wax. Rounded walls of slick, seamless, gunmetal-gray concrete encompassed a floor of black marble shot through with glinting veins of white quartz like lightning across a clear night sky. In the center of the room, a simple rectangular dais of carved white and black granite was positioned within a circle of alchemical symbols etched deeply into the marble below. Standing at equal intervals about the sacred ring stood ten men and women in long, hooded, garnet-colored robes, their hands clasped before their stomachs and obscured by voluminous belled sleeves. As the footsteps of the soldiers echoed into the room, the thick metal door quickly shut behind us. The faces of the humans rose in unison from their meditation, their gazes turning to regard us with a serene blankness that concealed the truth of their souls.

“Tynan!” A woman’s scream pierced the dense silence

like a hawk's lonesome screech.

The eyes of the humans remained locked on me, not a single flicker of emotion registering any acknowledgement of the sound. My heart thundered in my chest, my racing pulse making the room spin as I held my breath, my eyes scanning the room for the source of the cry. To the right of the circle, just beyond the golden glow of the red candles positioned at five points, Moria knelt on the floor, her wrists shackled with heavy iron chains that were bolted to the black marble. Dressed in a long white gown of loose silk bound at the waist with a simple knotted cord of the same alabaster shade, her long black hair plaited down her back in a single elegant braid, she appeared a virginal offering to the gods.

I could only wonder in horror at the significance of her presence and the part she might play in the events about to unfold. As our eyes met, she scrambled to stand, her bare feet slipping beneath her as she struggled with the weight of the chains. My lips formed her name soundlessly as I watched her, stunned with relief that she was indeed still alive. I wanted to run to her, to break the chains that bound her and flee from the fortress, but I knew it would be pointless. The Tyst would track us, destroying everything in their path until we were recaptured. Tears streamed down Moria's pale face as she watched me with a silent pleading fear.

"Tynan?" Her lips formed my name again, her voice barely more than a whisper as she realized I planned to make no heroic move to rescue her. At least, not at that moment.

I tore my gaze away from Moria and back to the circle of robed humans before me. Moria collapsed back to her knees again, her shoulders slumping as she placed her face in her hands and began to sob uncontrollably. While the effort of protecting my mind from invasion severed me from Moria's inner thoughts, I could see by the dark circles under her

eyes and the bruises along her wrists beneath the shackles, as well as her neck above her collarbone, that her time in captivity had been brutal. While her interrogation had not been as severe as the one inflicted upon Khanna or myself, her fragile composure was not of the temper to withstand such violence, whether of the body or spirit.

I struggled to remain stoic as the essence of her pain sliced through my heart with a razor precision. I could not chance any open show of weakness to my captors. A chill slithered along my spine as the focused energy of the mortals molested me, probing intensely with a piercing curiosity at the edges of my defenses, which I now kept in place with the energy the Chronous provided. My own reserve was quickly fading. My instincts screamed within me as the beast thrashed within its iron cage desperate to flee the ominous atmosphere of the chamber. The sensation made me dizzy, the air trapped in my lungs turning stale and poisonous as if it were arsenic.

Even the Chronous seemed hesitant to allow the portion of itself supporting my body to further enter the room, holding me steady and still amongst the ring of soldiers guarding me until the barrel of a gun against my spine propelled me forward. Clumsy and awkward in my own skin, I stumbled forward and dropped to my hands and knees with a grunt. The soldiers around me retreated, moving off to either side to fade into the shadows about the perimeter of the room, awaiting their next signal from Malakai, who continued to stand beside me. Behind us, the door to the room hissed open and shut again. This time the eyes of the robed mortals lifted to address the new figure. They bowed in unison.

The hollow echo of slow purposeful boot steps on the marble reverberated throughout the chamber as Cardone approached us, stopping a few feet away. He regarded me

in silence for a long moment and I wondered if he now questioned whether I was the appropriate candidate for the summoning ritual. I could barely hear his thoughts. They were well concealed, but still vibrated close enough to the surface of his psyche for me to glean at least the basis of their content; he was disgusted by the sight of me, irate beyond reckoning that I had allowed myself to be injured in such a manner that my body had taken so long to heal. I wanted to lunge upwards and rip his vocal chords from his throat with my bare hands and scream that it was his doing that had made me so wretchedly frail and monstrous.

“I am not as broken as you may think I am,” I growled, staring straight ahead at the empty granite dais. I pushed myself back upon my haunches, straightening my back and squaring my shoulders as I drew a deep breath to steady myself.

“Has he fought you again?” Cardone asked Malakai.

Malakai shook his head. “No. Not since the last time.”

“And I have no plans to do so,” I interjected coldly. I found myself wishing the Chronous would simply take hold of me and use me to destroy Cardone now, but it seemed to be shying away from the situation, prowling the outskirts of the room like a panther in the darkness.

Cardone turned to the robed man closest to him. “Prepare him for the summoning.”

The man nodded and left his position within the circle. He approached me cautiously, the heavy fabric of his robes softly whispering with each step. Malakai held up his hand, stopping the man as he reached out to help me to my feet.

“I would advise not touching him,” Malakai said.

“But how shall we prepare his body if we are unable to cleanse it?” the man asked softly, his voice confused and troubled.

“Show me what must be done.” With effort I struggled to my feet, anger at my condition fueling my determination to see this event through to the end, no matter what the outcome. Either way, the Tyst would die, even if it meant the death of the world as well.

The robed man took a step back, his eyes wide, his expression uncertain as I found my footing. I turned to face him; his lips parted, his brow knitting with confusion as he studied my gaunt, starved face for the first time at close range. He turned and began to walk away. I looked at Malakai.

“Follow him,” Malakai replied without embellishment.

My heart raced within my chest so that my hands shook from the intensity of my pulse. I was not sure how much longer I could restrain the beast from consuming the last threads of my sanity and savagely taking what it needed to revive itself. As I followed the man into a small antechamber, I found myself wondering how crucial a role he played in the ceremony and if he would be at all missed if I devoured him. I walked slowly across the threshold which was covered by a heavy canvas curtain, my bare feet causing no more than a whisper, my attention fixed on the back of the man’s neck where it was exposed slightly above the folds of his hood.

He was a young man of no more than thirty with short-cropped brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His aura was heavy, resonating with a potent vibration like the deep hum of a slowly silencing Buddhist gong that bespoke of his dedicated studies of the magical and alchemical arts. Despite his unease in my presence, he remained focused on his task as if in a trance, filling a large copper bowl with water from a pitcher on a small table beside a bench made of black leather and heavy burnished steel. On the bench was folded a hooded robe the same deep red hue as the one he wore. With the exception of these few items, the room was empty, lit by

a dim strip of lighting embedded behind the molding around the edges of the ceiling. I paused near the entrance, letting the curtain fall behind me with a soft sigh of the fabric.

“You have been fasting, I see,” the man said quietly, attempting to sound calm. “That is good.”

“If you would like to call it that, I will not argue,” I replied, biting back the sarcasm that dripped like bile down the back of my throat. “It was definitely not my choice.”

The man did not halt his movements. He lit incense and a candle on the table next to the basin of water. “While the interior of your body has been cleansed, the exterior must still be washed and blessed.” He turned to face me. His brown eyes regarded me with a strange mixture of calm and curiosity. “In any other situation I would assist you in this portion of the ritual, but I am not to touch you?” he asked quietly.

“That would be unwise, yes,” I responded. My knees were beginning to tremble, my body quaking as even the strength lent by the Chronous began to be inadequate. I sank to my knees, the room spinning around me.

Despite the warning, the man ran forward. He grabbed my upper arm and directed me to the bench. As I took a seat, he jumped back away from me as the realization of the recklessness of his actions took hold. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

I shook my head, closing my eyes as I attempted to stop the world from its nauseating rotation. I could still feel the heat of his touch on my bone-thin arm as if the imprint had been seared into my icy flesh. “Leave me,” I whispered.

The man wavered uncertainly, watching me with great concern as he wondered whether or not I would be whole enough to withstand the ritual. “You will be able to feed soon,” he promised.

“That is what Malakai said,” I grunted. I opened my eyes and glowered at the man who was beginning to dissolve before me. The mad current of his pulse tinted his image blood-red.

“I don’t know if I believe him...” My voice trailed off in a hoarse whisper.

“The Queen will be provided to you for strength during the ceremony. You will have the blood you need,” he replied calmly, as if it were merely a simple detail.

“No!” I snapped, a sudden burst of adrenaline-fueled strength empowering my body and mind, clearing the maddening haze from my consciousness. “I will not feed on her!”

I stood and charged the man before he could flee, grabbing him by the collar of his robe and slamming him back against the wall behind him. “I told Malakai I would allow the usage of my body for Cardone’s sick little plan, but not Moria! Did you really think I would allow this, you sick, twisted human?”

The man gasped, his lips moving but no words emerged as he struggled, panicking in my grip. He clawed at my knuckles; I bared my fangs as my control over the Thirst finally broke free of its chains.

“Stop!” A desperate female voice cut through the red haze of my rage, snaring my attention just before my fangs plunged into the man’s neck. “Tynan, please don’t!” Her words died away in a heaving, hysterical sob.

For a long moment I felt frozen, trapped in a bizarre limbo as I struggled, trying to pry myself away from the man’s throat, so deliciously close to my lips now that I could taste the salt of his skin on my tongue as I breathed. The sound of chains rattling beside me was accompanied by a hesitant touch on my arm.

“Let him go.” The resigned sadness in Moria’s voice was heart wrenching. “Please...” She pressed her hand harder, wrapping her slender fingers about my forearm.

Slowly, I uncurled my fists from the man’s robes, lowering him awkwardly to his feet. As his toes touched the ground, he raced from the room. I began to shake again, my body wracked by uncontrollable tremors that set my teeth on edge, a vise of sickening cold clamping down in the center of my chest, squeezing the air from my lungs. I hunched forward, placing one palm against the wall to steady myself. Faintly, I was aware that another presence had entered the room along with Moria. The oily arrogant energy of Cardone hovered behind her, watching the two of us with a barely concealed hatred.

He did not love Moria; she was merely his property, his righteous entitlement as the ruler of the Empire and another weapon for him to wield in his quest for expansion and ultimate power. The scorn that poured, scorching as liquid metal, from him was merely for the fact that I had tampered with his prize possession, altering her terrified unquestioning devotion to him. If it were not for his overwhelming desire for immortality, he would have had Moria beaten to death for her insurrection, while I was handed over to Malakai for the cruelest dissection. I could not fathom why he had now brought her to me, except perhaps, as one final twisted means of torture for both of us. Inside, beneath my frail, quaking shell, I grinned at the knowledge that Cardone would soon face his judgment day, whether at the wrath of the Vicinus or the elimination of the Chronous. The vision of Cardone burning alive ignited in my mind’s eye, bringing a small weak smile to my lips beneath the curtain of disheveled hair that disguised my bowed head.

“Tynan, please look at me.” Moria leaned close to me. I

could feel the weight of the chains that bound her limbs.

“No,” I whispered, not wanting her to see me in such a state, so feeble and overcome by my own dark desire for violence and blood.

Moria turned away and begged Cardone. “Please, let me be alone with him.” Silence hung heavy between them as Cardone glared at her uneasily.

“He will not hurt me, not until the ceremony. I am certain of that,” she pleaded, her voice still crackling with shed tears.

“I cannot make you that promise,” I whispered so softly I was unsure if she could hear me.

“I will help him cleanse for the ritual,” Moria said.

“Do not even think about trying anything, my Queen. It would be suicide for you both,” Cardone said coldly.

Moria turned back to me, placing one hand on my forearm and one between my shoulder blades.

Cardone leaned partially out of the room and called to one of the soldiers standing behind Malakai. The sound of boots on marble echoed menacingly as the personnel marched hastily towards the antechamber.

“Watch them. Do not take your eyes off of them for one second. They are not to be trusted.” Cardone cast another hateful glance in my direction. “Shoot him if he tries anything at all, but do not kill him.”

The soldier said nothing, but took his place just inside the room in front of the entrance. I could sense his uncertainty, his innocent mortal confusion of what exactly was to occur that evening. The perfume of his nervous sweat tormented me; I could hear each swallow of salvia down his throat and slow intake of air in his lungs, the subtle creak of the joints of his fingers as they flexed apprehensively around the trigger of his gun. The culmination of sensory assault made me feel

as if I were sinking into an irreversible state of insanity from which I would never return. A hoarse, wry laugh escaped my lips as blood tears began to slip down my cheeks tracing the contours of my skeletal features.

“Come here.” Moria gently tugged at my arm.

Despite my fear that I might attack her as I had attacked the robed man, I allowed her to pull me away from the wall and guide me to the bench beside the table.

“I’m sorry,” I said as she helped me to sit down. I leaned against the wall, tilting my head back to stare at the ceiling.

“For what?” Moria asked quietly, keeping her voice as low as possible in the presence of the stationed guard. She lifted the bowl of water from the table and placed it on the bench beside me. Standing before me she lifted my shirt over my head, undressing me as if I were a small child, and let it drop to the floor beside her. The chains she still wore clanked eerily against one another as she moved, slowing her as the weight encumbered the motions of her delicate frame.

“I failed you.” I stared at her.

She did not meet my gaze, keeping her eyes downcast and intent on her work, lifting the white cloth within the basin of blessed water and wringing it slightly before bathing the skin of my arms and neck, stomach and chest. “You did not fail me. My life has been forfeit for years. I was ready to die when you found me. Because of you, I now have a son. A son who will live on, with or without me.”

“But I don’t know where he is now.” I watched her, memorizing every detail of her exquisite features one last time. Even with her flawless alabaster skin marred by the purples and greens of the bruises, her beauty was mesmerizing. My heart ached as I longed to know what had become of her son, our son.

“Somehow I know he is okay,” she said lifting the

cloth from the basin to my face, lovingly wiping away the gruesome streaks of blood tears. She tried to smile despite the agony that gripped her soul causing tears to brim in her eyes like liquid diamonds, occasionally breaking free to slip down her tarnished cheeks. “I suppose that is what you call a mother’s instinct?”

I reached up and took her wrists in my hands, staying her movements. She lifted her eyes to meet mine.

“Moria, I will make this right. Whether in this world, or another, I will. I promise you.” I did not know what compelled me to make such a declaration, but I could not suppress the words.

Her brow furrowed for a moment as she stared into my eyes, simultaneously taken off guard and comforted by the promise. We both knew what was hidden beneath my seemingly gallant statement: the likelihood that neither she nor I would live to see another night. I began to regret my choice of words immediately; they were hollow and useless, causing more damage than healing, as my words so often did. She nodded silently and broke away from my gaze, pulling her wrists free of my hands to reach over to retrieve the robe from the bench beside me. She handed the garment to me as if it were a sacred offering, her eyes now distant as if she had retreated deep within herself. With trembling hands, I took the robe from her, holding it before me as I watched her.

Moria began to turn away but paused mid-step, a fresh storm of tears welling up in her eyes. She whirled around. Before I could react, she took my face in her hands and gently kissed me on the lips. As I reached for her she turned away, her eyes still downcast, and hurried from the room as quickly as she could, despite her chains. Stunned, I sat in silence staring at the curtained doorway. The soldier positioned beside it watched me in disgust as he wondered how Moria

could think to kiss a creature as wretched and dangerous as I. His thoughts accosted me, sharp as flint arrow tips. I met his gaze and his eyes widened. I began to rise slowly, like a jaguar readying itself to leap, a warning to the young human to beware of his false sense of superiority.

“Leave!” I hissed at him, baring my fangs.

The soldier bolted from the room. Alone, with only the deep resonance of the Chronous’s life support echoing in my mind, I began to doubt my decision to enter into this agreement with the machine. Cardone would not stop in his quest for immortality; he would find another to replace me or another Queen to bear the infernal child into the world. However, as I clumsily slipped the robe over my head, the frantic dismay of my demons assaulted me like captive chimpanzees screeching within their cages, feverish with rage. Despite the constant link between my psyche and the Chronous filling my body with the cool, quiet promise of an omnipresent power source, I felt utterly alone and isolated. I had no way of knowing what had become of any of the souls that had touched my life beyond these fortress walls. Their memories seemed faded, tarnished by the torture I had endured, the images of their faces cracking and peeling like ancient photos left out in the sun.

My soul was riddled with holes through which seeped a blackened sickness, bitter as regret but numbing in the absence of continuity or direction. I feared that, if I stood again, the last of my spirit would simply flow from me to the floor to seep back into the earth. Absent was the Ancient Immortal oracle to guide me with his sagely wisdom or even the stern impatient love of my Dark Father to direct me towards the battle before me, handing me my sword and shield in the last moments before entering the fray. Alone, I had made this decision to trust in an entity of fiberoptic

synthesis and prefabricated notions of free will. Everything the Chronous construed, as its own individuality, its own decisive independent manifesto, was merely the product of an accumulation of human input over the course of a century. The machine had no free will despite what it may have believed, no divine, righteous installation from the gods significant and removed from the institutionalized grid erected by its human programmers. Everything it had learned to understand, to justify, to rationalize, even to feel, was the product of input and output, of commands and codes, written and rewritten and deleted for generations.

However, were we, the living blood and tissue creatures of the Earth, whether Immortal or mortal, nothing more than the product of our own programming? Was it wrong of me to desire the guidance of a creature whose heart of blood and tissue beat roughly in time with mine over that of an entity who had no heart to speak of, whose only reference of love and loss was the construct of accumulated synaptic responses gleaned from clinical observations? I closed my eyes and sank deep within myself, searching for the testimony of my soul by which I could seek the solace and affirmation I so desperately needed.

I am here. The voice of the Chronous rippled across my mind in a facsimile of comfort.

I know, I replied. *Are you certain that this is the only way? I do not understand why you cannot simply attack Cardone without me. You are the ultimate power here in this plane of existence. You must know that?*

I had asked this question before of the machine, but still did not understand the answer. I needed to reaffirm that my surrendering was not only necessary but justified.

No, I am not, the machine replied, seeming hesitant to elaborate. *It is still here with me, woven into my core. While*

your battle severed most of its link to the physical plane, it managed to cling to me. I have tried to eradicate its presence, but I do not understand it. Its power far exceeds my own. The laws of this universe appear to not apply to its behaviors. The only way I can help you to fight it, is if it manifests here in this plane and detaches itself from me. During that time when it has finally left my system, is when my powers will benefit you the most.

You are uncertain whether this will work. I can sense it. I knew the answer already.

The probability of success is very high, the Chronous replied. Your physical abilities will be enhanced by my power supply giving you the optimal opportunity to eliminate the Vicinus permanently.

A psychotic chuckle began to well up in my throat at the absurdity of the Chronous's plan. Even after the months of living with the vampiric god nestled at its core, infiltrating every minute corridor of the grid as he strove to free himself from his otherworldly prison, the Chronous still could only rationalize with statistical quotas of probability, not the more ephemeral, elusive possibility of the random chaos of which the Vicinus was king. The Chronous viewed the summoning ritual as simply another program, another move on the theoretical chessboard against which it would strategize its own maneuver. The ethereal, subjective and wholly organic nature of magic was frustrating to the machine. Each time the fingers of its consciousness wrapped about a single detail, it burst and vanished into thin air. I had come to this conclusion about the Chronous nights before, based on our previous discussions, but a part of me had still hoped that it would provide me with a more secure and encouraging answer.

Tell me we will succeed. Tell me I will walk away from

this. I tried to sound commanding hoping to persuade the machine to obey.

There was a small pause of suffocating silence. *I cannot do that. It still lacked the ability to lie.*

“Of course not,” I said quietly, opening my eyes. Carefully I stood, drawing heavily on the Chronous to muster the strength to walk out of the room. “Please don’t fail me.”

With each step I took, the Chronous gradually began to feed more and more energy through my frail frame until each and every nerve ending within my body vibrated and hummed.

Careful... I said to the machine. The surge held fast at its current level leaving me feeling invincible and alive in a way I had not experienced since first drinking from Nahalo’s veins.

As I lifted the curtain partition and stepped forth into the ritual chamber, I drew a deep breath and forced myself to appear as weak and broken as I had been when they first delivered me to the room. Keeping my eyes downcast, my shoulders slightly slumped, my features partially obscured beneath my hair, I slowly walked towards the ring of mortals. Like a spider turning its prey over and over again between its legs, I focused on the black pearl of my hatred for the Tyst Empire, wrapping it in the diseased fiberglass strands of pain and rage that had sold me into their slavery. The chaotic thoughts of the soldiers collided against the dark looming crags of my mind, caustic icy waves crashing deafeningly into one another until they receded into a grating static as I forced them away from me. Malakai’s barely veiled malice wove in and out with a black mamba grace through Cardone’s own contempt until the song of their poisoned souls pulled deep and low. In the midst of the stifling storm of animosity the single melancholy pulse of Moria’s love resonated. It was

a beacon to guide me through the darkness and the promise that the future was close enough for me to cling to. I wanted to touch her mind, to coax it with the tranquilizing falsities I once was able to feed so easily to the souls of the mortals around me as if they were sparrows eating from the paw of lion. Now, my desire to be that sparrow and seek shelter within the placating lies of another seemed to shatter that predatory instinct. I could not even raise my eyes to meet Moria's.

I approached the circle and the atmosphere of the room changed as if the gathered slowly began to release their held breath, filling the chamber with an elevated awareness of all things physical and metaphysical. The steady drip of wax falling from the melting candles to the marble, the slight rustle of fabric as the rise and fall of chests moved with each inhale and exhale, the scent of human breath, and sweat, and the pungent perfume of incense spiraling up from the base of the dais to pollute the air with a light fog all combined in the length of a single heartbeat. The symphony of sensation slammed into me, enveloping me completely. The apprehension and dread I had cultivated in my heart dissipated, replaced by an overwhelming curiosity. I felt drunk on the power of the Chronous, enamored so entirely that I wondered if I were under the spell of something within the ring, a greater power I would not be able to resist. I wanted to immerse myself in the moment, throwing myself into the ritual to invite the Vicinus into myself to use as it saw fit.

Deep inside, a fraction of my reason screamed at me over the roaring tide of magic, Do not lose yourself in this! You must fight it! Keep hold of reality or you will be lost forever!

The temptation to let go and surrender was exquisite,

akin only to the draw of the Dark Blood. As I crossed the engravings on the floor, I felt a sharp tug at my center, both orgasmic and eviscerating at the same time, as if I were caught in the last thrall of a horrific death. A deep chant wound its way up from the throats of the mortals surrounding me, weaving in and out of the atmosphere and grabbing hold of my soul as if the sound were an invading spirit attempting to possess me. I staggered for a moment before catching my balance again.

Shaking my head, I reached up and rubbed my eyes as I fought to stop the world from spinning around me. The chanting strengthened, rising until its rhythm felt as ancient as the heavens, archaic as the mountain beneath the fortress. Images of the previous summoning flashed in my mind's eye, of Sea in his long ceremonial robes approaching Moria as she lay supplicant and naked on the very granite altar that awaited me now. Silently, I fought to banish the details, but I was powerless to stop the hallucination, forced to watch as Sea removed his clothing and knelt before her, parting her legs even as she lay terrified in the grip of the ceremony's power.

For a long agonizing moment I could not distinguish between reality and dream as the sound of the chanting enveloped me, drawing me further and further into the realm of the ritual's climbing power. Before me, Sea moved his hands over Moria's body, seducing her to respond to his unnatural desire for her. Arching her back, a low, quavering moan escaped her lips as she surrendered to the pull of the energy between them allowing the force of the summoned god's will to enter her as Sea moved over her, the curtains of his long white blond hair draping her pale limbs as she wrapped herself about him and pulled him deep inside her. They moved together as one entity, their spellbound passion

astounding and unnerving as the chanting rose to a deafening crescendo to accompany their unified climax.

Never had I even attempted to imagine Moria in such a light, as a woman in the grips of an otherworldly, unfettered sexual euphoria. But now I found myself aroused even as the images began to sift away from my mind's eye, dissipating into wisps of memory to be replaced by the cold empty altar before me. Even my hatred for Sea and disgust for his violation of her could not temper the desire that swirled about me, tightening in my abdomen with a demand nearly as primal in its force as my Thirst.

Let go of it. Let go of it now! It is only the starvation and injuries that are influencing you so, I chided myself desperately. The power of the ritual was taking hold of me, shaking my soul loose from my skin and readying it for the Vicinus. Terror gripped my heart.

One of the mortals, a tall woman with dark brown hair clipped short and neat as her male counterparts, approached me. Without thinking, I allowed her to guide me to the dais, helping me to climb the single step of stone. Quickly she stepped away, but was replaced by another robed figure. I leaned back against the granite table, my hands curling about its edge to hold me upright, and watched him with suspicion. In my delirious haze I recognized the man who had accompanied me into the tiny antechamber. My heart thundered in my chest, my body trembling from exertion and restraint, as I watched him lead Moria towards me.

I shrank back towards the edge of the platform as he accompanied her to the altar. Silently he reached inside his robes and retrieved a small metal key to unlock the cuffs about her wrists and ankles. The chains fell to the cold granite, the sharp clatter and clang of metal on stone echoing about the room. Even after it had faded, it still resonated deep within

my ears. Returning the key to the hidden pocket, he retrieved a small glass vial of liquid and uncorked it. Placing his index finger over the mouth of the bottle, he turned it upside down. Facing Moria, he reached up and drew a symbol upon her forehead with the clear liquid. The scent of cloves and a far more pungent herb wafted towards me, dancing seductively beneath the dominant cloud of incense around us. With Moria anointed he approached me, his eyes meeting mine with a silent appeal not to murder him. I remained rigidly still and silent, not trusting my control over my body, for it was quickly becoming hard to tell just who or what now manipulated my limbs, be it myself, the Vicinus, or the Chronous. I was a puppet and nothing more.

Hesitantly, the man reached out to draw on my forehead in a similar fashion. I closed my eyes as the perfume snaked about my face, sweet and seductive, the marking on my skin heavy as if someone had pressed the heel of their palm against my head, trapping me with their invisible strength. My hatred for Sea, my contempt for Cardone and even my newfound lust for Moria spiraled within me like a cyclone until it lifted upwards and out of my body. My head snapped back and I exhaled sharply with shock, my arms and legs light as feathers drifting on an unfelt current of air. Distantly, I was aware of the Chronous's power still present within me, continually threading in through the back of my skull. It flowed down through the miles and miles of nerves causing my skin to tingle. However, as the breath left my lungs, a new presence began to test my defenses. I recognized it instantly, the archaic resonance of its infinite essence tasting the air about my frame with its flickering forked tongue, curious and suspicious of this new offering by the Tyst of a vampire it had already battled once before. Drawing another deep breath, I slowly lifted my head again and opened my eyes,

my gaze instantly locking onto Moria.

“Drink from her and heal yourself,” the man said quietly, his voice blending seamlessly into the chorus of ancient Latin recited by his companions. “She is our offering to you and to the Vicinus. You who will become the Vicinus.”

I was speechless. The reality of his words crashed into me, paralyzing me. The man turned away and walked silently from the dais back to his place in the circle. For a moment Moria stared at me, her eyes wide with confusion and fear. Backlit by the pillars of candles beyond the ring behind her, I could see the slender outline of her silhouette beneath the thin white linen of her gown, the curve of her small perfect breasts and narrow waist down to the dark patch between her legs. My breath caught in my throat. I tried desperately to keep from succumbing to the desire that tormented me for I still wrestled with the moral debate of whether or not she was my sister or merely my sister in the Blood.

However, the starvation was more than I could resist any longer. The scent of the mortals surrounding us, their blood rushing hot and fast through their veins as they poured every fraction of their focused energy into the spell they incanted, was more intoxicating than the finest of absinthes, sweet and numbing with the whispered promise of sin. I did not want this, I did not want Moria to be the one sacrificed, and I hated myself and the world for allowing the placement of us in this moment, but there was no way for me to resist the temptation any longer.

The Vicinus’s presence coiled about me, supporting my physical weight without invading my flesh as the Chronous’s energy animated my body just enough to allow me control over its movements. With a will that did not feel entirely my own, I pushed away from the altar, wavering slightly, as if drunk. Slowly, I approached Moria as she stood frozen; her

mind shrieked to me of her fear, of her incomprehension that the one and only being she had come to trust to protect her in this world had finally turned on her. Inside my body, the last aspect of my true self thrashed against the barricade that was forming between my reason and the infiltrating alien powers, howling and pleading for me to stop, but to no avail. I could no longer resist the needs of my body, or that of the god I would soon welcome into me.

Reaching up, I traced the line of Moria's jaw with two fingers, slowly drawing them lightly across her skin down her bruised neck to her collarbone as I stared into her eyes, my face inches from hers. She trembled beneath my touch, her body responding instinctively to the electrifying, mesmerizing suggestions I allowed to flow forth from me into her like water. Closing my eyes and moving my face about hers, my lips passing over her skin, I inhaled her scent, the sweetness of her hair like autumn leaves lining the forest floor, her skin like rain-soaked earth and beneath it all, the sharp, coppery spice of her blood as it ran hot and fierce through her veins.

"Tyman...?" she breathed, struggling not to be swept away in the tide of power that washed over her. Her head fell back as my hand slipped behind her willowy neck and she relaxed into my hold as the last of her will spiraled away in the storm.

Around us the same chanting verses cycled, the decibels of the incantation escalating slightly with each round. I kissed the tip of her chin, working my way with feather light grace down her neck until my lips hovered over the muscle just above her artery. Inside me, a war had begun which I felt only remotely part of, as if I stood on a far shore watching two battleships approach one another. I wanted to launch my attack, to sail out to join the fight, but the call

of my Thirst stayed me, luring me back inland into the fog with the promise that all would be righted with just one taste, just one drink. I suddenly understood why the Tyst had held me captive for so long, why they had tortured me with such prolonged starvation.

Just one drink...

I sank my fangs into her throat. Blood erupted into my mouth, spilling over my tongue, as thick and hot and sweet as drowning in a poppy dream of pure perfection. The cells of my body consumed every last molecule, billions of piranhas thrashing in the shallow waters of my tissue in a fevered frenzy about the fallen flesh. I maintained a sliver of my reason, enough to know I did not want to kill her, but the unadulterated bliss, the exquisite rapture that wracked my body as the memories of her life flowed through me, around me, was irresistible. With one hand still cupping the base of her skull behind her neck, I wrapped my other arm about her waist and pulled her against me, pressing her body against mine as if I might be able to absorb her into me like two molecules combining seamlessly. I sighed into her and continued to drink.

A sharp pain speared me through my chest suddenly shattering the blessed oblivion I had surrendered myself to. I pulled my head back from Moria's neck, ripping my fangs from the wounds with a gasp, my lips and chin smeared with her blood. For a split second I thought I had been attacked from behind and impaled. Paralyzed in the grip of pain, Moria slipped from my grasp, crumpling at my feet, unconscious. I wanted to howl aloud, but even my voice was trapped, held suspended within me, a scorpion perfectly preserved in resin, its tail raised and ready to strike. I twitched, my hands tightening into claws, my eyes rolling back in my skull as I fought not to lose consciousness. Falling against the side of

the altar beside me I pressed my forehead against the cold polished granite and began to pray for death, blood tears slipping from the corners of my eyes as the pain became unbearable. It pulled at my center beginning at the outside of my chest and between my shoulder blades, funneling inwards as if a black hole had begun to form there.

Reality flickered and fluttered, film creaking upon an old metal reel segmented with cigarette burns, black and haloed with bright orange spots dancing before my eyes as the pain destroyed my vision. Distantly, I was aware of a scream that finally broke free from my throat, echoing angrily about the chamber. The voices of the mortals did not skip a beat, the words of their chants blending into one another until only a spiraling, soaring wall of sound remained, encompassing me and blocking out the rest of the universe. Searing heat filled my body, the product of the Chronous's increased feed of power and the force of the god pouring its essence into me as they fought for domination. The temperature rose until I believed my internal organs might liquefy from the fire. A strange papery fluttering sound filled my ears. The rustling, whispering noise began to transform, thickening and solidifying until it took the form of wings, dense and heavy with leather, lined in razor-edged scales of obsidian and flint.

You must fight. The voice of the Chronous reached out to me through the cyclone enveloping my soul.

I...can't. I can't fight it! I gasped, my body shuddering, my fingernails digging into the stone before me, cutting shallow grooves in its surface.

My soul was clinging frantically to my body as the Vicinus's power swept over me, around me, through me howling and shrieking with a demonic vengeance. The ethereal promises of a new life from his consciousness had

vanished, his desire to assimilate me as part of his essence replacing the recognition of me as his true progeny. Never again would he entertain my insubordination or stoop to offer his manipulative logic to persuade me to join his reign of terror. I would no longer have the opportunity to live on, in another realm, another world perfectly crafted for me as a reward for my submission. He would sever me brutally from my body and toss me back into the void from which all life came. No afterlife, no reinvention or reincarnation, but only simple, pure nothingness, the most terrifying fate of all.

I clung to the side of a chasm dangling from a crumbling ledge as the souls of the damned called to me from the hell of pitch below. The cavern resembled the gorge created after the bombing of Fredericksburg, fathomless and horrifying filled with the angry, restless souls of the dead. My feet kicked against the side of the sheer face, scrambling to find purchase in the quickly eroding rock as it blew away, dissolving in the sandstorm wind cycling around the perimeter of the crater. This was not the way I had envisioned the fight. I had assumed the Chronous's power would make me invincible, easily ousting the Vicinus from my body, but we had underestimated the Vicinus's ability to puncture this realm and take hold of what he desired, what he needed to fulfill his quest for revenge.

Tap into my core, the Chronous shouted to me over the storm. Use the energy I am giving you.

The physical world had vanished. All that existed was the storm and the chasm of oblivion below me. Even in my first battle with the Vicinus, I had not been this terrified, utterly gripped in the vise of harrowing fear, for never had I understood death to be such a complete obliteration. I had always suspected that something must lie on the other side of this earthly realm, but now I knew that the Vicinus would

not allow that to occur. Our afterlives were manifested by our own beliefs, the product of the accumulated energy of billions of souls desiring for salvation or damnation. However, in the greater cradle of the cosmos that concept could easily be crushed to dust. I knew I had to fight, for I was not ready to face such an extinction, nor could I allow the Vicinus to stamp out the lives of those upon the Earth and their hereafters, their heavens and their hells, whatever form they might take, wherever they might be.

The limestone and clay beneath my fingers was beginning to crumble as the shelf I clung to dissolved, along with the rest of the crater's walls. Around me black shadows sliced through the air with shrieks and the heavy swoosh of leathery wings. The Vicinus called on the most terrifying images of mortal demons, dredged up from my own mind, to assault me, working free my soul's tenuous grip on my body. I closed my eyes and tried to draw breath amidst the tornado. The gods of my old mortal world, both Christian and Pagan, seemed pointless to pray to. and suddenly, even my own philosophies, the ones I had sculpted, all felt pointless and hollow. I needed something to cling to, something to focus on and draw strength from besides the energy of the Chronous matrix. The machine did not understand this. It could not comprehend how, in the face of complete annihilation, I could search for a spiritual light to guide me. The machine wanted to exist, but it did not understand what it meant to live.

Even if I could not find my own reason, I knew those who struggled for survival beyond the Tyst fortress had a desire to live that was unparalleled by anything I had experienced. Whether they were the Phuree, the amagin denizens, or even my own vampiric people, their beliefs and their will to live was something to embrace.

I let go of the ledge, my fingers coated with a fine layer of limestone dust, stone embedded deep beneath my nails. The current of shrieking darkness lifted me, spinning me out into the center of the chasm, ripping at me with invisible talons as if it meant to shred my soul and devour it. I held fast to my center, drawing on the steady stream of energy imparted to me by my synthetic lifeline, using it to prevent me from being sucked down into the void below. I squeezed my eyes shut, refusing to look at the horror of infinity or the wretched warped entities that hovered near me. They sniffed at my hair and skin, their long, serpentine harpy tongues tasting me as they readied themselves for the kill. How the Vicinus enjoyed his illusions, the fine details he manically etched with the nib of his quill and the ink of my own subconscious.

I threw my head back and outstretched my arms, imagining the Chronous cradling my neck in its palm pushing me upwards, suspended now in the center of the storm, perpetually dangerously close to the heart of the darkness. Opening my mouth, I inhaled deeply, drawing the forces that swarmed about me as if I were drinking from a waterfall, sucking them deep down into me to the pit of my being. I needed them to invade me completely. for only then could I draw upon their power and trap them. I welcomed them with a lust for the power they offered. These entities were extensions of the Vicinus's own essence each carrying with them a morsel of the omnipotent infinite chaos that was the very air the god breathed. By inviting them into the core of my soul, I warped their desire to destroy me into a strange need to assimilate me into their folds, a reflection perhaps of the Vicinus's own lingering quest to cultivate me as his new vampiric progeny.

The Vicinus hovered in the distance, observing my newfound ability to manipulate yet another of his cleverly

contrived illusions, warping it and working it as if it were of my own design. I could sense him questioning whether or not my spiritual elimination was necessary to his rebirth; though he longed to indulge his hunger for revenge, he asked himself if there was a way to blend my soul with his, folding me back into himself to exist simultaneously in the same physical form. He wanted me to be his protégé, his accomplice. He desired for me to start a new strain of the vampiric race within another realm of fresh and untainted design so that the true spirit of his being could flourish as he believed was our Immortal destiny, if only humanity had not been there to thwart our evolutionary progression. Contemplation of my domination consumed him, even more than his reentry into the physical realm as he watched me pulling, one by one, the ghostly black spirits into my body.

I reveled in the scrutiny, feeling more and more empowered with each digested fragment of the god's essence. The physical world was becoming a distant memory as the howling wind of nothingness wrapped tighter about my body like a cold silk cocoon. As the energy moved over me, through me, it began to soothe me, scouring away the grit and grime of all of my tribulations and lacing my soul with profound stillness in the eye of the storm. What came next was instinctive. My movements, my actions and even my intuitions were guided by a force far more ancient and wise than I could even fathom touching, let alone tapping into to wield as my own. I exhaled slowly, separating the darkness from the illusions of demons I had ingested to retain only the wraiths' inner core, their original unblemished state. It was like stripping the beaten brown husk of a mimosa pod away from the tiny seeds inside.

I could sense the Vicinus closer now, hovering within the illusion he had created, daring to draw nearer to me

as he prepared to claim my body. But something stopped him from attacking, not quite fear, but far more foreboding than mere precaution. I lifted my head and slowly opened my eyes as I felt the last of the power absorb into me with such a blinding intensity that my body began to take on a fiery luminescence. Across the black expanse of the gorge, the Vicinus perched on the edge of the opening, crouched down, his fingers splayed on the earth as if he meant to leap forward. Thin, willowy limbs of snowy white flexed with sinewy muscles. He wore a thin black tunic and pants, gathered at his unnaturally narrow waist with a black belt of heavy scaled leather. His waist-length obsidian hair snapped in the wind, whipping about his face and body like writhing, angry sea serpents. The eyes that had haunted me flashed spitefully, the deepest of crimsons swirling and glinting as if they each contained a newly formed galaxy.

Careful, Tynan. His warning slithered with a reptilian aggression through my mind.

I defeated you once before, I replied calmly.

Defeated? I will allow you that idea, though it is far from the truth, he chuckled. *I allowed you that victory once because I thought you would come to accept my offer. I see that you have not. A pity. I do not plan to allow such an intervention again.*

Allow? I am as much a part of this universe as you. The words slipped past my mind's lips before I could truly consider their gravity. *I have just as much right to exist.*

He threw back his head and howled a laugh as haunting and dark as the chasm that lay below me. He cocked his head to one side and considered me, a wry smile tugging at the edges of his wide colorless lips. *It will be such a pity to watch you vanish. I have grown strangely fond of you.*

Drawing another deep breath of dark matter from around

me, I lowered my arms, pushing myself upwards through the air until I was level with the edge of the crater. The Vicinus eyed me warily, his posture changing as he readied himself to attack. Arching his shoulders, he rolled them back, stretching his arms down and out by his sides, his fingers splaying as he opened his hands, palms facing me. From his back emerged the beginnings of leathery black wings. Folded tight at first, they grew up and out from behind him, expanding slowly, one glistening black and red scaled section at a time until they stretched several feet to either side. At the tip of each wing curved a massive talon of the same glinting obsidian shade. The Vicinus straightened his back, flexing his wings, beating them against the air to demonstrate their immense power. The first movement brought a gust of air fast and hard across the expanse towards me, hitting me full force and throwing me backwards. Quickly, I fought to right myself again and maintain my position, but a surge of uncertainty fluttered in the center of my chest as I realized the fault in my confidence. I was not ready to take on another battle with the Vicinus, but I could not allow him the pleasure of this knowledge.

But it was too late. He had sensed my moment of wavering courage, tilting his head to the side and sniffing the air as if picking up the scent of his prey. A cruel, devious smile animated his lips, causing my blood to turn to ice in my veins. Beating his wings again, he lifted from the ground and, before I could draw another breath, he surged towards me like an archangel delivering the wrath of God. I tensed, desperately feeding on the energy I had drawn from the illusion around me and the stream of power still delivered by the Chronous somewhere distantly within the physical realm.

My focus slipped as the Vicinus sped towards me, his

face contorted into a demonic snarl exposing his long, razor-sharp fangs, and I felt myself begin to fall downwards into the oblivion. I clawed at the air trying to find my center, a scream frantically winding up from my chest to my throat as my mind raced, caught in the suffocating grip of fear. The Vicinus reached out and grabbed the front of my shirt, his long nails slicing open the flesh of my chest below in five neat, deep gouges, stopping my fall instantly. As the blood began to spread across my chest and down my stomach, he slowly lifted me, his massive black wings whipping the air around us into the vortex of a hurricane. His fury was all consuming, his gaze boring into mine as he brought me close enough to him to feel the acrid heat of his breath on my face. His lips curled back, his jaw unhinging like a boa constrictor as his fangs elongated. Before I could even contemplate my next move, he bit hard on my neck, his teeth puncturing down past my shoulder into my chest near my heart.

I gasped, my eyes snapping open as I felt myself sucked backwards--the Vicinus coiled about me as he drank deep from my body--into the physical realm. Frozen, I stood on the dais like a statue, my feet apart, my arms outstretched to either side of me, my head bowed as if in prayer. Though I had, in part, returned to the waking world, inside me a battle raged between my soul and the Vicinus as he continued to attempt to oust me from my flesh. The pain was surreal in its excruciating depth, as if my skeleton were being separated, bone by bone, from the muscle and tendons that bound it. My teeth clamped together until I thought they would shatter as my eyes rolled back in my head. I pushed back against the god's venom, but I was not strong enough.

Help...me...! I screamed to the Chronous desperate for a renewed source of energy to draw from.

You're burning alive, the Chronous replied. *I do not*

advise a higher level if you want to live.

I don't care! I shrieked. Kill me if you have to. Kill me!

The Vicinus will use the additional energy if I supply it. He has too great a hold on your body now. The Chronous wavered a moment too long as it attempted to compute my survival rate. It was now apparent that its calculations had been incorrect and based purely on hypothesis.

Trapped inside my body, clinging tenaciously to it as if I dangled by my fingers from ledge of a skyscraper, I felt the Vicinus push me down until he finally took control. Though annoyed, he was enjoying the fight, his curiosity for my next action delighting him devilishly. My body twitched sporadically as he settled into my limbs. Did he mean to keep me alive within him or would he tend to my complete elimination at a later time? Either way, he seemed content to gain the upper hand in our struggle for the time being. At last he drew breath into my lungs, lowering my arms as he flexed my fingers, a cosmic glee filtering through his mind as he gazed about the room at the awestruck mortals. One by one they collapsed to their knees, their lips parting in speechless wonder at the reincarnation standing before them.

The reflection of my body in the grip of the god exploded from their minds; my eyes, once a brilliant hazel were now stained blood red, the flawless white flesh of my face was perfect and whole again, no longer an animated skeleton, taking on an eerie luminescence. Though it was still my body that stood before them, I had been transformed into a mesmerizing holy enigma of my former self that evaded all temporal constraints of religion or physics. Even I, as I continued to cling to the far reaches of my physical self, my strength waning with each passing second, marveled at the metamorphosis with a terrified awe.

Please help me... I pleaded with the Chronous. *You can*

destroy us both. I know you can. He is in a physical form now. Please... I did not know if the Chronous could hear me anymore, my words were trapped so far on the edge of reality that they seemed to slip over the horizon of existence to be lost forever in the darkness.

The Vicinus stepped down from the dais and crossed the ritual circle with slow, carefully placed steps. His eyes had locked on Lord Cardone who stood just beyond its perimeter, pressed back against the far wall of the room as if he suddenly wished to disappear into the shadows. The rest of the soldiers had scattered, some fleeing from the room entirely while others cowered in the corners, torn between their duty to protect their emperor and their survival instinct. I did not know what the Vicinus intended to do, for, though we shared the same corporeal self, his thoughts were completely sealed from me, more so than ever before.

“You are the one who called upon me.” The Vicinus’s voice slithered from my lips, cold and with an archaic resonance that echoed within the chamber no matter how softly the words were uttered. “What have you to say for yourself?”

Cardone had begun to tremble beneath the heavy layers of his uniform as the realization of what he had requested began to sink in. Slipping down the wall, he sank to his knees before the Vicinus, struggling to find the words he had imagined he would use to address the god who had promised him immortality as payment for his loyalty. The Vicinus only tilted his head slightly to one side as he watched the fumbling mortal before him, the warrior and ruler who had subjugated an entire planet reduced to a quavering, fawning human.

The Vicinus shook his head with pity and disgust. “You are not worthy.”

With those simple words he reached out and grasped the sides of Cardone's head and, with one swift movement, tore it from his neck with a sickening, wet crack. Blood sprayed up from the severed arteries in an arc against the dark gray concrete of the wall behind Cardone's body. The headless corpse remained kneeling for several long moments, frozen in death, his hands still outstretched towards the god before him as if awaiting salvation, before crumpling at the god's feet. Even I was stunned. Screams erupted throughout the chamber. The Vicinus held up the severed head, allowing the blood contained inside to pour down into his open mouth, savoring the lush, sensual taste of hot, human life force on his new lips and tongue. I could feel every second of the psychotic pleasure he took in his first kill with my hands, the jubilation of victory coursing through him in one brilliant red wave after another. His obsession with revenge was all-consuming.

As the last drops of blood dripped down his chin, he tossed the head aside and reached up to his face with both hands, his fingers curiously exploring the sensation of the blood congealing as it cooled in rivulets on his skin. No matter how removed his actual thoughts were from my reach, his lust for the physical realm of Earth was tangible to me, piercing my soul with poison-tipped barbs. As repulsed as I longed to be by the guttural craving, there was a dark part of me that understood it on a primal level. It was the aspect of my bestial nature that I, even in my most depraved moments of bloodlust, denied; the mindless, vicious reptilian savage that knew only the kill-or-be-killed mentality of survival. I felt my resistance begin to wane as the repulsive attraction to the Vicinus's decadent reveling in the slaughter lured me towards the center of his being like a moth drawn towards a deadly flame. I forced myself to look away, digging deep

within my soul to find the power to fight back against the swelling tide that threatened to drag me out and drown me in the vast depths of its bottomless black ocean. The core of the power that continued to flow through me from the Chronous remained, a beacon of white light towards which I swam.

Outside me, the Vicinus turned away from the remains of his slain invoker and surveyed the remaining souls within the room. Those who had not scurried away cowered in the corners or even in the same subservient kneeling positions they had fallen to, gripped in the unshakable numbness of incomprehension. They had allowed themselves to trust that the Vicinus would embrace them and reward them for their obedience. They believed their extraordinarily detailed manipulation of the universe, designed solely for his rebirth, would move him to bless and honor them as worthy disciples.

The Vicinus approached the kneeling robed woman nearest to him and held out his hand to her. Her thoughts rushed through my body, past the Vicinus's callous being and down to my core like a colony of bats screeching from their cave. She could not resist him, though her terror of him as he stood over her, staring down on her with a deranged expression of false gentleness and glee, caused a darkness to form on the edge of her sight. Her hand trembled so terribly that it shook her entire frame. She placed it in his open palm and allowed him to draw her to her feet like a puppet on a string. He pulled her close against him, his new physical body becoming aroused at the sensation of her mortal warmth, the sensuous curves beneath her robe awakening the memories of his first tryst with a human woman so many centuries before.

Wrapping one arm around her waist he bent close to her, moving his face about her, breathing in the perfume of her skin and hair. "How I have missed this so!" he exhaled.

“Humans are such decadent creatures. Your scent, your taste.”

He ran his tongue up her neck. “You have no idea how lovely you truly are or how much I will enjoy this.” Raising his head back he plunged his fangs, my fangs, deep into her neck.

Blood surged thick and sweet as molasses over our tongue, pouring down our throat faster and faster with each pulse of her heart. Soundlessly, from the place where I was trapped on the edge of sanity, suspended over the lip of reality, I gasped with a pleasure intensified by the shared duality of our co-existence. I could hear the sound of her spine cracking as he gripped her with all his strength, her ribs splintering one by one with a sickening pop until every last drop had been drained from her body. Ripping our fangs from her artery, the Vicinus released her, letting her fall to the cold black marble like a gutted rag doll.

I twitched, caught in the thrall of the last threads of her life as they blew through me, howling with confusion and desolation as they spiraled away into the void of nothingness the Vicinus had threatened my own soul with. I realized sorrowfully that the souls he consumed would not be set free to find their ways to their heavens and hells, but would be obliterated, demolished beyond recognition and scattered to the far ends of the cosmos to reintegrate back into the fabric of the universe, their stories forever lost, their light permanently snuffed out of existence.

Thrashing about in the invisible web, I tried frantically to wrest myself free of the gossamer tethers that sliced through my skin like fiberglass with each desperate movement. Fueled by rage and the gluttony of new blood that coursed through the veins of my physical self, I broke through the seduction of the Vicinus’s killing heart to claw my way back to reason.

Anchoring myself to the steady stream of the Chronous feed, I drew hard on it as if it were the deepest, most revitalizing of human veins, feeling it explode into the very atomic structure of my DNA like microscopic suns forming within me. Distantly, the Vicinus began to take notice even as he moved on to yet another of the cowering, frozen mortals at his disposal. But, drunk on the blood that coursed through him, and empowered by his lust for revenge, he dismissed my struggles, laughing as a wicked child might at a captured lightning bug beating itself against the lid of its mason jar. I knew then he would not eliminate me. He would continue to keep me for as long as he could, for mere entertainment if nothing else, a prized pet, a clever oddity. I took comfort in this, realizing I might have the slightest chance to win back my body.

A scream pierced through the air behind us, exploding in a deep warrior cry that echoed off the slick metal and stone with a deafening defiance. Pain exploded through our back as something sharp and cold was driven through our body, between our shoulder blades, puncturing our right lung before ripping through our chest in a spray of blood and tissue. The Vicinus stopped cold in his tracks gripped in the physical pain he had not experienced in his previous time on Earth. Blood welled up our throat, spilling over our lips and down our chin as the lifeforce we had just consumed bubbled up from the wound. I wanted to laugh, to cackle insanely at the confusion that overwhelmed the god as he marveled at the weakness of the body he had chosen to inhabit, but pain gripped me despite the repression of my soul in the body. My physical faults had at once become my greatest strength in my eyes, but they were still weaknesses.

The Vicinus turned away from the mortal he had been intent on to face his attacker. Malakai stood a few feet away,

having scampered back after his first assault. Feet planted firmly apart, he clutched a high-powered machine gun. His wild arctic blue eyes blazing with startling rage and fear. The Vicinus smiled, welcoming the new challenge, and glanced down at the gruesome hole in the center of our chest made by the gun's long metal bayonet. Slowly, he returned his gaze to meet Malakai's. Tensing the muscles of our body, I began to feel the damaged organs within begin to mend, cells dancing and vibrating at such an intense level that the pain instantly diminished, replaced by a searing heat that verged on icy numbness. Within seconds the wound had closed, the flesh smoothing over until it was flawless once again.

Malakai's face paled, but he did not move. Instead, his finger clamped down on the trigger unleashing a rain of bullets in the Vicinus's direction. The god would not be taken off guard a second time and simply sidestepped the onslaught with a movement so quick even a keen Immortal eye would not have seen it. My concern for Malakai's survival had been extinguished the moment I saw Khanna's injuries, but even I was unprepared for what came next.

The heavy hollow sound of the gun clattering against the stone seemed to precede even the Vicinus's next movement and was followed by a sharp, panicked gasp. Inside I reeled, dizzy from the burst of power catapulting my body forward as if it were nothing more substantial than mist. As reality settled slightly, I watched in horror as Malakai dangled in the god's grip, our hand wrapped about his throat, lifting him off the ground. Malakai flailed helplessly, clawing at the fingers crushing his windpipe. He tried to gasp, his legs kicking sporadically as he attempted to strike the god before him.

"You doubted him. You hated him even. Yet, you are enraged by his passing," the Vicinus remarked curiously.

Malakai could not shield his mind from the Vicinus. The god carefully combed through his immediate thoughts and older memories, one by one, even as Malakai's face began to turn blue from asphyxiation.

"You are one that I could have used, at least for a time. It is a pity that you have proved untrustworthy," the Vicinus said quietly.

"Tynan, no!" Malakai managed to squeak a few words. "Tynan, fight this!" Malakai now realized the fault in his brainwashed allegiance, but it was simply too late.

Shocked, I halted my struggle to claw my way back to the surface and listened. However, before I could react, the right hand of our body shot forward, fingers straight as a board, ripping through Malakai's uniform jacket to puncture the flesh just below his ribcage. Malakai began to shake in the Vicinus's hold, his legs twitching, his face contorted with pain, his hands gripping the wrist before him in shock. Blood seeped up through Malakai's throat, bubbling over his lips in a strangled gurgle. The Vicinus turned our hand upwards within the wound, digging deeper and pressing past Malakai's stomach and lungs until he grasped a hold of his heart.

Inside I screamed, suddenly realizing that there had been a small part of me that had, for some unexplainable reason, hoped that the brainwashing done to Malakai could be reversible and that if he could not be saved from the Tyst, at least an inkling of his former self could be salvaged. As our fingers wrapped about Malakai's still-beating heart, the warmth of the flexing muscle and pumping veins against the iciness of our flesh, rage enveloped me, burning away the last of the cocoon that had held me captive and mute. Distantly, the Vicinus took notice of my newfound freedom with irritation, but made no move to stop me. Slowly, he

tightened his fingers around Malakai's heart, squeezing it with agonizing precision until it burst in his steel grip like an overripe mango. Malakai's body twitched in the last throes of death as the Vicinus withdrew our hand, holding it up before our eyes to marvel at the thick glistening glove of gore.

Do you see this Tynan? the Vicinus purred evilly. *This is only the beginning. I will crush every last human upon this planet. I will reclaim my name and my place in the cosmos and I will keep you here, within me, so that you can witness it all as your punishment for denying me.*

I turned my psychic face away from him. Closing my eyes, I concentrated on empowering my abilities, which I found I had not lost entirely with the partial separation from my physical self. It was then that I realized how permanent the Blood was. A vampire was not merely the mythic predatory creature I had become, but an all-encompassing identity that went far beyond the acts of violence I inflicted or aspect of my Immortality. In those fleeting moments of clarity I embraced my nature in a way I had previously thought impossible. Behind me, in the vast wasteland of the void, the Vicinus's threat to my soul continued to swirl in on itself, all light and matter disintegrating the moment it touched its edge like a black hole. Its power was omnipresent, ancient as the concept of existence itself. Realizing that the feed of the Chronous system, which was based solely in the physical plane, would not be nearly enough power for me to harness, I turned back to the void, extending my mind carefully towards it in search of something far more potent to draw upon.

The Vicinus had admitted a weakness to me in his confession that he intended to keep me his prisoner until his war had been waged in its entirety. He would not allow me

to slip over the edge of oblivion when his quest for revenge had only just begun, when he had barely tasted from the succulent murderous fruit he had been denied for so long. The desire for a progeny still resided in him, a protégé to pass his knowledge to, his wisdom and his utter contempt for humanity. Deep within his being he continued to want the creation of a new world for me to exist in, to begin anew and fulfill the true destiny of the Immortal race to become the keepers and rulers of a planet.

From the center of the void flickered a white light, so faint that I thought at first glance that my sight was playing tricks on me. I focused on the spot where I had seen the ghostly illumination. Again, the flash of white beamed and began to take shape, solidifying in a long snaking tendril that began to work its way out of the monstrous gaping center of the void, slithering out over its horizon towards me. At first I wondered if the Vicinus had changed his mind and made the decision to eliminate me entirely, but I felt no ill will or malice from the vine of light that came towards me.

Instead, it did not seem to notice me at all, the sole focus of its intentions directed past me at the Vicinus himself. Where the Vicinus's energy was chaotic and dark, the purest form of infinite random intelligence and the deepest of greedy malice, this energy was level, calm and far more powerful than even the vampiric god himself. It vibrated with a melody of synergy and fluidity that spoke of the elegant symphony of creation, its beginnings so ancient as to be irrelevant for they manifested in a time before time existed and before there was enough fabric of the universe upon which to ponder and formulate questions. My astral self shuddered in awe, gripped by a pure untainted love for the simple regal wavelength of harmony that slithered up and past me, acknowledging my existence, but wholly

unconcerned as it saw me as merely another molecule in the ocean it had dreamed so many eons before.

This is God.

The thought blew through me like a blizzard blanketing every preconceived notion of life and death I had ever embraced. So consumed with my newfound reverence, staring at the tendril of fluxing, ebbing light that held the truth to every question ever pondered by humanity or Immortality. I was only distantly aware of the Vicinus's surging panic. Slowly, I tore my attention away from the light, turning back towards the surface of my corporeal self still held hostage by the Vicinus. Over the delicate hum of the new energy, an enraged, terrified howl of defiance ripped through the space between him and me.

I will not let you take me back! he screamed. *You do not control me!*

A battle had begun inside my body as the new force sought to dominate the Vicinus, recapturing him in order to return him to the prison the gods had built for him. Never once did the new energy morph into a reflection of a physical entity, but it filled my body with its essence until I thought my skin and bone would shatter like a porcelain vase with the pressure. I closed my eyes, feeling incredibly small and vulnerable in the presence of such a profound omniscient, omnipresent cosmic truth. I began to pray more fervently than I had ever prayed before, though to exactly what I was not even sure anymore. Filled with a profound, renewed desire to embrace the universe and return to the philosopher and theologian at my core, I desperately wanted to live. I wanted to return to my son, to raise him and watch him grow and marvel at the extent of the power of creation in his each new step or word. In a way that transcended explanations in mere spoken language, I knew I had found what I had been

looking for, that kernel of truth that would allow me to return to my quest of Preternaturalism. If only my soul could cry for I wanted to prostrate myself beneath the battle that had begun and weep for salvation and beg for my own survival. However, the gods were unconcerned with my small vampire soul as they thrashed like Titans amongst the clouds.

In a soundless, lightless explosion more deafening than any atomic bomb, the massive snake of white light snapped backwards, slithering with an electric slicing sound like steel being sharpened continually upon a whetstone. The light was accompanied by a terrified, defiant reptilian shriek. As it passed by my soul, drawing with it the essence of the Vicinus now in his demonic, dragon form, wrapped in an unbreakable coil at its end like an epic ethereal octopus, I felt myself pulled in the opposite direction towards my physical self. I gasped, a piercing tug hooking me like a fishing lure through my center, yanking me from the spot where my spirit cowered on the edge of oblivion and hurling me up towards the surface of existence. With a traumatic force I felt my spirit collide with my body in its entirety, filling out through my limbs as if I were melting back into my flesh. In the distance, deep within me I could hear the dying last cries of the Vicinus as the supreme force of the universe reclaimed him for another eon of imprisonment.

I wondered if I would ever lay eyes on him again.

CHAPTER 17

Without the strength of the Vicinus I crumpled to the cold marble floor. The room spun about me, my head aching as if beaten severely with a steel rod, until I felt my stomach begin to lurch up into my throat as wave after wave of nausea washed over me. Even though my body had already consumed all of the blood the Vicinus had drunk, the instinctive desire to purge myself was overwhelming. My nails dug into the stone, my back arching as my body tried desperately to empty itself of the poisonous residue left behind by the Vicinus's presence. Finally I collapsed, still as death in my complete exhaustion. Lying beside Malakai's corpse amidst the sticky, cooling pool of his blood, I pushed myself over onto my back. I was dazed and weak, fully expecting to be attacked again by one of the Tyst soldiers or perhaps even a robed priest free of the thrall of fear. No attack came.

The room was eerily still and brimmed with a silence so crisp and unadulterated that it rang deep within my ears, punctured only by the sound of my shallow breath and faint heartbeat. I stared up at the ceiling marveling at the fact that

I was alive and whole, that I had survived by some divine miracle to stand witness to a timeless struggle between the supreme reigning laws of Chaos and Order. Though my physical body shuddered in pain with each breath, a sweet, simplistic peace enveloped me like a healing salve lending to me the comfort of knowing I would never doubt the purpose and place of my race in the universe again. We were a bridge between humanity and the divine, a necessary link to the cosmos, the Darkness to the Light. I vowed to myself that I would not forget.

The link I had shared with the Chronous feed had been severed in those last moments when I had been thrown back into my body. I missed the narcotic rush of power now, feeling all too human and feeble, despite the quantities of new blood that coursed through me. The Chronous was silent. I could not even feel it in the way I had before the ritual, like a fractured second personality lingering on the periphery of my mind, awaiting the moments when I called on it. I whispered to it silently, searching for the machine's intellect, but was answered with only silence. I wondered if the expulsion of the Vicinus had somehow electrocuted the mainframe, shutting it down as the backlash of power became too much for even the Chronous to regulate. Drawing a deep breath, I gradually crawled to my knees and sat back on my heels to survey the carnage around me.

My mind felt numb, my heart beating hard and fast in my throat as my eyes drifted over the cooling corpses of soldiers and priests about me. Broken and sprawling, some of the humans lay near the door to the room, which stood open to the hall outside, slaughtered in their final futile attempts to flee. Other soldiers slumped in the corners where they had cowered, paralyzed with fear, while the remaining priests that had not fled the room, lay crumpled in the very spots

where they had knelt before the Vicinus, awaiting their fates. Blood streamed thick and red from the eyes, noses, ears and mouths of the fallen as if their insides had liquefied under a tremendous pressure. A few feet away from me, Cardone's severed head watched me with open eyes, his features frozen in a permanent final expression of terrified awe. I could not bear to look on it for too long as the memory of my hands upon the sides of his head as the Vicinus used me to deliver his final verdict upon Cardone was simply too excruciating. Though I was completely aware of the fact that it had not been I who had murdered him or any of the other victims in such a barbaric way, I would need time to come to terms with the residual sensations burned permanently into my flesh.

My gaze traveled to the ritual ring and over the humans lining its perimeter, their robes flowing out around them in pools of red nearly matching that of the blood that spread out beneath them. Panic seized me as my eyes finally touched upon the dais.

“Moria!” I breathed.

Fueled by a sudden surge of terror, I scrambled to my feet, sliding awkwardly as I found my footing in my body once again on the wet marble floor. Dashing across the ring I collapsed at her side, scooping her into my shaking arms as I fell. Smoothing the black hair from her face, I could see only slight trickles of blood had escaped her nose and ears, unlike the thick streams from the other humans. Perhaps, I prayed silently, her partial Immortal Blood had strengthened her from the attack? Softly, she moaned as she attempted to open her eyes. Without a second thought, I lifted my wrist to my mouth and using my fangs, sliced a deep gouge across it to open the veins. I knew I would not turn her as I had done Jasmine, but I had to attempt to save her. Jasmine's body had been too broken to be saved by a simple transfusion such as

the one I gave Moria now, but I hoped that, given Moria's heritage, it would be enough to revive her, at least until I could somehow return to Phelan's estate and the Phuree healers.

With a gasp, she clamped down on the wound, pulling my wrist hard against her lips with her hands as she drew deep upon the stream pouring from me. It was only a matter of moments, however, before the wound closed again leaving her whimpering for more. However, I dared not supply her with a second draught. The effects of the Blood were immediate, her eyes brightening, her breathing steadying, her pulse returning to a semblance of normalcy. Reaching up, I rubbed away the streaks of blood along the sides of her face near her eyes and nose revealing the delicate flawless complexion beneath.

"What...what happened?" she whispered staring up at me in confusion.

I shook my head slowly, trying to find words to tell her of all that had transpired since she lost consciousness. It was simply too much to convey.

I replied calmly, "It's over. It's all over."

Whether the war outside still raged was uncertain, but at least I could rest assured that this particular battle had come to a final conclusion. "Let us leave this place...forever," I said, pulling her tightly against me as I stood.

Placing my hand on the back of her head, I bowed my face over hers, covering her line of vision with the curtain of my hair. "Keep your eyes closed. You do not need to see what lies in this room."

Moria did as instructed, burying her face in the folds of my robe around my neck. Cradling her like a child, I fled from the atrocity of the ritual room. To my horror I discovered that the inner rings of the fortress were lined

with the same gruesome carnage as the chamber in which it had originated, the slaughtered corpses of Tyst soldiers and other royal attendants sprawled in the halls in congealing pools of blood. I sped past them in a flurry, unwilling to contemplate their deaths for too long lest I begin to lose a grip on the vestment of sanity I had managed to retain. The Chronous system appeared to be malfunctioning throughout the fortress, forcing me to pry open the doors to the outer corridors with my bare hands.

Beyond the inner rings, the death toll dropped, replaced by a deafening sea of chaos as those remaining alive ran through the wings they had been confined to in utter confusion of what had transpired. Severed from the technology they had been born into, the very synthetic lifeforce that supported and nurtured, not only the fortress, but also the Empire as a whole, the human denizens scattered now like terrified field mice trapped within the maze of their own construction. Unable to open even the simplest of doors they flung themselves into a hysterical frenzy as they were overcome by their desperation to find a way to freedom. A few who had their wits enough about them took notice of the path I was opening and followed me, though my preternatural speed left them far behind as I ventured forth with my own quest to break out of the fortress. The maddening wails of the humans I moved past haunted me long after I left them, winding through the corridors like the tormented cries of the damned welling up from Hell.

I pitied them, all of them, but their plight was their own to solve now.

When we broke free of the last set of doors, bursting forth into the cold crisp night air, blood tears began to slip down my cheeks. I wanted to fall to my knees and kiss the earth below me, to throw up my hands to the heavens and

thank the entity that had spared my life in exchange for the recapture of the Vicinus. However, the desire to be far away from the demented depression of the fortress drove me up into the dense black and green shadows of the forest. Only when the sound of owls calling softly through the branches of the rustling pines replaced the sorrowful song of the helpless trapped humans, did I slow my pace, finding comfort in the embrace of the gnarled roots of an ancient tree's base, to find my center. Sinking down into the bed of decaying pine needles, the cold winter wind moaning through the branches high above and smelling of impending snow, I pulled Moria tight against me as if she were the last vestige of hope I had left to keep me from spiraling off into the forest.

As the adrenaline of our escape began to wane, we gradually began to uncurl from our hiding place, releasing one another from our fierce protection and emerging tentatively like wolf cubs from our lair. I sniffed the air about us, opening my senses to ferret out any unwanted stalkers from the shadows that might have followed us from the fortress, but we were alone. With the exception of the auras of hibernating wildlife and foraging nocturnal mammals scattered throughout the mountainside, we were finally free.

For a long silent moment, we stood at the forest's edge silently watching the fortress below as its behemoth weight lay seemingly more lifeless than even before. The ominous resonance the structure had once carried within its metal and concrete shell had dissipated, the marred black spirit that had mutated its purpose with its Machiavellian manifestos of domination and greed slithered out from the cracks and back into the shadows. Cardone was dead and along with him, his desire for immortality. The Vicinus's hold over the world was no more for it was only Cardone's dreams that had drawn him, like a cobra to a snake charmer's flute, to the

surface of this realm.

Only a couple of hours lay between us and dawn. With one last glance at the remnants of Cardone's legacy, I pulled Moria against me and took to the skies.

CHAPTER 18

Keeping as low as possible, so that Moria would not freeze in the icy winter wind, we flew over the dark nightscape of the Northern Territories on our journey southwest to Phelan's estate in Texas. The surges of the battles I had witnessed igniting throughout the land previous to my imprisonment seemed to have nearly vanished. The amagins were dark, cold shadows of their former selves without the Chronous to power them. The remaining inhabitants cowered in fear, scurrying from one dank hiding place to another, partly in fear of the Tyst armies' wrath, but more because of the fear of the unknown world without the protective control of their coveted technology.

Beyond the amagin city limits, the less inhabited areas seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. The cleansing purity of snow blanketed the rolling hillsides and tiny farms, transforming them into a picturesque reflection of a time before the word "technology" even touched the tongues of mankind. It was a painting that inspired a calm sense of hope within me, one that I longed to sit before for years and lose myself within its subtle layers. I knew it was only a

façade. Though Cardone had fallen, the grid would no doubt be reinstalled by its creators as soon as possible. Without it, anarchy would ensue as the current structure of society buckled. However, the silent black tapestry was a façade I could embrace and believe in and sometimes that is all we need.

As we turned south into Texas, the snow gave way to rolling plains of leafless winter trees and frostbitten grass. Dormant and waiting, the world held its breath, burrowing deep into the hard-packed clay and limestone and curling beneath its protective armor to dream of spring. The amagins here were just as black and fearful as those further northeast, having only just begun to recover from the raids after the Queen's abduction to find themselves plunged back into the Dark Ages. The muted auras of the humans that struggled for survival amidst the shattered remains of their desolate lives spiraled up from the rubble with a sorrowful moan of exhaustion and bitterness. Few clung to hope any longer, the last threads of their tenacity to continue their fight to build a semblance of peace within the Tyst Empire's architecture frayed and unraveling.

In my heart, I knew that the dictator's demise was a blessing, that it would mean the beginnings of a new world without the constant threat of annihilation, but I also understood the path to that destiny would be a long and treacherous one. If the Vicinus had taught me anything at all, it was that chaos often breeds more chaos. I could only pray that, from the ashes of that chaos, would rise the reign of peace the world so desperately needed. I knew in my heart I was committed to that road even more than I had ever been before.

I could sense Phelan's estate growing near, the subtle vibration of the house beneath the hundreds of concealing

magical wards as sweet as the ghost of a long low violin note. My heart sang with joy that the house still stood, filling me with a hope that perhaps my kin had survived. Navigating towards the exact location the mansion came into my line of sight, the untarnished, solid beacon of Immortal strength and defiance it had been for so many centuries. It appeared that the combined efforts of Phelan, Nahalo and the Phuree had successfully protected the structure from the prying eyes of the outside world, allowing the destructive path of the Tyst siege to flow past it like water around a river stone. Whatever Khanna may have confessed to Malakai had apparently been useless to the regime.

As my feet touched the frost-covered lawn beside the front walkway, the front doors burst open, golden warmth and light pouring out of the massive entrance like the kiss of the sun. In a matter of seconds Moria and I were surrounded by dozens of humans and vampires, all taking their turns in a dizzying dream of joyous relief as they embraced us over and over again. As the Phuree midwives pulled Moria away and ushered her into the house to tend to her wounds, I threw back my head and laughed, overcome with a flood of emotion I had not experienced in ages, allowing myself to be swept away in a simple, pure happiness. The terrors of the last few hours seemed as distant as a fading nightmare, at least for the moment. I was alive and, more importantly, those I loved were as well. Tomorrow I would begin the long process of dissecting my last battle, but tonight all I wanted, all I needed, was right before me.

“Thank God you’re home!” Lillian cried into my hair as she wrapped her arms about me. “We thought we had lost you forever!”

“Yes, I’m home. I’m home,” I said, repeating the last words over and over again as if I could barely believe it

myself. I buried my face in Lillian's mane of golden hair and breathed in the warmth and love radiating from her entire being.

A high-pitched cry of glee startled us and another set of slender feminine arms were flung about my waist, wedged between Lillian and me. I gasped slightly as the arms squeezed my body with a young, Immortal strength. Pulling away from Lillian, I felt blood tears begin to well in the corners of my eyes at the sight of Jasmine's autumn hair cascading around me, her face pressed into my chest. Lillian stepped away, a sweet, understanding smile spreading across her lips at the sight of Jasmine's undying love for me. I glanced up at Lillian and began to speak, but her expression told me all would be conveyed to me in due time. It was all Jasmine could do to simply sob into the folds of my robe, so overcome with emotion that all words were lost.

"Oh, my dear, sweet Jasmine," I whispered into her hair, lost in the joy that, not only had she survived, but she appeared to have been accepted into the folds of our Dark family. "I am so sorry I left you. I promise I will never leave you again."

"I thought you would never come back. I was so scared," Jasmine cried softly. "It has been so terrifying learning how to live like this without you to help me."

I had never seen her in such an uncontrolled state before. She had always been my pillar of strength, the beacon to guide me to safety out of the dangerous shadows of my own mind. Now it was my turn to be there for her and I pledged to do that very thing.

"I know, my love, I was scared too," I cooed as I embraced her, stroking her hair until her sobs subsided. "I am here now."

"Yes, you are." Phelan's voice reached me over the din

of the crowd.

I looked up over Jasmine's shoulder to see my Maker calmly watching me from a few feet away. The reality that Phelan had allowed Jasmine to live sank into me; despite my insurrection and my subsequent departure, Phelan had not slain her or imprisoned her as I had dreaded he might. She was alive and free within the house, which was more than I had hoped for, or would dare to ask of my Maker. However, at Phelan's approach, Jasmine moved around me, placing my body between her and the Elder vampire, signifying that, while he had allowed her survival, he had not been entirely kind to her.

Phelan walked towards me, stopping an arm's length away. He was dressed in coarse brown pants and a white shirt that had seen far better days, the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. His hair, usually so neatly and elegantly plaited, escaped the long braid down his back in fine red wisps framing his face. An overall sense of weariness surrounded his body, the fierce light of his emerald eyes dulled slightly with the strife of the weeks of war since my departure.

"I thought for a moment that I had lost yet another Son." He shook his head, trying desperately to control the emotions he was so unused to displaying to the world, trapped behind his austere, commanding outwards presence. "I don't know what I would have done if..." His voice trailed off as he closed the space between us, embracing me with a genuine affection I had not experienced from him since those first early days of my Dark Life.

Tentatively at first and then with force, I returned the embrace. For a moment it felt as if all had been forgiven, every betrayal, every harsh word, every wound, both physical and emotional, burnt to ash and scattered to the heavens. In the wake of all I had been through, all of the

death and brutality I had witnessed and the profound truth I had been blessed with, all the little wars between my Maker and I seemed incredibly trivial. He was my Family, he was my Kin. Though we would never truly see eye to eye on all things, I respected his authority and cherished the bond between us. I wanted to believe that we could start anew and rebuild the strength of the bond that had made us such a formidable force in previous centuries. If I continued on the path to reconstruct Preternaturalism, I would need his loyalty and his guidance.

I sensed another Immortal watching Phelan and me closely. Lifting my head from my Maker's shoulder, I spied Nahalo standing like a statue a few feet away on the walkway. The crowd of Phuree humans and Immortals flowed around him as the initial surge dissipated, trickling back into the house as the news of my arrival lost its initial brilliant shock. My eyes made contact with his; he broke his stance and approached us, his feet making barely a whisper on the stones below him. Phelan moved to my side, his arms dropping away from my shoulders. Nahalo reached up and placed his hands on my arms as he held my gaze, a proud smile tugging at the edges of his mouth.

"I knew my visions would be correct. The gods were right about you." He nodded as he spoke. "You did it! It is over."

My eyes dropped away from his gaze. In truth I had not been the one to win this battle. I had merely been an imprisoned witness to powers far beyond my expectation or control. If a force more eminent than the Vicinus had not arrived in time, there was no telling how long I might have struggled to free myself as the vampiric god grew stronger and stronger with each life he consumed.

"No, I did not," I said quietly. I raised my gaze back to

meet Nahalo's. "But I survived to tell the tale. That is enough and far more than I can ever have asked for."

Nahalo nodded silently, his inquisitive contemplation boring through to the core of my soul. "There are many who await that story," he replied. Placing a fatherly arm about my shoulders, he gestured towards the open doors.

I drew a deep breath as I stared at the deep honey of candle light pouring from within the house, so surreal in its inherent warmth. Beyond those doors lay a new chapter, a new beginning and an end to the pain and ambiguity of my first few faltering steps in this century.

"Nodin...?" I thought aloud with a tremor of terror, my eyes cutting towards Phelan pleading for a glimmer of hope. Phelan smiled. "Safe and sound and asleep upstairs. Edvin followed your directions and brought him straight here. You need not worry any longer. You know I don't say this often, but it was a good thing you both disobeyed my orders."

"Oh, thank the gods!" I exhaled heavily, placing my head in my hands to rub my face, running my fingers through my hair as relief washed over me.

Phelan and Nahalo stood to either side of me for a long silent moment as I collected myself once again.

"I never thought I would say this, but it is good to be home," I whispered, my gaze roaming over the towering stone façade of the old estate before me.

With dawn quickly approaching, the sky bleeding from a deep purple hue to a fiery rose, we left the sprawling frozen lawns and entered the warmth of the mansion to find safety from the sun's incinerating rays. As the doors closed behind me, the gentle metallic whir of the mechanized shutters descending from the molding over the windows throughout the building hummed gently to me a protective lullaby. There was so much to atone for, so many mistakes to right,

so many harrowing tales to tell to the expectant faces around me. However, those tales would be told on another evening. I was alive and returned to my family, in blood, and the Blood. While the future still lay dormant and riddled with the darkest of enigmas for me to unravel, I knew that I would remain strong in the face of whatever battles were brought to my doorstep. I had a child to nurture, a fledgling to foster, two strong, beautiful women whom I had sworn to love and protect and two peoples who would forever have my undying loyalty.

Though I did not know what it held, the future was ripe with promise. I would meet it with respect and honor and determination.

FINAL THOUGHTS

By E.R. Vernor “*Corvis Nocturnum*”

What inspires us to create works of art, poetry or literature, I ask myself? What makes for good fiction when the concept of the characters is so easily perceived of as being one-dimensional? I reflected as I began reading this book. In my decade-long research for my non-fiction work *Vampire Evolution: From Myth to Modern Day*, I studied the vampire mythos, from ancient civilizations to our modern height of obsession and thought I had encountered every unique version of this archetype. I was wrong. In the works of Gabrielle Faust, she tackles one of the most difficult things an author can do. She takes on the vampire mythos we all love and explores it in what I felt before this an impossible new way. She breathes new life into the genre by adding in elements that make me feel as if I were ten years old again, enthralled and pouring over the pages of a classic novel. The world that I find myself exploring here in these pages is no less stimulating than when I first read *Lord of the Rings* or later in life when I picked up Ann Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*. It was by reading voraciously as a child I fell in love with books of all types and inspired me to become a writer and publisher.

Over the years someone in my profession becomes so involved in the making of a book and the busy life that comes with the business of it we tend to lose that small bit of ourselves that loved books in the first place. I wish to thank the author for reminding me again of the memories of my

youth that made it an amazing journey for me to start reading and not being able to put the book down, as each page would draw me in still deeper to find out what was going to occur next. When I poured over those pages, I could see what the person in the book saw, feel the emotions they did. It is the mark of a great writer to draw us in and paint a picture of a world so vivid we lose ourselves in the lives of fictional beings that for at least a short time make us forget they are real. That is the magic of being an author. The ones who are blessed with the gift of weaving a story so well-crafted we can believe we are there in it is rare, but I think the journey that Tynan has endured reminds us that we can be as brave and determined to see a clear path out of the dangers life throws at us even if it is all make believe.

The very best fiction is based on classic archetypes, the personalities of people we know, and the ability to make what is unreal seems natural. I think the vampires and humans alike in this book accomplish that and then some. Like Tynan, I eagerly await the next stages of this saga to see what the creator has in store for him. I am certain we shall not be disappointed in what lies before us.

* * *

Corvis Nocturnum is an author, publisher and lecturer who has written over a dozen books on popular culture. The content ranges from vampires and zombies to the Devil and the occult. He has also been a consultant for A&E Channel's Paranormal States. He has appeared as a guest speaker at Dragon Con, Scarefest, Parafest and interviewed on the BET Channel's The Lexi Show episode "The Church of Satan". He was also interviewed in an October 2009 Penthouse Magazine article on sex and Satanism. He is also an artist who lectures, at conventions and universities, on other subjects such as secret societies, Goth culture and does his best

to debunk the many myths and stereotypes prevalent about dark subcultures. He is a staff writer for American Gothique e-zine, the founder of Dark Moon Press publishing, and owner of Dark Moon Productions. Teaming up with CORE Films, Def Tone Pictures he joins Sunset Studios as the executive producer of Eerie America: Travel Guide of the Macabre, based off the book from Schiffer Publishing.

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:

www.gabriellefaust.com

www.twitter.com/Gabrielle_Faust

www.facebook.com/Gabrielle.Faust

www.facebook.com/EternalVigilanceVampires



Photo by Murphy Hunter

Eternal Vigilance: Bound in Blood

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ANTHOLOGIES (Editor & Contributor)

High Stakes: A Vampire Anthology



