

Hidden Carmina

Second Breath Chronicles



By Adri Sinclair

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Adri Sinclair

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**Edited by Rosie Manson
Illustrated Cover by Corrupted Zone**

Thank you to all the FB Beta readers, special mention to:

**Craig hubby Sinclair
Magda Cornelius
Ingvild Bergland
Danine Fourie
Tina Fourie**

Dinners were burnt, families were growled at as we all fought to get this pretty little lady out there to the masses. Thank you!

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A Stranger in the night.

I gaze up and notice the colors lashing out of an angry paintbrush over the horizon. The knot in my stomach is a vivid notification, reminding me of being as irritated as the enflamed and ginger tints marking the sky. From where I'm sitting, the towering volcano in the distance looks lonely yet proud. I marvel at the magnitude of nature rendering the likes of me insignificant. I'm just a small biological mass cowering at the foot of a fire goddess; nothing special. The prickly patches of grass and barbed brushes under my naked legs recommend moving. I inspect the scrapes and welts around my hands and knees with renewed vigor.

By the time I distinguish the human shape from the other obscure and creeping shadows, it was too late. A sense of annoyed inconvenience forces my head to look up at the person blocking my view. What I thought I'd see was a family member. What I see is two deep, gilded eyes set in the moon-pale skin topped with dark hair rivalling black lava. I feel every last nerve recoil into tiny prickly hairs, standing straight up. The view of the man in front of me is a complete opposite rendition to fire goddess I just venerated. He is an enormous portrait hauntingly hanging in mid-air. My mouth dries rapidly but the trio who live in my mind become rather loud and verbal:

“Run!” and **“Hit it!”** and **“Stay calm dearie, for your safety.”** As so many times before in my life, I ignore them altogether.

His piercing eyes leave mine and my nerves snaps back into a much more appropriate accommodation under my skin. I wonder briefly why his attention is diverted from me. While narrowing his eyes, his stance become more cautious. As if he's reading my mind, he answers in a soothing, deep, velvety voice.

“We're not alone.”

“I'm not afraid.” I stutter in his general direction. I am. I'm petrified. At this exact minute, I am not sure if it is because of him, or something else lurking in the shadows.

“You're not-” He stops mid-sentence and pulls his fingers through his short, dark mane. His gold-plated eyes meet mine with overwhelming resentment all the while reaching out to me with a tranquil promise. I watch as his mouth opens marginally and I hear him inhale the air around us deeply. His lips push up on one side and I think I see confusion reflecting back at me.

“You're human?”

Something in the manner he said it worries me. What else would I be?

“Um.”

Spontaneously, my mind erupts into a song I have learned as a toddler. The gypsies who visit our valley used to sing it to me whenever I became more panicked than usual - which is often, as life would have it. I have cultivated bravery out of necessity – accepting the inevitable nature of being me. Right now I am nervous too, a lethal combination.

*“Then off to reap the corn and leave where I was born/
Cut a stout blackthorn to banish ghosts/
And goblin' brand new pair of brogues to rattle o'er the bogs/
And frighten all the dogs on the rocky
road to Dublin' ”*

I squeeze my eyes tight, and bellow the song louder and louder until it fills the corners of my awareness. I'm not sure what this will achieve but maybe when I open them, he will be gone. *"One, two, three four, five/Hunt the hare and turn her down the rocky road -And all the way to Dublin', whack-fol-la-de-da!"*

"Stop that!" he barks at me and I watch as the song evaporate. His hands are digging into my shoulders and he shakes the last notes clear from conscious existence. His hands are big... and cold. "You-?"

"Yes, and you will attract every predator for miles around!"

"P-Predator? What are they... looking for?" I stammer.

"I will give you **one** guess." he hisses and his eyes bare sharply into my humanity. More anxiety boils and bubbles up to the surface of my skin, and even if he didn't tell me not to sing, I don't think I could have continued anyway

"Get away!" and **"Why are you still here?!"** and **"Listen to him dearie, he has not hurt you...yet."** Again, I don't acknowledge the permanent campers in my head.

He stands up with an apprehensive expression on his face at the exact moment the howling starts in the distance. Howling is not a new sound to me at all, but it is much closer than usual. Instinctively I cast my eyes to the night sky, looking for the moon. I know I am too old to believe in the childhood stories of werewolves, but I am here with a person who apparently can read my thoughts and think I will be hunted.

"Come." he grunts at me then turns away.

"No." I tenaciously whisper to his back.

The moment I hear myself speak I regret the decision. My mother tells me constantly to weigh my options before surrendering to my stubborn streak. Evidently, I failed to heed said advice and recall it too late.

The big, tense man stops in his tracks not turning around to face me. Hand rubbing over the back of his neck followed by a little stretch gives me the distinct sense it is me causing the ache he may be feeling. I've seen my brother do the same thing, calling me a pain in the neck.

"Suit yourself." He shrugs his shoulders. "You may *actually* be left alone as you're too skinny to make a proper meal anyway."

"How rude." And hurtful, I add in my mind. I look up to verify again the cycle of the moon. Second quarter. Fantastic! Bad things always happen during a full moon. You can read any story and see it is true. You don't hear about a fair maiden turning into a meal during a waning moon!

"Fair maiden?" he snorts humorously.

I choose to ignore him and concentrate on getting back on my feet. The ground is uneven and I have been sitting in the same position for far too long. Needles and pins creeping up to my ankles and into my calves, further up my thighs numbing my legs. Before my brain can register what is happening with my body, I take a big step towards him and land flat-out in a sprawl at his feet. I feel the blush pushing into my face at approximately the same time as half the earth rips through the skin on my palms and the other half repeats the process on my knees. The gash from my knee towards my shin angrily spits blood back at the rocks in protest.

“Gods!” he growls at me furiously through clenched teeth and tight jaw, “Let’s give *them* blood too, it will help your case a lot!”

Before I can say another word he is standing by my side. A big hand grips below my palm, lifting me from the ground. Kicking out to find something solid to connect with, I find nothing. Gulping down mouths full of air the size of tennis balls which get stuck in my lungs while I try to control the anxiety blistering through the fiber of my being.

“Put me-”

“No.”

“I am fine-”

“And slow.” He answers while passing me from one hand to the other. My arm and shoulder aching under the tension of suspending my entire body from it.

“You are so rude!” I now shout at him, fuming.

“Go on.” the sarcasm drips into my mood resembling hot wax. “Bleed some more and let’s make more noise. Ought to get you the attention you seem to so desperately want,” he taunts me.

I swallow down any rebuttal I could have as the heated fury give way to a sickening feeling because of the speed we’re moving at. The realm is whizzing past me imitating a bicycle ride. The landscape around me looks like someone’s vindictively smeared all the colors in one direction on an oil painting; dark shadows sweeping up the olive and auburn colors. Either he is exceptionally tall, or supernaturally fast. My heart races along with his strides, scarcely keeping up and I search for anything to help me find my way back home.

“Both. I can take you home later.” he says and I snarl in response.

“Very-”

“-Rude. Yes you said that already. If you don’t have anything of value to contribute I implore you to sing your song again. It is half entertaining.”

I snap my mouth closed and resolve not to speak to him again. I want to go home.

“And where is home?” he asks in the velvet covered tone.

“Valley-” I start and then remember too late I wasn’t going to talk to him. The snicker slinking down from just above my head grating at my mood.

“I’ll get you back there.”

“**Mind reader hey?**” and “**Particularly strong**” and “**Now dearie, don’t sulk, it is so unbecoming and he is ever so handsome!**” It is easy to ignore the voices sneaking in their opinions. The thing about these voices is in the habit they have to unnerve me and appear at random. I hear what they say yet I’m always superbly careful not to acknowledge them. They seem to be more persistent on taking front stage if I do.

The grip against my wrist tightens and my body pulls into him a little closer, almost protective. I find it oddly unsettling to think he’d want to protect me, yet the sum of his attitude and mannerism suggests dangling me towards a playful puppy in a game of fetch would be a lot more appealing.

Safe Landing.

Blood is rushing back into my arm as I am re-connected with the earth without warning. I spill onto the ground with equal force to an unexpected mudslide. Soundless, I rub my wrist and arm in an effort to stimulate circulation back into it, tears stinging behind my eyes at the unbearable ache. It feels as if the bones were crushed and the sweltering bruises forming like bangles remind me of the times I accidentally singe my arm on the hot oven racks while cooking. Stubbornly, refusing to speak, I hold back the tears threatening to brim. I maneuver awkwardly into a position which would aid me in standing up without having to use my hands.

“Oh...” his head whips around into my direction. He pushes me back onto the soft, dry covers. “I’m sorry,” he whispers, his voice soothing again, rich and creamy. “I’ve hurt you. I’m sorry. Let me have a look. No, no please, don’t pull away.”

If you had told me a moment ago this brute of a man would be so gentle, so precise and comforting in the way he touches me, I’d have told you about the possibility of having lost a few brain cells to a beer bottle. His trembling cold hands smoothly cover my left wrist. He looks so sad and remorseful so I offer a weak smile.

“I’ve had worse, it doesn’t hurt so much.” Part of this is unquestionably true. I am the clumsiest of all our family. Just waking up is a stumble in itself. I terrify the other kids on sport days, though they are all excessively polite about it. The connection between my brain and body is malfunctioning or delayed. My mother often comments how the exact opposite is true about my brain to mouth functionality. I look at the hand-print-bangle and try not to think about how much it hurts.

The big, handsome human shape shakes his head in my direction and sighs. His movements mesmerize me.

“You’re a terrible liar.” Taking my hand for inspection, he concludes: “There’s no infection. I’ll clean and cover those too.” He points to my knees “It should heal without scars.”

It is my turn to shake my head at him.

“You are an atrocious liar too. The slash on my knee is going to leave a whopper, along with the various others I already have on display in the general area.” I am surprised to be able to finish my sentence and not have him interrupt me or cut me short. Getting up, he throws a warning look at me.

“Please don’t stand on my bed again. Your feet are rather dirty”

“Your-”

He rolls his eyes and moves away from me.

“Yes, my bed. I harbor no intention to be inappropriate with you at all.”

“Yes, not even throw me for the wolves.” I grumble under my breath. This seems to tickle him and I see his shoulders shaking while pouring warm water into a bowl before returning.

“Nope, nor dangle you for a game of fetch, no. Hold still please.”

His hands move fast, making me contemplate whether or not he is touching my skin at all. His movements are slight and calculated and under my watchful eye I don’t miss the bandage virtually wrapping itself around each knee, appearing almost eager to be there. I look down at him, his hair

so unruly and his skin so pale. I reach out to touch his arm with my hand, to slow him down. I don't get near it. Without shifting, he moves his arm out of my way and eventually gets up. Silently I look on while he burns the bloodied swabs and pours the water down the drain followed by bleach and hot water.

"I have to make my way home. It is... dinnertime with my family. Don't leave here please. You are safe but I cannot say the same if you should. There is food in the fridge, help yourself. I will escort you home afterwards."

My hand rubs over the cover and I nod. I stare at him as he makes his way towards the door thinking that there must be a fairytale somewhere to warn you about handsome giants with gentle touches. Before leaving, he turns with a dazzling smile.

"This brute's name is Liam."

Lonely regrets.

The tears break through and streak across my face in a race to my chin. I am tired and hurting and hungry! How long past dinnertime is it? Mother and the others are going to be furious at me. Nothing new for me, to be precise, but I do not try to purposefully annoy them. I am so incompetent next to them, which is what led to me running away today. I didn't want anyone to get hurt, least of all my brother. Realizing I'm falling down the stairs, it was too late to warn anyone. All the food was spoiled and preparations had to start over. He was right, I am a clumsy idiot. It's not like I don't know this. I did try. It is our mother's birthday after all and I ruined it.

I curl myself around the pillows on the cover and sob into them wretchedly, remembering Jarrod's words in pain and anger.

"Just because you're nothing special you can't keep spoiling everything."

Maybe they won't miss me. Things surely went better after I left and perhaps.... Perhaps I could just stay here and not get underfoot.

I close my eyes, drifting off into sleep.

**** Dreams that are nightmares that are dream inside nightmares****

"Don't let go, please, I will do better!" I am begging to an invisible hand painfully dangling me by my wrist.

"Don't let me fall, I beg you!"

The darkness around me is pressing against my chest comparable to a heavy weight. It threatens to crush my ribs.

The hand is relaxing around my wrist and I scream louder, more desperate. "Please! No! Don't let go!"

My feet kick out around me, I twist my body in several directions looking for something solid to support my body.

"Clumsy Idiot," I catch the snarling voice inside my mind. The darkness is pushing harder at every opportunity, my breathing labored.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry! I will do better! Please don't drop me!" I cry and beg louder.

*There's a smell of cake and custard filling my nostrils making me want to throw up.
"P-Please, don't let me fall. "
I force my eyes to see past the tears and darkness; the family is here.
Laughing at me, pointing at me.
The grip of the invisible person tightens again.
It hurts, it hurts so much; however it is also my saving grace right now.
"I don't want you," I hear it say in a soft velvety voice, and it lets go.
I scream as I plummet down into the darkness smelling of cake and custard.
I hold my breath avoiding the smell of my guilt, my shame.
"I'm SORRY!" I scream, "I'm SORRRRY!!"
I hear my own words echo back to me, nobody is listening, nobody cares.
The darkness is mocking me with silence and the air is being pushed out of my lungs.
I hear nothing anymore.
I see nothing anymore. I just feel the raw vacant hole where my heart is meant to be.
"NO!!!"*

It takes a few seconds to realize I am awake. My hand bundling the dress over my aching chest letting go as awareness seeps back into existence and my breathing stabilizes. I gather the rawness of the screaming claw marks in my throat.

My eyes fly open and are met disturbingly close by a pair of worried golden orbs staring back at me.

"Are you ok?" he asks me concerned. "You ... I... are you alright?" He repeats.

All I can do is stare. It is hard to think with him so close and, evidently, he is rather worried. I turn my face to get away from his haunted look, but not before I witness the intensely sad curl around his lips. This man is morbidly breathtaking.

"I am f-"

"Don't say it. Don't say you're **fine**. Don't lie to me." His stony fingers grab my chin and force my face back to his. "Terrible liar."

I blink my eyes closed. I can't bear to look at his face right now. He is beautiful and caring and miserable. **Sad**. I just met this man a short while ago and already he is being hurt by my ignorance.

"No," he whispers. "Not by you. Please look at me. Open your eyes. Please," Stubbornly I keep them closed, my heart beating a thundering tune rolling over a desert plain.

"You know you cannot hide from me in your mind my little Rockflower. You might as well face me." He openly jests.

"Rockflo-"

"Yes. I think it suits you, don't you?" he whispers near my ear. "Colorful, fragile looking, alluring smell and tough as nails."

"Fair point" and "Well Made" and "Oh, I do believe he fancies you dearie" the voices intrude. I open my eyes in order to exile them to the obscurity at the back of my mind.

Gentle Giant.

The angle of his head bent down to me, the tension in his body, the way his eyes search the room, the way his shoulder is half sheltering me from all things dangerous beyond him, and his slow breath ... I lose my grip on any form of decency and control I tried to display. I wrap my arms around him and, even as he stiffens under my touch, and I feel the unnatural coldness of his body, there is no stopping me. I cling to him as if he is the last floating debris of a sunken ship on a rough ocean; the sobs break through my whole being.

“I didn’t m-mean to upset a-anyone, or h-hurt anyone. I am s-sorry I am such a pain in the n-neck, and nothing special a-and I ruined e-everything. Everything!” The coolness of his skin feels good against my tear-induced fever. Liam does not move or speak until I’ve emptied out the reservoir behind my eye sockets. Eventually he pries my fingers loose and pushes me away with tender determination.

“You should leave. Come.” I curl back against the pillows and shake my head.

“No.”

He throws both his hands up in the air in exasperation, then stares at me with a razor sharp look.

“Rockflower, you have to go now. I can’t be held responsible for- Please, let me get you home now.” There is an undertone of stress control in his plea.

“But you came back here.”

“I live here.” He reminds me purposely.

“You said it was-”

“The threat of a hunt is terminated. We couldn’t... I was worried – Never mind, just get up please!” he sounds thoroughly annoyed.

This time I obey mutely. I pull my shoes closer with a frown, trying hard to recall how they came off. Pulling at the leather I become acutely aware of the wrist pain. It shoots up my fore-arm along a vein, pretending to slice it wide open. I grind my teeth and coerce my focus on the task at hand. I fix my waist long red hair into a high pony and pull my jumper closed around my shoulders. It is not as snug as the cover I just gave up.

“Ready,” I whispers into an empty room, and feel myself being scooped up into strong arms covered in cotton sleeves when I reach the door.

“You going to carr-?”

“Yes, unless you’ve become super-fast during your nap?” he is taunting me again.

I don’t argue. Instead I lean my head against his chest and imagine myself floating through time and space.

“Hmm, that’s what I thought,” are the final words I hear before I give myself over to my awake-dream. With the sweet smell on his shirt, it is not hard to relax.

We reach the clearing all too soon.

“Rockflower,” he whispers, inserting himself prominently into my awareness. “We’re here.”

Fleetingly I thought: he’s brought me right to my family home. Bewildered, I wonder what Momma would say.

“I could take you there,” he whispers.

“N-No, this will do. I can find my own way.” I stammer again, not wanting to inconvenience him any further nor have him around amid being scrubbed down by Mother for this latest transgression. “It won’t be an inconvenience, I ... enjoy carrying you this way. And your Mother won’t be a problem.”

The sound of his voice stirs deep in my heart and I shuffle myself around trying to get down. He puts me down and I start walking away from him fast. Being so close to him is doing bizarre things to my heartbeat and for some reason it messes up my coordination more than usual. His hand closes firmly over my wrist as fast as I started, preventing me from tripping over my own feet but also pulling me into his body uninhabited. The moon is steeling away the shadows from his face, leaving patches of light all around us; robbing me from breath in the process too. The trees are swaying in their synchronized motion giving me an excuse for the abrupt unsteadiness overpowering me. Why is it so hard to concentrate around this man?

He lifts my wrist to his mouth and trace his cool, marble smooth lips over the bruises. Slowly he moves my arm upwards to rest my hand on his shoulder. Sliding his fingertips light as a feather down my arm and back over my shoulder, around to my back leaving a trail of bumps as the lone evidence of his touch. Pulling me in tighter, immobilizing my movements. It is unnatural just how strong he is, how fast he is, how easily he moves his body identical to liquid pouring itself around the world. It is abnormal for me not to feel his heart beat while mine is doing an African type stomp. It is unusual for me to feel comfortable, so utterly safe and unwilling to leave him. I seriously don’t want to leave him.

His free arm circles around and wraps itself in my hair pulling my head back as far as it would go, exposing my neck. I hear a wolf howl far off in the distance then feel his mouth on my collarbone dulling all but one of my senses, his touch is a contrast to my heated skin. My soul is soaring and the kiss over the pulsing hollow is delicate. A throaty rumbling growl mash up against my skin. “Why do I fight to protect you?” Raw power in his voice, “And want destroy you all the same...?” His arm tightens around my waist more, vaguely making me wonder if he’s trying to force a reaction out of me. The words I want to speak stick in my throat, unwilling to hitch a ride on the air leaving my body recklessly. My heart sprints crazily, no rhythm to be found. He laughs in complete abandonment, obviously enjoying the spontaneous answer my body provides through an orchestra of rushing blood, beating heart and ragged breaths. His laughter turns into a deep, guttural sigh against my neck.

Rocky road... Rocky road.... It’s not working; where’s my road to Dublin?!

Renewed intensity burns through the wrist.

Out of nowhere, a trance consumes me. I overhear my own thoughts, I detect the darkness creeping towards me, and the cool air brush over my body while I struggle against him to get free. I am trembling and don’t know if it is the cold or the adrenaline rush causing it.

“Please stop -I won’t let you fall, I won’t hurt you.” A deep voice beseeches me.

I am falling into an abyss of soft bed-covering and tearstained pillows, and I stop fighting.

A Rude Awakening

I wake up with two hands ruthlessly shaking me until my teeth threaten to fall out. I wave wildly to fend off the assault at which point my eyes open. I look straight into the freaked out expression of my sweet sister. I can hardly make out what she's saying so I opt for grabbing her hands to stop her from shaking me.

“Lilly stop it!”

“Carmina? You're real?” Lilly's questioning look convinces me she's lost her mind. What on earth would make her ask such an apparent thing?

“Uh, yes,” I sit upright, hoping to find my bearings.

“And alive!”

“Yes again,” I confirm the obvious.

“You're not dead!”

My dear sister Lilly. There are times when I wonder if she's stepped out of a high school musical where all the blondes are fickle and shallow. Not that Lilly is any of those things – she just resembles it when she's stressing. My temper gets hold of me. The hunger pains squeeze in my belly and the grumble loudly coming from it contributes to the annoyance I feel right now.

“Lilly Nightshade, if you cannot start making sense this instant I am going to slap you right into tomorrow!”

My approach shocks my sister and she stumbles backwards. Standing up, she pushes her auburn hair, behind her ear. I follow closely, starting a steady but firm pace towards our home.

Lilly grabs the base of my arm, making me wince.

“What is the matter now?!” I yell.

“Carmina, we've been looking for you. You've been gone-”

“Yes, about that, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stay out all night and ruin Momma's birthday dinner.” I glance at her over my shoulder to make sure she's following but Lilly has stopped and her mouth is wide open.

“Lilly,” I point at the sun “Breakfast.”

My sister starts moving in a chaotic flurry. Her hands are pointing, tears flowing, feet stumbling towards me and there is just no sense coming from her mouth. I struggle to grasp why she is so absurdly upset.

“We looked. There was blood and wolves. And there was no you. And you were still gone. And there's trouble about the land. And you weren't alive. And I came to say goodbye. You're alive! Oh no, the Elders!”

I grab her hand and start marching as if possessed by the long forgotten ghost of a lost, and hungry, soldier.

“What do you mean dead? Clearly I'm not and, if I may add, I'm starving.”

“The wolves were smelling your blood. They were so big.” I glance back at her and her green eyes are as big as saucers.

“You could not have survived them... and then Jarrod said-“ I cut her short angrily.

“Jarrod says too much too often.”

When we reach the gate opening into the courtyard, I am surprised at the solemn silence greeting us. It is as if there is a gag-order and the clan is following it to the letter. All but Lilly.

“Momma, look! She’s alive!!”

I roll my eyes, noticing the generally light features of my family turning a lot paler for seeing us.

Jarrold drops the table and rushes at us like a puppy who’s seen his owner for the first time in a year.

“Carmina! Oh gods... You’re alright! I’m so sorry!” I wish they would all stop *yelling*.

Frozen, I stand and watch the spectacle unfold around me. Momma’s billowing pink dress and orange apron descend as if floating on air. Her ashen face looking tired and her arms reaching for me like a long lost child. The remaining family piles closer like slow moving statues one step at a time, looking suspicious of what their eyes are showing them.

“It is you! My child, oh thank the gods.”

I brace for the impact of having Momma slam-hug into me, grabbing me in a vice grip threatening the structure of my ribcage.

“Yes Momma, it... is...” I try speaking through gulps of air. “You’re....hurting ... me.” I manage.

Momma lets go of me and the majority of the family creates a circle, surrounding us. I have no clue what is going on but whatever it is, I did not expect this kind of reception. Why are they all behaving as if I’m the prodigal child returning home?

“Uhhhhh,” I stammer, looking at each face in turn.

“Lilly, go draw your sister a bath! She stinks. Jarrod, get the tables sorted, breakfast still needs to happen. Carmina, come.”

Finally, something feels right. Momma is back to delegating. In the brightly lit kitchen she hands me a glass of milk and a slice of fresh buttered bread.

“This will tide you over. You look like you’ve not eaten ... My child, what happened to you?”

Greedily I grab the bread and milk. I am starving.

“I left last night and went to-” Momma cuts me short.

“Last night? Carmina Rose Nightshade, you were missing for exactly one week.” My eyes snap from the calendar to the newspaper on the table to Momma’s face. I grab at it and reads the date.

“Hahaha, you’re funny. I’m not buying it.”

Momma’s hand lifts and I want tie my hair back, then realize it is tied. When Momma lifts her hand in this manner, she means business. It is custom for the woman in her company to use the wristbands on our arms to tie our hair back, showing our open faces in support of Momma and respectfully not interrupting her or anyone who’s got the floor. The woman in the kitchen does as expected and I cringe.

“Carmina,” she starts reasonably. “You left a week ago after trashing the cake and desserts and almost breaking your brother in the process. I heard Jarrod shout at you and you ran off.” Momma takes a deep breath. “We thought you’d be back once you calmed down... but when you didn’t come back we went looking for you. Lilly told us about a glade where you usually go when you’re

upset.” She wipes over the side of her face, removing strands of hair that isn’t there. “When we got there, there were four big wolves in the clearing. We hid until they took off. A team went to investigate, finding your scent and small traces of blood. We thought the wolves... it is irrelevant what we were thinking, but you were not there. We came home and started preparing for a sendoff ritual.”

Momma’s hand is still up, keeping the silence in the room. I hear Lilly calling from the opposite side of the house just before she rushes through the double swing doors. Immediately tying her hair back waiting with the clan’s woman.

“The Elders of our sister clans send notice and they will be arriving momentarily to discuss matters of our land; an Ancient show up yesterday insisting on an audience.” Momma stops, unhurriedly bringing her hand down. “Where were you my daughter?”

I look in disbelief at the faces around me. A week? I’ve been gone a week?

“Momma, I was in the field and fell asleep. I had dreams about being carried off to somewhere but I was brought back again. Then Lilly shook me till my eyes rattled in their sockets and now I’m here. I-I’m sorry Momma, I don’t remember anything else.” I plea with her to believe me. “What or who is an Ancient?”

It is Lilly stepping up to stroke over my hair, and softly says: “It’s not the first time my darling sister, and it won’t be the last for you not to remember.” Looking at my mother, she continues, “Ancients are ... the land-owners we answer to.”

“I-I’m sorry to have worried you.” I stutter.

Momma pats my hand and motions me towards Lilly. “Stay with her.”

The look on Momma’s face is saying much more than the words do. The pattern is obvious.

Momma is worried I will fall asleep. The nightmares get worse whenever I have memory lapses. I have had these black-outs since I was a little girl and they can last anything from a day to a month, happen at any time for any reason and nobody knows why. I don’t recall ever having had one away from home and this scares me. Momma usually appoints Lilly or Jarrod to stay with me for a while and fill in the gaps when and if needed.

I take Lilly’s offered hand grateful for the firm, familiar warmth rising from it wondering why the temperature of it is something I consciously notice today.

News spread fast and the courtyard fills up with family who come to see me well. I don’t want the attention and drop my head to watch my feet. It is so hard not to be awkward around them in general but today, said embarrassment is tenfold. Lilly ushers me out of sight fast.

“Get to the bathroom before they get a hold of you. They can wait.” She whispers with a defiant set of her lips.

Wedding bells.

Momma was right; I do smell. The blanked out memory feels like an itch I can’t reach bringing me to the point of weeping again. What have I done? Where have I been for a week? Lilly pushes me through the bathroom door and an aura of peace trickles through me. Here I am, away from all the searching eyes and questioning looks; here it is just me and my sister and a tub full of warm,

steamy, scented water. I inhale the smell. I cannot remember a time not being surrounded by the scent of Mother's special blend of herbs and spices. She's named this one after me too! "Hidden Carmina" is what she calls it. Sometimes the family would tease about how ironically wrong the name is. They can smell me from a mile around and they're not always pleased about it! Sometime they look flat out repelled by the smell. I love it though. It has been my own personal gift from Momma and it smells like cinnamon cookies hidden under fresh cut grass after rain.

I sink into the bath until the water reaches my nose. I like how my hair is floating in long red streaks around me.

"Carmina..." Lilly looks towards the door worriedly. "There's something I need to tell you."

I raise my eyebrows and nod, lifting my head not to inhale the water so close to my nose.

"Well, it is Jarrod..."

I sit up, slip, slide under then splutter as I struggle up again, water leaping at the floor in a mass exodus.

"What about Jarrod?"

"Well-" She bites her lip, keeping a safe and dry distance from the spilling water. "-he is genuinely sorry for what he said to you."

"It's not what you want to tell me. I guessed he was sorry already." Through narrowed eyes I peer at her, moving my fingers in a beckoning motion. "Out with it."

"Please don't get upset. I know you have a difficult time ahead of you, but I would much rather you hear from me..."

"What? Lilly, speak up or so help me..." I start.

The tranquility of my soak in its entirety disrupted, I wash myself forcefully. My wrist feels strange and cumbersomely stiff.

"Carmina, Jarrod asked me to marry him. I said yes." She blurts out fast, and then it looks like Lilly wants to do a mind melt with the bathroom door.

"Hmf, really now?" I hide my joy for my little sister. This is payback for all the times she made me sweat over small things, like the time she borrowed my hairband and said Momma was angry because I couldn't find it. I stressed out for hours over it!

"Yes, I'm sorry. He thought you were gone forever and said life is too short to make two big mistakes in one life-time and it would be a mistake not to tell me how he felt about me and it was great because I have felt about him the same way for a long time but I don't wish you to be upset and Momma said..." I wash my hair in silence. Dunking my head under the water to rinse the soap away, I hide the grin busting to break out. Getting up, Lilly is still talking.

"...so I thought maybe you wouldn't be too upset because he does love you but he loves me differently and..." I gawk at my sister, wondering if she will ever take a breath.

"**Lilly!**" I yell at her. "You're rambling."

The tense silence following is rather unbearable to Lilly, who's wringing her fingers together. I cannot speak because the sheer happiness bubbling like the foamy soap will betray me. I get out, dry off and slip into the light sundress my sister picked out for me. She's absolutely fantastic. Lilly

and Momma always anticipate my needs and know better what I want before I do. The dress is perfect and brilliant with soft sunflower splatters all over it. I tie my hair high, indicating to my sister I mean business.

I stick my finger against her nose, tap it and growl as I walk out the door.

“**Jarro**d! Where are you, **you snake!**”

I hear Lilly’s gasp and I hold my index finger upright to my mouth, aiming to stop her from talking again. Failing.

“He... loves me Carmina, and I love him!” she desperately throws the words at me. From the top of the stairs it is not hard to find Jarrod amongst the collection of the men in the courtyard. It is getting close to breakfast time and it is Jarrod’s duty to move the tables in place. My eyes find him staring at the stairs, his mouth wide open and his face a grayish shade of worried. The rest of the men take a step to the side clearing my path towards my brother.

“You spiteful, selfish, horrible little man!” I howl at him. “How **dare** you. Thought I was dead? Well I am **not!**” I warily walk down the stairs, concentrating incredibly hard on sounding angry and not falling down. At the bottom of the stairs is a pile of wood logs. I pick up a log on my way past, marching towards Jarrod.

“Carmina... Calm down, please, what is the matter with you?” His eyes leave me and find Lilly right behind me.

I hear him and several other men breathe the words: “She knows.”

Jarro

d tries to retreat but finds his back right up against the wall. I hear Momma’s intense call behind me but I have a plan. Payback is a bitch.

I lift the log with all my might and feel profoundly satisfied watching it land hard in Jarrod’s stomach. I don’t think anyone thought I would indeed hit him. The men all burst out laughing and I glimpse the picture of Momma’s pandemonium flying towards us. I don’t even see her feet touch the ground! Jarrod folds over double and I grab him into a hug. I know he can take it. I can’t possibly hit as hard as his rough housing buddies and they hit each other with things bigger and heavier than logs.

“I love you, you **dope!**” Confusion and lack of air stuns him.

“Jarrod, you should have done this sooner you beast; I’d have helped you!” I shriek at him in laughter, Lilly and Momma catching up to us. Jarrod finds his failing breath, jumps up and grabs me into a spin, taking Momma and Lilly with us into a freefalling spill. My brother is as big as a bear, his dark-blue eyes like an electric current looking for a discharge. If the roguish mythical creature Puck ever had a rival, it would be in my brother Jarrod.

“I see.” Momma composes herself and straightens up her dress, hair and apron. She glares down on her three children who are still slopped into a human stack at her feet. Walking away and shaking out her burnished raven-black hair she throws an approving nod at me over her shoulder. “You’ve made your point remarkably well, Carmina.”

Momma never condones violence amongst the family, in particular the siblings. Perhaps this time it is overlooked because of my “*return from the dead*” stint, or maybe because I was justified- sort of.

I gawk after her until my attention is pulled back to the immediate squeak from my sister.

“So... you’re not angry?” Lilly sheepishly verifies while two green crystals holds me captive.

“I am, but not for the reasons you may think. What on earth gave you the idea that I may be angry in the first place?”

“Uh... you and Jarrod share a truly special bond and we kept this secret and so... everyone expected it would be the two of you – you know?”

I laugh until tears roll down my face. Occasionally I question the stability of the world I live in. Most times I have to question my family’s thought process.

“Lilly! We *do* share a particular sort of bond. We’ve also shared teething rings even if he was a little old for it; we shared mischief, infuriating swimming lessons and a lot more. You are my sister, he is my brother. We’re not family by birth but to me, you are no more and no less than my cherished family-unit. **How** could I not be happy for you both?”

“Then why are you angry?”

“Because you kept this from me. Because I missed it when it became public. Because... you denied me the pleasure of celebrating your relationship with you.”

“Oh...” The precious relief on Lilly’s face threatening to punch a wall in the water gates, so I turn on Jarrod.

“And you? **You Mister!** Hiding such a sweet thing from me! How *could* you be so cruel? Did you go on one knee? Did you? You better have!” I threaten, grabbing a fist full of his shoulder length chocolate-brown hair.

“I did! I did!” he crows struggling against the fingers looped through his hair. “Jeesh Carmina, what happened to you out there, you’re so vicious? I *like* it.”

The gong’s brassy sound announcing breakfast shivers through the courtyard and we untangle ourselves from one another. We have exactly fifteen minutes to assemble and take up our seats before breakfast gets underway.

“Oh about time, I’m starving!”

Meeting the “Ancients”

In summer, our meals are served outside. This requires an early start and effort on our side. Momma ordered table-sets custom-built to accommodate our clan’s needs. They are wide to carry the prepared dishes down the middle. Seating ten at a time, we still get to face one another and enjoy our breakfast in a social environment. Several of these sturdy, dark oak tables are used. The men usually takes care of the tables as they are particularly heavy. For the remainder of the year, we use the dinner hall, where the tables are stored after meals during summer. The sun rises early and sets late in summer allowing us to make full use of the natural green tree-canopy which incidentally also serves as a platform for the local bird orchestra. To avoid any accidents from our nervous performers, we attach several clear, ground sheets to the totem-like beams Momma installed alongside each tree.

Mealtimes are my favorite on any day. Not because I have a healthy appetite for my pint size body, but because of the generosity of our clan's people. Every meal is a voluntary routine executed by the families. Nobody is forced, nor asked to step up or cook, or lay the tables – except Jarrod, Lilly and I. Nobody is left out either, or turned away. We eat together, plan together and generally spend about two hours at a time being a family. Nothing and nobody else matters during this period. Worries and problems are solved together, children are encouraged and supported together (In our clan, Momma takes the village-raising-a-child-thing very seriously!) Eating with my family and our clan house is something we do **together**.

I have never seen an official gathering of Elders and my personal opinion simmers around it being terrible, judging by the nervous energy playing hide and seek on the member's faces. Of course, I have met all the Elders, as one does during back and forth visits; never in any kind of official capacity. Frankly, I'm in the dark as to what the whole effort entails.

Inquisitively I keep a look out for the Ancients' arrival above all. I have never met them but I am told they will be here for breakfast. Curiosity peaks my interest, as the words 'Ancients' conjures up Gandhi-like men and woman with wrinkled faces and walking sticks. Why else would they be called by such a dusty-sounding name? I don't grasp why the land-lords would be worrying about the estates now. It truly is beyond me and how come I've never even heard of them until this morning either? Fleetingly my mind drifts to the Indiana Jones movie but I put that delicious distraction firmly away. The last thing I need is to be preoccupied and cause a scandal.

The flock assemble and we wait on Momma to join before we start eating. From the house I notice a stir and we all turn to regard the four impressive figures clad in purple and red approaching us, Momma counted amongst them. I amuse myself by thinking of the Harry Potter movie wondering which house the Elders would be from. Once more, shaking my head, I banish my unruly imagination. More astonishing than the outfits are the fact that three of the Elders are accompanied by extraordinary large creatures.

"Animals at the table?" I question in a whisper and was poked hard in the ribs by Lilly. "Manners!" I feel my heart sprint as they approach, for no apparent reason.

A sense of doom overshadows my happy thoughts unexpectedly by lurking in corners.

A sharp pain in my head starts pounding against my temples but before I can analyze my change of temperament, the Elders are upon us. We wait for them to be seated before we sit down as one. This was easy for me to follow as we never sit down before Momma, and she was the last of the joining company to be seated. Maybe this 'official' stuff won't be too hard.

My eyes blur beneath the strain of the hammering workmen pounding against my skull which does not stop me staring at the Elders and their companions. Momma, sitting at the head of our table, is joined to her right by her brother Darius; between them is a colossal Wolf with a snowy white pelt and piercing pale-gray eyes. Next to Uncle Darius is Auntie Joshlyn with a Lynx the size of a house with hunter-green eyes. It was almost twice the size of the few lynxes we've spotted on the

far side of the valleys. Next to Aunty Joshlyn is Uncle Edward and an enormous Bearded Vulture, sand-brown with; pale-white eyes rimmed with a crimson red. They all appear to be fixated on me, while I am wondering if we have to wait for these ambiguous “Ancients” before we can eat.

I swallow hard and glare at the plate in front of me. I desperately hope they’re not going to delay breakfast. The food appeals far more than landlords and official meetings!

Momma’s hair is still loose, thus a margin of informality is at the order of the day. The gang is seated and Momma breaks the silence.

“What are you all waiting for? Eat! I’ll be damned if a few formalities spoils the food on my table!”

The pounding in my head grows louder. I thought I heard the camping trio speak, but even their words were faint and muddled. I shake my head trying to clear it.

“Margarith, it is always an honor to sit at your table,” Aunty Joshlyn declares with a heartfelt smile playing peek-a-boo. Uncle Edward squeezes his wife’s hand and his beam is a complete reflection of hers. It is Darious, in particular, who is distant and deep in thought.

“Honor to our Ancients too,” Mother says as she lifts a mug in salute. Around the table, the gesture spreads like a Mexican wave and I spill my milk trying to follow this new ritual. “blah blah blah..*Ancients*.” I mumble and gulp down the milk hoping it will help against the headache threatening to leak my tiny brain across the table.

Honor them? I can’t help but think inside the painful fog. *They didn’t even bother to show up!*

Momma’s prepared rabbit liver amongst various other foods today and I watch with a sulk as it vanishes being offered to the animals first. My mother smiles gingerly in my direction and joshes: “Don’t worry my child, you will get yours too, don’t look so morose!”

The crowd sniggers sympathetically while the three animals seem... interested. Then the most bizarre thing happens: Momma explains to the three *beasts* why I enjoy raw livers! I pinch my thumb and forefinger onto the bridge of my nose snipping in my mind about not knowing it was show and tell at breakfast day. I don’t pay attention to what exactly she’s saying to them, I am dead hungry and the livers are fresh. I don’t even bother plating it and grabbing the whole serving dish along with the nearest fork I shovel the squishy, creamy mash into my mouth.

“Carmina suffers from a severe anemic condition. Pernicious anemia is a disease caused by B12 deficiency. Nobody knew what was wrong with her and I remembered an old home remedy where the recipe calls for raw liver as a substitute for blood related problems.” Momma glances at me and shakes her head in exaggerated vexation.

“When she was diagnosed by an ... informed doctor, we managed to get her the right medication. Of course this turned out to be a waste of time and money if you ask me! As you can see, she’s a little greedy over the livers – in particular rabbit – and I have not managed to wean her from it.” The lot of them titter at the tale and Momma continues with a little more humor too. “Of course, I had to hide other food in her liver just to get her eating like a normal person again!”

I don’t worry about them laughing at me and truthfully I don’t care if there’s not enough left over

for the pets on the other side of the table. I eat until the lumbering hunger in my belly subsides.

Suddenly, the family seem so far away and I just catch murmurs of their fluent discussions flowing outside my grasp. I open my mouth to speak but the words I know were there become vague and then evaporate. I see Momma's animated chatter, her hands moving and her smile lovingly sweet. I see Lilly leaning over to Jarrod and touching his hand, sharing a beautiful moment together. I see the gathered people all eating and talking. Togetherness- as is normal for our breakfast time. But why can I not *hear* anything?

Something snaps much like the sound of a ruler distinctly shattering into three pieces while the sound echoes through an empty room.

SNAP!

SNAP!

SNAP! And then all hell is breaks loose internally.

There are voices, speeches everywhere, in languages I don't know. Not *my* voices. Just... voices. They're conversing together making it sound as if I'm standing in a big empty hall just before a major concert. I try to distinguish what they are saying but something's covering my ears. Feeling for the deafening device with my fingertips I find nothing. I concentrate on opening my eyes wanting to see who they are, but it is too dark to see anyone! Alarm grabs a hold of my chest, the dress becoming too small. I pull it away from my skin hoping it will help with the fierce heat now rushing towards my face. There is screaming assaulting my ears from all known directions without warning. The terrifying darkness turns into red splashes against a white wall. Out of the blue images starts flashing through my head. Blood smeared leers, dead children in a pile burning, snapping sounds as bones breaks and more screaming, more talking, added laughing, growling, screeching. The dreadful images flood my mind while my lungs fill with icy air and reject my screams. My internal world is spinning out of control. I am going to fall and for once I think I don't mind it.

"Can she hear us?"

"This is not possible!"

"Get her out of here!"

Three strong voices. Unfamiliar and commanding. They are *not* my voices! Who are they? I am lifted into a wingless hover above the noise and flooding images. The chaos seems to organize itself, drifting to avoid me while I am anchored in the center of it all. I vaguely sense a tension-ache in my wrist. Calm is being restored, an invisible bubble closes around me to isolate me from the nightmarish void. I feel my mind deliberately sinking back into my own body.

Then my eyes break open violently. I am frightened, at least the headache is presently a dull sensation floating out of reach but persisting in memory. With a deep, sobering breath I convince myself it was just an anxiety attack because of the long morning, at all the new things happening

and having been so hungry. I almost believed my own story too, but then I notice three sets of eyes piercing into me. My eyes sneak towards the table in the fashion of a shady trader. Are those pets accusing me of something?

“Isn’t that right Carmina?” I hear Jarrod’s teasing tone.

“Uh?” I stumble not having a clue what he was talking about. All eyes are now on me, and I gather I’m the anecdote to an inside joke.

“Course it isn’t,” I defend out of habit, not knowing what else to say as I was marginally distracted by a ninja hijacking my own brain. I must have given the expected answer however. Several fingers points at me, others lifts their hands in a high five motion and the courtyard, including Jarrod, is roaring with laughter.

“You cheeky minx!” Jarrod pretends to scowl. I am still disorientated by the commotion running rampant where I should have a brain. I offer a feeble smile and pretend to be targeting my food for a revenge re-match. While breakfast goes without further incident, there was still a static energy flitting between the family members.

After adults and children alike were done eating, Momma stands up and then leans both her hands on the table, like she does in the event of announcement or final words of parting.

“Thank you all for being here, sharing this meal with us. I believe our Ancients are satisfied with their investigation for now. We will take further discussions in private.” A calculated nod to her brother Darious. “I declare the rest of the day a family day. It has been emotional and I think our clan can do with a bit of togetherness. We’ll have a bonfire night. Let’s work together and make it happen. Of course, your young ones will be present for as long as is appropriate. Lunch will be on the go, but Lilly and Carmina can see to the little ones as always.”

The Elders all nod in agreement and excitement flairs up amongst the children. Their enthusiasm pertaining to the word “Lilly”, nothing more.

This was the final word on the matter. Momma holds her left hand out with the palm up by way of inviting the Elders to join her; we wait for them to leave before getting into the day’s groundwork. I watch in awe as the Bearded Vulture majestically lifts off, circles twice and then vanishes, leaving just a screechy call reverberating in our ears. The Lynx turns to pad off with big, soft paws making no sound at all. He jumps over the wall gracefully and naturally with a soft rasping growl and is gone in seconds. The wolf seems to hover longer, nudging Momma who walks with him to the gate. Momma embraces the massive wolf without having to lean down or kneel, her whole body practically lost in his beautiful silvery pelt. A soft yipping sound, gray eyes fleetingly turn in my direction and he too is gone.

I excuse myself and retire to my room shortly after. I hardly notice or care for the investigative looks passing among the clan. I need to be alone, and figure out what is going on. The images from earlier are still fresh in my mind’s eye and I feel lost. The eyes of the animals are also haunting me, as if there’s something about them I need to know. I imagine my life turned on a dime to become a

mystery and I am the single uninformed person in this backwards story.

In an effort to relax, I close my eyes just to see pale white, green and gray sets staring back at me. I sing the Dublin song loudly until exhaustion whisks me off into sleep.

***** The dreams are nightmares are dreams and nightmares*****

I drift towards the darkness. Chaos.

There is someone behind me, pushing me ahead

I try to dig my heels in but I find the ground is no longer there to support me.

I am falling.

Falling.

I feel the air whipping past my head and I know the ground is approaching.

In an effort to brace for impact, I put my hands out. Instead of crashing bones, I feel myself sink into a pool.

Dunked under, I fight for air and push hard to swim to the surface. It is so thick, the water...

The wetness is sticky and dense making my progress slow. I am struggling for air and make it to the surface just in time.

The sweet smell is overwhelming, causing me to convulse.

Strained by the sticky mass, my eyes refuse to open.

Wiping at them with the back of my hand, I manage to see a shred of light pouring on the pool I landed in.

It's a thick brownish red mass. I heave when I realize what I'm floating in.

BLOOD? No no no no!

I scream towards the light. "LET ME OUT! Please! Let me OUT! "

I don't want to swim through this, but my solitary salvation is the ledge on the opposite side. I whimper all the way to it, begging as I go.

"Please, please, I don't want this. Please." Nobody comes to rescue me.

After what feels like hours, I make it to the ledge. Covered in blood.

I look back at the pool by my feet and gasp seeing the faces looking at me.

Everyone I have ever met, ever known, is drifting in the pool like suspended dolls. They look happy, content.

"No!" I cry out again. I feel the ache in my wrist and then notice I am the one bleeding!

It is MY blood filling the pool. Pouring from my knees, my palms, the soles of my feet.

"NO! "The faces in the pool of blood is smiling at me, grateful.

"NO, I don't want to die! " I scream again.

I am not afraid of death, I am afraid of suffering life.

I stand on the ledge, take a deep breath, holding it, I dive.

Sinking, sinking deeper. I hear a voice calling me, I am not interested.

The darkness can have me.

I am not afraid of death, I am afraid of suffering life.

I will not suffer life.

The pain in my chest gets harder to bear, but I hold my breath.

I will not breathe.

“I am not afraid of death, I am afraid of suffering life!”

CARMINA WAKE UP NOW!

The dream does not change again after this. Over the period of a month, I wake up in the morning with a raw scratchy voice and sore throat. Momma and Lilly take turns to leave a warm cup of herbal tea, lemon and honey for me to find at daybreak. I constantly have this abnormal sense of someone dreaming and waking up with me. I put my hand out to reach for the cup feeling colder than it should be, I've overslept!

Boy next Door.

Liam regards his mother with the desperation of a son in trouble. “Mother I can't go to there. Why is father being so difficult about this?”

Esmeriska Moretti places her hands on her hips. “It is not your father being difficult Liam, it is you! You have been moping for a month's cycle; getting tiresome. What is your problem?” The woman's gray eyes narrow as she searches her son's face.

“**Girl problems!**” shouts a younger male voice from the next room. William pulls a pained face and throws his hands up in the air.

“I ought to knock your teeth out,” he threatens his brother, who is shuffling through the saloon doors. It does not require much for a burly boy-fight to ensue.

“Why on earth do I bother?” Esmeriska mumbles, slamming a cup onto the table.

“You bother, my sweet wife, because you have a kind heart and they are our own.” A calm, grating voice speaks closely behind her. Like a ballet dancer, she leaps towards her husband in a warm embrace.

“You're right Will. I do care, but a trivial matter as trivial a matter as girl problems should not set Liam in such a wayward mood.” She sulks.

The jostling boys end their robust game the minute they hear their father's command.

“Boys! Front and center in three... two... one...” Will walks his wife to the dining table and pulls out a chair for her before he does the same for himself. Two motion blurs appear as the countdown ends at the far side, opposite the parental pair.

Esmeriska points a sharp, pale finger at the two boys, casting a sour look at her husband.

“We'll be the laughing stock! You would think after 142 years in our care we'd manage to keep them civil!”

Will puts his hand over his wife's in a show of support and then turns to the two boys.

“What is going on here? Liam, you refuse to shift into wolf, and you're keeping your link closed against us. Certainly nowhere near customary behavior. Why are you doing this?”

John opens his mouth but the warning grunt from his father has him shrug and sit his muscled body down heavily.

“I-I cannot explain it Father.” Liam is honest and respectful. He has changed so much in a month,

looking muzzled and haunted. The handsome strong jawline in a permanent vice: “Not good enough Son. Try to explain yourself. Is it girl problems like your brother suggests?” Will commands in a fatherly firm manner.

“I-it is private Father, please. Can we not talk about it?” Liam protests, his eyes begging his father not to press the matter.

Will holds his gaze and as soon as he speaks again, his tone is supportive but also chastising.

“Son, *nothing* is private when you are behaving like a runt alpha with no pack. I have been patient about this but no more. It’s particularly unhealthy for you and for your mother, brother, me too. “ Liam looks at his family with a shameful twist on his face. The dimples at the corners of his mouth are sunken and gets deeper as he clench his jaw tighter. His beautiful golden eyes a smoldering fire waiting to burst into flames. The vein in his neck visibly tightens while speaking through clenched teeth.

“Remember the girl, the one you went to investigate living with the Fire Clans?” He starts with caution.

“*Told* you! Girl probl-...” John licks back his words under his mother’s scowl. Her light purple lips are pursed together in a firm warning.

“Yes. What about her?” Will tilts his head towards his son.

“She’s my girl problem. I-She-We’ve met.” He stops talking, recognizing the expression on both his parent’s faces. The silver haired male and black haired female are visibly shaken.

“This is what you’re hiding from our House? Our family?” His mother’s wild hair bristles.

“I am sorry. I ... Mother please don’t be upset,” he pleads with her. The silver head of his father leans against his mother’s and two globes filled with parental care fix on him.

“Show us Son, choose what you wish, but show us in order for us to help you with this predicament; it is keeping *you* away from *us*. We miss you. Please show us.”

“Alright, I’ll show you.” Liam feels humiliated by his role in this family’s pain, now understanding Carmina’s shame about her dreams.

Carefully, he takes them on a visual journey. The connection between them is robust and they can feel precisely what he feels, see all he sees and smell accurately what he smells. The whole memory plays as if it is re-created and re-lived by the group as a whole.

A Memory

The scent on the air is befuddling the wolf into an irritated turmoil. One moment it smells human and the next of home, cinnamon, rain and fresh cut flowers. He’s been following the vexing scent for all of five minutes. He feels the hunger pains in his gut, doing nothing to progress his mood. The smell fascinates him, though, and he cannot let it go. He has to find what it belongs to! His keen wits pick up on movement just beyond the tree line. For a moment he thought to turn away, as it is close to the Fire Clan’s daily trail to and from work. They’re not really a ‘Fire Clan’ but because of their location so close to the spout of the volcano, Margarith’s clan adopted the name.

The gentlest draught carries the aforementioned aroma to him again and he breaks into a sprint towards it. Free from the trees, a small movement brings him to a skidding halt. Loose stones and

shallow-rooted grass skid along with his massive paws. Superbly long, flaming red hair attached to an uncanny body is sitting on a clearing made of sharp, cold lava. Frustrated at seeing a person so late, he turns onto a well-trodden path taking him to his cabin where he changes shape and gets dressed. The trouble with being a shape-shifter is that your clothing doesn't magically transform into a pelt, no matter how hard you try. The sun's shift in position allows him to move freely in his human form. There is no chance of the imperfections on his skin betraying him in case he is seen by someone not of his own kin.

He circles back, surprised to pick up on the scent so quickly and strongly again. Upon reaching the place where he saw the red-head, astonishment washes through him. Seeing her maddens him all over again as *somebody* is getting in his way of finding the bothersome smell! Approaching the patch, he can smell tears, and the ugly mixed scent of herbs and spices. He is held in place by her thoughts drifting to him as if he's dreaming. He marvels at her humble approach to nature and the sadness in her contemplations. The sun catches her long rubicund hair, lighting it up like a small burning bush. Something about her views draw him closer to her. Her mind drifts from one moment to another and he smiles at the sweet analogies she contributes to her environment.

She seems wholly absorbed in inspecting her palms and knees, and this is the moment he chooses to walk right up to her, revealing himself unconditionally. He didn't know what to expect but he wanted her to notice *him*. To adore *him*. He wanted to be in her mind with every sinew holding him together. The sadist residing inside him also wanted to scare her. He never expected the offended look and the thought of him being a bother to *her* leaps into his mind with a scathing vehemence. Before he could make sense of anything, three new voices assault his senses leaving him confused and tense. He cannot see anyone so how can he hear them?

“Run!” and **“Hit it!”** and **“Stay calm dearie, for your safety.”**

The girl appears totally unaware of the fact and just after he points it out to her, worried about *her* safety, she blatantly lies to him.

“I'm not afraid.”

He wants to tell her what a liar she is, but then he catches her scent mildly breaking through the mess of smells surrounding her.

“You are human?” he asks her and instantly regrets doing so, foreseeing she might not know he isn't! Instead of her answering, the sound of her singing an absurd folk song – High Kings? - breaks down each reservation he may have had about this girl.

The world seems to freeze in at the moment around him and his family pushes along for an audience. An onlooker would not notice their conversation as they speak internally through their tie with one another.

“*You met Carmina?*” Will whispers.

“*I did, as I said.*”

“*But Son that is not anything to hide from us! It does explain why you were so distracted at dinner hunt.*” Esmeriska looks between the frozen image of this intriguing red-headed girl and her son. “*She is beautiful bro! No wonder you kept her a secret.*” John pipes up, circling inside the vision in front of them.

Liam clenches his fists and then the memory flits back into motion after the pause. The small group snorts at him carrying her off by the arm, and her thoughts seem to amuse them to no end. The three commentators are persistent in their effort to command her. Each moment with this girl is enchanting. All but the nightmares. Those were horrific in nature and her small features unfairly set against the enormity of those visions.

Arriving back to the clearing, the trio felt and watches him struggle against his nature and his desires. They know how much he wanted her, and wanted to kill her. They observe as he asserts immense control over his natural instincts and shower this girl with a safe, distanced passion.

When she passes out, her conscious thoughts are sheltered from them and they thought he had frozen the memory - he didn't. The sun rises and sets five then six times in utter silence, Liam only moving to bring dew-drops to her lips. Eventually he sets the fragile body down on the ground and walks off. Not before he heard those terrible nightmares start up again. His chest feels as if someone has punched a hole in there and filled it up with sting nettles. The feeling stayed with him over the past month.

Fully aware of their surroundings again, they sit in silence for a few moments, enthralled. Liam does not close his link from them and thus the loop to his family consciousness stays intact.

“All this time my son, you've walked about feeling like this and you would not let us help?” His mother sounds incensed.

“I didn't want it to go away mother, it is the one way I stay connected to her.”

“What do you mean...?” His father's attention pins on him.

“I-She does not remember the time she slept, or having met me.” He sounds sad at the thought.

“And when she dreams I dream with her. It... I can't explain it.”

Esmeriska puts her hand out to touch her son's arm. “You soul-branded a human girl Liam, it should not be possible...”

“But I did, and I could have saved you the trip to the Fire Clan. She does not know a thing about us... or any of our lives. And... she doesn't remember *me*.” The thought makes him cringe in pain again.

“Liam... she's *human* my boy...” His mother whispers.

“I know.”

“She knows nothing of us.” His father speaks in hushed tones too.

“I know. You said.”

“Let's go fetch her.” John is happy with his solution.

“Wha’? John, have you lost your mind? We can’t just *fetch* her!” His mother and father both objects.

“Yes we can. Look. Pops and the others were happy she is human and knows nothing of our true nature right? But she knows *nothing* of our true nature. Who will protect her if she runs into the others who are not like us? She needs teaching. Who better to do it than our respective Houses? She can learn from the Risi and Azzara families what they are willing to teach her. And then she can come here.” He looks at Liam. “And you will teach her about the Moretti’s.”

Liam stares at his brother and then narrows his eyes. “Keep some of those thoughts to yourself brother, or I’ll have to . . .”

John laughs brazenly and shrugs.

“You marked her soul, brother, but she is a tasty morsel...” John does not get to finish his sentence. Within a heartbeat, Will is between his boys giving them each a menacing snarl and a slap for good measure.

“Back off John, this isn’t a game. Liam, you will have to claim her... soul at some point.”

“I know father, I didn’t realize it was happening until she was back in the cabin. I... should have been more careful.”

Will sits down at his wife’s side and taps a finger on the table. “The other Ancients will never allow her to learn our history John. She is *human*.” He is aggravated.

“But what if... what if she is more than that? What if we need to find out why there are three voices invariably trying to instruct her? Surely there is something of interest to us? We can all hear them.”

Liam stares at his mother begging her to help him, appealing to her love for romance and challenges.

“He makes a valid point, Will. We all heard them, even in his memory. And didn’t you mention an incident at the Fire Clan’s gathering?”

“Ah yes. It was peculiar, undeniable.” Will answers his wife and the two boys shrug at each other, perfectly clueless and locked out of the ‘official’ business their father is involved in.

“Well I think John made a valid suggestion, regardless of his motives,” Esmeriska concludes but not without a sharp pointed finger at her son. “I’m onto you young man.”

Will laughs, knowing well there is no empty threat from his wife and these boys should know by now they cannot hide things from their mother; unless they break link and never shift. It would be clear admission of guilt anyway.

“I’ll send a formal meeting request to the other houses. But before we do, we need to make sure **our** house in order.” He looks at Liam with concern. “You **know** there will be conditions?”

“I know father.”

“I have one more question for you son. Two. Why did you hide this from us and how long did you think you can keep this secret?”

Liam looks as desperate as he feels.

“I... I hid it because I felt it a private matter, and I knew she didn’t remember me. I know how the bond works and I was afraid you would take her from me. I would have kept this up for as long as I could... which turns out to not to be especially long at all.”

Esmeriska leans against her husband with a teasing smile. “Our little boy is genuinely in love.

Would you look at that? We've waited so long for this to happen... It is as special as I had wished it to be for him."

Will lets out a chuckle and rakes his fingers through the substantial heap of unruly wildness impersonating her hair. "And unpredictable as much as challenging."

John clasps his hands together and make fake swoony sounds and swaying from side to side. "I know of a hell-cat sister who is going to be seriously moody to say the least!"

"John, don't be ridiculous! Liam... you have to agree to take this charge." Will continues. "Do you accept the responsibility of teaching Carmina our House, Moretti history?"

"I do father, but... how do I know I won't hurt her? You've seen how fragile and hazardous to herself she is."

Esmeriska smiles big and nuzzles more into her husband who answers, "We know you won't, because you can't... It's all settled then."

"Hmmm hmm hmmm! We'll be visiting the harpies and the hellcats soon. You up for a little hunt, brother?" John's invite is more like a challenge to his brother.

Both the boys look to the parents. They are waved off in unison. In seconds there's a static charge in the air and Esmeriska shouts "OUTSIDE! You don't change in the house there's not enough space!"

"*By the power of the WOLF!!*" Followed by the sound of tearing clothes, singed material and two wolves howling in unison.

The parents smile, recognizing the childlike maneuver.

"It won't be easy..." Will says into his wife's hair enjoying the smell and the tickles against his face.

"No, and I pity the fool who hurts his girl." Esmeriska smirks with a mother's superiority.

Wedding Plans

Lilly has become unbearable with the wedding stuff. The malls are overcrowded, noisy and the terrible smell of fast food does not hang around; it clings to your skin and hijacks your pores. I cannot fathom why she insists on travelling from town to town to find one bridal shop after another. We all know she is going to settle on a dress made for her, designed by her and fitted to her in the end.

In the shoe-store, Lilly drags me into, my worst nightmare unfolds. Lilly has a keen eye for fashion but when it comes to me, she forgets way too often about my personal limitations. Walking upright being one of them.

"These shoes, Carmina! I think you will wear them." She holds up a pair of short ankle black boots. They would have been perfect, if they didn't have such a ghastly heel!

"No." I refuse.

Lilly reverts into an instant-pout-until-you-say-yes face. "Yes. For me? Come on Carmina! They will be perfect with the dress I am having made for you!"

I grumble and take the shoes from her.

“See these?” I wiggle the heel. “They will kill me, then I’ll have to haunt you forever.” Lilly stares for a moment and then proclaims, “You can practice! I’ll buy two pairs and you can wear the one all the time until you’re used to them.”

I roll my eyes at her.

“Lilly? For real? I am 22 two years old and can’t even walk with my own two feet.”

“Carmiiiiiiiiiiiiinnnnnnnaaaaa,” she whines at me.

“Fine.” I give in. Anything but the prolonged Lilly whine.

I try the shoes on and don’t do the ‘twirl’ Lilly suggests. In fact, I stand with my hands spread out on either side, squeezing my knees together. Not very flattering but at least stable enough for her to get a look at them on the floor- as opposed to me on the floor and them ... not.

“They fit, let’s go.” I mumble moodily.

“They are just perfect! How about new jewelry?”

“No.” This time I won’t budge. “I wear clan made jewelry or nothing.”

Our family works hard in and around the volcano. The men dig the porous rock up by the barrel full and break them up into sizes big enough for a woman’s hand to work with. The women spend hours making it into jewelry and ornaments, fused with homemade perfume and packed with specially made soaps and waxes. The harder rocks are carved and chiseled into stunning statues or figurines. These are sold to the tourist companies for their markets and tradesmen.

Mother was given this land as her share of the clan property, even though it was, “As barren as her childless womb” and bad luck. Worth nothing. It was a mocking gesture from her brother who had first pickings, not a kindness. He did not count on Mother being a shrewd business woman and creative thinker. He did not count on her finding me either. They did not count on the clan forming one member at a time, seeking a home, a reason to continue life. None of us are ‘clan’ by traditional birthright; we are all strays. We are outcasts but not to our Elder Margarith, my mother. To her, we are children, family, and *her* clan – beware anyone who would say otherwise. They certainly did not count on the loyalty and fierce family values the Elder Margarith infuses and inspires in her clan. Our clan is strong. Modern.

“Fine fine fine,” Cleverly, Lilly lets it go. There are certain things that will circumvent even her infamous nagging ability. One of those things is my stubbornness about supporting our clan.

We spend most of the day traversing countless shops for the men’s outfits, and never-ending rows of boutiques for bridal-gown-browsing. More gifts, more samples, more cake tasting, more flower sniffing, more-more-more. Exhausted, I beg her to go home. It has been a week of none-stop shopping and travelling and I am tired. I want to go home.

“Yea, let’s. I am done with this. Such limited, unimaginative choices in gowns. I think I will just design my own too.”

“Surprise-Surprise.” I don’t try to hide the sarcasm from my voice.

“Oh you! It was fun to be together just us two.” Lilly is sincere, “We should drive home ourselves.

It shouldn't take long and I do declare the hotel staff will be happy to have a peaceful night's rest!" Her teasing stings but I cannot fault her for it, truth is truth. I know the nightmares are loud and peace-disturbing for anyone within a few meters. I tried not sleeping at night while we're here, but eventually there was no escaping the inevitable.

Red in the face, I agree. It *is* nice to have my sister to myself again. She has been exceedingly busy and insisting on having her wedding with the first snow-fall; less than a month away. She always fancied herself a Winter Queen and this is her moment to live the full fantasy. Of course, she is consulted on miniscule details, from the carved seating to the last bite at the reception. She's right, a drive home would give us a few more hours alone.

"Let's."

The sun is setting and the sky is streaked with puffy clouds in shades of oranges and pinks. A silly thought jogs by, telling me I would do very well as a naturist artist – if I didn't like the color green far too much. I don't think a green sun would be as effective. Still, seeing the breathtaking art-strokes coloring the sky after a long day brings peace to my soul.

Getting out of the car, I hear a far off screech from a pair Bearded Vultures. They are very high above us and I almost topple over looking up at them. Tilting my head up sideways, I watch the birds circle above.

"I wonder what it must be like, so high up, seeing us ants on the ground." I muse to myself. Lilly heard me and follows my gaze with a thoughtful expression.

"They see us as we are, not as ants." She states without any doubt. "Come! The mob has spotted us." She sighs dramatically and I know it is fake because she's been missing Jarrod something fierce. I do not have the sole claim to sleep-talking.

"You first, this was your idea." I shove her ahead of me playfully, pretending to look for something in a bag whilst giving her ample room to move ahead.

"Bought the whole city did you?" I hear Jarrod tease as he takes the parcels from his beloved.

"She did! There's loads more in the trunk and back-seat, you will need help," I let him know, enjoying the flabbergasted expression on my brother's face.

A big set of arms enclose me and I squeal right before I wonder when I've turned into Lilly. My balance is wavering and my face threatens connect itself to the ground.

"Who-Huh?" Spinning around, my breath isn't just knocked out of my sails, but my eyes stretch big, threatening to cover my whole face.

Instead of a jostling clan member, I am captured by a set of unfamiliar dark, golden-brown orbs framed with black lashes. Gorgeous! And oh boy is he large!

"John Moretti, at your service Ma'am!" he says in a jovial manner, bowing deeply in front of me.

Jarroed wedges himself between us, his finger tapping me on the chin. "Close your gob Carmina and **you**, wait your turn runt. Let me greet my sister!"

Jarroed hugs me and whisper in my ear, "Good to have you both home safely. Thanks for doing this, I know you must have hated it."

Clinging on longer than needed, not trusting myself to turn around I confess to my brother, “I did.” “Carmina, my *fiancé* please?” Lilly purrs like a kitten, holding her hand out as if to receive payment of sorts. Awkwardly, I let Jarrod go and force a smile to my face while waving and greeting the family as they turn up one by one. I sneak a peek at the John person again. How old is he? And where do they find clothing to fit him? This young man is enormous!

“Don’t let his muscles fool you Carmina, he’s a whelp.” Jarrod must have seen me stare.

“John, my sister Carmina, Carmina, John Moretti from the Moretti House. Our... neighbors. The Moretti’s are here for a visit.”

I get the distinct feeling there’s more, but Jarrod is not going to tell me.

“You’re in good hands!” Lilly grabs Jarrod’s arm “If you’re not busy let’s get the kids! I have something for each of them!”

Lilly does not have children of her own yet, on account of her being too young and not married. Which is soon to change. The running joke amongst our clan informally states that, if ever anyone is orphaned, they will be adopted by Lilly even if it might be against their will. She is young but she is the poster child for the perfect mother hen.

I smile watching Lilly encourage the outrageous rituals amongst children. This involves some elaborate cat and mouse chase around the courtyard, with Jarrod pretending to herd them into a corner. The game is manic, and there’s lots of squeals and laughter. At the end of the game, the children are all sitting around Lilly, quietly anticipating their turn to receive a gift. I don’t know how she does it. One minute it is all bedlam and the next it is angelic patience and serenity.

“Pity she’s already snatched up,” I hear John say behind me. I don’t dare look at him yet. The last eyefull is still leading me to spontaneous combustion around the cheeks. Other than our kinsmen, I have never really felt comfortable around men. In particular friendly, playful, handsome men. And this one is all of that. I do give him fair warning.

“Don’t let Jarrod hear you say that. My brother is... Protective over his family. And I am giving you a polite version.”

Truth be told, it is a wonder Jarrod has any friends; for the amount of times he had beaten the crud out of them over Lilly, or me, he should be a loner.

I pick up the parcels and aim towards the house. John seizes me around the waist again, keeping me back.

“Wait, let me bring some too. I assume Margarith’s place? We are staying there and then you can meet the other Moretti’s.”

“Sure,” I mumble.

Of course they’d be staying in our home. I feel a little sour about the news. I was looking forward to a long warm bath and maybe something to read. It is just after dinner and there is no rush to get to anything in particular. The stink of the polluted city rudely pokes scrawny fingers into my nostrils and it is disgusting. I don’t notice John’s return, and jump when his shoulder nudges against mine, jerking me from my wishful thinking.

“These trips are terribly long and sticky, aren’t they? Perhaps you should have a nice soak first. Goodness knows I would not feel too social after such a long drive.”

I gobble up the offer like a baby rabbit with a carrot stick.

“Oh! That would be tremendous if nobody objects.” I exclaim and watch him fake a heart attack on the spot.

“What a smile! Oh so as to slay a beast” he stumbles a few paces and falls down, rolling around in the grass holding the parcels above his head to avoid damaging them.

“John, you belong in a theater.” I state dryly and climb over him, moseying towards the house.

Once inside, I sort through the parcels quickly, gather up Lilly’s- which was just about all of them- and put them in her room. John has gone back and forth with Jarrod and a few others to bring the bags, parcels and wrapped packages inside while Lilly spends extra time with the children.

I reach the bathroom and couldn’t help but grin noticing the tub is full of steamy hot water and “*Hidden Carmina*” engulfing the nooks and crevices around me. I smell the air and wonder if she’s used a whole bottle today. The perfume is already filling up my pores and I’m not even in the tub yet.

“Welcome home” is written on the mirror in Momma’s recognizable handwriting.

Home at last. I sink myself into the tub and spread my hair around me, making the strands twirl on top of the water. I go over the week, nauseated by the memory. I don’t like strangers, and I don’t like crowds yet Lilly managed to find both in excessive amounts. I hate the food, I hate the stink... Why did I subject myself to this? Oh yes, because my baby sister is getting married. I shudder to think what would have happened had I not agreed. Lilly has always had her very own way of ‘persuasion’. Usually leaving one feeling tortured and regretful for saying ‘no’ to her in the first place. Lilly is not a brat, quite the contrary, but when she wants something...

I wonder about the Moretti family. Who they are, why they’re here. I’ve not seen Momma yet and that too is odd. I wash the ugly city and all the sticky muck from my skin vigorously, leaving a light glow and fresh feel behind.

By the time I get out and am ready to face the Moretti family, it is quiet outside. Making my way down the passage into the main room, I hear Jarrod’s miserable moan.

“Oh gods yes, Carmina is home!” His hand covers his face as if he just smelled something terrible. My brain was prepared to give him a complete scrubbing down, but the words get stuck half way and my mouth wasn’t catching up to it, gaping open.

The next few seconds do not race by, but slow down to a halt. I recognized John, of course. With him is a woman I imagine to have come straight from a 20’s movie set. Soft, powdery white and blended skin in such a way to make you wonder if it’s a porcelain mask. She is tall, even when seated and her gray-green eyes smile at me with an age old wisdom. Her mouth is small with full lips sporting a dimple in each corner. Her hair is magnificent, static wild, pitch black and waist

length. Next to her is a gentleman with shorter hair but the complete contrast in color to hers. It is shoulder length, and silvery white. As unruly as hers but caught in the back into a loose ponytail. His eyes somewhat darker and his jawline strong without being obnoxious. He has the broadest shoulders against her slender frame. He far surpasses handsome turning short at pretty. The couple sits together like a black and white puzzle, perfectly chiseled to fit specifically with one another. I think I've just seen my guardian angels.

I am convinced I'm dreaming and this my personal rendition of a fairy tale where I am the ugly duckling! I hear her enjoyment ring out in a wind chime jingle. Temporarily I thought the sound would make the sun rise strictly to see who's stealing its stage!

"Oh you are funny! I am quite real I assure you! Thank you treasure, what a beautiful picture you paint of us."

"Uhm" is about the extent of my vocabulary at the moment. I am not aware of having spoken but then, I am not aware of anything but this group made up of modeling-movie-star qualities in generous proportions.

Lilly clears her throat and hisses. When I turn to her, annoyed at bothering me while I'm admiring our guests, she circles her wide open mouth with her fingers and then pinch her lips closed.

"Oh." I close my gaping mouth, a blush spreading from my chest burning like a veld fire straight into my cheeks. "I'm sorry, sorry. I'm Carmina. Good evening."

"Esmeriska Moretti, and this is my husband William Moretti, I believe you've met John and my son Liam."

"More like an encounter," I speak my mind about having met John and am thankful about the humor not being lost on the Moretti family. Bewildered I look around for this Liam she mentioned. I somehow missed the guy. I blink several times, concentrating on keeping my mouth shut while wondering how on this forsaken planet I could have missed all *that* when I find him. He was standing up straight and tense just inside the door. As soon as my eyes latch to his, I feel the ache on my wrist flair and the hair on my arms prickle. I distractedly rub my wrist feeling a nagging thought in the back of my mind refusing to reveal itself. Out of nowhere, the three campers inject their thoughts.

"*Stay Calm*" and "*He is a giant*" and "*Oh dearie look, you found Liam.*" I categorically ignore them.

Liam's eyes hold me captive. I feel my mouth dry and my head empty like the cheerleaders portrayed in a stereotypical movie cast. His skin is pale and looking smooth, as if it's lightly polished marble. My fingers twitch to touch him. I would have touched him too if it wasn't for those classically shaped lips pulled in a firm, straight line and the look perceivably ...angry? Is he mad at me for something? I am bewildered, watching his hand glide towards his mouth to clear his throat, keeping it there in a fist.

"Carmina..." My name sounds like a chore to him, one he does not want to do at that.

“Why are your men so big?” I turn away hurriedly and blurt out to the woman I have now started calling Lady E in my mind. She is just too much grandeur to be called anything else. I needed to say something, anything to distract my swooning mind from all of *Liam*.

Lilly shakes her head and mutters, “Honestly Carmina! Were you born in a cave? No manners today!”

“No, more like a hole with a house on top of it,” I retort to my sister’s chastising while chasing after the rogue thought.

I bite the inside of my cheek, irritated by Lilly doing her best Margarith impersonation. I still want to know why the lads are so huge, and why Liammmmm... a squirrel hijacks the thought. Lady E and her husband laugh hard with each other, their hands woven together.

“It’s in the genes,” Sir William says. I decided the naughty twinkle in his eye promotes him to Uncle Will. I like him a lot.

“We came to help with Lilly’s wedding arrangements. We’ll stay ‘till after the wedding. Are you excited Lilly?” Lady E changes the whole flow of conversation and I sigh in relief. I am too tired at the moment and I’m still trying to figure out why Liam is glaring at me from behind his fist. I do wish he would move it, he has such a sensual mouth.

Jarrold calls Liam over for an opinion on a build and it was hard not to gasp at the sheer size of the man. John is big, but Liam is taller, his shoulders wider and his hands... He moves so gracefully, unlike the hilarious death scene from John earlier today. There is a seriousness about Liam that captures my mind with intensity.

The memory of John makes me snicker to myself. I like John, though I foresee troubles with him and Jarrod in one house. Their humor and naughtiness is a match and I suspect they will soon turn the village into a slapstick production to make Jim Carrey envious. Liam lifts his gaze towards his brother, flying daggers breaking from under the unruly black strands over his face. When he turns his head my way I resist the urge to duck. Liam excuses himself abruptly.

“We have an early start tomorrow. John, a word please. Goodnight everyone.” Liam leaves without giving us a chance to say goodnight and I feel slighted. Uncle Will and Lady E come to their feet too.

“That will be our call, too. Lilly, we’ll see you bright and early.” Lady E winks at Lilly. Spirited, they leave the room, and I marvel after them. Eventually I excuse myself too with the pretext of love birds needing to be alone for quality romance or something. I saunter to Mother’s room which leads to mine.

Momma is sleeping, her glasses still on her face and a book on her chest. Waves of love rinse and repeat through me. Taking her glasses off and putting the book away, I kiss my mother’s crown and cover her properly. “I love you momma,” I whisper to her before leaving for my room. My own blankets and bed fold around me to spoil my every sense with relaxation. I am home. Thank goodness!

I pick up a book and start reading, not eager to fall asleep just yet.

Boy Talk

“Oh heck Liam! For someone with a crush on the girl you managed to make her feel self-conscious, hurt and confused by just being in the room. Bro! Try smiling for once. What is the matter with you?” John punches his brother hard in the shoulder.

“I don’t know. I think it is how she smells. I cannot stand it! And... she makes me nervous.” Liam shoves his brother away from him.

“It’s not bad. You’re just moody because she likes me!” John taunts his brother. “I know you heard her the same way I did!”

“John, if you touch her...!” Liam throws a threatening punch at his brother’s head who skillfully ducks out of the way.

“**Boys,**” Esmeriska’s voice is a warning in itself. “That is as much as I am going to tolerate from you two. If you want to hash it out, do it privately.” She rubs at her temples.

“Mom, he is a buffoon! Not even trying to be nice to her. Some bloody lovesick mutt he is.” John mutters.

“John, I said enough. I am going to spend alone time with your father. The gods help you if I get back and this argument progressed beyond anything civil.”

“I’d listen to your mother,” Will warns the boys. “She’s not impressed with either of you tonight, and I cannot say I am. Work it out or go to bed.”

“Bro, if you ruin this, you spoil the whole plan. We’ve worked hard to get the agreements from all parties and if she is your soul-branded, then you better step up your game because I... I will side with Jarrod.”

“You will side with a half breed over your own?”

“You will love a human girl over your own?” John retorts.

The conversation ends abruptly with a scream drifting to them from below the house. Liam closes his eyes and clench his fists. His jaw grits firmly and without warning or another word he storms out of the room.

John shuts himself off from the nightmares, respecting at least part of his brother’s privacy.

“*She’s dreaming again, poor thing.*” Esmeriska’s voice tenderly pushes towards John.

“*Yeah, I’m cut off mom. Goodnight*”

“*Thanks John. Good night.*”

Merciful Mother

Liam sits outside the window of the room where Carmina is sleeping, his eyes closed and his head in his hands. He wants to be with her so desperately. He wants to hold her and let her know she’s going to be alright. He wants to... Anything, anything to stop her agony. The nettles in his chest are burning into a full poisonous fever.

Margarith opens the window above him and sits on the ledge. The moon coloring her sleek black hair mimics a dark stream. She looks like a faery godmother, missing only a sparkling wand. Her gentle eyes look out far beyond the estate.

“Liam, night after night you are here. How long now? Over a month? Why?” she asks him in a motherly tone.

“Margarith, I’m sorry if I bothered you. I was hoping to be... quiet.” He turns to better see the woman he has come to admire and respect in a very short time.

“You’ve not bothered me, but I am her mother, I notice, given ... never mind. Why?” she asks again.

“I miss dreaming and feeling normal. When she dreams... I can be with her. You know we don’t sleep, we don’t dream. When she dreams, I dream with her. It is the closest I can be to her humanity. I have no idea how to explain it to you... or myself Margarith. She is so fragile and I have to be sure she wake up. I ... I have to be *here*.” He tell her honestly.

“Alright then.” Margarith purses her lips together in thought before saying, “Come inside. Since your family is under oath, I reckon you’ll be alright. But nobody Liam, **nobody**, gets near her when she sleeps, am I being clear or do I need to spell it out better?”

Liam climbs nimbly through the window when the woman gets up and steps away with an invite. A grateful look to Margarith. “I understand. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

She smiles knowingly.

“Perhaps I do.”

Liam stares down at the pale girl fighting invisible demons in her sleep. He looks at Margarith for answers but she leaves him alone with Carmina. It is a new dream and he closes his eyes, leaning his head back against the wall behind him. It makes him uneasy, this dream. He does not know anything about it. In the dream she’s had since he last held her, there was always just a singular moment where he could push past the fog. He knew where it will be and when. In the exact second he would push his mind as hard as he can calling to her to wake up. Any sooner and it won’t work, any later... He does not want to think about possibilities. He concentrates and listens to her breathing, her heartbeat... the nightmare burning into his memory.

**** The dreams are nightmares are dreams and nightmares****

Snow is falling. How beautiful! Lilly is getting married!

I feel the excitement in the air. A chill wind blows and it is with pride that I fall in behind my little sister.

The snow lands, and promptly turns into blood.

“NO!” I scream at it in anger.

Lilly is laughing, looking at Jarrod and does not turn around. They’re so used to me screaming and falling. Nothing is going to spoil her day.

I watch as the bloody ice settle solely in Lilly’s footprints.

Frozen blood prints against the white snow ,

Following her up the aisle.

I try to avoid the footprints, lifting her dress away from the blood.

“Oh gods, no, no ... please... don’t spoil her day!” I beg softly as I lift the dress high above my head.

Lilly turns to me and smiles from the front. Together, Lilly and Jarrod bend down to pick up a piece of crimson footprint each.

I watch as it melts and drops all over their pretty outfits.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” I tell them both.

They look at me with those adoring eyes.

I realize in the moment I am covered with blood, freezing inside it.

My body feels colder and colder as the snow falls harder and the blood freezes around me faster.

“NO! Please!” I shout but the sound is covered when I am fully encased in a frozen blood rock.

My skin fuses with the ice and I realize my blood is flowing and joining the prison holding me here.

I look for Momma and the rest of the clan to find they are chipping away bits of blood, then eating it. MY blood! NO!

I try to let them know I’m inside! I AM INSIDE! But my words are as frozen as my body.

I don’t want to die! Please! Not yet! Not yet!

I feel numb and my eyes start to blur.

I am too tired.

My beautiful sister and my strong brother, my family. They’re chipping away at my existence.

I am too tired to fight them.

I am so cold...

Carmina... wake up Please just wake up!

Team Work

I wake up freezing, my body trembling violently. Moving seems to be problematic as I am wrapped in the blankets like a pretzel. For a split second, I think I passed out and am in a dream again, feeling the fear gathering in my stomach. By the time I manage to force my eyes open, the rest of me is halfway into a full-fledged angst attack. The gentle hand rubbing over my legs followed by the sweet, chiming voice calms me down.

“You’re fine, sweetheart.”

“I w-want my m-mother-r.” I stutter through chattering teeth, feeling weak and bitterly cold.

“She will be back in a moment, she’s just gone to get you something warm to drink.”

“W-h-hy are you her-re?” I ask Lady E, while getting agitated at my inability to control my chattering teeth.

“Ah yes... I came to see your Mom about a gift for Lilly’s wedding. She was just on her way out to get your tea. I offered to get it but she insisted I’m a guest...” Dreamily, I soak up the sedative tone

of Lady E's voice. I like how it is so sincere and somehow seems to wrap me up in warmth too. It conjures up a picture of a soft silken cocoon and I have to focus before answering her.

"That's my mo-other."

As if on cue, Momma glides down the stairs into my little room. I wonder why she's fussing so much today. Usually when I wake up the tea is just *there*.

"Ah, my child, you're awake!" She puts my tea down and Lady E helps me sit up and de-pretzel myself in order to drink it.

"Quite the fright you gave me there for a moment, kid. You are glacial." Stating the obvious, my mother is pottering with the blankets, pulling at the sheets and straightening my bed before delivering my jail sentence. "I brought you breakfast, you're not leaving your bed today."

I thought I smelled food but I was concentrating so hard on holding the cup still enough to drink from it that I didn't notice it at all. Momma places the liver cuts in front of me, with toast and fried eggs.

"Eat, **all** of it, not just your favorite," she orders.

"Why am I banished to my bedroom? Can't I go eat with Lilly and Jarrod?" Fully aware of my childish sulk, I allow my displeasure to reflect in a pout. The look on her face silences me. I have come to the conclusion that every mother on this globe has a universal, built-in '*shut your mouth child*' look.

"Not looking like that." My mother holds a mirror and I have to agree. I look terrible. My skin is clammy, my eyes circled black and there is no color to be found anywhere. When did I turn into the bride of Dracula?

"You didn't eat properly over the past week, did you?" Momma rebukes.

"Guilty as charged." I don't bother to lie. The evidence is overwhelming. There's an amused glint pointing fingers at me from Lady E.

"I can always ask Liam to keep her company today. He's not exactly looking for the bride of Dracula but..." I look away guiltily wondering why she would use that expression right after I thought it. I banish the ridiculous thought of her being able to read my mind but cannot deny the accuracy of the gentle teasing.

"It is clear she needs rest, and perhaps a door guard? Liam has a lot of study work to get through..." The grey-green baubles in her face turn to my mother. "The quiet will help him tremendously."

I know her offer was done in kindness but, of the two sons, she had to choose Liam? I'd rather have John's presence, robust as it is. Even Jarrod's tiring energy will suffice. But Liam? Liam... scares me in a way that is hard to explain. He is just so aloof which draws me **to** him and **that scares** me. I have never been so ... so blatantly attracted to a man who manages to make me feel I'm doing something wrong for merely being in his company.

I pretend to be in pain but Momma ignores the horrible face I am making. She accepts the suggestion from Lady E; the verdict is passed and my sentence intensified to now include what I consider capital punishment. The grumpy giant gets to study in my room.

"You, eat." Mother points at the food before she takes on a conspirator's look, speaking to Lady E.

“I think you could tell Liam about his... schedule today? I will go lay down the law for the other two pups and their accomplice, Lilly.”

I was going to object again but the two women are already half way out the room and the best I can do is pick up the mirror and mutter to my reflection tartly, “Yeah, make the spider look after the fly - that will work.”

The food does smell good and I realize the cup in my hand is empty. I did not even notice drinking the tea but I focus my full attention to my plate, leaving the liver for last to make sure I get to savor every delicious mouthfull.

What an inconvenient time to get sick. Instead of helping my little sister (or at least make for comic relief trying to help her) I’m stuck in a cave, hardly a beauty and sharing with a beast. Just my luck.

Amid the buzz in the courtyard, Margarith announces to Jarrod that Carmina has taken ill. She explains to him that it is nothing serious – not more than usual anyway. Carmina neglected to eat healthily and thus her blood is weakened and the anemia has set in firmly. Of course, there are others to hear the announcement and a general concern sweeps through the clan. Carmina may be clumsy, awkward and at times uncoordinated with the rest of them – but she is good at organizing and planning. Carmina knows the strengths and weaknesses of the people around her and like her mother, she is exceptionally good at utilizing skills to the max.

“I told them to take care of themselves out there.” Jarrod is angry, unreasonably angry. Margarith forms the opinion that Jarrod’s anger is a mixture of concern and protectiveness. One part concern, three parts Liam in his sister’s room.

“She will be up in a day or two... but you need to prioritize, Jarrod; Lilly needs you out here and goodness know she’s a handfull at the moment.” Margarith points towards the unfinished builds and general disarray across the whole yard. She does not wait to get a response as she flags down John, who is slowly approaching.

“John, for goodness sake, pick up your feet and pretend you know how walk upright.”

Jarrood stomps off muttering, kicking at nothing in particular and growling under his breath.

Margarith lifts an eyebrow and the corner of her mouth sinks into a knowing smirk.

“John, we need you to help Jarrod today, please.”

John, having already heard what is going on, grabs at his leg and hobbles in circles.

“I am in soooo much pain Margarith – perhaps I should go rest, with Carmina.” He staggers for effect and finds himself promptly strained by the ear. Margarith Nightshade is not a very big woman at first glance, but there is a passive strength to her that comes with years of experience.

“Well in such a case,” Margarith pinches him- still by the ear- towards the children’s area, “injured boys get to look after the children until their **mothers** get to see to them. I’ll send Esmeriska around soon.” Margarith does not let go of the Laurel and Hardy

-esque John, and stretching out to her full height, she hoists to her toes when he tries to escape. John

dances around like someone possessed, arms flailing in ‘hallelujah’ calls, raised to the sky shouting “It’s a **miracle!** I am cured!”

Margarith lets go of his ears and John bolts like a lightning strike towards Jarrod, screaming in a banshee voice: “**Run** dude! We have a witch in our midst!”

Several of the audience watching is in stitches and the quick rub over his ear is not lost on anyone. Jarrod puts his arm around John in a show of camaraderie and his words, only just audible, reach Margarith: “Momma goose got her pinch on today, we best behave.”

The double ‘J’ duo breaks into a sprint, roaring with laughter, and the Elder Margarith dusts her hands off as if she’s just taken the trash out. Moments later, Esmeriska joins her and the two women high five one another amidst intrigued looks. Noticing the spectators, they straighten up and take on the stately poses as is becoming of women in their position. One sweeping look around the courtyard from each of them and heads are dipping down, getting back to work fast.

“Went much better than expected.” Esmeriska states in a whisper.

“Had no doubts it would.” Margarith whispers back.

They walk together to go find Lilly.

Babysitting Carmina

I pretend to be sleeping, listening for the heavy steps coming towards my door. I expected a much louder footfall than the one approaching. I didn’t expect the knock on the open door though and it spurs me into beating my blanket in displeasure. Of course *he* would knock.

“**BUSTED!**” and “**BWHAHAH**” and “**Now dearie, he is a gentleman. Give him a chance**” Point blank ignoring.

“Come in” I whisper, hoping he would not hear me and go away.

“Thank you,” he answers. I watch him pass through the door and have absolutely no idea how he manages to fit through the frame. If I did not see it myself, I’d never have believed it. However, Liam seems to drift through it and the magic wand that is my imagination convinces me that the door changed size for him, not the other way around. Liam seems to command his environment and everything tends to...flow when he moves.

Liam walks towards the window furthest away from my bed and opens it before pulling my small, oak desk effortlessly to stand in front of it, dropping his books down noisily.

“What’s a little re-arranging amongst strangers then, hey?” I sneer at him for changing my things without asking.

“You should have pretended to sleep then it wouldn’t have bothered you.” He does not turn to look at me while dragging the chair closer to sit down.

“How’d – Why would you say that?” I flinch, embarrassed. This whole family has an uncanny knack of repeating my way-ward thoughts back to me and it is becoming rather unnerving.

“I’d have done the same.” He assures me, “Look, I’m not here to bother you. You need rest; I need quiet. Win-Win.”

“Fine.”

It wasn’t fine, not by a long shot. I dislike being cooped up inside while the world gets to go about their merry ways. At least now I get to study him, or more precisely, his back. I like that his dark hair is not too short but not as long as Jarrod’s. It is in an unruly, modern cut, little strands defying any thought of actual styling. It suits him principally well and I do like how it is faithfully as wild and natural as his mother’s. I look at my hands and then his broad shoulders which almost stretch from one side of the desk to the other. I bet he would enjoy a massage, he is so tense. My hands are too small though. I wish he would not be so angry with me. I don’t know what I’ve done to displease him. It’s not like I stole his most prized possession or ate his last Rolo. Why can’t he be more like John? They’re brothers after all.

Liam turns around in the chair and lifts an eyebrow.

“I can feel your eyes drilling holes in my back.”

“I... was just wondering why you are so mad at me.” The honesty of my words seems to readily relax him.

“I am not mad at you.” A blank stare into the wall behind me turns my head to look at it as well. Looking back at him, I wait patiently but he does not offer anything else. I rub my wrist and when I see him shifting his look, I hide my hands under the blankets and lift them to my chin.

“Then what? You don’t like me much,” I challenge him from the safety of my blanket-cocoon.

“***Brave girl!***” and “***Totally***” and “***Now don’t push him away, dearie***” their interference, as always, falling on deaf ears.

I watch Liam’s face vigilantly. The odd sense of familiarity pressing again; why does he remind me of a painting? One I can almost, but not quite, remember. Liam’s quick flash in my direction slams the air directly from my lungs and catches it in my throat. I question myself, wondering if I am imagining the heat and passion that is sending my heart out of the racing blocks like a pro-athlete.

“I have to study,” he says licking, with the tip of his tongue, over his lips and turning his back to me. I choose this moment to leave the room for a shower. I have to get out for a while. If I’m going to be here, I might as well try not to offend him with my odor as well. He seems to do pretty well on his own without my help. When I get out of bed, Liam does not move or react at all. I try to be as quiet as I can. Thankfully, I don’t stumble or fall or go through my usual ritual of sprawling and crawling. I am relieved to make it all the way out and sprint to the bathroom.

My heart is calming down and I try to understand what’s just happened. Why do I feel like I hate him and want to make him happy all the same? Liam is messing with my state of mind. I know I like him... against all odds, my heart and the butterflies at the mere thought of his name tell me this. But I dread him. He seems so dark and gloomy. Yet, I keep seeing him lick over his lips and it is

stuck like an old record. I dream of seeing his smile, or hearing him laugh, or... I want to see him happy. I bet he has a great big smile, his mouth is made for smiling... and kissing, but is always set with a tiny bit of sadness. I wonder what it would be like to be held by those big arms...

I finish my shower fast, not especially liking where my thoughts are heading. I have to distract myself before I can go into the room with him again. The heat of my own imagination is still pulling at my heartstrings. I decide to make a pot of tea and a pot of coffee, grabbing a bottle of water for good measure.

Reaching the stairs to my room, the doorframe flows around all that is Liam, who's sporting a sweet, tiny little smile, standing in the doorway as if waiting for me. He takes the tray and places it on the desk.

"Peace offering," I mumble at his back.

"I could have fetched that for you," he says in a husky tone. My heart thuds against my chest, pleading to be let out. Why now? I just managed to get my thoughts under control and I am sure the whole house can hear the blows against my rib cage.

"Yes, but then you would not have smiled," I say and insolently tap my finger to his mouth; not thinking about what I'm doing. Liam moves away from me in a rush.

"Inappropriate," he mutters.

I ignore his mood swing and park myself at the table.

"What are you studying?" I pick up one of the heavy books.

The title reads: "*Myth, Mythology and History*." Wrinkling my nose I drop it back onto the desk.

"Oh, posh fairytale speculations?" I tease.

He snatches the book closer to him and points to the bed.

"Rest."

He might as well have told me to drop dead; the tone would have been the same. With a big sigh, I leap onto my bed and turn my back to him, facing the wall. I *am* tired, exhausted to be brutally honest... but sleeping is out of the question. Several minutes pass while I stare at the wall, having loud, internal arguments about the intelligence of forcing myself to stay awake.

Unexpectedly, the referee's verdict comes from Liam's corner.

"I ... can sit with you if you want."

He sounds unsure of himself. I fling my arm off the bed, twisting my body along to face him without turning around, trying to figure out if he's making fun of me. Why would he offer in the first place? The instant answer came back to me, asking why I cared to analyze it.

"Really? I mean: yes, please, it would be nice."

I accept quickly, before he can change his mind. I know it does not always help with the nightmares but I feel safer and more relaxed when I'm not alone. When we were younger, Jarrod used to prop the pillows in the corner and let me crawl into a bundle on his chest. He would stroke my cheek and tell me made up stories. Whenever the dreams got too much for me to handle, he would wake me up and continue the stories as if nothing happened. Jarrod may be a jerk sometimes, but he is my jerk. He's always taken care of me.

I move away from where I was laying, making space for Liam. Briefly, I wonder if my bed can withstand his bulk. With his book in hand, Liam hardly makes a sound moving across the floor and getting onto my bed without it even creaking. He regards the pillows and then start piling them into the corner before sitting against them. Wriggling his shoulders, he nestles in and holds his hand out to me.

“Come on, before I change my mind.”

I pounce as if he’s my personal teddy bear and I curl up against his chest; not questioning for one second how he knew to set himself *just* like this, *just* as Jarrod used to do for me. I close my eyes and allow myself to drift off, the smell of pine trees and sand filling my nose. It is a fresh smell rocking my senses into a blissful peace. Before I fall asleep, I open my palm against his chest and vaguely wonder why his skin feel cold under this soft shirt, I should try to warm him up... I snuggle in tighter feeling his chin rest on my head and one arm folding around my shoulders securely. Maybe he won’t be too mad when I interrupt his study. Sleep grabs at me, leaving me no time to struggle or worry about the nightmares.

Liam expectantly waits for the turmoil to start but the horror and mayhem is absent from her sleep. Peeking into the dream world she holds, all he sees are beautiful colors splashing and swirling. It reminds him of a child with finger paints; having free reign to make a picture as big or small as they want across an entire white walled room. He pushes his lips into her hair and takes a long breath. Carmina’s hair is still damp from the shower, she smells of water and ... He swallows hard. He can smell her natural scent, the Rockflower-human mix he has been missing. Liam allows himself a lingering kiss on her crown and looks down with a smile, knowing she’s not going to have nightmares at all. This is the same sleep she’s had for several days in his arms during their first meeting! A joy fills him inside, and he keenly invites his family into the moment with him. “*She’s sleeping,*” he tells them.

“*Oh!*” the three members of his family sound pleased.

“*Look, she paints when she sleeps...*” he allows them to share the dream for a few moments.

“*Liam... she knows we are here...*” his father whispers.

“*Dad? I don’t think...*” but he was cut off short.

“*Look at the colors and how they are changing... really look at it.*” His father insists.

“*It is the colors of our eyes... she knows!*” John sounds his usual ball of excitement.

“*Sorry Carmina, we will let you rest...*” Esmeriska’s energy fades away nimbly, as do the other two.

Pulling Carmina closer into his body, enjoying the steady thump of her heart against his ribs, Liam admires the generosity of the colors shared between them. He was about to withdraw from the painting room too just as he hears his name.

“*Liam...*”

The sparkling around the word is concerned, the colors getting darker. He whispers to the sleeping girl, “I’m here, I’m not leaving you.” As an afterthought he adds “Ever.”

She stirs in his arms, and he hears his name in her dream again: “*Liam*,” sounding beholden. The colors turn into a bright collage again.

He stays in the dream, but entirely on the outskirts, watching her colors as they shift and transform, creating patterns.

When she lets out a deep sigh of contentment, he feels light and giddy and the smile on his face does not leave again. The intense fulfillment in the knowledge he has just gained gives him pleasure beyond anything he’s experienced in a century or more. He knows this is a gift *he* can give her. Selfishly, he gloats internally. In *his* arms, she is at peace. In *his* arms, she can sleep. Liam rejoices in the thought that *he* can slay the monsters that prey upon her soul.

Inhaling her scent from time to time as if building up recourses, he steals kisses on her crown as much as he dare. When he moves to cover her with the blanket, she grabs onto his shirt as if to stop him from going.

“I’m not leaving you, my love,” he whispers and open her fingers, kissing the tip of each before resting it back on his chest. The rest of the time he spends in a state of blissful togetherness, while she sleeps serenely, barely moving. Liam ignores the building desire for the life-force that is coursing through her veins.

A Mother’s Thanks

“Are you sure she’s sleeping, Esmeriska? My Carmina is sleeping?” The look on Margarith’s face is doubtful.

“I swear it. You can go look for yourself. He showed us her dreams and…” Esmeriska is at an emotional loss for words. “I know it sounds odd but she *paints* in her sleep, Margarith… and she was aware of us being there, watching her.”

Margarith looks at the woman in front of her and tears stream down her face. “But she’s not in pain?”

“No, no she’s not.”

“I… I do believe you, but can I see for myself? I have never seen my Carmina sleep quietly.”

Esmeriska’s charming laugh echoes through like a wind-chime, “It is your house and your child, I dare anyone try and stop you!” She holds her hand out to Margarith.

Margarith pushes the door open and Liam smiles at her invitingly. The big young man looks similar to the guardians of treasures; proud and cautious. Margarith hovers over Carmina, tucking a stray hair behind her ear before putting her own hand to her mouth, covering her trembling lips. Tears shedding down her cheek, she whispers, “Thank you” to Liam who responds by pressing a kiss on Carmina’s hair.

“Thank you,” he whispers after a while, making a wordless promise to the Elder in the room. Carmina is safe with him.

Margarith moves a bottle of water closer to Liam. “Wake her at lunch if you can. She must eat… I hate to have to, but it is important.”

“And you must feed too Liam… shall I send John to-”

“No, mother,” he answers a little too fast. Esmeriska gives Margarith a knowing look before Liam

continues.

“If there’s more of the meaty stuff, I’ll have it, but we hunted well last night, I’ll hold.”

Both women understand his reluctance to leave Carmina’s side, so they don’t press the matter. Carmina sighs “*Liam*” again and his arms tighten, assuring her he’s still there. Margarith and Esmeriska leave the chamber, their conversation hushed and excited.

“My baby-girl is sleeping!” Margarith says in disbelief.

“And my big boy is going to live on love and water,” Esmeriska jokes.

John finds Jarrod hacking into a piece of wood mercilessly. There is no reason for it but John surmises that something is eating at his new-found buddy.

“I think it is dead.” He declares, picking up a piece and pretending to look for a pulse or heartbeat.

“No, *it* is alone in my sister’s bedroom.” Jarrod growls. John sits down next to Jarrod and watches him hack for a few more minutes.

“Carmina is sleeping.”

“She can’t be, we’d have heard her.” Jarrod glares towards John.

“No jokes, dude. Like a log. Snoring and everything.” He exaggerates.

“John, you’re my friend, I don’t expect you to lie to me just to make me feel better.”

John stands up, and takes a firm hold of Jarrod’s arm, placing a palm flat on his chest.

After a few seconds, Jarrod looks at John astonished.

“How did you do that?! Wait! She’s sleeping!”

John lifts an eyebrow. “Don’t forget who I am when I’m not playing doctor to wood splinters, buddy.” His grin is wide.

“Oh, right, Ancient. Easy to forget you’re as old as the damn log itself!” Jarrod gruffs in return.

“John... she’s sleeping without those horrible dreams. Does my mother know?”

“Yes, do you think the two witches of the east would keep a secret like that?” he dramatizes the exchange between them by pretending to be an old lady, playing both parts in turn leaving Jarrod spluttering.

“You’re so full of ... I’m glad. Although *it* had to steal my place to get her comfortable,” he smirks at the thought, remembering how hard it was to keep Carmina close to him at times when she slept. He rubs his chest spontaneously.

“It isn’t easy with her here, is it?” John asks openly.

“No. We have to keep so many secrets. I dread the day she finds out – which is why your plans bother me, John. What if she can’t handle it all?”

“Carmina, not handle it? Jarrod, your sister keeps a few of her own secrets. I suspect she can handle a lot more than you think. But for the record: I threatened Liam to side with you if he screws up in this trial period.” John ends in matter-of-factly.

“You did not!”

“Scouts honor, I did.”

Jarrold laughs at John and bashes against his shoulder, “You’re alright dude,” using the one word John was told not to over-use by Esmeriska.

John tackles him with, “I know right? Fricking awesome.”

Temptations

“Hello Sleepyhead, time to wake up.”

Liam’s voice breaks through a lingering fog. I am reluctant to open my eyes at first, but jolt at the realization it was *Liam’s* voice speaking to me. His arms tighten around me, allowing enough time to untangle my confusion.

“Liam?” I hear from the door.

“She’s awake, Lilly.”

Lilly stops in her tracks half way.

“A picture to behold!” she squeals excitedly, dancing into the room leaving a trail of the food’s aroma behind her.

Liam’s arms loosen their hold, but I am unwilling to move away from him right now. Lilly clambers onto the end of the bed, setting down the food between us.

“Lunch is served. Momma says you both have to eat and she won’t have left-overs.” Lilly mimics Momma’s tone so well, I had to laugh.

“Wouldn’t want to get on Margarith’s bad side,” Liam’s infectious tone startles me. He sounds so... cheerful? I lift my head to look at his face, his finger moves under my chin holding my gaze longer than I anticipated. “Do we?” he asks with a smirk.

His lips are so close and his breath sweet, like fruit. Smiling, I shake my head. They can think I was answering him if they want to, but what I was doing was shooing the thoughts along before I do something very dumb. I pull away as best I can and try to ignore the betrayal by my thundering heart.

“I think you are Momma’s most favorite person right now Liam, but I would not test the theory too soon! Jarrod has been singing your praises all day as well, which made John throw up in protest.” Open mouthed, I stare at Lilly. I cannot imagine *Jarrod* likely to be a Liam fan for any reason at all. Without stopping or waiting for a response, Lilly proceeds telling us about the day’s events, her banter less annoying than usual and quite a godsend. She fills me in on all the things happening, the highlight of the day being the high-five between the two older women and speculation about the reasoning behind it. I fade out and focus on the food.

It was not long before Lilly was on the wedding topic, telling us about all the progress, who’s doing what and how wonderful it is all going to be once it’s put together. Liam speaks in engaging tones, asking questions and offering ideas and solutions. His good mood is infectious but still puzzling.

“And you slept like a baby!” Lilly pats me on my leg right after I shove a large helping of crunchy salad in my mouth. Waiting for a response, I choke it down as fast as I can, hearing the chomping in my own ears. I am convinced this is Lilly’s sadistic habit to get back at me for something I may have said or done a very long time ago. She does this all the time.

“She did, and I managed to get through all of my work too.” Liam answers for me. I can’t say I like when he speaks for me.

“Really, Lilly? Right after a bite?” I scold as soon as my mouth is empty.

“That wasn’t a bite, if the plate wasn’t so big, Carmina, it would have joined the salad in your gob,” she teases me back.

I stab a piece of almost cooked meat and hold it up to Liam.

“Must be for you, I can’t stand the stuff.”

He leans around to see if I’m serious, his breath fruity and sweet-smelling close to mine. “Says the girl who eats raw organs!”

Lilly is thoroughly enjoying the exchange, her eyes darting between us; you would swear she was watching some romantic movie and waiting for the kissing scene.

“Well, I’m glad you managed to rest. And without... you know. Waking the dead and stuff.”

“I ... Actually had a rather pleasant dream...”

“Wait, you dreamt? Oh, what did you dream?!” I should have thought this through better. I feel Liam lean back against the pillow corner behind me.

“Yes, what did you dream about?” he echoes Lilly’s question and I am glad I can’t see his face.

“Uhm... colors. Like... like abstract paintings. It was peaceful and comforting.”

The half-truth seems to lull Lilly’s curiosity and her happiness for me is wired through her body language. “Oh Carmina! This is incredible. I am so happy for you.”

“Hmmm, don’t worry about the big pillow back here, I’ll get my meat when it’s cold.” Liam breaks into the conversation. I take the fork he’s holding out to me and pass it back with another chunk of meat on it, followed shortly by the whole plate.

“Well, I’ll be back after lunch with the family. The children won’t settle by themselves!” Lilly jumps up, places a kiss on my cheek and leans right past me to give Liam one too.

“Wow! What did you do? Cast a spell over my family while I--” I joke when Lilly is out of earshot.

“They love you a lot.” He says seriously, leaning past to place the empty plate in front of us. His hair brushes against my skin and it is hard to fight the urge to rub against it with my cheek. Pine and sand cuddles up to me and I clear my throat before answering.

“Yes I know they do... Liam?”

“Hmmm...” His head is still close to my ear. I know what I want to ask, but I am not certain how to go about it. I don’t want him upset again, or moody or ... telling me I’m inappropriate again. How do I tell him that I thought I heard him make a promise while I was sleeping? Can I hold him to a promise he made to me in my dreams?

“Will you stay with me, like this, here...? Today...?” I push through, holding my breath while expecting him to rush away again. I hear him inhale against my hair. His big hand cups the side of my face, turning my head to look at him. I thought to put up a struggle but the compelling nature of his movement prevents any form of resistance. Liam puts his forehead to mine, his eyes closed.

When he eventually answers, there is no denying that this man has a hold on me and there is nothing I can do about it.

“I am not leaving you Carmina. Ever.” The delight in the words is reproduced through the energy that flows between us.

I have no idea what made me do it, but I lean in and press my lips against each corner of his mouth. The soft growl breaking from his chest giving me a fright and I pull back.

“I... I’m sorry...”

Before I could say another word, Liam gathers me into his chest, pushing my head against his shoulder.

“Never apologize for being honest.” He says against my hair. I feel his cold palm on my back and take comfort from it. Maybe he believes it is the fever that made me do it but I can’t lie to him. I am a terrible liar; even the children in the clan tease me about that. I love this feeling he creates inside me.

“I don’t want to make you mad at me again.”

“You can’t. And you did steal from me, my Rockflower.” I freeze at the name he calls me. Is it possible? “You talk in your sleep. I like it, I’m keeping it.” He explains reasonably.

“I did not steal from you!” I protest.

Liam roars and I am certain I have heard this exact sound before.

“I’ll let you know what you stole someday.”

I am no good at guessing games but I know I did not take anything from this man... other than his offer to sit with me while I sleep; that was not thievery of any sort.

“Dude, we’re coming in!” I hear Jarrod call at us. My eyes stretch as they try to shove through the door at the same time, getting stuck. Liam wipes his hand over his face, looking extremely tired all of a sudden. “You taught Jarrod to say *dude*? Mother is going to wring your neck,” Liam’s voice sounds a bit like Uncle Will’s.

“I taught myself to say it. He just didn’t stop me.” Jarrod defends his friend.

“Mom says five minutes and to get the plates...and to force-feed you if it’s not empty.”

“Yip, and Mother said you can’t hog Carmina’s attention all day, Liam, and have to uh-” John starts and get stuck.

“--Take a run. A long one.” Jarrod finishes for him.

“The food is finished and Liam is going to stay right here, where he promised me he will be.” I scrunch up my nose at the two. “Unless you both prefer I start screaming?”

Both boys bounce on the bed together, near smothering me in hugs. I fear my bed may cave in under all the weight, considering that Jarrod holds his own next to the Moretti brothers. Of course, this places me in the middle of a three-way game of shove. Not too long into the game, I hear Lady E’s holler.

“**Johnathan!** Get yourself up here *now!* Bring the *dude* of yours along.” Liam enjoys the amnesty of his appointed task but there is no denying that the other two are in trouble. If you’ve ever had your mother use your full name, you know it to be true. I put my hand to my mouth and giggle pointing at the window, showing a way out.

“Do not even *think* about using the window.” Momma’s firm, icy, annunciated words drift up from outside.

I was snorting with laughter and John cries out, “Witches, I tell you...Wicked witches...”

Jarrold gathers up all the dishes and mutters about scoring brownie points for doing what he was sent to do, even if it is late. The dishes become his self-protection against the two women waiting outside the room.

When John and Jarrod leave, Liam pulls me up from the bed.

“Circulation. Let me make the bed, they messed it up good.”

“I can do it,” I offer, leaning past him to reach for the fitted sheet.

“I don’t think I can stand it.” His growly voice appears, leaving me nervous of him again.

“Go... go... Powder your nose or something, please,” He suggests urgently.

“I can do with a bathroom break.” When I turn to walk out, I find myself right up against his chest.

He is so close and my legs threaten to give way under the exciting drumroll through my core. The ever present burn on my wrist is soothed when his hand clasps around it. He licks his lips again and I feel him trembling against me.

“Bring- bring more water please.”

He lifts my wrist to his chest and briefly closes his eyes before he swirls me towards the door.

“Please.” He asks again and I nod, speechless.

With Carmina out of the room, Liam opens and closes his fists a few times. His lips are pulled back in a grimace, showing his teeth all pearly white. His head threatens to explode in an uncontrolled turmoil when the picture of Carmina leaning against him burns into his view. He did not expect the sudden onset of his nature and, in a panic, he push his thoughts in a desperate call.

“*Dad.*”

“*Hell-bound son! Calm yourself.*” His father answers almost instantly, feeling the rise of the bloodlust through their connection. Will was busy helping with the build of the new home for Jarrod and Lilly when the distress call hit him like a sledgehammer. Will recognizes the threat to Carmina as it emanates through Liam’s mood.

“*I need to get out of here. It is too much right now, I don’t want to hurt her.*”

Will feels his son’s control slipping. His mind works fast to help Liam escape. “*You need to shift. Go for a run. Go home... Fetch a book.*” He provides a solution, letting his own calm and confidence flow into the words as they drift towards his son.

“*What happened?*” Will asks discreetly. He just had time for a breath and the memory streams to him in waves. He feels the strong emotions, and marvels at his son’s control. “*You did well my boy... but you’re right. You need to go.*”

Esmeriska pushes against their link like a knock.

“*Sorry Mom...*” Liam offers and she hushes him up.

“*I felt it without sharing. Don’t apologize for being honest.*” She turns his words back on him.

“*Will, my love, I think it is your turn.*” Esmeriska says and fades out with a ringing laughter.

“*Wicked woman. I am starting to think John has a point about this witch stuff.*” Will drones mildly. Before Liam could protest about anything, his father is standing next to him in the room by the window.

“*What are you waiting for son? Off you go. Now.*” Like a sign, arm pointed at the window, father commands his son with an intentional warning. Liam leaps through the window and Will makes himself at home on the freshly made bed.

“What to do, what to do?” Will speaks to himself, drumming his hands on his knees. When Carmina opens the door to her room, her comical look tickles him into a snigger.

I stop when I see Uncle Will instead of Liam. I search the room to see if Liam is hiding somewhere but even I had to giggle at the stupendous idea. The man is as big as house, where would he hide? “Liam had to go get a book. He finished the one he brought with him, dear girl. He left a note.” Uncle Will says and then dryly opens his hands like a magician revealing the end result of a trick. “Ta-Dah! Consider it read.”

I am now snorting with laughter. “Always good to see you Uncle W...Sir.” I offer. “Uncle Will is good enough for me, sweetheart. What have you two been up to then?” “I slept, mostly.” I answer honestly.

The silver haired man looks me up and down and tuts. “You still look terrible.” “I know. Sorry.” I apologize automatically and he waves his hand at me as if it is unimportant. “I’m just happy to be getting a break. Honestly, *my* wife and *your* mother should never be put in charge together!” he complains. I put the water down next to my bed and climb onto the desk to look out the window.

“It is so beautiful out there today, but I think Lilly will have to speed up; snow will be early this year.”

“And how would you know this?” Uncle Will seems genuinely intrigued.

I look up at the clouds and point. “They’re already playing with the paintbrushes. Look, light pink.” “By Jove! You’re right, my girl, I *am* impressed!”

I hear a wolf howl and lean out the window more.

“Did you hear that? I saw the biggest wolf the other day - at the table no less!” I blurt out.

Uncle Will lifts an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“Uh-huh. It was real big too. Not like the ones I see sometimes when we pass through the glade. This one was massive...And beautiful. And it liked Momma.” I ramble like a schoolgirl on an outing.

“And what do you make of it? Having...pets at the table?” he all but chokes trying to keep himself from laughing.

“Momma said it was rude to call them pets. There were three animals that day, all big in size but breathtakingly beautiful. I felt bad about what I said afterwards; it’s hardly fair to have called them pets. They certainly weren’t your house variety, I’m sure of it. But I wasn’t feeling myself. I wonder what it is like ... you know, being a wolf with so many humans around.” I feel ashamed but brush past it when the memory replays.

“Well, maybe one day they will tell you, my dear.” He speculates. I jump off the desk and nod hard. “There’s a story about ‘skin-walkers’ called a *naaldlooshii*. They can read human thoughts, change into various animals, wolves and birds and cats at will. The jury is out, according to myth, on whether or not they are friendly or bad. I wonder if it hurts. I mean, your whole physiology has to change, doesn’t it?” I realize I’m rambling and shut up.

Uncle Will stares at me, his mouth open in surprise.

“What? Did I get something wrong?” I ask him, concerned.

“No, no; a good summary, though they are called the *yee naaldlooshi*. I’m surprised you know about those stories.”

“I read a lot. Being clumsy has its draw-backs but the bonus is the one where I get to read.” I tell him in a self-mocking tone.

“Well... You know the books Liam is reading? We have a library full of them. You should come visit us after the wedding. I think you may like it.”

I feel guilty about the earlier conversation with Liam. “I would but I’m afraid I insulted Liam about his book earlier today. I was in a mood; sometimes Liam gets on my nerves. I called it *Posh Fairytales*.” I confess to Uncle Will.

He folds over with laughter, slapping his leg as he tries to regain air into his lungs.

“You did not?! O, my girl, you are a treat. Perhaps you can read the next book with him? That would be a start in setting things right. Just wait till my wife hears this!”

I giggle along with him and we speak for a while longer about other myths I know about. Uncle Will seems taken with my knowledge on specific subjects. He questions me, debates and argues over certain aspects and I am having a great time. Eventually, Uncle Will gets up and ruffles my hair.

“Your babysitter is back. I am going to hide before those dreadful women get hold of me.” He winks and slip out the door like a thief with the best loot, or story to tell, ever.

Wedding

Days flow into weeks. I cannot say it was an easy month for our family. Exhaustion was clearly written all over the faces at the dinner tables and it is obvious that winter is upon us. The days started dark and faded to shadows earlier than usual. Life was good for our family and the courtyard was a constant hive of activities. The wedding preparations took their toll on everyone as we fitted it in and around the day-to-day running of our Village production lines.

The Moretti family is woven into the fabric of our current existence and there is no reason not to be in high spirits with the first snow expected to fall overnight. Momma and Lady E are a powerhouse of teamwork and things happen under their supervision in the exact manner that they should. When you are called upon by either of them, you know your elbow from your toes.

Days are filled with chores and tasks while nights are filled with Liam as my own Sandman to the absolute appreciation of the family. I have never known how much of an impact my night terrors had on the kinfolk until now. They have never complained nor muttered about it in the past but over the weeks, I have stumbled upon random conversations expressing how lovely it is not to worry about me having those dreams. I felt tremendously guilty. To do my part, I donned those distressing shoes day in and day out devoting an hour walking in them up and down the aisle built specifically for the wedding. Admittedly, the shoes were an outstanding choice for the design of my dress. I wasn’t sure how it would all work together, knowing the long, flowing dress could catch under a heel at any point and my nerves were wrecked. When I expressed this to Lilly, she had the perfect

solution. Lilly made a skirt for me to the exact length of the dress to wear when I'm practicing with the shoes. To my surprise, she also announced that Liam would be walking with me behind her. John will be at Jarrod's side as his best man, and it will be Momma giving her away at the altar.

Practice

I watch the snowfall from my window and the vivid memory of the former dream threatens to stab at the last ounce of control I can muster. It is still dark outside, apart from the few lights in the village still burning. Today will be the day where everything either falls into place... or falls apart. I climb off the desk and start pacing my room in the practice skirt and shoes. I count the steps to help me concentrate but it does not work. I hear the scraping sounds of the heels across the wooden floor and it scrapes at my nerves, too. When the nausea overwhelms me, I start towards the door. The small steps and the heels connect in an awkward manner and I have to grip the railing to steady myself. The door flies open and it is Liam's familiar size filling the whole frame.

"For the life of me, Carmina! You will break your neck and then someone will find a way to blame it on me!" he growls, grabbing me around the wrist. A sense of relief washes over me, feeling the now-familiar clasp of his big hand.

"I...I need--"

Liam pulls me into his arms, fast, and rushes me to the bathroom.

"Go *away*," I tell him when he tries to help by holding my hair away from my face "and close the door!"

The nauseous feeling passes as soon as Liam is out of sight and I sit on the side of the tub. How embarrassing! Finally, I feel courageous enough to move again and head to the basin to wash my face. When I open the door, Liam is still there with his arms folded over his chest.

"Come," he says, and takes my arm. I don't protest, waddling awkwardly behind him while the shoes mock me by clacking louder as we walk. Liam opens the front door, rolling his eyes at my reluctance to go outside. Pulling me behind him, we make it to the top of the stairs and he pulls my hand through his arm.

"I won't let you fall. We'll practice once and then breakfast, ok?"

My mouth is too dry to answer and I nod instead.

"Don't cling, my Rockflower; I won't let you fall." He whispers in my ear and I realize I have a deadly grip on his arm. With effort and will, I force myself to ease up. "Much better. Now slowly, come... I'll match your steps, so you won't have to worry."

The first step makes a crunching noise under the heel as the ice and snow gives way. I feel myself tense up worse than before. With his free hand, Liam taps the top of my fingers to remind me about loosening the grip. Slowly, we make our way down the stairs, to the courtyard gate and back. I beam at him, not having stumbled or fallen!

"There you go. See? I won't let you fall Carmina, I promise," He assures me before scooping me into his arms and running up the stairs. "I'll see you at noon, my Rockflower."

Feeling much better about the day ahead, I grab a slice of toast and head to my room. It has become a habit to sit right on top of the desk in front of the window. I don't know why I never thought to move it there before; it is such a lovely view over the courtyard from here!

Liam paces back and forth, looking irritable and edgy. There is no motivation behind the sharp pang he feels in the hollow of his chest! Trying to make sense of it all, the sole conclusion he can come to is the persistent thought of them leaving after the wedding. He has no idea whether or not their visit has had the impact they hoped for.

After visiting with the other houses, they utterly - without exception - denied the request of teaching Carmina anything inside their homes. They agreed about there being more to the girl than they first thought based on the evidence provided and, thus, appointed the Moretti family to direct the whole process of steering Carmina's quest to information. The final word from the ruling Houses were: "It is your house, your daughter and your responsibility." In particular, they were surprised and intrigued about the fact that Liam had bonded with the girl in the way he had. It had never happened before in any part of history ever recorded. And they would know - they are Ancients, after all!

The Moretti family went for a run together before the sun rose and made sure they fed well. While they can stand most human ways, the eating of cooked food has never done them any favors. It is not that they can't, they just prefer not to if it can be avoided. Arriving back at exactly 15 minutes before the events start, Liam withdraws deep into his own mind and offers no more than automated smiles and greetings. The clouds are hanging thick and heavy over the whole valley and it could not have been any more spectacular if a magic wand was involved. Lilly's Winter Queen theme is in full swing.

There is a collective intake of breath as Lilly makes her entrance. She looks like the queen she wanted to be. The bright red flowers all along the carved seating a smashing contrast, the exclusive colors in the white and black gowns of the attendees. Lilly's rich auburn hair is sleeked back all the way down her waist. Woven into the silky strands are tiny glass shaped bells that sparkle and chime when she moves. She opted for a short veil across her face, leaving the rest of her hair exposed. The snow falling in her hair, adding to the effect, which, as a whole, is perfectly breathtaking! Her crimson red lips set against a powdered, pale face make her look the part of a provocative Monarch. Her dress is cut in a typical Victorian ball gown with the same tear-shaped bells creating a motive of flowers all around the upper layer of the dress, the lower layer as red as the silk flowers pinned to the seats. In her hands, Lilly holds the most delicate arrangement of orchids in white. Jarrod spontaneously falls to one knee the moment his eyes connect with the revelation of his fiancé, both his hands to his chest. He waits for Lilly like a knight waiting on his queen; the gesture impulsive, sincere and not a hint of jesting. A soft murmur flows through the family when Lilly takes a deep breath, looks behind her at Carmina and then wraps her arm through Momma's. Momma's a vision of royalty herself, in a pale blue gown, looking proud and greatly emotional. The gentle music starts up to accompany the two women gliding towards the front of the aisle.

Liam turns to find Carmina behind Lilly, and finds himself frozen in his tracks. He has to force himself to focus and walk towards the woman in his sight rather than run away from her... or worse.

When Carmina looks up at him, and the full visual impact confronts him dead on; Liam feels himself slipping. Desire, hunger and thirst assault his senses relentlessly.

“Our girl is a Moretti in the making... Steady on, lad.”

Liam clenches his jaw when he hears his father’s adoration and firm warning.

Carmina’s hair has been made to be unerringly as wild and chaotic as Esmeriska’s. A mass of untamed, enflamed wildness wraps around her small face and shoulders, cascading all the way to her midriff. In the frame, her face is dainty, fragile, insipid and her lips as bloodshot as her hair. Liam feels the howl push up into his throat. He swallows frantically, pulling Carmina’s hand through his arm in the same manner he did this morning. The warmth from her touch threatens to unravel him.

“Liam, hold it together my sweetheart!” Esmeriska speaks calmly, feeling her son’s struggles.

Liam’s eyes find Carmina’s, and if he had a beating heart, it would have stopped. Her hazel eyes are big, painted in a soft wolf shape and framed by white and black shadows. There is a deep emotional green emanating from those eyes and Liam gulps when he realizes she’s placing her complete trust in him. He looks away, closing his eyes and breathing hard to steady his thoughts.

“Dad... Mom... I don’t know if I can do this... help me...” His words are filled with pain, passion and an Ancient need.

*“My son, we’re here. None of us expected **that!** If you need to go...”* Will is right next to his son, placing a hand on his shoulder; a father offering strength, a son taking from it.

“Sweetheart, if you must go, go NOW. We’ll sort this out.” Esmeriska lifts her chin to Margarith who is a quarter of the way with Lilly. Liam and Carmina’s cue is seconds away.

It is Carmina’s thoughts pushing Liam into the undertaking again. He hears her singing the terrible song about Dublin and he knows she is counting on him. *Him*. He feels her trembling hand clutching his arm and he pushes the carnal instincts away with force and determination.

“I’ve got this. I promised. Thank you, I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

“We’re so proud of you, we’re here for you ...”

He taps Carmina on the fingers with his free hand and whispers, “I won’t let you fall, I promise.” Forcing himself to relax, he matches her steps and keeps his promise. For the second time in one day, the guests all inhale loudly. The pair walking behind Lilly looks like a natural selection. Her red hair next to his black, her white corset next to his white shirt. Lilly watches her creation walk towards her and a jubilant smile showers the whole scene. The queen and her knight are joined by the Lady and her prince! The picture is complete.

I attempt not to stare at Lilly, but she looks spectacular! I try to make her proud by being graceful and slow in my movements and, thankfully, Liam took a walk with me this morning. There was not a dry eye in the house when the Queen puts her hand on her knight's shoulder and stops him from getting up. Instead, she sits down next to him, her dress creating the last, personal touch to the already perfect scene. The minister follows their lead and, instead of the traditional wedding vows, he led a ceremony worthy of a Disney movie! The service was mercifully short, even while being improvised.

"I pronounce you man and wife. Queen and Knight, protectors of your kingdoms however big or small they may be."

Momma and John step past to help the newlyweds up under thundering cheers of the family. Jarrod's hand cups Lilly's face, and the sweet embrace that follows, sealing the vows, is filled with promises of love and loving.

I was a little surprised at how quickly Liam vanished after the ceremony. He could have at least waited a little before running off with the feeble excuse of having to check on *something*. What is more important than my sister's wedding day? It's not as if it was a surprise to anyone. I feel somewhat vexed but have little time to let it take hold; John is by my side before I could create a full soapbox moment in my head.

"Carmina..." I am glad to see him.

"If you say one word about my dress boy, I'm going to lay you out on the floor." I joke, but stop when I see the look on his face. It is somber and brooding.

"Carmina... you look... You floored Liam today. You floored all of us." I narrow my eyes, waiting for the teasing, which isn't coming.

"You don't know what you're doing to my brother. Cut him some slack today. He is doing his best." John says and then promptly turns to walk away.

I am left speechless, wondering what it is I have done to get the serious side of John. The tone in his voice was strangely reserved and official. I feel guilty for the angry thoughts moments ago. I guess I am being unfair and the Moretti family is here out of the kindness of their own will, not because... because I ... need Liam.

The surprise of admission to myself makes me flush deep red. I drop my head and stare at my hands, watching them tremble under the bulk of my own concession. I rub my wrist, feeling the dull ache and missing the firm clasp to make it go away. It is only when Liam takes hold of my arm that the ache seems to dissipate, like my dreams when I'm in his arms.

He kept his promise and I didn't fall today. I should be grateful for him doing this and helping me. John *is* right: I don't know what I'm doing to Liam. I don't even know what he meant by it but I know he is right. Perhaps I am asking too much, being too needy. I'm broken and defected and Liam is not my personal aid. I swallow the tears down like a lump of un-chewed food. I have hurt Liam so much and *John* had to tell me. I push my hand through my hair, tucking it behind my ear and out of my face.

When I look up, it is the familiar big mount on the other side of the room filling my view. Those

gold-plated spheres are staring at me with a serious connotation behind them. I look behind me, wondering if Liam is staring right through me at someone else. Mother and Lady E marching in time like a well-drilled unit divert my disposition.

“Carmina! Lilly is looking everywhere for you! Come on, we’re taking pictures outside.... You will not believe what your sister is doing!” Momma exclaims excited. Lady E is grinning from ear to ear too.

“Precious! Every moment is just treasurable! I’ll go grab my lump too Margarith...*LIAM!*” she yells and I know there is no escaping.

When we make it outside, my humor lifts immediately. Lilly and Jarrod are running around with the kids, throwing snowballs! Lilly’s dress is sludge-dirty at the seams and somehow... the mess just seems to enhance the whole dress! The glass chimes are put to their fullest charms, like a magic wand granting wishes. One after the other, the clan joins in and soon there is a mass of snow flying all over the place! Out of nowhere, a shower of red rose petals pours down with the snow and when we look up, the Bearded Vultures are turning over and over above us, their screeches drifting down with the petals, followed by the spine-tingling cat-growls and wolf howling. This lasts a few meager seconds. Lilly clearly did not anticipate it and she squeals in typical Lilly fashion - in delight.

“The Ancient token of approval! How blessed are we!” she yells at Jarrod. He grabs his new bride and swirls her round and round. Lilly puts her head back, letting the shower of snow and petals brush over her face giggling like a schoolgirl, the crystals chiming and sparkling along; truly a magical moment. I feel strong emotions well up in me. The scene is perfect and beautiful... and awe-inspiring!

The spell is broken as I am hit on the back by what feels like a boulder. I turn to see Liam tossing a big ball of snow up and down on his palm. My first thought was to run, but I’m still wearing these horrible shoes! I am not new to this game at all. It is a fight he wants? Fine. Game...on!

Bundling my dress as if to make a dash for it, I tuck and roll instead. Getting back to my feet, the snowball has been made and is flying at Liam. I hit him full in the chest. A roar of laughter flairs up under the Moretti family and it is Momma who shouts a warning to Liam: “Oh yes, did we forget to mention our secret weapon? “

“Clearly just luck!” John calls back, hurling another snowball in my direction. My eyes follow it until it looks like it is going to connect. At the very last second I step out of the way, my hands up to catch the readymade snowball Jarrod is throwing my way. We’ve teamed up time and time again and this is a well-rehearsed maneuver. Another tuck and roll, and John finds his upper leg covered in snow.

In this moment I realize the additional reason Lilly insisted on a “first snow” wedding day. She knows I would not make it with the rest of the clan in any manner of sports - except snow games. For some reason, my body and brain coordinate exceptionally well under snowball attacks! There is yet a person in this clan who can move or throw as fast and accurately as I can or beat the team of Lilly, Jarrod and myself.

I cannot remember when last I had this much fun. Frozen rose petals all around us, dirty dresses,

ruined suits and soaking wet hair - yet... It all still feels like the happy ending to a forever after. Exactly how it should be.

My mind boggles at the ability of the family to thrive in this cold weather. Even the children don't freeze easily! My teeth start chattering and I know I had better find heat before I turn into an ice sculpture. Dodging snowballs and tackles, I work my way towards the reception hall where there are several fires burning. I also smell the warm chocolate in the air and my mouth waters. Nobody makes hot chocolate like Lilly! My heel catches on a clump of muddy grass and I feel myself plummeting ahead. Before I hit the ground, a blur of black and white dives towards me. I feel my body sideswiped and, instead of falling, I find myself firmly wrapped up in Liam's arms with the rest of his colossal body underneath me.

"I have you. I promised."

I pull back to get a better look at him. "You did. Thank you, Liam."

When I try to move away from him, the grip around me tightens and there is a roguish light in his face. Summarily he trades places with me and his body is over mine, his lips so close to mine when he speaks, provoking me.

"But I said nothing about not taking you captive." That voice... I stare in disbelief.

"You're cheating! I am obviously at a disadvantage and I was already tumbling."

It takes a lot of effort to dismiss the pesky thoughts of his lips so exquisitely close to mine.

"A toll then, my Lady, a price to pay for freedom?" he offers, still not moving.

"Depends on what it is..." I counter, instinctively not one to agree for the sake of agreeing.

Without another word, Liam dips his head a fraction and his cold, smooth lips brush over mine. My heart starts kicking against my ribs like in an effort to climb into his chest. Liam growls intensely and, in response, I feel his shirt bundling into my fists, getting a firm hold and wanting to pull him closer to me.

"Consider the negotiation started," A raw whisper, not removing his lips; I feel them moving, forming the words against mine. The moan escapes before I could counter it.

A loud, spirited growl discharges to shatter the moment into a million pieces. Liam gets to his feet and scoops me up with him, bouncing me once on a lifted knee for good measure. I cower when I realize so many eyes are on us and several cameras are snapping from all possible directions. Liam gives another loud howl and then shouts, "I am capturing the fair maiden, sister to the Queen!" Lilly yells from the doorway of the function hall, "Not without said captor undergoing the vigorous test against my magic hot chocolate potion!"

"Then I accept!"

I feel myself being marched towards Lilly with the rest of the clan in tow. I am still a little drunk after the short exchange, and cowardly hide my face in his wet shirt.

"You should keep this look, it suits you," he remarks under the cheers and sneers of entire gathering.

The day is a great success. I feel a sad twinge knowing it is over all too soon. The Moretti family will leave tomorrow; Liam will leave tomorrow!

“We’re staying for another week,” John announces to the table.

“Someone has to finish the honeymooner’s home. Gods forbid we leave Lilly to fill the place up with a shopping mall!”

My heart skips a beat and I suppress a happy dance. After seeing Lilly and Jarrod off to their honeymoon, I go in search of John. I find him outside staring up at the sky, leaning against a wall. He does not turn around, but I am sure he heard me. I bite the side of my lip and whisper to his back, “John, thank you.”

He does not move but I see the little pull at the corner of his mouth and I know things are right between us. I touch his shoulder with my fingertips and leave him to his thoughts. Liam was at his post, waiting for me when I made it to my room.

A few days later and I arrive in my room for a well-deserved rest. I’ve spent the day helping Momma and Lady E sort through piles of pictures to make a welcome home gift for the honeymooning couple. We’ve chosen hand-made frames and we filled the photo albums, too. We leave another pile of albums and pictures for them to choose from when they get back. I endure the teasing over the amount of pictures with Liam and myself in various awkward situations; awkward for me, of course.

When I open my door, I immediately see a beautiful, three-picture frame with hand carved depictions of the Moretti House crest. In the bottom corner the unmistakable handwriting. *“I won’t let you fall”*.

The three pictures are a perfect summary of the day. It starts with us both walking down the aisle; the second of him carrying me in his arms after the almighty roar - the smile on his face of pure satisfaction; the third of me sleeping against his chest. I wasn’t aware of the last picture being taken but it captured the moment perfectly!

A quiet moment passes while I wait for my heart to catch up to the rest of the thoughts running through the memories of the past month. The new couple’s house is complete and tomorrow the Moretti family will disentangle themselves from ours, leaving to go back to... wherever they came from. It is little consolation when Momma tells me they have no immediate travel plans and thus we’ll see plenty of them in the time ahead. I cannot believe it has taken me twenty-two years to meet them and now I do not even want to imagine a day without them here.

I need air to breathe. My room has suddenly become too small and I need to get outside. As always, I leave a message with Momma. She gives me an understanding nod and tells me to take something warm. My mother knows me well enough to know where I’m going and why. Thankfully, I don’t have to explain too much.

It is dark outside and I allow the tears to run freely. Blinded, I walk through the gate, heading

instinctively towards the clearing. Briefly, I think to look at the moon. Taking a deep breath, I forge ahead, satisfied I won't be eaten by werewolves tonight. I watch the giant volcano covered in snow and can't help the thought of the Fire Goddess needing a break, too, at times. The peace and calm surrounding the giant fire-pit is deceiving. The night is crisp and clear even with the gentle dusting of snow still lazily drifting down.

Without further regard, I sit flat down and take my time to take in the mystic surroundings, yet again filled with awe and admiration. Looking up, I watch the snowflakes drift down, catching them on my hand and watching them melt into tears. I smile sadly, pretending that the world around me is reflecting my soul's mood.

The shadows falling over me startle me and drag me back to reality.

Truth be Told

When Liam receives the message from Margarith saying Carmina is going for a walk, he darts after her as soon as he can excuse himself. He watches the small frame walking towards the glade and sniggers under his breath when she looks up at the sky, her thoughts wandering towards him. Her obsession with the moon amuses him to no end. He listens to the sweet beating of her heart, healthy and steady, allowing the sound to thunder through his own imagination.

Liam lifts his head to catch her scent and let out a steady, longing howl. He doesn't have to guess where she's going, he knows. Keeping down-wind, he stands to watch and listen. He feels her ache and the turmoil burning in her mind, reflecting his own sentiments almost exactly. He does not want to leave. He knows he can come back to her room anytime, but he won't be holding her and the notion of her agonizing dreams makes him fume. It is true his heart is still, but his wolf heart is close to the surface and aching with stored passion. Liam knows he is in love with the redheaded creature beyond any reasonable doubt. How could he leave here, how could he be satisfied with the crumbs again? He gave her up the first time, but, selfishly, he does not want to repeat that deed.

Liam does not miss the sneaking shadow making its way closer to Carmina.

"Where are all of you?" He pushes his thoughts urgently toward his family.

"With Margarith inside..."

"There is someone here..." He lifts his face into the breeze and picks up the foreign scent, strong and potent. His family reacts instinctively when they receive a floating introduction of the smell.

"Be careful, we'll come as soon as we can..." As one, they reply.

The shadow is small and fast, and Liam is careful not to reveal himself, remaining downwind, using the shades to hide his presence all the while making his way closer to Carmina.

“Oh! Hi!” I try to hide my surprise when I see the little girl.

“Oh! Hi!” a soft little voice echoes back at me, mimicking my tone.

“Are you lost dear one?” I ask, getting to my feet, a headache pushing itself on me without notice.

“No, are you?” she asks in turn. I give her a warm smile and look around to see if there’s anyone else out here. A hood frames her small face, tight little curls peeking out from under it. She is doll-like.

“I certainly am not, but come. Let me take you to my home to get warm, then we can help you find yours.” I put my arm around the girl who twists out of my reach.

“Carmina, Carmina,” the girl sings my name. I freeze in place, watching her now a little more carefully. Her voice sounds mocking, ominous and spiteful.

“Carmina, Carmina... Human indeed,” Her voice changes from crystal-clear and child-like to a hiss.

“No surprise there, dear one. Why... Why don’t you wrap up and we get you home and safe?”

I force myself to stay poised and composed, trying to ignore the headache forming just behind my eyes. Children aren’t my strong point. I wish Lilly were here.

“No. No, don’t go yet, I love meeting a Moretti pet!” she shrieks with delight; I wonder why I am reminded of the horrible girls in primary school who used to tease me for being shorter and less athletic than them.

“I am not a pet!” I push my chin out, feeling the stubborn streak banishing the headache just enough to guardedly focus on the girl in front of me.

“Oh, that’s right, vampires don’t have pets do they, Carmina? I’m surprised your half-breed family made it this far without draining every last drop... You do smell delicious!” She sniffs in my direction. I stare at her blankly, pursing my lips together wondering what she means. I try to appeal to her child mind.

“Of course vampires don’t keep pets - we should go inside...” I have heard children’s imaginations run wild and the morbidity from this one is puzzling. Why would she mention vampires?

“Ooooooh!” she appears thrilled again. “What a naughty, naughty House - breaking their own rules!”

“What rules? What house?” I ask, genuinely curious, but I don’t hear her answer.

My head explodes into thousands of voices all talking together. The pictures flashing with each one is as horrible as it is strange. A big pile of skulls with Bearded Vultures tearing at the bones; a child with a blood-smeared mouth giving a toothy smile; family members, one after the other, with black-red eyes; wolves gutting corpses surrounded by pale, tall, dark beings scattering human remains in all directions.

I try to see the little girl but the visions make it impossible to move, talk or see anything. More images pile into my mind-sight. Lynxes are tearing up... children! Lots of destruction and the assault continues ruthlessly.

“*It’s time dearie*” I hear one clear voice. Why one? Time for what? Where are the other two and why is she so clear above... Oh my head! I claw at my skull in agony.

“Now-now dearie, just you focus and let Velvet take care of this.”

I hear a loud **snap!**

An echo rebounds through my head in a starburst formation, dispelling the horrible images and every other voice associated with them.

“Open your eyes dearie.”

I open my eyes and feel like I’m looking into two different places at once. I see a large...gigantic wolf circling the little girl and I. I see myself in a big empty room inside my mind. The empty room is exactly the same as the one I paint in, trying to convince me I’m sleeping.

“Focus Carmina, please dearie,” I know the voice is fading away from me, but the clarity of the two separate universes stay. I want to scream but instead, a rush of anger and disgust fill my pores and seep into my bloodstream.

“Why am I so angry? I should be afraid,” I hear myself thinking all too loud, even to my ears.

“Carmina?” Liam asks.

Briefly, I notice the room’s ambiance changing to a purple haze. I look around to find Liam, only to see the wolf and the girl having a standoff. She is so small and that wolf is so large! He is going to hurt her! The girl looks so fragile, a porcelain figurine. Something changes on her face and her mouth pulls into a sour, angry sneer.

“Vampires? Why did she mention vampires?” The thought turns into a scream and then slams back into my head like a bouncing ball.

“Oh gods...” Lady E’s voice trembles inside the room, leaving yellow ripples all over the floor.

“Liam, get her out of there, we’ll deal with the Gello’Des,” Uncle Will sounds worried and I watch the blue colors of his words splash and sleek against the far wall.

“Bro! For the love of... MOVE!” John’s voice is angry and confused and again... there’s a hatred buzzing all around me, painting little red lightning bolts. In silence, the whole room entirely fades back to white.

The big, black-and-red pelted wolf pushes me hard in the opposite direction of the little girl. My body is numb and none-responsive. Before I hit the ground like a ragdoll, the wolf is there to break my fall, putting himself in the way. Big paws pin me safely in a soft cage.

The scream breaks free and I hear my own voice sounding horrified.

“Liam, help me!”

“I’m here Carmina... I’m here. Hush; close your eyes. I’m taking you home. I won’t let you fall, I promise.” I listen to the familiar resonance of Liam’s voice, feeling his calm and compassion painting my white room in pastels and I relax enough to cling to the wolf for dear life.

“Carmina?!” It is Momma’s voice ripping me straight out of the dream.

“I’m awake!” I yelp just to hear Liam say, “Rockflower, you have to use your words, concentrate on your body. Use your voice.”

I look at Liam, baffled, and then realize Momma is not in the painting room!

“Oh.” I say, hearing myself twice over.

“Now concentrate on finding a door in your chamber. Close the door, please, Carmina. I promise

I'll bring you back there."

"Do what he says" and **"My turn next"** I hear the other two voices abruptly pipe up. I deftly ignore them and focus on Liam's instructions.

When the small open door is found, I close it smoothly. The room fades away to nothing. My body is re-united with its motoring functions. I look at my mother's worried face and lift my hand to touch her.

"I'm ... fine." A memory wedges itself between the words and I look at Liam, when did he tell me he didn't like me using the phrase? "I am!"

Liam's expression is marginally amused. "I know you are."

In an instant, the whole experience replays in fast-forward. I kick against my bed to push myself into the corner, drawing my legs up as far away from the two people I trusted the most - until now. "Carmina, my darling..." Momma starts but I shake my head and put my hands over my ears. Liam reaches out to touch me and I viciously slap at it.

"No! Don't touch me!" I growl menacing at him. "Are you? Both of you? What did that little girl mean?" I can't bring myself to say the word circling in my brain.

They don't answer me and the expression on their faces was enough of a response. I yell at them to get out. I pull my pillow in front of me and start screaming into it the instant the door is closed behind them. My family? My Liam? What dream is this and why do I not feel terrified? Am I... am I one too?

I don't hear the knock at my door, or see the gentle giant in Jarrod's shape standing in front of my bed.

"Carmina..." he starts and I push my face deeper into the pillow. It is when I hear Lilly's voice, I force my body to stay still.

"Carmina Rose Nightshade, enough of this! We're your family."

I feel the stubborn edge returning then lift my eyes. Slowly, I put the pillow to one side and crawl to the end of my bed. I lift my head to Lilly's face and look pointedly at her - I was about to tell her exactly what I was thinking but then, something happens: I hear Lilly's voice, but she's not talking. Am I ... I can hear my sister's thoughts!

"That's my big sister, stand up Carmina and get angry, we need you too. By gods if I have to punch you to provoke you, I will."

I turn my head in Jarrod's direction and my eyes widen. His thoughts are softer, uncertain.

"You can't hate us, we're family. Damn it Carmina - fight back, this is not how you were meant to find out!"

I close my eyes and then motion to the door. "**Get out.** Both of you. I will be there in a minute."

I watch them leave soundlessly, acutely aware of every movement and the faint beating of their hearts. I can hear... their hearts beating?! Vampires don't have hearts, do they? I look at the door in

disbelief. I can hear the muted tones of the clan outside. I can hear water dripping somewhere. I can smell the snow and the mixture of 'Hidden Carmina' all over my room, gosh that stuff is strong! I look to see if the bottle was left open. It wasn't. I lift my arm to smell myself and nearly choke. They were right all along, not very 'hidden'! I feel the dull ache in my wrist and I want nothing more than Liam's touch over it. Liam... is he? There's only one way to find out. My temper is catching fire and, with long strides, I make my way outside.

Negotiations

The Moretti family, along with our whole clan, is gathered in the courtyard. Liam looks broody and Esmeriska holds Margarith in an embrace.

"It was never meant to be this way, Margarith. I am so sorry." Margarith takes a step away when Lilly and Jarrod appear from the house.

"She said she'll be out. Momma, Carmina is... *more*." Lilly's hands motion in front of her as if waving over a tall, invisible item.

"More what, Lilly?" Will asks brusquely, "What do you mean *more*?"

"Just... **more**. I don't think we'll **ever** tame her hair again." Lilly says, as if that should explain and validate exactly what she's trying to tell them.

Jarrold wipes over his face, giving John a handshake. "Thanks for fetching us."

"I couldn't face the red-haired fury alone when she gets her bearings," John points to the menacing looking Liam, "not to mention keeping *that* mess in check by myself. He's got it bad."

Jarrold's grin spreads over his face, he cannot help but get pleasure from Liam's discomfort but he confides in John, "Fair warning, John, I think she is ready for a full out war..."

John rubs his hands together as if he's just heard the best news in the world. "Then we have a challenge dude... uh, Jarrod" he says, hearing his mother's hair rustle close by.

When Carmina opens the door, the silence is overwhelming in the courtyard. Her eyes are blazing with a green tinted fire, suspiciously narrowing to slits as she search the faces. Her head tilts to the side as if listening to something. It becomes rather clear what Lilly meant about Carmina's hair and Carmina being *more*. It looks like a wild fire threatening to spread out of control. Carmina has a strange aura of confidence, poise and grace. Something is different about her and it is hard to figure out exactly what it is.

Carmina searches the faces of the people in front of her, focusing on each one of them, listening to their thoughts one at a time. She hears their concerns, their worry for her, their love... for her. Then her eyes fall on Liam and she roars.

"Uh-oh," John steps towards them but it is Lilly's hand over his chest that stops him.

"This, John, is not our fight." She points to Liam, "It is his, I believe."

Carmina's walk to Liam is deliberate, her steps steady and calculated. She puts her hand out and Jarrod fills it with a snowball without questioning the wisdom of doing so; a well-rehearsed action on both their parts to anyone looking on.

Uncle Will snorts and Momma inhales loudly. Carmina's other hand goes up, and the women in the

courtyard all tie their hair back. Liam is frozen in his tracks, confused. When the women move as one to tie their hair, distracting Liam's attention, it is the exact moment Carmina was waiting for. The snowball flies faster than he could turn back his gaze and hits him square in the chest.

"*Negotiation*," she hisses at him, "*is now resumed, Wolf boy.*"

"Yeah, I think she's upset with him," John snickers, pushing his elbow into Jarrod's side.

Liam does not move; his eyes stay on Carmina, who is still holding the attention of every clan member along with his. He licks over his lips not sure what to expect from this tiny ball of bewitchment threatening him with a snowball. The humor does not escape him but there is a serious undertone in the behavior from the clan, and he is not going to provoke the girl any further.

"Momma!" Carmina calls over her shoulder, twisting her palm up as if to call Margarith as witness to an inquisition. A few paces away from Liam she stops but does not look away from him.

"I see you, my child." Margarith acknowledges the request from her daughter

"I am my mother's child." Carmina hiss at Liam. "And my mother is...?"

"Margarith, daughter of my creator and father, William Johnathan Moretti, Ancient and leader of the Moretti Wolf House along with Esmeriska Irena Moretti."

Carmina shakes her hair and waits for her mother's verdict.

"Truth, my child."

Carmina turns her hand palm down by way of thanking Margarith, lowering it to dismiss the need of her Mother's witness.

Margarith leaves the floor as the custom requires and leads the family to the furthest wall, quickly explaining to the rest of the Morettis what is going on. This is how the clan has settled more than one disagreement or upheaval. Margarith named it the "*cool down*" system: one gets all the aggression out by pummeling snow balls at each other and, when you're done, you sleep on the matter. In the morning, you talk over your problems and resolve it amicably. If not... Margarith will mediate. Most of the time it works out well. In summer it is a game of dodgeball. However, as Carmina is unpredictable right now, these are not strictly Margarith's rules.

"If I want to learn more, will you teach me?" She pushes her chin to Liam.

"What do I get in turn? You said we're negotiating!" He barks back at her.

Carmina's face twists in an evil little smile and asks, "What do you want in turn, Wolf boy?"

Liam charges at her but Carmina is ready for him. The snowball hits him in the shoulder and she rolls towards the rest of the clan. She tips two fingers up and the family starts grinning, picking up snowballs.

Liam stops in his tracks and growls at her. "Your study to happen on my turf!" He shakes the snow from his shoulder and starts a semi-circle around Carmina.

"The rest of the negotiations will resume ... later." She hisses at him again. Carmina flows flat onto her stomach, flicking the two fingers she's lifted as if pointing out a direction. From the ground she watches with her chin in her hand as the snowball fight erupts around her, all guns firing at Liam.

When Carmina rolls off to the side, she finds herself wedged between Margarith and Esmeriska.

"I can never hate you Momma. You saved my life. We'll... need time."

Margarith hugs her daughter and whispers: "I love you."

"I know."

Esmeriska joins a huddle around the pair and pats Carmina's back.

"You have a ... what did you call my son? Wolf boy.... Yes, one of those is heading your way."

Esmeriska must have seen the look Carmina's face and because she cracks up laughing in her beautiful chime-sounding manner. "*Adopted*. All will be explained. The only blood family here is your Mother and her father – Will."

The two women move out of the way as one and watch Liam grab Carmina by the wrist, whirl her into his body then pick her up over his shoulder, marching her off.

"He is taking her to his cabin. She is shattered and we agreed she needs a short separation. I wanted to tell you but.... Well, you are here." Esmeriska states inconsequently, waving her hand over the courtyard shambles.

"Where did Pops go?" John asks, out of breath.

"He is home, consulting with the other Houses. It was a Gello'Des who came here."

Margarith puts her hand to her mouth, but it was too late. Lilly had overheard.

"Are you sure?" Lilly snarls.

"Yes, and it looks like you may have your day after all." Jarrod speaks calmly to his wife.

"She revealed our nature to Carmina. She thought Carmina already knew."

Lilly's grin is a contradiction to her usual serenity; her mouth twists wryly as she walks away without a word.

A Dens and Wolves

Liam puts me down when we reach his cabin.

"Wait here," He says, going back outside.

I hear a faint static crackle and then find myself looking at the same black and red wolf from earlier, padding into the room. I freeze in place. If it wasn't for those searching eyes... I look around me and then sit down on what I assume is the bed. I watch as the big wolf apparently approves and jumps in behind me. I realize I am unequivocally exhausted. I cautiously lean back against the warm body behind me, wondering why he is so hot! I get comfortable and fall asleep to the sound of the soft heartbeat under my cheek. My dreams escort me to my inner sanctum: my painting room where I see Liam silently sit on the outskirts of my space.

He brought me back, just like he promised. There is so much to work through, so many questions unanswered. Not now. I settle into a rhythm of expressing myself with colors and patterns and peaceful silence.

Time in this dream-space is almost absent. When I open my eyes, I am surprised to find it is still dark out. I don't move much, wallowing for a while in the blissful state of mind. I feel the soft fur under my cheek and yawn.

"*Hello, Sleepyhead,*" The thought floats into my mind.

"Hmmm," I answer out loud.

"*Mother brought you clothes and food. She's changed the study for you into a room...*" He let the words hang in the air.

"Hmmm," I answer aloud again.

“Are... you still mad at me?” he asks tentatively.

“I don’t know...” I answer honestly. I feel him move out from under me and fall back against the bed. I reach for a pillow and pout.

“You should eat.”

Instead of answering him, I pull the pillow over my face. I don’t want to move. My body is aching and stiff and I feel hot and sticky. When he does not speak again, I peek out from under the pillow and listens to the sounds surrounding us.

I can hear the soothing crackle of a fire from somewhere inside the house. I turn my head, lifting away from the pillows. I can hear ice falling from the roof, thudding down just below. I can hear a small animal scratching into the snow. I hear birds far off singing a noisy song. I hear heavy footfalls, listening to them stop and then a thud, followed by a crunch and several smaller sounds flopping into the ice, and again, and again. Is he chopping...wood?

I try to sneak out of bed but get tangled in a sheet and slam facedown on the floor, one foot still hooked conspicuously on the side of the bed. Just. My. Luck.

“Carmina, are you alright?”

“Mind your own business! And stay out of my head!” I grunt towards the door. When I feel a flash of intense hurt while he fades away from me, I regret having said that. What is wrong with me? I close my eyes against the feeling and roll onto my back to untangle myself. The reel did not work and I open my eyes to see what can be done. Sat on his heels, is Liam, hovering over me. He’s not laughing or smiling but his eyes are filled with those tiny little flecks like devil forks.

“You going to help or just sit there?” I ask, embarrassed.

“I am going to mind my own business.” He mocks.

“Fine.”

I sit up, but the corset is a little restricting and I can’t reach my leg. I try kicking and pulling and twisting my leg and, in pure frustration, I let out a sulky scream.

“AAARGH!”

Falling over backwards, I lay there with my hands thrown up next to my head. Liam is still sitting there emotion- and expressionless. Except for those eyes.

“I’ll... go draw your bath for you then? Let me know when you slay the sheet-beast.” The taunting in his voice scrapes at my temper like a match to tinder.

“Help me, you bully!” I shout at him.

“Ask nicely.”

“Liam Moretti!”

“Yes, Liam Moretti! Help the lady!” I hear John’s laughing voice burst through the door before he does. He’s at my side and ripping the sheet away neatly, swirling it in the air.

“White flag, my Lady!” he offers. I push him as hard as I can out of my way and storm down the passage looking for the room Liam mentioned earlier.

“Hell Bro. How you do it is beyond me. She’s spitting mad at you, ah-gain... how do you do it? You ready for hunt? Mom and Dad are just outside ?”

“Yeah, I don’t know what I’m doing... I suppose ... She needs her space.”

I can hear the scribble of pencil on paper and howls rising up outside. Static fizzing sounds fleetingly pass by and then it is silent again. I recognize the sound now as them changing to or from their wolf shapes.

I take my time organizing the room to my liking. I drag the desk to the window. Lady E has outdone herself with this room. It feels warm and comfortable and the colors on the wall are neutral. On the one end of the room is a big modern couch, with a small side table. Against another wall is an empty bookshelf with wardrobes on either side. There are pictures on the wall of both families taken over the past month. I clamber onto the desk and sit there watching the snow fall outside. I wonder what it is like on these hunts of theirs.

Would they mind if I ... tag along? What do they hunt? I close my eyes against the stream of questions pouring out into my mind. I need to get through one thing at a time, and right now that one thing is this newfound ability to ... speak inside my head with them, and listen to thoughts. It is so intrusive; I don't like it. I also don't know how it works and it is bothersome.

Habitually I look at the moon and roll my eyes. Guess I will go have a shower instead. Getting up lazily, I open the wardrobes to find a selection of all my favorite outfits. Eventually tracking down my preferred set of winter PJ's and go in search for the bathroom. I really ought to thank Lady E; she's really done me a huge favor.

The bathroom is a big and roomy with fresh towels against the walls. The shower is enormous and I don't have to wonder why. The tub is equally as spacious. There are no mirrors and nothing else but a toothbrush on a stand. My bathroom bag is there on a side cabinet. Underneath it is a note; I recognize Momma's handwriting.

Shortly after the tub is filled I reach for the papers. I decide not to use the hearty "Hidden Carmina" fragrance in Liam's cabin without asking him first. I sink into the tub and open the letter.

*"My Dearest Daughter,
I don't know where to start, or even what to say.*

I want you to know that there are things you will learn going into the future, and not all of them will be pleasant. I wish I could have spared you the history and the nightmares that are still to come, but alas I can't.

If you know nothing, my lovely child, know that we all did what we thought was safer for you.

Only time will tell if you can ever forgive us for keeping this secret – there are laws that prevent the revelation, but know that each and every one of us are standing with you in this.

You are family. WE are family. And no matter if you choose never to trust us again, if you choose

never to be part of our lives.... Gods forbid.... We will always stand as a family unit with you.

I include the full story of your Biological Mother. I think it is time you know about yourself and your own history.

Please forgive me, forgive us.

Love.

Margarith Nightshade,

Momma.”

I close my eyes, my trembling hands rustling the papers. I don't want to know my history. I know it already. My mother found me, she raised me and no amount of history can change that. I am safe because of her. I am alive because of her. Do I want to question that? No.

I pull Momma's page from the front and dunk the rest of the letter in the water. I get out of the tub, getting dressed without drying off properly. When I'm done, I scoop the mushy, ink soaked papers from the water and throw them in the bin.

“Not Smart” and “Stubborn as ever.” I wave my hand dismissing the two voices. I refuse to think about the missing third. I climb back onto the desk and watch the sunrise, letting tears flow at will, taking a lot of the tension with them.

Attitude Lesson

When Liam arrives back at his cabin, he expects to find the usual aroma of 'Hidden Carmina'. Instead what he smells is a sweet, clean scent of the woman he loves. It takes him, in a hungered frenzy, to the door of her room. He stops at the closed door, standing with his head against the frame, listening to her heartbeat and the stifled sobs. He clenches his fists in frustration, stopping just short of hitting the wall. With effort, Liam turns away and heads to the bathroom for a shower. When he opens the door, he has no control over the growl that rumbles from his chest and into his throat. He can smell her and taste her on the air and it is trying to force him back to her room. “*How long will I last?*” he speaks quietly to himself, knowing that there is no answer to the question.

On his way back to his own room, Liam stops again to listen to Carmina. He lifts his hand to knock but halfway changes his mind. She will show when she's ready. His mother told him not to force any interaction. Carmina has a lot to deal with. Liam heads outside, standing dead still in the snow, watching the day move past him. The hole in his chest is stinging worse than ever. Several times he fights the urge to simply go back in there and take what he wants. He knew it would be difficult, he didn't know it would be a constant battle.

Around lunchtime, his frustration is unbearable. Marching himself inside to the kitchen, he is caught off guard by Carmina sitting at the table having lunch. He does not speak to her when he thrusts past towards the fridge. Eventually he closes the door, rubbing his hand through his hair and

letting it rest in the nape of his neck.

“How... How are you feeling?” He asks without turning to face her. Carmina turns in the chair and regards him with an unnatural calm.

“Fi--” she starts and jumps, visibly shaken when he pushes both hands forcefully into the fridge door.

“**Do. Not.** Tell. Me. You’re *fine!*” he growls between gritted teeth. Still, he does not turn to face her.

Carmina’s face sets in a stubborn frame and she hisses back at him, “Well then, don’t ask me if you don’t want to hear it!”

When Liam turns to face her, his eyes are darker than usual. He glares at her for a moment, sucking in a breath through his teeth. When he speaks, the words carry a tone she has never heard him use with her before. “Don’t push me Carmina.”

Liam leaves the kitchen and starts running. He does not change shape, but forces the full extent of his uncontrolled energy into the run. He allows the memory of the first encounter with this woman race against him.

When he ultimately stops, he realizes that he’s at the family home. Esmeriska open the door before he can do it himself.

The look on her son’s face tells her all she wants to know and she opens her arms to him. Will appears behind his wife and his hand rests on his son’s shoulder.

“She’s a little Vixen, my brother. If she weren’t, she’d not have bonded with you. You need her more than she needs you.”

It is John’s words that had the family turn to him.

“You...?” Liam glares at his brother.

“Yeah bro, I was there. Nearly beat you home, too.” He smirks, pushing himself away from the pillar he was casually leaning against.

“Look, be as mad as you like, but I saw what I saw this morning and I worry about **you.**” He laughs softly. “It’s your den brother, and I will not intrude but I will not let anything happen to that girl either. I promised her family. If you didn’t leave today, I would have dragged your big brother ass out of there myself.”

John saunters up to his brother, standing chest to chest with him. “You need to get a hold on this thing or make a move ... soon.”

There is no hint of banter or joking in John’s tone and Liam knows his brother is echoing the sentiments of his mother and father too.

Esmeriska and Will look surprised when Liam speaks next. Both of them let the brothers resolve their differences on their own. Liam looks at his mother, father and then to John.

“Thank you brother. It won’t happen again, it was just...”

“Yeah, her natural scent is something to guard against, knocked me off balance too and I don’t even have a bond with her!” He winks at his brother knowingly.

“Well, now it’s settled. Spend the day Liam, it will do you good.” Will wasn’t asking. He was telling his son. Esmeriska clips John on the ear.

“Language.” And then nods approvingly, “Well said, you’ve done good.”

Oh dear gods what have I done?! I have never seen Liam so dark and terrifying. I wanted a reaction from him but not *that* particular one. Will he be back? I cannot find enough strength to move off the chair. The dent in the fridge catches my eye and I gasp. The whole of the top door is thoroughly bashed in and yet, I get the feeling that he held back a lot! I close my eyes trying to find him. “Liam?” but there’s no answer. I’m such a stupid girl! I don’t know how to do the whole door thing without him here! I am alone now, like I wanted. Then why am I feeling so terribly unhappy about it?

My legs find strength and I head to my room again. On my way to the window, I grab my frame with the pictures of Liam and me at the wedding, and a pillow. I make myself comfortable on the desk playing the past day over and over in my head. I let my fingers trace his shape on the picture then hold it to my heart. I am so tired. The tiredness snuck up on me and I feel myself dozing off. I try to fight it and lose the fight. I scamper around in the fog looking for a door that I don’t find... The darkness snatches me away.

***** The dreams are nightmares are dreams and nightmares*****

The grip on my wrist turns into a claw. I feel myself dangling.

My feet kick out to find something solid to stand on.

This time I find it. But the relief is short lived.

I hear a screech above me, and when I look it is a vulture, turning, turning, turning.

“No! No! Shoo! Go away!” I scream at it.

My wrist is still in the claw grip.

I try to pull it free but the thing won’t let go.

It burns like holding a hot coal.

The face of the wolf with the golden eyes pushes straight into mine.

His mouth snaps while he tries to pull me closer to him.

“NO!! HELP! NO!” I scream.

I turn, trying to find a direction to run just to notice several lynxes circling me.

They’re all growling.

The louder they get, the harder the wolf snaps at me, the closer the piercing screeches from above become.

I scream and scream. My voice gives way and all that is left are tears.

I wipe my face to clear my eyes from the tears just to pull my hands away, covered in blood.

I hear Momma scream at me but I can’t make out what she’s saying.

I try to see where she is but the tears, the blood-tears, fill my eyes and keep me blinded.

I use my dress to wipe enough to see Momma rushing towards me with the whole family behind her.

Lilly and Jarrod are snarling and hissing next to Momma.

The clan behind them is manic, screaming and screeching, the wolves still snapping closer and

the cats are finding their way to me!

“No! I am family!” I try to speak but it is only a raw, throaty scrape that escapes. “I AM FAMILY!”

They keep coming, more and more of them.

The sky fill with vultures and the ledge threatens to give way under the jumping wolves’ weight, the lynxes jump and I put my hands up in defense.

“STOP! PLEASE! STOP! “

I hear the screams in my own ears sounding hoarse and raw.

“I AM FAMILY!”

YES CARMINA YOU ARE! WAKE UP NOW, PLEASE! OH GODS! CARMINA WAKE UP!

“I am family!” I hear myself still screaming, fighting the arms that are trying to hold me, the picture clutched against my chest.

“You’re awake, open your eyes, please - open your eyes...” When I do, the light in the eyes looking back at me practically chokes me with relief.

“Liam! I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” I wrap my arms around him. I hear him sigh as his arms circle me securely.

“Carmina...” I feel him move and I tighten my grip.

“I am sorry...” His voice stressed. I refuse to let my grip go, even when his hands are pulling my arms away from him.

“Come, please?” He moves off the desk and pulls me along. I awkwardly try to climb off the desk but he picks me up and stands, holding me against his chest and shoulder, wavering. After a contemplative look down on me, he marches me to the kitchen where my chair is still in the middle of the floor. He puts me down on it and looks me over from head to toe.

“I’m f--” I start, but stop when he gives me an accusatory look.

“Look, I need to lay just this one thing on the table right now. Please.” The chair, with me in it, moves to the table and a short blurry motion later, a plate appears with food on it; bread, cold meats, salad, cheeses and small pieces of liver.

“Eat.” He says and he sits down. There’s a cup of tea for me and a glass of water for him.

“Thank you...”

His head is in his hands and I make an effort to eat. I am not hungry but I can feel my energy slipping and know what will come next if I don’t.

I eat in silence, feeling stropy at the crunchy sounds filling the kitchen. Liam does not move but stay with his head rested in the palm of his hands, both elbows on the table. I feel my heart break into a million pieces knowing that I am doing this to him. I don’t know how to open the stupid door that will let him in and now he blames himself for my stupid nightmare, too.

Liam speaks again, flatly, “I am letting you know now that I will not accept your banishment of me from your mind again until I’m sure you can find your way back to me when you need it. I can’t stand the excruciating worry of not knowing how you are. I will not leave, even if you order it. I’m

sorry, I can't."

Relief washes over me and I nod. "I... understand. I won't ask you to do that again." I feel the tremble in my voice and to hide it I take a mouth full of food.

"This... **you** are new to us Carmina... we have as much to learn about you as... you have to learn about us." I swallow the food and the lump in my throat.

"But I... I'm just human..."

"Just... Human?!" Liam drops his hands on front of him on the table and I jump at the noise it makes. "There is nothing '*just*' about you Carmina. Not a stitch of '*just*'. We know what we are..." I push my empty plate back and pin him down with a look. "And what are you, Liam?"

His lips pull in a tense line. I get up and take his face in both my hands, lifting it to me.

"What are you Liam? Tell me." Fury burns around his mouth as I watch his jaw-line tighten, feeling the tension against my palms. "You can't even say it, Liam, and you want me to accept it?" I know I have already accepted it, but I need him to say it. I need them all to admit it. To cement it for me into my soul so they cannot take it back or take it away from me. So it can be as much a part of me as it is of them.

"Carmina... don't..."

"What are you, Liam?" I ask again, leaning a little closer. Liam takes both my wrists in his hands again, and stands up. He pulls me up to him, my fists against his chest.

"I am a monster, Carmina. I am the nightmares that you dream of. I am a beast with a heartbeat and I am an immortal without one."

I lean into his chest, pushing myself firmly against his body, hissing at him when I speak.

"Yes, but what **are** you?" I ask again.

Liam pulls my arms up and around his neck. He lifts me with one arm around my waist and the other tangled in my hair, exposing my neck. His lips are cold against my skin and I feel the words burn into my being.

"I am a wolf at times, and I am a vampire at other times."

A pained, rolling growl washes after his words over my neck. I try to lift my head to face him again, but his grip tightens in my hair.

"I want to protect you," raw power in his voice, "and destroy you at the same time..." The words carry a familiar chime to them, but his searching mouth finds the pulse in my neck and hovers there. I feel his body pushing firmer against mine.

I hear a *snap!* And I'm inside his head. I feel him in mine through the heat that is burning a slow course into my blood. I feel his excitement, the power he is restraining and I feel the fear of...me? Liam lifts his head from me and growls, deep, passionately and loud.

"*Liam?*"

"*Welcome to my room,*" the whisper sounds like the growl.

I shut the outside world out and give myself over to the rush of emotions. Liam's hand releases my hair and I lift myself, grabbing onto the collar of his shirt. I refuse to open my eyes, keeping the outside world as far away as I can get it. I lean against him and taste the blood in my own mouth

when his lips crush against mine and his teeth sink into the soft flesh.

“Gods give me strength....” I hear his words before he pulls his mouth away from mine. I grip as hard as I can onto the shirt collar and pull myself back to his lips. I feel drunk and heady. I feel him fighting against his nature and it heightens my own excitement.

“You need to... stop...” He is howling against my lips and I throw my head back in a slow drawn out moan.

“Oh gods, Carmina, you are going to kill me.”

I don't feel us moving and I don't know how we got there, but I am being dumped in the snow. Liam's body is over me, holding me down with one hand to my chest. Kneeling, he is keeping a distance between us. It takes a few moments before the cold of the snow sobers my senses up enough for me to squeal in horror.

“I don't want this.” He says, pushing me away from him before he gets up.

“You... wait... You...don't?”

“John was right. You're dangerous to be around!”

“Liam? What are you saying?”

Liam turns around and looks at me; I don't move from my little ice-bed.

“Carmina... You can't play with the devil's tail and expect to keep your soul.”

“My soul is just fi-- It is not your concern. I assure you, you will not get hold of it.” I feel hurt over the sudden change in atmosphere.

“You are such a stupid little girl!” he shouts at me.

His words motivate me into movement. I jump up and run at him full force. Liam moves out of my way without effort.

“If I want to hurt you, I can – and believe me when I tell you, I want to!” He says, rushing around me in a blur.

“I will always recognize you.” He inhales my scent and I feel the strain he is under to keep control of himself. The power of what my smell is doing to him desiccates **my** throat profusely.

“I am stronger than you,” he grabs me into a hold facing away from him. I am stunned and numb at this point. I feel the joy he feels of holding me, the forceful power being contained. He is super gentle and yet I cannot move!

His face is between my neck and shoulder when he speaks. *“You won't say no to me.”*

He turns me around and kisses me with so much tenderness and passion I feel myself choke. My body trembles, powerless, while his seems to have an endless supply of power coursing through it. There is enjoyment that he draws from the kiss but... There is no pleasure in it. There is but a bitter struggle to stop at the right time.

“So you see, Carmina,” He lets me go, speaking from the doorway, *“I am exactly what I said: your nightmares exemplified.”*

He disappears into the house and I stare stunned after him. Moments later he is outside again, scooping me up and marching me to the bathroom. He drops me inside, the water already running and “Hidden Carmina” seeping into my pores already.

*“Help me, please, so that I can help you – we know what we are... but we don't know **who** you are.”* He walks out, slamming the door behind him.

Minutes later I am soaking in the tub and tentatively reach out to Liam.

“*Liam...*”

“*I’m here...*” He says

“*Your room is dark.*” I tell him.

“*It is dark...*” I ignore his sigh and the irritation he feels towards me.

“*Yes, ohm, there’s no color in here.*”

“*Carmina? I just gave you the Vampire 101 course and ... my **room** is dark?*” he sounds like he’s about to throw in the towel. There is a lingering chuckle trapped in the words, so I push ahead.

“*Yes. So, I thought... maybe... you know... I can share some of mine?*”

“*Some of your...?*”

“*Color.*”

“*How?*”

I lay down on the ground, shaking my hair out and watching the red spread all over his floor.

“*Carmina!*” he is laughing with every part of his body, enjoying the moment.

“*See, Liam, you can’t say no to me either, and like this? You can’t hide from me. And while you are stronger and faster and scarier... it doesn’t matter because you already have my heart... my soul will go willingly.*”

I fade to a corner of his room, finishing my bath.

Picnic

Days become weeks. Liam is gentle but also merciless about me getting to grips with the flow of energy and information between us. Progress is frustrating and aggravating, but progress means that I no longer need the visual representations to form the links with the rest of the Moretti house. I have learned about, and identified, their individual energies, moods, forces and signatures. I have learned how to “*knock*” and answer when they “*knock*”.

Liam still keeps me under close guard and refuses to fade or let me drop into complete silence and I am very used to having him as a constant companion. I have learned and grown with his family and am a lot more comfortable in my skin. While I am not allowed to disconnect, I have learned to draw my own thoughts to silence and dwindle to become a noiseless observer hardly noticed. It is not like we spend all the time together either. Liam has to eat and his wolf form needs rest.

We also made an agreement that Liam is not to carry me everywhere when I am too slow for his liking. He can either go ahead, or learn patience. I am not a baby and if I’ve not utterly fallen apart by now, I am not going to do so anytime soon. He sulked for a while over the new rule but got over it soon enough when I agreed to piggyback rides.

Today is Wednesday. I know this because there is a knock at the cabin door. Liam told me that his

mother is insisting on a face-to-face family day, which includes me, and they will be fetching us at this time. I suspect she's checking to see if I'm as well as I say - not that she'd be uninformed if I wasn't. There is very little to hide once you get locked in as tight as I have been.

I open the door and am greeted by three grinning faces.

"Why do you still wait for us to knock? You know we're here..." John whines.

"Because it is polite... and I like making you suffer a little." I tease.

Lady E and Uncle Will each receive a warm hug and an invite in. I pretend to close the door on John, but he manages to get inside and scoops me into an embrace.

"You look great! I was starting to think you're nothing more than a voice in my head!"

Liam makes his way from the shower and, as natural as anything, removes me from his brother's embrace with a warning grin.

"Hands off..."

John backs off with both hands up in front of him. I roll my eyes and offer something to drink but Lady E stops me.

"Unless you need it sweetheart, but... Have you been to the river yet?"

"No... I know there is one... somewhere..."

"Ah, then you're in for a treat. We're hiking to the river today. But you're not going like *that*." She waves her hand over me like I'm wearing mud.

"Uhhhh?"

"Here. Wet denims stay wet forever and a big jacket is just too awkward to hike in."

She hands me a bright pink bag, in which is a set of pitch-black clothing; waterproof slacks with a top to match and a jacket; I can't figure out what it's made of but it is light, snug and warm! It is obviously perfectly sized and I wonder if I should braid my hair. Excitement gets the better of me and I decide against it. I have become used to this mess and Liam seems to like it a lot. I know he tries not to stare but I watch him sometimes and I feel his affection. There is no denying that I enjoy his admiration too. Emerging from my room, John grabs at his chest and does the falling over move again.

"Mother, what are you doing to meeee? Look at that girl - every bit the witch in training!"

I feel the approval travelling around me and I grin happily.

"Thank you." I hug Lady E.

"Oh no, my sweet girl, thank you! You are quite the painting."

"Off we go," Uncle Will commands. It is clear he does not like being cooped up indoors.

Once outside, Liam takes my hand firmly in his and matches my pace. I forget that I have kept this development to myself for the harder days when I am struggling. Liam is very affectionate and very possessive. It is the first time the others see us *together*.

"Oh... Li-am and Mi-na sitting in a tree..." John teases and Uncle Will chimes in, "K-i-s-s-i-n-g!"

Walking with the Morettis is proving to be a challenge. They are constantly scuffling and dashing back and forth or jostling. Even Lady E gets in on the playful shoving and it is all I can do not to fall over.

“Who’s Mina?” I pretend not to notice myself blushing.

John darts around me like a puppy with a new owner.

“VOTE!” He shouts and I hear it echo all around us. There is an air of jovial familiarity amongst the Morettis and the call for a vote is met without hesitation.

“Aye,” the other three pipe up and, apparently, that settles the score.

“You are. You’re outvoted.”

Lady E looks pleased as punch and her eyes are gleaming as bright as the sun. Dragging up behind them, I notice there’s nothing but *my* set of prints in the snow. Puzzled, I look behind me and to verify and the evidence is apparent. One set of dragging prints trailing as far back as the eyes can see.

“So I’m the fat one?” I point behind us and they laugh. Out of nowhere, three sets of prints appear next to mine as we stroll.

The view that greets me is a panorama of breathtaking awe. The river is frozen over and, with the little sunlight gliding against the surface, you can just about make out a random spread of sparkling crystals. On the other side of the river is a tree line that stretches forever, inviting you in like Red Riding hood. Drawing nearer to the bank, a quaint, heavy wooden gazebo grabs my attention. It is standing regal and tranquil with an air of self-importance. Inside is a cascade of bright pillows over a thick checked blanket and two picnic baskets to complete the picture. I feel myself well up with emotion.

“It is so beautiful!”

Lady E pushes her chin out with pride and, for a moment, she reminds me of a young Victorian rebel refusing to conform. I still can’t get to grips with how beautiful this woman is. It is clear that she received the desired response when she shakes her head and waves her hand in an ‘*Ahw gosh*’ routine. We sit down and make small talk for a while which allows me to catch my breath. The men, **all** of them, constantly look towards the river.

Lady E sighs and waves them off.

“Go! GO! The gear is under the deck.”

I watch as the three of them blur off and return in skates and sticks.

“Ah.” I grasp the reference.

“Mother brought a set for you too...if you’re brave enough?” John teases.

“Or is the fire in your hair reserved for snowball fights in particular?”

“I-I can’t. Uhm... I’m not very good at it, but I love watching. Please...” I recall the last time I tried this and it ended badly. I fell so many times tripping over myself, taking the others and the nets with me; the rink marshal asked me to remove the gear and not ever set foot on his ice again.

“Ok, ok, but put them on at least and come down with us...” Uncle Will makes a sad face at me and I narrow my eyes.

“So, *so* unfair!” I mutter, snatching the items from him and putting them on, shaking my head at the extra padding required just for me. Do they have a death-wish of some sort?

Slowly edging closer to the riverbank, I find an outpost good enough to firmly plant myself and

marvel as the four of them speed the length of the river. It's frantic game of tag that I can't follow. They put sticks down for me to 'guard' and 'use if necessary'. I gawk openly at how graceful all of them are when they move slowly enough for me to follow. In particular, when Lady E moves, her hair always seem to feather right back into place after every effort. Uncle Will's silvery hair is always close to his wife, and as a team, they move in a coordinated dance that leaves the boys blocked from getting past. I feel like this is an ice show and I am a guest of honor; alone in the theater, reserved just for me.

A headache flairs without warning and my hands instinctively fly to my temples. I know this feeling and my anxiety does not even pretend to be absent.

"No, no, no, I don't want to see those horrid pictures..." I find a hand full of ice and stick it on the back of my neck.

"Liam..." I whisper to him "*Someone is there...*"

"You can see her?" he asks, surprised.

"Her? No... my head..."

Without another word, the four blurs fly towards me and, for a second, I think I am going to throw up.

"**22 years hey? I got this.**" I hear the voice speak at the same time as I see the Lynx breaking the tree-line. The headache is in full swing, ready to explode and I feel myself hyperventilating.

"**Steady, Carmina.**" I watch the big cat's paws leaving heavy prints, two, three more paces and the blindness set in. Before any images can fill the darkness, there is a reverberating sound inside my head, banishing the pain along with it.

SNAP!!

Like before, I feel the energy surge, but this time there is nothing more than silence in the darkness.

"**Open your eyes.**"

When I manage to look, it is straight into a set of warrior-green eyes on a lowered head, front paw thumping angrily at the ground and a cat-yowl that sends tingles down my spine.

"**Richard over and out!**"

I know the voice is fading away from me. I want to say goodbye but he is already gone when I hear a new voice.

I feel her, and she is not happy. I withdraw quietly into a corner, making myself as little known as I can. I use my outside voice, the term best describing using my physical vocals.

"Liam?"

"Are you alright?" He speaks back to me and I hear the catty remark inside.

"Aw, how cute! You even bow out to her vocal needs. **What** is she doing here?"

Like I do... or did, with the voices, I focus outside of myself and don't acknowledge her remark at all. I have done this so often that it takes no effort at all and she's none the wiser.

"I'm ... a little scared," I say and like a wall, both Liam and John push in front of me, leaving just enough space for me to see between them.

"Jackie! So good to see you. We're still on our line. What brings you to the river, my dear? I'm sure it is not to find out why Mina is with us." Uncle Will speaks kindly.

“You too Will? Too bloody precious. No. We saw you arrive. Of course it is no surprise to find her here, we could smell her for miles. Joseph thought it would be nice to have a joint game.”

“Why don’t you go fetch your family, dear one? We can have a game or two it would be so much fun! And it would be marvelous for Carmina to meet Maria!” Lady E tilts her head in the slightest of gestures, almost dismissing the girl.

Liam gets a sadistic grin and John openly laughs at my reaction. Jackie glares at me but I don’t care. Surely they don’t expect me to play? With another House? Oh gods, help me. Help them!

*“Will she play? I prefer not to play with my **food**.”*

“Jackie! You will mind your words, please. Carmina is capable of far more than you give her credit. Don’t be rude to our guest.” Liam speaks to her for the first time.

The Lynx’s head turns away from me and she purrs. *“Aw **my** Liam... I was looking forward to alone time with you today.... It’s not like she even understands, how boring.”* She rubs her head against his side, nudging his hand. Is that cat really purring?!

Lady E, Uncle Will and John look at me in unison. They practically bounce me to the front of the conversation. It is Uncle Will that interrupts the Lynx-girl’s flirtation.

“Jackie Azzara, meet Carmina Rose Nightshade.”

I push through my Vampire fort and take Liam’s hand, feeling like a schoolgirl whose big brother just came to rescue her from the bullies.

“Well met, Miss Jackie Azzara. Turns out I do hear you just fine.” I speak to her personally, *“Some secrets are best kept in plain sight.”*

I see the cat freeze, I hear her furious growl, I feel her surprise and irritation. Her big head nudges against Liam’s hand before she glowers at me. I feel the pride and support from the Moretti family, giving me enough courage to hold my ground.

“All along?!” she hisses at me.

“No, from the part where you thought of shredding me.” I smile sweetly. The guess I made was accurate enough, judging by the shameful and bewildered reaction from the Lynx.

“How is this possible?” Jackie is shouting now and the tenacious tension sets into my bones. I refuse to speak again but I also don’t draw back.

“We will tell you when we ourselves know. Now, are we having a game or not?” Uncle Will asks, laying down the challenge.

Jackie does not answer but when she turns to run off, I allow myself to relax and memorize her signature before closing myself off against her.

“Mina... when...” Uncle Will asks in proud surprise.

“Uhm.... Richard, just like Velvet...”

Uncle Will sniggers and slaps one hand into the other, looking utterly pleased. *“I don’t presume to understand it, but good job girl! We hardly noticed you at all!”*

John lifts his head and let out a long, joyful howl followed by the rest of the Moretti family.

From the other side of the river four figures break the tree line, one male and two females. Their emerald eyes are aware and curious like prowling cats. They have a more sturdy build to them but every movement is the embodiment of grace and poise. Their skin is smooth and light, pale, but not as pronounced as the Morettis. I tilt my head while looking at their hair, anticipating the specks of

sun that highlight the colors to their full glory. Each one has a style in a mix of gingers, browns and silvery streaks but in different proportions and almost reflecting markings. It is not that their hair is unruly, it is just... everywhere. It is lush and invites you to stroke your fingers through it; but when you see their sharp eyes and the set of their mouths you know you shouldn't dare. I can't help but feel a little envious, being back in my ugly duckling fairytale. I can see why Liam.... I shake my head and try to ban the idea.

"You...see them already?" Uncle Will asks, observably aware of my analysis and I flush scarlet. There is no secret to be kept and there is just no way around it when you're under mental house arrest.

"Don't you?" I ask, somewhat cheekily.

Uncle Will looks at Liam and then his lips pull into a peculiar smirk. Another silent communication between them – I'm guessing.

"Don't be daft, of course I do..." he shoves me purposefully hard and I closely fly past Liam, who in turn catches me and places me upright in front of his Father.

"Apologize, Madam, or you're the disk today," His hand is still around my waist.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" I yell and can't help laughing along with them when they do a terrible rendition of disappointed faces.

"Don't forget who is Alpha, Mina..." Liam teases me and twirls his mother around his finger in a ballet towards Will.

"Mother is the sole person to get away with ... just about anything,"

Lady E dances past me and nuzzles up to her husband.

"Is it true?" I hear the male voice from a distance.

"Good morning, Joseph! Is what true?" Lady E glides over to the male and kisses each cheek.

"Ah, the beautiful Esmeriska! Forgive me my impatience." He receives and returns the kisses, taking her hand to kiss it as well. I smile to myself; this man is a charmer.

"My friends! It has been... very long! So good to see you, so good."

They are all greeting one another and I am pertinently excluded from the friends list. Jackie looks over Liam's shoulder at me when she pushes herself firmly against his body and I swear I can hear her purr again! I offer a smile, hoping it will come across warm and friendly and maybe even confident. Instead of letting go, she swings herself around him, leaning against his shoulder turning her back to me. I grit my teeth and am about to step forward.

"Sweetheart," I hear Lady E gingerly push into my mind "*The hellcat has an itch to scratch and she's chosen the wrong scratch pole. Don't let her push you around but pick your battles.*"

I nod to Lady E who waves me towards the group.

"Carmina Rose Nightshade... but I am sure we don't have to tell you who she is."

"Oh Carmina! Bella! You are a sight for sore eyes! Oh you look more..." He waves his hands around in circles trying to find the words. "...hypnotic than before.... Jackie tells me stories about you... are they true?"

I feel all eyes on me and swallow hard.

"It is, Sir..." I stammer and the catty chitter pushes against me.

“Ah, you can call me Joseph! I heard you once before but ... it was unclear.” He taps his head and I blush scarlet red when the connection signs up firmly. I also recall having called them pets. How embarrassing.

“Oh...” he laughs at my reaction.

“Oh she is exquisite! A blush!” He pulls me closer and offers the family-friend kiss on each cheek.

“You cannot ever lose that, it is the most beautiful color any woman can wear. Maria! Come, come see this child. Quickly!”

I feel like I’ve just passed another test. I look at Liam worriedly and shake my head when he takes my hand, leading me to the iced river.

“Liam... I am terrible at this. I can’t walk, you want me to...” I feel my feet slip out from under me and I connect to the ground. This is going to be the death of me today. Had Jackie not insisted on wrapping Liam up in cat-fur he may have been able to catch me. I see the anger on his face towards her.

“Oh she is so clumsy! How can she play? How will we choose teams?” Jackie, still draped over Liam, makes full use of the situation to point out my shortcomings.

“We do this the same way as always. Race the disk to the line and hit,” Joseph injects, “Shortest distance team with longest. Unless anyone objects?”

“I can’t do this!” I feel a serious case of anxiety rinse and repeat through my body.

“Just try Carmina... You will gain respect for it. I will not steer you wrong my girl.” Uncle Will answers. *“Or would you rather that cat...?”*

“No, I’ll try.” I feel like pouting but settle on a quivering lip instead.

I watch them as they each fly to the makeshift line drawn in the ice, then hit the disk so hard there is no telling where it ends up. John, Jackie and Maria race for the disk and that is a side-bet waiting to happen. Jackie, having found it, brings the disk back. I am up last in tow and try as I may, they don’t forget me.

Instead of putting the disk in front of me, Jackie drops it to the ice and kicks it with force in my direction. I watch it come at me and for a moment wanted to put my arm up to defend myself. But that stubborn person that lives in my body pulls a determined face and focuses on the disk. It is as if the thing slows down enough for me to follow. I see the rest of the place around me as if looking through the bottom of a glass and sigh, waiting for the black fog to whisk me off until they’re all gone. It doesn’t happen. I push off towards the disk, which all but comes to a stop anyway; I grab hold of it and, painfully slowly, make my way to the line. Crossing it at the speed of... nothing, embarrassed at making them all wait on me like this. When I reach the line I hit the disk and put in all my embarrassment, anger and frustration behind the hit, hoping it will be enough to get it out of the immediate view. I turn and yell at the Moretti family through our link.

“I told you, this is a disaster!” closing my eyes and putting my hands over them, feeling like I want to cry. At least it is over now.

The silence stretches for too long and I open my fingers to look at the Moretti family through them. Why are they not saying anything? Everyone is staring at me. Maria is the only one who’s left for

the disk and she's not back yet. Probably trying to help me save face. I swallow hard and feel the tears burning. How embarrassing for them all – Jackie must be so pleased.

“Holy grace girl? What did you do that for?!” John skates backwards at me and then circles me twice.

“At least I didn't fall, stop that or I will...”

“Carmina! Do you not know what you just did?” I hear and feel warmth, utter shock and a flood of pride. The Moretti family shows me in their memory what I didn't know I had just done.

I see a black and red blur, hear a clap and then see myself with my hands over my face.

“What was that? Why is it so distorted?”

“Just human, huh?”

I glare angrily at Liam who's standing with Jackie like a pair of cheap plastic flamingos. Maria returns and drops the disk in front of Jackie before I could say anything else.

“She ran out of river.” She says plainly. Maria gives me a big smile the likes of which has an attachment indicating absolute pleasure and then she sticks her thumb up.

Jackie looks incredulous, clearly not believing Maria's report. There is a gentle push and I turn my mind to Maria, allowing her in. She shows the Morettis and I where she found the disk. I swallow hard as the cheers around me erupt. Jackie snarls at me and marches off.

“Well done,” Maria offers in a kind, earnest manner

“Thank you, very much. I'm so sorry...” I apologize, feeling she had to go so far to get the disk.

“She is kind, she apologizes for winning! I can be friends with this one!” Maria laughs and I feel relieved for the umpteenth time today.

I ignore the vicious current flowing just outside the energy around me, and walk over to Liam.

“Ah, my Rockflower... I believe we are partnered.”

“I believe we are,” I smile happily when Liam takes my wrist and kisses my pulse.

*“Let's **play** before we lose the light!”* Joseph shouts from a short distance away.

“Game on! Best out of 25 wins!”

The game was vigorous, long and energetic. I had to stop several times to catch my breath and drink water, enduring various jokes, teasing and clipped remarks. I became so caught up in the whole game that I did not stop for a moment to process or question what was going on. For once I fitted in, I held my own and it felt good!

When the game was over, Liam and John hoist Maria and I onto their shoulders and race us across the full length of the river in both directions, with the rest of the group in tow. Our team won. Not by far, but we won. Lady E invites us all to the gazebo where the picnic was still practically untouched.

“Carmina, sweetheart, you must eat a little bit before we head out, and fill up your water bottle. I suspect you are going to be ever so sore in the morning.”

Nodding at the instructions, I sit down, leaning over to see inside the basket and grin when I notice the familiar red lid. Lady E rolls her eyes and says, *“Margarith was not exaggerating. You will eat*

nothing else if we don't force you.”

“At least this time I share?” I make light of the whole thing. Uncle Will and Joseph roar with laughter while Maria and Jackie both look to see what I found.

“Oh yes... yes, I remember your love for this. We were all surprised... but didn't leave hungry, you left us a little!” Joseph hits his belly as he laughs. Of course, everyone joins in except for me. My mouth already stuffed and there is no way I can even try to respond. Joseph and John are taking utter delight in my chagrin when Maria asks shocked, “She eats that? *You* eat that?”

“Since she was a baby,” Lady E answers for me, “And never hunted in her life.”

The flush deepens. I know I am spoiled and I feel ever so guilty over it.

Jackie found another opportunity to slide over to Liam and get under my skin.

“Speaking of hunting... I am starving. You must be too...”

I roll my eyes and offer her the liver with a big smile. “Lady E prepares them herself, they are so good! Not warm, but beggars can't be choosers.”

Jackie scowls but takes the dish from me and I pull a tongue at Liam making kissy faces as I turn away. Lady E and Maria turn their heads and laugh behind their hands and Liam narrows his eyes at me with a warning I choose to ignore.

We eat, chat and an invite to visit later, everyone is saying their goodbyes. The sun is not set yet but the cold is creeping up. The trip home took considerably less time than in the morning and without having a bath, or change of clothing, I fall down in exhaustion in Liam's arms and go to sleep.

Suffering Life

Lady E was right. My body is as stiff as an ironing board and twice as expressive about it. It takes more or less a week for me to recover and not sound like a zombie from some long-forgotten scary movie whenever I move. The cure against the ache is warm baths and working out the soreness with exercise. I fall into a routine easily and feel a lot better for it. Having little spare time, I spend it reading. I have always loved myth and mythology books and, thankfully, there are plenty of those around. Winter is also coming to a close but for now the fire is still burning at night when we both take time out to unwind with a book.

Vampire Bible & The Scriptures of Delphi: Origins of the Vampire

“Ambrogio was a young adventurer. Born and raised in Italy, he had always longed to travel to Greece to have his fortune told by the Oracle of Delphi. When he was an adult, he got on a boat and sailed to the western edge of Greece, near Astakos. He traveled east until he eventually reached the city of Delphi.

Delphi was home to a great temple of Apollo, the Sun God. It was also the home of the Pythia, better known as the Oracles. The Pythia would sit in a chamber within the temple and speak of prophecies, inspired by Apollo, to those who came to seek the Oracle's wisdom.

When Ambrogio finally arrived at the temple, he went to speak to the Pythia. The Pythia, whose

words were often cryptic, said only a few words: "The curse. The moon. The blood will run."

He couldn't sleep that night. He stayed awake outside of the temple, pondering the meaning of the Pythia's words. As the sun rose in the morning he realized that he had not slept. As he walked back toward the town he saw a beautiful woman dressed in white robes walking to the temple. He ran over to her and introduced himself. Her name was Selene, and she was a maiden of the temple. Her sister was the Oracle, and so Selene tended to the temple and took care of her sister while in her entranced state.

For the next few days every morning Ambrogio met Selene at dawn before she entered the temple. They soon fell in love.

On his last day in Greece, Ambrogio asked Selene to marry him and return with him to Italy. She agreed. He said he would make the preparations then meet her at dawn the next morning at their meeting spot outside the temple.

Apollo, the sun god, had been watching. He, himself, had taken a liking to the beautiful Selene and was enraged that Ambrogio would come to his temple and take one of his maidens away. At sunset that night, Apollo appeared to Ambrogio and cursed him so that from that day forth a mere touch of Apollo's sunlight would burn Ambrogio's skin.

Ambrogio was distraught. He was set to leave with Selene in the morning, but he would not be able to meet her at sunrise as he promised because of the curse. Having nowhere else to turn, he ran to a cave that led to Hades for protection. Hades, god of the underworld, listened to his tale and made him a deal - if he could steal the silver bow of Artemis and bring it back, Hades would grant him and Selene protection in the underworld. The deal specified that Hades would give Ambrogio a magical wooden bow and 11 arrows to hunt with. He was to offer his hunting trophies to Artemis in order to gain her favor and steal her silver bow. As collateral, Ambrogio had to leave his soul in Hades until he returned with the bow. Should he return without the silver bow, he would have to live in Hades forever, never to return to Selene. Having no other choice, Ambrogio agreed.

He had no way to contact Selene. He had parchments, but no writing implement, so he took his bow and arrow and killed a swan. Using its feather as a pen, and its blood as the ink, he wrote her a note explaining that he could not meet with her but would find a way for them to be together. He left the note in their meeting place and ran off to find a place to hide from the sunlight.

Naturally, Selene was devastated when she found the note, but she kept working at the temple, as she did not want to anger Apollo any further. The next morning, Selene went back to the meeting place, but once again Ambrogio was not there. She saw another piece of parchment with writing

in blood on it. It was a love poem from Ambrogio.

Before morning for 44 days Ambrogio slew a swan and used its blood to write Selene a love poem. After draining the blood and taking a single feather he offered the body of the swan as a tribute to Artemis, the goddess of hunting and the moon, and also sister to Apollo. He hoped that even if he could not steal her bow, she would be honored by the tribute and would be able to convince her brother Apollo to remove the curse. On the 45th night, Ambrogio had only one arrow left. He shot it at a swan and missed, the arrow sailing into the distance. He had neither the blood to write Selene's poem nor the swan to sacrifice to Artemis. He fell to the ground and wept.

Seeing how good of a hunter and how dedicated of a follower Ambrogio had been, Artemis came down to him. He begged Artemis to let him borrow her bow and an arrow so he could kill one last bird and leave one final note to Selene.

Artemis took pity on him and agreed to let him borrow her silver bow and an arrow. He took the bow, and in desperation, ran to the cave that led to Hades. Artemis realized what was happening and cast her own curse on him. The curse caused all silver burn his skin. Ambrogio dropped the silver bow and fell to the ground in pain.

Artemis was furious at his deceit, but he begged her for forgiveness. He explained the deal he was forced to make with Hades, his curse by Apollo, and his love for Selene. He apologized profusely and swore that he had no other choice.

Artemis took pity on him again and decided to give him one last chance. She offered to make him a great hunter, almost as great as she was, with the speed and strength of a god and fangs with which to drain the blood of the beasts to write his poems. In exchange for this immortality, he would have to agree to a deal. He and Selene would have to escape Apollo's temple and worship only Artemis forever. The catch was that Artemis was a virgin goddess, and all of her followers had to remain chaste and unmarried, so Ambrogio was never allowed to touch Selene again. They could never kiss, never touch, never have children.

Ambrogio agreed. At least this way he and Selene could be together. He killed another swan and left Selene a note telling her to meet him on a ship at the docks. Before dawn the next morning, she saw the note and ran away before Apollo could notice.

When Selene arrived at the dock she found Ambrogio's ship and met him down in the hull. There was a wooden coffin with a note on it, telling her to order the ship's captain to set sail, and to open the coffin only after the sun had set. She did as the note said, and after sunset she opened the coffin to find Ambrogio alive and well.

The couple sailed to Ephesus, where they lived in a cave during the day and worshiped Artemis at her grand temple every night. They lived happily together for many years, never touching, never kissing, never having children.

After a number of years, Ambrogio's immortality allowed him to stay young, but Selene continued to age as a mortal. She finally fell ill and was on her deathbed. Ambrogio was distraught, knowing that he would not join Selene in the afterlife because his soul still resided in Hades. At night, he went into the woods and found a white swan swimming alone in a small lake. He killed the swan and offered it to Artemis, begging for her to make Selene immortal so they could stay together forever.

Artemis appeared to him. Thankful for his years of dedication and worship, she made him one last deal. Artemis told Ambrogio that he could touch Selene just once - to drink her blood. Doing so would kill her mortal body, but from then on, her blood mixed with his could create eternal life for any who drink of it. If he did this, Artemis would see to it that they stayed together forever. Ambrogio wanted to refuse, but after telling Selene what happened, Selene begged him to do it. After much convincing, he bit her neck and took her blood into his body. As he set her limp body down, Selene began to radiate with light, and rise up to the sky. Ambrogio watched as Selene's glowing spirit lifted to meet Artemis at the moon. When she arrived, the moon lit up with a brilliant light.

Selene became the goddess of moonlight, and every night she would reach down with her rays of light to the earth and finally touch her beloved Ambrogio as well as all of their children - the newly created vampires who carried the blood of Ambrogio and Selene, together.”

After reading the story, I drop the book on my chest and stare at the ceiling.

“Suffering life,” I mumber to myself.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing... I just read the story of Ambrogio, it is such a powerful love story and so sad.”

This grabs Liam’s attention and I hear the musing in his voice when he speaks. “Carmina... in your dreams, you always say you’re not afraid of death, you’re afraid of suffering life. What does that mean?”

He does not turn to me but I can hear the controlled chords in his voice. I roll my head to one side looking at his back, trying to think about the answers that are obscure in my head.

“Well... I have not thought about it. Knowing what I know now, I think... maybe you’re suffering life. Ambrogio did for sure. You are living, but not alive. Constantly in pain because of ... what you are, what you want and being tortured because of it. I don’t want that. I think death is a merciful relief when you suffer pain. Having to live with it...” I falter, not knowing exactly how to express this deep-seated fear that has always haunted me. I don’t even know why it scares me as much.

“So... you would not want to be... like us?” He asks. He is frozen in place, not even the slightest movement from him at all.

“No.” I answer honestly. “I cannot begin to imagine what it is like for you Liam... but you are always in pain. You are always suffering and being tortured; all of you. How... How can I choose that for myself?”

“I see.” He drops his head down and continues writing. I am not sure what he thought he *saw* but I know I’ve given an answer different to what he hoped for.

“I’m sorry, Liam.”

He appears right at the bedside and takes my hands in his.

“Why? Why are you sorry, Carmina?” he searches my face and I can taste the desperation in the air.

“For being part of that suffering. I can see how much it takes from you just to be in the same room as me. I feel how much it weighs on your family and I guess, sometimes, my own family too.”

Liam is not moving. He sits with me in that way for what feels like hours. His head on the bed next to me, his hands holding mine.

Denying Ever After

Liam can feel the heat of her hands in his. It would be so easy to take from her what she just denied him. She trusts him and relies on him and he knows that if he tried, he could convince her to willingly... She said it once, that her soul will willingly surrender to him. She thought she would die, and she was willing to die for him, but not become eternal for or with him. She would not suffer life. The struggle inside is like a raging storm.

“*Liam? What is going on?*” he hears John ask but he shuts his brother out. Shortly after, his mother and father both repeat the question just to find themselves shut out too. He does not want to speak to anyone. Right now, what he needs is this woman who is constantly making him aware of his nature. This woman who’s just told him he has no chance of a happy ever after. This woman who has brought life into his living... and without even knowing it gave him a surrogate soul to cling to. He strokes over the back of her hands, feeling her blood flowing against his skin. He just needs silence and she is providing it.

Carmina falls asleep this way and Liam does not move. He watches the painting room, the last remaining feature of Carmina’s rooms. Unlike the other rooms she created to connect and compartmentalize, this one is theirs together. She cannot get here without his touch and he cannot without hers. This is where he feels human with her, where he can dream, where he borrows her soul for a while just to know what it is like to have one again. If she... when she... How can he give this up or want to take it away from her by having her join him.... How can he **not** if she will forever fade away without even this to share with him? How can he want to create and destroy and then be told that he alone should choose between the two?

When I wake up, the sun is already out but it is still early. Liam is sitting next to the bed with his

head resting against it and his hands holding on to mine. Without a word, I feel him fade and then close the pathway that has kept us connected for so long. For the first time in a while, I am definitely alone inside my own thoughts.

I watch him leave and frown after him. Perhaps he feels it is time I get on by myself. After all, I have a good grip on the whole matter now. I mosey to the kitchen and help myself to whatever is there to eat. After the hockey game I find myself hungry a lot more often. It is like my body is burning up food faster than I can provide for it.

While getting dressed, I decide that I will go see my family today. We have things to discuss and I have been selfish for long enough. I miss Lilly and Jarrod so much, and Momma's letter has been read so many times that I don't even have to open it anymore to know every word and fold on the paper. I do not leave Liam a message – I don't see the need for one. He will find me if he wants to, of that I am certain.

Visiting Family

The snow is still on the ground, but the sun is out today. I squint and look at it, feeling a little resentment towards the sun god Apollo. I turn my hairband on my wrist a few times when the dull ache returns, running up my arm. When I set off, the wind in my hair makes me grin. I don't move too fast but fast enough to avoid getting cold feet, proverbially speaking.

When I reach the courtyard gate it takes a few seconds to muster up the courage to walk through it. I know the family is aware of my arrival – heck, even I can smell the scent of "Hidden Carmina" drifting ahead. I push the gate and barely is the creaky sound gone when Jarrod grabs me in a wordless embrace.

"I've missed you, brother." I don't know when I started crying, but the tears are flowing freely.

When Jarrod pulls away from me, I realize why he wasn't speaking. His lip is trembling and his beautiful dark eyes are near swimming too. But big boys don't cry, and he takes my hand, kissing it before walking me to the main house. I feel a flood of warmth and familiarity.

Once inside, I meet Momma, Lilly, Uncle Edward and Auntie Joshlyn expectantly looking at me. I stop, looking at all their faces and then open my arms to my mother. When she hugs me tight, I whisper in her ear.

"I never hated you, and I never can."

Lilly's keen ears obviously heard what I said and she flits over to us.

"I told you Momma... We missed you Carmina!"

The two Elders in the room smile bright and I had to escape the hold of Momma and Lilly to greet them.

"I am surprised to see you both here, are you well?" I ask.

I know I can just take the information I want but I feel that is rude. I can't 'knock' and ask their permission like with the Moretti and Azzara families.

“We have been here... visiting to support your Mother, dear one,” Aunty Joshlyn answers.

“I ... I’m sorry Momma, it took so long...”

My mother smiles and shakes her head. “You are home sooner than I could ever have dreamt my child. How are you?”

“Honestly? I’m starving!” That breaks the tension in the room and everyone bursts out laughing.

“Breakfast should be soon. I should have known you came for the food!” Jarrod teases and Lilly hits his shoulder playfully.

“Look at her, she’s so skinny! Are... Will you stay a while?” she asks, giving me a pleading look.

“I will stay till after dinner, if, of course, that is alright? I ... have not told the Morettis I’m here, but they will find me if they want to.” The group rallies around me and I’m being herded outside.

When we get to the stairs, Momma takes my arm in the protective manner of old to make sure I don’t tumble headlong. I pat her hand and grin big at her, which makes her frown at me deeper. I know I’m busted for keeping a secret by the way Momma tilts her head and purses her lips. The table is set already with my plate in my place as always.

“How did you know I was coming?” I ask and Momma chuckles.

“I didn’t,” she answers.

“Your Mother has kept your place and set it out with every meal. Every day, since you’ve left.”

Aunty Joshlyn informs me in her gentle voice. The emotions well up in an instant and I hug Momma.

“I’m so sorry, I have been terribly selfish...”

“You’re here now. Let’s eat.”

Jarrold and Lilly move themselves to either side of me. I shake my head at them but they wouldn’t hear of switching places to sit together.

Uncle Edward keeps staring at me and subsequently, I cannot help ask, “Everything alright there, Uncle Edward?”

He tilts his head before he speaks. “I am admiring how much you’ve changed Carmina. You look.... More.”

Lilly giggles next to me and I elbow her. “What?! The last time I said that, you incited a full scale snow-ball war with that Moretti guy.” I turn to her in surprise, not having known Lilly used the same phrase before.

“Oh. Well, I’ll take it as a compliment from Uncle Edward; there will be no war... I don’t think.” I am careful these days about what I say and how I say it. If there is one thing I have learned since my entanglement with the Moretti and Azzara families, it is that you never know.

“Well, that may be debatable,” Jarrod pipes up bitterly. “I have a score or two to settle with you.”

“You do?” I shake my hair back and push my chin out, ready for a fight. “Official or just Jarrod being a pain in the keester?” I take this opportunity to steal his bacon off his plate like I used to do when we were younger.

Jarrold narrows his eyes and I mock him by making mine bigger. It is Momma who, just like always, puts the table back at order.

“That’s enough you two.”

Breakfast proceeds with light banter and gentle teasing. I stay alert for any sign of Liam or the others, but nothing comes. I know there's an argument brewing between Jarrod and I.

"So, what's the deal with your wolf boy?" Jarrod asks when we start clearing the tables. I have fallen into my place as if I've never left, picking up my chores on the go.

"I don't have a wolf boy. He's probably occupied with that hellcat." I grumble. Jarrod pulls a typical guy face at the tone and I change the topic.

"When last have you seen John?"

"You're on a fishing expedition, sister. John was here this morning just before you arrived. He's been around almost every day."

I figured as much. John has a lot of energy and I don't see him sitting around at the house doing nothing or reading.

"And if you're wondering: he was tight lipped about you. Wouldn't say anything other than you're well. I started getting suspicious." The words make me gigglesnort as it is easy to imagine Jarrod suspicious.

"Well I am here now."

"We missed you Carmina. Lilly missed you."

The guilt starts chewing at me the minute the words are absorbed.

"I know."

"That the best you can do?" The force in his voice rattles my peace but I don't react at first. "That beast boy carries you off and we don't hear a word for near... what? Two months and all you can say is '**I know**'!" he growls at me.

I stop what I'm doing and look at him.

"Fine form, Jarrod," I hiss back at him. "I find out my Mother and whole family are vampires. Not only that, my mere existence is a burden on them and **you** want to lecture **me**? Fine. Form. Brother."

Jarrod freezes in place and I turn around to see Lilly standing there with her hands folded over her chest.

"I told you not to upset her, Jarrod! Carmina ... We understand, we do!"

Jarrod was clearly not ready to let it go. He grabs me in one hand and Lilly in the other, marching us both to Momma's house. When we get there, Momma looks up and sighs. Aunty Joshlyn and Uncle Edward get up to leave, but I am not ready to let this go quietly, either.

"No. Please stay. It seems there are things we need to discuss and clear up right now."

I jerk myself loose from Jarrod's grip and tie my hair back. Lilly and Momma follow suit and the visiting Elders sit down.

"I stand accused, do I Jarrod? Let me hear it. All of it, because when this is done, it is **done**." I speak to him calm and quietly.

"You don't understand anything, Carmina. We're not like the Morettis."

"I know."

Jarrod stares at me blankly. "You... know?"

"Well heck, Jarrod, what do you think I've been doing the past two months?"

“I don’t know Carmina. And that is why I’m angry. *None* of us know what you’ve been doing the past two months. But there is a lot that you don’t know about-” Jarrod changes his mind, “What **have** you been doing the past two months, little sister?”

I narrow my eyes at him, then step up to his face.

“I’ve learned what me being human means to you - all of you. I cannot say it pleased me much.” I growl at him.

“Carmina...” Mother’s voice is soft.

“No, Momma. He started this and I am finishing it. It is true; I don’t know what has been going on here. It is true that I have been torn apart by fear, guilt and feelings of inadequacy. So forgive me, big brother, if that didn’t fit with your idea of how things were meant to go - but I am *human* after all.”

“You hurt us, Carmina! You left us without giving us a way to explain.”

I turn away from him, looking at all the faces in the room one at a time.

“Explain, Jarrod? Explain how you took beating after beating for me to keep me safe? Explain how Momma always had to think of ways to hide me, protect me and defend me? Explain to me how the whole clan - even the children- *especially* the children - had to learn to endure my presence despite the discomfort I bring to them? Explain why my sister had to plan her wedding in winter to include me, rather than for her own fanciful mind? Explain to me how I will be the one getting old, and then die ... making all that effort you spend keeping me alive for nothing! Did I miss anything Jarrod?” I sneer at him. The anger and hurt boils into my brain and seeps into the rest of my body.

Jarrod’s face pulls in pain and I step closer to him, looking up at my big brother. It is hard to see Jarrod serious and angry with me but my fury matches his. Without warning, Jarrod clasp me to him. I have never seen my brother weep before but he is not hiding it from me this time.

“No Carmina.... You didn’t give us a chance to explain why we did of all that **for** and **with** you. We love you so much. You saved me when I was only little. You gave me a purpose and you didn’t give me a chance to thank you or explain when the secrets were no longer needed. You are a regular pain, but Carmina, you hold us together even when you stumble at every corner. Even... when you left... you gave us something to hold on to. Every member who came after Mother found you, stayed *because* of you! Think about it, Carmina. Every one of us.”

“Truth, my child,” Momma says and I clench my teeth.

“Why?”

Jarrod lets me go and opens his palm up to Momma.

“Because you give us the strength to fight the beast within the nature and embrace the human we share the same cage with.”

I take a deep breath. The information is like a knife plunged into my body. I had not considered this at all. So consumed with what I thought I knew, I forgot that my family are half human. The half that they dedicated to me is human.

“Oh. I’m sorry. I am.”

“You know now,” Lilly is still scowling at her husband but the love she has for him is clearly reflected in her eyes and the way she strokes over his hair.

“I do, and I want to know everything. My family is here. I belong here.”

The conversation takes on many forms and the burning question came out as direct as ever.

“Why are you really here?” I ask Uncle Edward. “Please tell me what is going on?”

The Elder looks at his hands and then takes Aunty Joshlyn’s.

“We came to see our Daughter. As confessions go.”

My mouth opens by itself and then snaps closed. With everything topsy-turvy, I have no inkling as to whom the daughter is and for a moment I thought it was Momma.

“When Teresa Gello’Des confronted you, Carmina, I had to make sure that Lilly was not going to do something irresponsible. The Gello’Des creatures... are responsible for the kinfolk’s separation and I thought it time to reunite them. There are no more secrets among us.” Momma fills me in. I stare at Lilly and the Elders in stunned silence.

Lilly chortles and declares in her usual jovial manner, “I have two mothers and a father. Beat that!”

It didn’t take long for the whole complicated story to unfold. I am told about how Lilly’s birth was the first in Joshlyn’s clan after her own birth, but Lilly had a twin sister. The Gello’Des was active in the area at the time and was to be included in the division of land. They became vicious and started working on destroying newborns of the half breed families. They felt that children who are not created like they were do not deserve to live. Joshlyn’s clan was new, weak and had no defenses. Edward’s clan was too far away to lend any decent protection, which left one other option.

The Ancients stepped in to help and destroyed a great deal of the Gello’Des family, but the threat was always there. So, to keep Lilly safe and make sure she was not targeted, her death was staged and she was sent to Momma. Momma had just taken on her land and drew no attention from the Gello’Des family even with me on the grounds. Lilly did not remember her parents, but she recalls the death of her infant sister vividly. Their bond was so strong that it might as well have been her own death she lived through. With Teresa showing up as she did, it is a clear indication the Gello’Des family is recovering and boldly challenging the Ancients. In order for Lilly to take any form of action against the Gello’Des, she has to be blood related to the Valley clans and, of course, she is. If she went up against them on her own and killed any one of them, this information would become relevant too late and the Ancients would be forced to take action against her and possibly Momma too.

Aunty Joshlyn and Uncle Edward have been spending time with Lilly. It serves as a way of making up for lost time, but also a method of record keeping. There had to be independent witnesses to this event and Momma’s clan members were chosen to provide that. They knew nothing of this particular history, it is not blood and, therefore, their innocence when the knowledge was revealed and impartial sentiments in testimony will be accepted. Of course this excludes the families born into Momma’s clan over time, but there were enough witnesses.

I listen to all this and more in shocked silence. Everyone was so patient answering all the questions I had and Jarrod seemed to ease up over time too. By the time lunch came around, the mood was

make it! Get down, both of you!”

I feel like a child again, and obey the order from Momma after I was sure Jarrod was ahead of me getting down. Showing off, he jumps from the tree, leaving a hefty dent in the snow bed. I climb down reluctantly, allowing Jarrod to pick me up from the third step off the ground.

“She started it!” he pouts at Momma and, from various positions, the laughter in the courtyard rises up.

I look up at the sky and grimace when I realize how late it is.

“I have to get going.” I mutter. Under a lot of protest and invites back, I head to the gate.

I wave at the family and promise to be back soonest. I decide to pace myself at normal speed at least to the glade, and from there I’ll hurry it up. I’m surprised that I’ve not heard from the Moretti family, but I also know that they won’t intrude unless it is urgent or unless I need them. I listen to the ice crunching under my feet and my eyes are constantly surveying my environment. I enjoy the cold but soon realize I’m thirsty and forgot my water bottle back home. I smile at the word ‘home’ and do a little twirl by myself.

A short distance later, I spot the figure standing dead still in the clearing. I narrow my eyes and concentrate, listening and focusing on it, still a fair distance off. I change my course to be downwind; not that I think it would help any with my very special aroma. I keep my pace steady and, when I identify the figure, my heart skips a beat. Standing still for a while and watching him, I feel my heart breaking. Even from here, I can see his clenched jaw, his hands twitching open and closed. I change direction and stay downwind going home. There will be no point in confronting what I already know.

Spending time with my family reminded me that I am a lot safer with them. They are half human and eat human food. It just seems right that I live with them and not here, where I am a constant torture to Liam and the Moretti family. It is not natural. The thought is painful but it is also realistic. I cannot be with Liam. It is one thing for the Ancients to be with my family because they share something in common, too; it is another thing for me to be the constant source of pain to them. I cannot live with myself knowing this anymore. I can be a part of their family, but merely at a distance. They don’t deserve the pain and agony I bring them.

I sit down to write Liam a letter, explaining that he was right to close the link and give me time to think for myself. I told him that I will learn on my own and figure out what I can, and will stay in touch, at best if they contact me specifically.

I leave the letter on his desk and make my way out the door, being careful to move along to the river, walking in the shallow cold water, hoping it will be enough to blot out my scent. I turn to smell the air rushing up behind me, satisfied that there is very little left and it should be gone pretty soon with the gusts sweeping over the river. I edge back and find a small gap leading into the

canyon that surrounds the volcano. I head up against the canyon, being careful not to cut or hurt myself. Eventually, I find a dry empty cave and wedge myself up against the far wall of it. I cannot smell any animal remnants. It should be safe, and nobody will hear me dream here - assuming I will sleep at all. When I hear a howl in the far off distance, I clutch at my chest, forcing myself to continue breathing. I recognize that sound, I know to whom it belongs. Three more in short succession and the guilt almost drives me back the way I came.

Back Home

The sun has hardly any time to rise when I set out to the courtyard. I have not slept at all for fear of being discovered. I am starving and thirsty. It is a direct line from here to get home and I don't even try to hide myself. I stand outside listening carefully but don't hear, see or smell a Moretti. When I open the gate, it is Jarrod who meets me there again; no surprise as I've already heard his heartbeat for several seconds.

"Carmina... you're early."

"Yeah, uhm, Jarrod?"

"You look like crap. Come." He motions me after him towards he and Lilly's house.

Lilly lifts her head in surprise and rushes over. "You're still in yesterday's clothing and you look like hell! What—"

"I ... want to stay here, with family." Too tired to endure a long game of cat and mouse, I continue, "I have left Liam... the Morettis. I will sleep elsewhere – don't interrupt me either of you – I will sleep elsewhere until I can get a soundproof home set up for me. I don't want to discuss it any further." I feel my lip trembling and plea with them, "Please don't make me."

Lilly embraces me. Jarrod grunts under his breath, "I am going to—"

"Build our sister a house. That is what you are going to do." She finishes his sentence. I knew I could count on her.

"There's food in the fridge, you're not the only one with a beastly appetite," she teases and pokes at Jarrod who, in turn, grabs her finger and kisses it. I roll my eyes, trying to hide the pain at seeing them together like this. It is going to be harder than I thought.

I ask to have a bath and use the plain unscented soap from the shower instead of the luxurious scented foam-soap Lilly uses. I know this must be Jarrod's as he does not wear anything with a smell, being one of the hunting providers for the clan. The scents are too much of a give-away - or so he says.

I try to fix my hair but it refuses to take on any other state than anarchy. Lilly has already brought an outfit from my own collection and I know Momma has been updated on events. I don't take up on the offer of raiding the fridge even though I feel nauseated with hunger.

When I hear the gong for breakfast, I had to work very hard not to blur my way to the table. I settle for a semi-fast jog. Momma gives me a hug and I allow myself the calm sense of understanding she is emanating. I still refuse to read minds, but this I cannot shut down. I feel the energy around me

whether I want to or not. It is systematically enhanced into a personal experience when I am linked with the Moretti family. Even thinking their names hurts, so I make a conscious effort to divert my attention.

There has always been a silent acceptance among our clan. Because of Momma's nature and rule about not turning anyone away, we are used to having strangers and often returning family at the table. When break-ups and make-ups happen, we don't interfere unless specifically asked to do so. I am grateful for this custom today. Breakfast continues like any other day and I manage to eat enough to feel satisfied. Jarrod makes a few jabs about the amount of food I manage to pack away and mutters about fat girls who can't hunt. I hear John's approach long before I see him and excuse myself from the courtyard with "John's coming". I am not ready to face him or anyone of their kin.

I head to the furthest most secluded patch of open land. It has a direct view over the volcano. It is a quiet space, half surrounded by trees.

"Hidden Carmina."

I laugh at my own joke but the smile vanishes when I hear the wailing howl drifting from far away. When Jarrod joins me, he is visibly in a temper and I decide not to push him.

"Is this the space? Could you have gotten any further away from us?" The sarcasm is not lost on me but I ignore it.

"Yes, this is the place, it is perfect."

Jarrod stares at me for a while and then nods.

"Will do. Four days. Get some sleep; you still look like crap."

"Only four?" I question and he smirks at me.

"Would have been two if you waited until summer."

"I'm sorry, Jarrod..."

"No, I'm sorry. We should have thought about this sooner. John knows you're here."

"Of course he does. Where else would I go, Jarrod?" My lip is quivering again.

"Liam didn't take the letter you left too well."

I cover my ears and shake my head. I don't want to hear it. I know he is better off without me and I know I am well of being here. Jarrod grabs my hands away from my ears and wraps his arms around me. He recognizes the signs of me being in distress over hurting someone I felt didn't deserve it, even when, at times, it was in self-defense.

"Carmina... You love him that much, huh?"

I simply nod.

I wipe my tears fast and step away from Jarrod when I hear Momma approaching. Jarrod frowns, tilting his head and, seconds later, does seem to grasp why I moved away. I had enough time to find control and give Momma a bright smile.

"She found her spot. With your permission we'll start right now?" Jarrod asks. Momma looks between the two of us and nods to Jarrod.

"Get it done as soon as you can. Gather all the men, we've got enough winter stock to last us. This

takes priority. You, missy, come with me.”

Jarrood makes big eyes at me, having heard the unmistakable ‘you’re-in-trouble’ nature of Momma’s last command.

I follow my mother and have a sinking sensation that I am not going to like what I’m about to hear. I listen to the crunch of our footsteps and listen attentively to all the sounds around me, committing them to memory. It is an easy way to eliminate regular everyday noises from the more important things I may miss if I’m distracted. We reach Momma’s favorite thinking spot under a big evergreen tree. The pine smell pulls at my heartstrings and I make a mental note to ask Lilly for a mixture that includes pine.

“Carmina, what is going on? John looked a wreck this morning. What happened?”

“Nothing, Momma.” It is the honest truth. “I realized last night that I belong here; I am human, you are half human. My family is here. My life... is here.”

“And Liam? Does he not get a say?”

My temper flairs at the question, a defense mechanism, installed years ago, whenever I am confronted with difficult situations.

“No, Momma. I am not vampire, I am not half vampire and I am not wolf. I am human. They don’t get to decide anything for me. In particular—” I feel the tremor in my own voice and clear my throat,

“In particular, they don’t get to say who I torture by existing and who not.”

“What do you mean, my child?”

“Momma, here, you eat food, you don’t need blood but you like it, it is your nature and I can live with that. You don’t constantly feel thirsty just because I’m around. You don’t feel pain or torture because I’m living here. Discomfort, yes. Annoyance? Absolutely. But Jarrod said it. You’re not like them. I... Momma, they suffer because of me, how can I allow that?” I ask, breaking down. My mother puts her arms around me and rocks me back and forth.

“No, my darling child, they suffer regardless.”

“I understand that Momma, but... When I am there, it is like giving a junkie a filled syringe and saying he can’t use it. He suffers without the syringe in his hand and will learn to control the need, but he suffers more when it is right there in his hand and recovering will take longer or never happen.”

“It is his choice though, Carmina. The syringe doesn’t get to walk away on its own, my girl.”

“Momma, I cannot *want* them to suffer life if I am not prepared to do it myself.”

“I see. Well, I will not turn them away, my girl. At some point, you will have to stop running away, too.”

“I don’t ask you to, Momma, they are your family too! I will stop running when the time is right. You always say things happen as they should.”

“I do. Don’t forget: I also say that your choices should make you happy.”

With that, my mother gets up and leaves me alone to process my thoughts.

I am exhausted and decide to head for the little cave on the side of the volcano. I listen and scan the area well before I enter. My sleep is constantly interrupted by shaking or screaming myself awake.

The dreams are intense and realistic, showing Liam drinking blood from humans, trying to quench his thirst. I try to stop him but I see hatred in his eyes just before he pounces on me.

It is hunger and frustration that drives me back to the courtyard after dinnertime. I head directly for the communal kitchen and sit alone at the table, eating. After cleaning up, I head to the design room. This becomes my routine for the next week. I avoid contact as much as I can but carry my weight by filling my quota of designs until the sun comes up. I head for a shower in Lilly's house and then run back to the volcano. I change the caves I sleep in every time, just in case.

Liam sits on the floor in the middle of the room. The letter from Carmina is shredded around him. He holds to his face the shirt of his she slept in. He can see and hear her everywhere in his den and it is pulling him apart but he does not want to make her go away either. On more than one occasion, John has come to sit with him here in silence and Liam can see his brother is aching too. How could she do this to his family? To him? His mother and father seem to be on her side, saying that she did what she felt was right; that she is her own person and will have to live with her own choices. His mother does not altogether fool him, though. He can feel her own sorrow at times. He wants to go fetch Carmina, like John suggested the first time he confessed his knowledge of her.

The worst part is that he cannot find her! He has tried just about everywhere to track her scent but she is specifically present here, and at her family home. The night she left, he lost her track half way up the river. He thought she'd go to her family home but waiting the whole night revealed nothing. He came back to the den in hopes that she changed her mind. She didn't. Liam screams loudly. The feeling of nettles in his chest is back and it is unbearable. He knows he can link with her, but she asked for space and not to be called on unless it is needed. Surely this counts? Surely him needing her in his life is a reason to call upon her?

When John arrives at his brother's den that night, as he's done every night over the past week, he swallows hard and sits down.

"Her home will be finished tomorrow," He tells his brother. "I tried tracking her but she's too fast and too clever. But we finished the home. She will be safe, Liam."

"She will dream, John."

"Yes; about that: her house is insulated and sound proof. But... I did something for you brother. You cannot let mother know. She will kill me."

"What have you done?"

"I—" John produces a small box and hands it to Liam, "I made you a key to her home. You have to promise, Liam."

Liam has never felt the surge of adrenaline and happiness at something as small as this before. He reaches for his brother and grips him by the shoulders.

"Thank you, little bro! I promise, they won't know I'm there!" For the first time since Carmina's

departure, Liam joins in the evening hunt with his family, after hiding the key away.

New Beginning

When the sun rises, I get up from the workbench with a groan. My wrist is on fire and I rub at it absently, listening to the stir outside. It is too early for breakfast. When I hear Jarrod, Lilly and Momma's steps approaching the workshop like a march in arms, I decide to wait on them, leaning on one of the tables. The door opens and it is Lilly bouncing her head around first.

"We come in peace!" she giggles, waving a white ribbon at me. Folding my arms over my chest, I wait for the other two to enter as well. Jarrod is carrying a big basket and Momma waves me to follow them.

Not long and I figure out what is going on. My apartment is finished and it is gorgeous! Momma hands me a key and shaking, I open the door. The entrance hall opens up into a small, warm space with a fireplace and a bay seat in the window looking over at the volcano. The walls are covered in beautiful wooden slats carved with flower and leaf patterns. On the opposite wall is a big old oak bookcase and a few books on Myth and Mythology. On the bottom shelf is a small stereo and my favorite music already piled around it. There's no furniture in this room other than a small, plush white rug and a big, black glove-like seat.

I shriek in delight when we head into the kitchen. It is small but already filled with everything I need, including a fridge occupied by a generous helping of snack-portioned foods. The walls are tiled in red marble and the counters in polished black and the glass windowed cabinets framed in a dark heavy wood. The small window allows for light to stream in liberally.

The bathroom is spacious with a warm color scheme of browns with deep red wood finishing. The shower is small but the tub is massive. The bathroom is complete with towels, nightgown, comfy slippers and several bath scents to choose from. I clap excitedly, knowing I will spend a lot of time right here.

When I open my bedroom it is entirely empty except for my wardrobes from Momma's house. The room is left in white washed walls. I look at the three confused.

"It is your private space. We thought you should do this one yourself. We've left a laptop on the kitchen table with your debit card. You can order what you want when you're ready. I can't believe we've not done this sooner." Momma pats my arm.

Money has never been a problem within our clan. Momma makes sure that the family is provided for and has several investments in each of our names. The money spent on the building and decoration comes from our own saving policies. Of course Momma keeps a close eye on the accounts and does not tolerate frivolous spending.

“Do you like it?” Lilly asks. I nod vigorously at my sister.

“It is so beautiful! I can never thank you enough!”

“You’ll find a way,” Jarrod grins at me and holds up the picnic basket. “Starting with breakfast. It is an ungodly hour and, if I have to be awake, then you have to share your food.”

I sit down with my family, excited and relieved to have my own home. My home.

When they leave, I walk through the house again and marvel at the workmanship of our clan. I can see each of them in every bit of work here. I take the laptop, warm honey tea and a plate full of cold meats to the bay window. When I arrange myself comfortably, I notice the small but precise carving in the wooden frame. My fingers trace over the intricate design of a wolf’s face with the letter “M” under its chin. Jarrod told me John was helping with the build and I don’t have to guess whose handy work this is. It is exquisite and the tears well up again. I can’t break down at every corner, I tell myself. With determination, I turn my attention to the laptop and order same-day-delivery from the priority companies we use.

The rest of the day is spent eating, drinking and decorating my room at leisure. When the dinner gong sounds, I am too tired to join the family. Knowing they will understand, I turn all the lights out and put one candle in every window of my new house. There is no real reason behind that other than I’ve always thought of having candlelight instead of electricity. I light a big fire and make for the bathroom to soak in a combination of pine and sandalwood until I can feel sleep sneaking up on me. I dread having to go to sleep but I am shattered. I opt for a comfortable oversized t-shirt and socks to sleep in and fall down on the bed. It is not long before sleep overwhelms me and the nightmares take flight in full force.

Liam has been pacing all day around his den. John dragged him off for a hunt early in the morning. When he came back, he cleared up the torn letter-pieces from the floor and burned them in the fireplace. He tried reading but that slowed time down. As soon as he looks at the clock on the wall, he groans in frustration.

John shows up at lunchtime and finds his brother brooding on the front porch, glaring at the sun from the shade.

“It won’t go away just because you want it to.”

“Says you,” Liam mopes.

“Yeah, you know you have a problem, dude?” John parks himself next to his brother.

“And what would that be?”

“Our Vixen has much keener senses than ours. Jarrod tells me she can hear and see things before he can, and for a hunter to admit that takes some doing.”

“Damn it! I forgot about that. She can smell from a distance too.” Liam puts his head in his hands and grumbles.

“Yeah. Good thing I’m a half-decent charming spy.”

Liam turns to his brother who is staring out in front of him with a decorously placed haughty grin.

“Look, bro, I am doing this because I love her too. It’s not for you. It’s for me.”

Liam punches his brother in the shoulder watching him topple over and yells, “Spit it out!”

“Jeesh!” John retorts. He reaches inside his jacket, producing a small collection of Jarrod’s bathroom soap.

“I bought a stash of this for you. And Margarith knows. I had to tell her, she’s a sharp woman.”

“Margarith— Of course. Was she mad?”

“Nope, she suggested the soap.”

“She didn’t! John, thank you!”

“She absolutely did. Look, we worked with the idea of dampening as many outside noises as possible in order to help Carmina relax. So... you’re not safe, but you should be ok. If you get caught, you’re on your own, brother. I want the red-head back with us - we’ll find a way bro.”

Liam doesn’t bother waiting to hear John out. He heads straight for the shower and scrub himself well and truly from head to toe. When he emerges, John pulls his face and waves in the air.

“For something that doesn’t have a scent, you reek of that half-breed.” He declares.

John leaves his brother to himself with the promise of ‘having his back’. Liam showers a few more times just to be sure and then heads quickly but cautiously towards Carmina’s cottage. Silently he watches her move through the house, lighting the candles in the windows. He is thankful for the wind playing a little havoc outside, mixing the scents. He listens intently but cannot hear anything inside and he dare not try to read her mind; she will know he’s there. Eventually he cannot stand it anymore and sneaks inside. The door is not locked and he rolls his eyes. Of course she has no reason to lock her door; she’s with family. Once inside, Liam waits quietly, listening to her heartbeat and breathing before he slowly makes his way through the little home. His keen eyes don’t miss any detail and he grins at the Moretti wolf on the windowsill.

When finds Carmina’s room, he stops in the doorway. It was hard for him not to rush over to her in that instant. She is already sleeping and her body is kicking and twisting as she fights the demons in her dreams. The candlelight glimmers over her smooth skin. She has never looked more tortured but more beautiful to him. Her wild red hair is spread over the crisp white sheets on her bed. Her heartbeat is thundering away under the stress of sleep and Liam clenches his fists when she screams his name. He aches to answer her. Her voice is filled with dread and pain and it cuts through him like a steel blade. Warring emotions continue to rattle inside him. He should never have closed the link, never have walked away from her.

How can this tiny person feel so much guilt for his wellbeing? She is the one with the threat over her life, and yet she worries over his pain. Liam listens to her dreams and sits motionless, blending with the shadows. When Carmina wakes from the dreams in a rush of anxiety, he watches her cry herself back to sleep. Liam Moretti is angry with himself and, internally, he reaches out to console Carmina.

I wake up and notice two things at once: I don't feel guilty over my difficult night terrors, knowing that the family slept well, and I'm starving. I also thought I could smell Liam but put it down to my overactive imagination and the vivid dreams. I miss him so much. Pulling my new diary closer, I start writing a letter to Liam; one he will never see. I know it is schoolgirl therapy but, for now, it is what I have.

*“Dear Liam,
I dreamt of you last night.
I hope you don't hate me as much as the dream suggests.
I know I am supposed to be scared of you and, logically, I am terrified of your whole family, and mine.
But I love you so much.
I am a coward, I guess, because I cannot accept my own hand in your pain.
Your family doesn't deserve the horror that I bring into your minds. You don't deserve it.
Momma said that my choices should make me happy. The choice to live with my family makes me very happy, but the choice not to be with you is harder to live with.
I hope you are well. I miss you.
Your Rockflower,
Mina.*

I head out for breakfast with the family and convince Lilly to take a drive with me out to the local bookshop. I need to learn things and the best way to do so is by reading everything I can get my hands on. I have ordered many books online, too, and alert Momma to the deliveries. I find the Delphi Scriptures and several others books to help me in my search for answers. Lilly leaves our details with the shop owner with a request to contact us if he finds anything relating Myth, Mythology, Demons, Vampires and other monsters. She convinces him that she's a student in Philosophy and the subject fascinates her. We stop at the library and I find a collection of science fiction literature.

We stop at a small stall next to the road on the way home. The girl working at the stall comes across too enthusiastic and I keep wondering what it is about her that bothers me. In the car, Lilly picks up on my pensive mood.

“You noticed?” She asks.

“What?”

“The girl. She's a gypsy girl. One like us.”

“Ah. Now I know.”

I feel annoyed and frustrated that none of this ever occurred to me before. I have lived my whole life like a bat. When I mention this to Lilly, she was quick with a logical answer.

“It’s like driving a yellow car. When you bought it you hardly saw one on the road. But now that you own one, there’s several yellow cars around you all over the damned place.” Lilly drives a yellow car. The irony! I get the sensation Lilly is not just speaking metaphorically and cannot stop the bubbling laughter.

When we get out of the car at home, it is John that greets us. He is leaning casually against the tree with his hands in his pockets. I lower my eyes away from him, while Lilly heads out directly at him to meet him with a hug. I take my time to gather my books and things and walk in the direction of my cottage. I have not revealed the speedy me yet, so I try to just walk fast and was too late to stop the slip on the last bits of ice that are left. I sprawl and watch my parcels fly ahead of me. I drop my head onto the ground with a sigh. John is there fast as lightning, holding my parcels, already gathered, out to me, but not trying to help me up.

“It serves you right for avoiding me.”

“John...”

“No. I’ve waited long enough. You didn’t break up with me so I shouldn’t be punished.” He walks towards my cottage and, upon reaching it, he pushes the door open with his foot.

“How’d you know it’s not locked?”

“Nothing around here is locked. Why would you want to lock it anyway?” He asks and dumps the parcels in the middle of the floor.

“Have you got food? I’m starving, missed lunch with both families,” he whines. I laugh and wave him over to the kitchen. We sit together eating roughly everything in the fridge.

“You still eating like a horse?”

“Yeah,” I wave a slice of toast at him “But at least nobody is around to bug me about it.”

“How long were you going to avoid me - us?”

“Forever.” I declare.

“You failed.”

“Clearly. But this is not an open invite, John.”

“Yeah it is.” He smirks, “Because you are going to make it one.”

“No I’m not!”

“Yeah you are. Just wait.”

I roll my eyes at him and then shoo him out the door.

While unpacking, there is a knock at the door and I answer.

“Hi, my name is John.”

I slam the door and finish my chores. Shortly after, John appears in view and draws on the window.

“Hi, my name is John and I am lonely.”

I close the curtain. When I get to the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea, the window rattles and I hear him shout, “Hiiii! My name is John and I am very, very lonely!”

I sit at the table and drink my tea, narrowing my eyes at the rattling window.

John doubles the assault by pressing on my mind, too. I can feel the mischief and mockery in his energy. I also know he is not going to stop. He does not need to sleep or rest or eat. I do. Three

hours of this abuse later, and I open the door and wave him in dramatically.

“Open invitation?” he asks and I slap him solid against the shoulder.

“Yeah, you bully. But I have house rules. I sleep alone and you clean up after yourself AND restock what you finish. No cheating by leaving one bite behind. And John... You don't live here. I do.” I rub my hand which is now stinging with the reminder of John's heritage.

“Open invite accepted,” he declares and makes himself comfortable with one of my books. “Except I have one request... Mina, please have dinner with my mother and father tomorrow here at your table, in your home. They deserve that much. Please?”

I narrow my eyes at him but know that he is right. I am safe here and it would be their choice if they come or not, therefore absolving me of any guilt over their discomfort. I walk out of the room where he's sitting and write a note to his folks. When I hand it to him, I push the link open and let him know that I am serious.

“No more requests, negotiations are closed.”

He accepts the link and the vivid clarification with a triumphant punch of his fist in the air. The gong for dinner rings out over the courtyard and we rush to the hall together. I first take a detour past the car to pick up a gift I bought for Momma from the stall. My mother is an excellent provider but she neglects her own tastes at times. The side-stall sells salted licorice, not something you pick up just anywhere. I bought the whole stack for Momma.

When I get to the dinner table, Jarrod and John are in a hearty discussion about motorcycles. Lilly pulls an ugly face and I had no choice but to relax in this lavish atmosphere. Momma dances when I hand her the treat. She sits down and nibbles away at it instead of dinner.

After dinner, I help with the chores before heading to the cottage. John walks me to the door, thanks me for the invite to his parents and salutes me with a “See ya, little Vixen.”

For a moment, I thought to lock the door but decide against it.

I sit down to write a note to Liam. My wrist is still aching; a constant reminder that he is absent.

“Dearest Liam,

Today was a good day. I found some reading material but I'm not sure how much it will help. The books do look good on the shelf though.

I did fall down again but no damage done. I need to confess the speed thing or I'm going to kill myself soon. I can't believe how much of a difference it... you... have made in my life.

I think I may need a bigger fridge.

I also think I may murder your brother but I'm not sure yet.

I'll probably wait till after your folks come around.

I am nervous because I've never spent time with them alone before and I have no idea what to feed them.

I hope your day went well.

*Love always
Your Rockflower,
Mina.”*

I leave the diary at the fireplace, add more wood to it and light the candles around the house, getting ready for bed. I'll shower in the morning.

When Liam slips through the door, standing still and breezily, unhurriedly he lets his mind wander through the house. Carmina is sleeping but he can smell his brother all over the place.

Immediately it angers him and he has to talk himself into calm. John wouldn't do anything stupid and is probably hatching another plan. He has no reason to be in Carmina's home uninvited.... Did she invite him in? Stopping himself short from growling, Liam moves into the living space. It is hard not to notice the single book on the floor. Without thinking, he sits down next to it to read. He had to swallow down the urge to go wake her up again after reading both notes a hundred times over. Eventually he gets up to see what books she bought and rolls his eyes. That nonsense won't help her at all. Lilly told John about the old bookshop and how much Carmina loves the place. A plan forms and he smiles to himself. He will see to her education after all. Liam finds his spot in the corner and places his head in his chin, watching over Mina. It is not easy for him to see her like this, but at least he can see her. And she's writing to him. And his folks are coming over tomorrow?

Before daybreak Liam leaves Carmina's cottage and heads directly to the butcher with a set of clear instructions. The good thing about farmers is that they are always awake before anyone else is! He then goes home, picks up several books and head to the bookshop Lilly mentioned. He stood in front of the shop waiting for it to open and sold the books to the old man for just about nothing. The owner was highly surprised at the condition of the books and their age! But Liam makes sure that he keep his word and ONLY sell the books to Lilly or Carmina. If they don't want it, he promises to be back and buy them back for their full market value. Pleased with himself, Liam returns home to find his brother. Seems there's a few things they need to discuss. Perhaps a few ground rules that need pointing out.

I wake up with a knock at the door. It is the weekend, for goodness sake! Who would bother so early in the morning? I am a little embarrassed to find the local town butcher standing at my door. I must look a mess! He drops off a package with precise instructions for preparation. When asked how much I owe him, where it came from, why it was brought to me, he winks and says: "You, little miss, have a guardian angel. Just do what it says. You'll be fine."

Heading to the kitchen I stop and smell the air. I am sure it smells of Liam... or Jarrod. Ugh, maybe John. Sure enough, when I get into the kitchen, John is already sitting there with a massive grin, eating raw bacon.

“Your handy work?” I ask and he smells the package.

“No, but gosh that is prime beef!”

“I know, I can smell it all the way back to the original cow!”

John picks up the instructions and grins. “That will do Mom and Dad, oh yeah, they’ve accepted. Good choice!”

It’s too early for me to cope with John, so I do the prep work on the meat as instructed, stick it in the fridge and head back to my room with a plate full of bread and cheese.

When my phone rings an hour later, it is Lilly letting me know she’s picked up some books for me from the bookshop. I stomp through the house, wondering when I won the popularity contest. A long drawn out whistle and I clearly hear John mutter about redheaded Vixens not being morning people.

“Get out of my head!” I snap at him.

I hear the wolf howl and the stabbing pain in my chest overshadows the ache in my arm. Gods, he sounds so close. The door slams and I know John is going for breakfast with his family.

Lilly drops the books off and announces that she and Jarrod will be away with her other family for a month, but she’s leaving the car for me in case I need to get to town for something. It occurs to me that I should probably get my own car. I don’t like her car. It is obnoxiously flashy and people stare when you arrive in it. I’ll go car shopping when she gets back. She’ll love that.

I pick up the books and head to the bay window. One book is a bundle that includes the story of Ambrogio. I know this story already but it is such a beautiful piece, I have to read it again. I wonder how much the books were. They look old!

I feel a tear run over my cheek as I read the story. It sounds so sad, so loving and so dedicated. I close the book and a piece of paper falls from it. It is a drawing of a moon with clouds over it. Underneath in print it reads: *Rescued and waiting to be saved*. The picture is a true work of art in pencil, the details spectacular emotional creations that make you want to touch the wispy clouds. I wonder if the creator understood longing as well, as it is flowing from the image; so simple, so elegant and so utterly destructive. I place the picture in a frame and put it next to the book on the shelf. The rest of the day is quiet, peaceful and relaxing. I don’t get dressed or changed until dinnertime creeps up on me. My nerves are shattered, but I am determined to make the best of the evening ahead. I miss Lady E and Uncle Will; it will be good to see them.

Dinner with the Moretti parents.

When the knock came on the door, it was not a surprise to me. I bounce to open it and had to catch my breath again at the spectacular pair standing there. Lady E hardly waits for the door to open

before she grabs me into a long embrace. Uncle Will trod in place, waiting his turn.

“Miss you so much! Look at you!” Lady E chirps, turning me around like a little ballerina doll. My feet tangle around themselves and I cling to her for balance.

“I missed you both so much, too!” I exclaim, and bring them in after me. “It’s not much, but it is mine.” I wave my hand around and the pair looks noticeably impressed.

“Oh my sweetheart, this is so fitting!”

“Except for that.” Uncle Will points to the window frame. I don’t have to look to know where he is pointing.

“John did a half-jack job on it!”

“Oh Will, let it...”

“No, may I fix it, Mina love, please? That sore eye is going to grate at me until I do!”

Barely a nod and Uncle Will flashes a little knife. I watch at the speed his hands move and marvel at the result. Lady E steps up and takes the knife from her husband, adding her own touches. When I look again there are no words to describe the effect of their handy work.

On my window frame, the wolf now looks like it shifts between female and male, the pelt around it has a tiny wild curl here and there and is framed with a pattern that looks like logs and growing flowers, the same as my walls. It is almost like the pair cast a spell over the picture.

“There. Now, I smell food,” Uncle Will declares and marches himself off to my kitchen. Lady E stops in front of my bookshelf with a frown.

“Where did you find these books, Carmina?”

“Oh, a very old bookshop in town. The owner calls me about them when they come in, he seems to have found a new seller who provides them. Aren’t they beautiful?”

Lady E smiles approvingly. “They are, and this little picture fits ... very well” She says, holding the frame.

“Yeah... it fell out of one of the books.” I confess. The expression on her face is hard to read.

“Well, best we get to the kitchen before my husband cleans the table... it smells goood!”

I feel proud of my accomplishment. It took some doing but I managed to slice the beef in paper-thin strips and arranged them on several plates. The tartar was a bit easier to make, especially when you don’t have to hide the speed at which the meat is diced.

“Oh, our favorite! If we have to eat human food... Mina what a lovely effort!”

The evening was a success and the pair enjoyed the Beef Carpaccio and Steak Tartar I made. There wasn’t a thing left, other than the rocket and decorations I added.

We sit and talk about the past week and when Uncle Will asks, I saw no reason to lie to him.

“I ... was very careful, I slept around the volcano canyon.”

“Told you we should have looked there!” He says to Lady E.

“You’re good at vanishing, Carmina,” I feel guilty at the edgy tone in Lady E’s voice.

“I’m sorry. How... how is Liam?”

The pair looks at each other and it is Uncle Will who answers.

“He is as well as can be expected. He started hunting again with us and seems to be a little more cheered up. I don’t like that he spend so much time with the hellc—”

I hear a thump from under the table and then see a grumpy face pull over Uncle Will.

“Oh. Jackie.” I say, trying hard to hide the effect the news has on me. Liam has moved on. That didn’t take long. At least he isn’t suffering for being with her and I suppose, awful as it makes me feel, it is some sort of consolation.

“I believe John is driving you insane?” Lady E changes the subject. I show her the way John came by an ‘open invitation’ to my cottage and the two Ancients are near falling over with laughter.

“Well, that is our boy!” they both exclaim.

They start telling me stories about John when he first joined them and how he managed to get his way. I learned how Lady E found John as a 24-year-old Soldier. He was meant to help capture villagers but couldn’t find it in himself to kill the innocents. Instead, he would sneak around and warn them. He was full of life and full of humor and the children in particular took to him very well.

Even after he was found out, he still tried to get the last person out of the village by throwing himself in front of the gunfire. Lady E, who was serving as a midwife in the village at the time, found him near death. She’s watched him night after night during his evacuation efforts and admired his spirit. He lifted the moods of the people and that was rare in itself. She couldn’t let him go, he had done so much good for the people. She asked him, when he was laying on his last breath, if he would accept help from her and Uncle Will. She told him that he may not live through the ordeal but she was willing to try. John’s one concern was if he would be able to continue helping the people. Lady E turned John, and thus became his mother. She guided him along the way and continues to do so.

I listen with wide eyes. It is not hard to imagine John in the way he is described, as he is still doing that around her family. Even Jarrod – who calls John a mutt – has a very tight bond with him.

“How... does the wolf thing work?” I ask.

“Well, that is hard to explain. It is like every vampire has a recipe to follow in order to change someone. The whole bite thing is a bit exaggerated but it was the fashion for a while. Our recipe is a cocktail of our blood with that of a wolf. We need two to create one.” Uncle Will explains.

“But ... you were the first wolf...”

“I was yes. I, like the other two families, were created by originals. Like... Ambrogio, there is a legend about the first wolf. I guess the originals of both human origins may have struck up a deal. You should look for the story of Lycaon, The Harpyiai and Lyncus. It may help a little. Of course they’re all stories...” Uncle Will gives me a little knowing smile.

“Where there’s smoke, there’s fire,” Lady E finishes and I am reminded of the conversation in my bedroom with Uncle Will.

I realize that the books I bought are all a little misleading to be polite, and that without the help of the Moretti family, I may fumble in the dark a lot. I tell the pair as much and they were very keen to help me find the right sort of book supply by bringing them to me from their own library. Of course, there is still the invitation to come visit anytime I wanted to and that made me feel happy for as long

as I didn't think of Liam and Jackie together.

The evening draws to a close and I see the pair off. Cleaning up takes but minutes. I feel and hear the storm brewing outside and the two howls in unison greeting the night air. Following my own ritual of fuelling the fire and lighting the candles, I sit down to write to Liam.

*“My Dearest Liam,
Dinner with your Mom and Dad was fun tonight.
Your dad told me to read the stories of Lycaon, The Harpyiai and Lyncus in an effort to understand better how the creation of the Ancients came about.
I am excited to find them.
I learned about John's birth and... about you and Jackie.
I hope you find peace with her.
It hurts to think you will forget me in the end, but it also brings peace to my mind.
I miss you so much and wish ... well, I wish things were different.
I love you dearly.
Your Rockflower, Mina.”*

I soak for a while in the bath and then go to find my bed. I am tired, but it is a happy tired. I hear the wind change outside and can smell the rain in the clouds, which reminds me to close the bathroom window.

When I fall asleep, the dream is filled with horrors of war, people eating people and me trying to convince them it does not have to be this way. I break down when I see the Lynx and the Wolf walk away from me side by side and a wooden stake forced through my heart. It was an agonizing pain and I wanted to die. Instead, I wake up with an excruciating pain through my wrist and straight into my chest. My heart thunders in my ears and blood rushes through my head as fast as the tears roll down my face. I cannot get to sleep again so I open a window and let the cold air brush over me where I sit, watching the sleeping fire goddess. I hear the wolf howling not too far off, fueling the ache in my chest and arm. I suppress the urge to throw my own call into the mix.

Liam watches the dream wrangling and twisting Carmina's body. Her wild recoiling and fighting is too much for him to bear. He moves closer to her bed and hover his hand just above her face. Just one touch and she will have peace. Just one...

The howl outside knocks him back into his corner and allows him time to sober up. Liam feels compelled to leave the room. He is losing his grip on things tonight and her diary entry is gnawing away at him. When he gets outside, his mind is set on tracking down his brother. Looking back at the cottage, Carmina is awake and looking out the window. Liam howls into the night sky before he rushes off.

He finds John, who wasn't hiding, easily. Without warning, he slams into his brother's body, sending him through the air with clumps of ice and dirt flying after him.

"What the hell, bro!" John growls at him, not taking the assault lying down. John flings himself at Liam and the brawl is evenly matched as they rip up the earth around them. Eventually standing in front of each other, heads low to the ground, snarling and growling, Liam shouts at John, "*What did you tell her?!*"

John is the first to lay down flat on his belly, eyes still fixed on Liam.

"Tell who? Mina?"

"Don't play dumb with me little brother! She thinks I'm with Jackie!"

"Why ... oooh damn! It wasn't me idiot! Mom and Dad were over there. Thought it may have been them?" John snarls.

The anger in Liam is clearly defused when he lays down too. After taking a few breaths, he calls for his mom and dad.

"Did you tell her I'm with Jackie?"

"We told her you spend time with that hellcat and we don't like it," Will answer first.

"How could you?! Father, she thinks we're together..."

"I'll set it right son, I'm sorry. It sort of came out when she asked about you..." Esmeriska's voice is genuine and filled with a promise she intends to keep.

"She... she asked about me?"

"Yeah, my boy..."

"I am fed up with this Mother, she has invited all of you back into her life but not me! Why?!"

"Because bro, in her mind, you're the one who is suffering at HER hand; we suffer because we're choosing it." John tells Liam about the conversation he had with Margarith on Carmina's views about them being like junkies where it come to blood.

Liam's howls are agonizing to listen to but are matched by the rest of his family who joins in throwing their own grief behind their sad night song.

Souls

Without Lilly and Jarrod around, the time passes too slowly. The month brings a change of season and spring is certainly slipping in through the cracks. The ice has melted and the days are stretching longer. I spend time talking things over with Mother about the books I'm reading. So much of the information makes no logical sense to me. When I tell mother about it, she listens patiently.

"Nearly everything says they have no souls, Momma, but I can't believe that!"

"Why is it important to you, my child? It is not like we're religious, is it?" Momma questions me. I catch myself pacing before sitting down next to her.

*"Soul is not about religion to me Momma. It is about being... a person; making choices, feeling things. If... if they had no soul, then they cannot love. **You** cannot love with all of you Momma. It*

makes no sense to me at all.” I retort, annoyed at my lack of ability to express the emotional connection I am feeling.

“What difference does it make, Carmina, if we have a soul or not? Humans have souls and look at the state of the race.”

“But... those are choices, Momma. You choose not to... not to drink human blood. Humans choose to do stupid things with the short lives they have. But your souls are the mechanism that allows you to choose, don't you see? Without it, you have no choice. You have dark driving forces without comprehension.” I desperately need someone to understand what I'm saying.

Momma thinks it over and nods, “I see, my child. By that principle, there is no argument from me over the fact that we very well may have a soul. Including humans.”

I frown at my mother. “You... don't think humans have souls, Momma?”

“My dear child, I question the wisdom of the human race a lot, but I have not in my entire life tried to figure out the aspects of morals and morality. I live my life simply and wish for others to do the same. Choose what makes you happy. If it makes someone else unhappy then take responsibility and if the consequences are unacceptable, then you can't possibly have chosen what makes you happy. You cannot control the world around you, Carmina, you can control *yourself*.”

I stare at my mother, who suddenly transformed into a pool of knowledge and wisdom I have always known is there but never used.

“Thank you Momma!”

My mother's words set me at ease and when I make it to my bed. I am happy to write in my diary. I realized I have made a dreadful mistake by shutting Liam out, and that the consequences were too high for me to accept. I cannot change that now, but I can acknowledge it and, hopefully, come to live with it. Liam is with someone else.

“Dear Liam,

It is over a month since I've last seen you and my heart still reaches for you like it was just a moment ago when you held me to sleep.

I came to the conclusion today that you have a beautiful soul.

You once said that you could take my soul if you wanted to, but I see now why you would say such a thing.

I didn't understand then, but I do now.

You don't want or need my soul, my love,

Yours is perfect as it is, beautiful, caring and warm, even when your touch is cold.

I miss you Liam, I wish... I wish you were here with me.

Momma said that I cannot control the world around me; that I can only control me.

Of course I think she's right, to a point.

I choose to be happy but I cannot control my stubborn heart refusing to let go of you.

*I realized today that the consequence of my choice to leave you is too high but...
My regret is that I am a slow learner.
The knowledge came too late for us.
I love you Liam, and if I could change my path, it would include you again. Forever.
Your Rockflower, Carmina.*

Liam returns from Carmina's cottage in high spirits. The grin was marred by the nightmare he watched in frustration. Halfway to his den, he smells the smoke before he sees it. He also smell another scent and the resentment leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. Liam dashes forward into a flat out run. When he reaches his den, the good mood evaporates like mist before the sun.

"Why are **you** inside my den?" He jeers at the woman sprawled on his bed in disgust.

"Oh my William... I came to see you last night, but you were nowhere to be found. You have not been to say hello in ... too long." Jackie's purring charm is truly misplaced on Liam. He's already noticed Mina's shirt is gone, along with her books. The place is re-organized and ... scented?!

"**How dare you!** You have no right—" but she cuts him short.

"She's gone William and you cling to her memory like a child to his mother's teat. I thought it was time to intervene. You need a real woman to take care of you..."

"Get out, Jackie," He barks at her but she does not move until he grabs her by the shoulders.

"Oh William, just a few moments and I can make you forget her."

The rest of the Moretti family arrives together, concern engraved all over their faces.

"Liam! What is going on? We smell smoke coming from here... Oh. Jackie."

In seconds, it is clear that Liam and Jackie are in some sort of stalemate. Esmeriska puts her arm out across John's chest to stop him from moving.

"Ah yes, that would be me doing your job Momma wolf. I took the liberty of rescuing your son from that horrible human's scent, her clothing smelled something appalling!"

Cats and Dogs

Liam roars and John joins his brother by ducking under his mother's arm. Esmeriska and Will are faster than either of the boys and they serenely place themselves between their sons and the woman.

"Jackie, the wolf den is not a playground and, unlike you, we have rules." Esmeriska speaks in a deadly calm. Anyone with an ounce of sense would know not to challenge this woman right now. Her eyes are ablaze and her wild hair looks alive under a static charge.

"You will leave now and do not come back into our territory again. We do not want trouble with your House, but you are not above the law because you're an Azzara." Will's calm matches that of his wife equally and his jawline is set in a compact tension.

"Why do you try to encourage this stupidity? She does not want him!" Jackie screams in a pitched yowl.

"Because, Jackie, Liam is bonded to said stupidity." Esmeriska's placidity is filled with venom.

"And you are a spiteful little girl. Mina stands a better chance with Liam than you ever will, my

dear kitten. Have you not learned from nature, my pet?"

"Cats and dogs, Jackie... we just don't mix, for obvious reasons." Will ends with a poisonous injection of his own.

"She will ruin you, this house! He cannot be bonded to her! She's human, it is impossible!" Jackie's vindictive aspirations reach a hysterical pitch.

"Liam, be a dear and go put out that fire. John, escort Miss Azzara off our property. Will, my love, I think Joseph and Mary will want to know about this." Esmeriska ignores the outburst, pulling her lips into the prettiest, most menacing smile.

"Goodbye Miss Azzara."

Jackie lets out a series of insults and snaps at John before she runs off into the direction of the river. John is short on her heels following his mother's direction and enjoying every moment of it. Liam is still seething. He storms into Mina's room and the foundation shakes under the thunder that follows. Esmeriska waits patiently for the crashing and breaking of the furniture to end, inspecting her own trembling hands. When the silence falls over the den, she firmly calls again to her son.

"That fire won't put itself out Liam."

When his blur passes her, she leaps into the small room. Jackie had removed all the pictures, clothing, and anything that marginally resembled Carmina, from the room. What was left is now in pieces on the floor. She turns away and closes the door softly.

Outside, the fire is doused but nothing remains of the small pile.

"New beginnings, my boy."

Then Liam sees his mother do something he has never seen her do in his entire existence.

She spits, literally spits, in the direction Jackie left in and follows it with: "If that arrogant little bitch comes near my kids again, I will shred her to pieces myself." After which, she daintily wipes her mouth at the corners.

Liam would never believe it if he didn't see it himself. When things calm down, Esmeriska goes to see Margarith in an effort to divert her own attention; Liam shows his father and brother what he witnessed.

"Woah! Remind me never to consciously make mother angry, bro!"

"That, boys, is my wife – your mother. Right there is the reason I paired with her and would not challenge her again..."

The boys look at their father and both ask simultaneously. "Again?"

Will coughs and gives a secretive wink. "The last time I kissed and told..."

The two men sit down next to the cindered pile on the ground.

"I can't believe she did that bro, I'm sorry." John shunts his brother's shoulder.

"Mother is right. New beginnings," and nonchalantly the grin spreads on Liam's face again as he recalls Mina's last entry.

"Jarrod is back from his visit. Join us for the hunt tomorrow?" John asks, suspicious of the look on his brother's face.

"Take Mina." His grin widens. He gets up and kicks at the burnt ashes, then stomps into them.

"Here's to new beginnings, bro!" John joins his brother.

First Hunt

The knock on my door brings relief. I heard Jarrod approach but it is still dark outside, so I figure he's just checking on me.

"Mina! Carmina! Get your gear, your lazy behind is learning to hunt today!"

Excitement surges through my whole body. *FINALLY!* I do a fast little run in place and wiggle around the room punching the air. I am a hundred percent sure I hear a familiar snort and blush deep red.

"John, knocking is an option!" I shout at him, storming into the kitchen.

"Yeah, but then I don't see you do happy dances around the house," He sniggers and mocks me, doing the same dance.

"Eat something, don't want your tummy rumbles scaring the animals away. Meet you by the gate." I rush, eating and dressing as fast as I can. When I meet Jarrod and John at the gate, they both start snorting.

"You – Food – Hair," is all I can make out between the choking. I feel the blush and comb my fingers through my hair, pulling out pieces of cheese and butter.

"Ugh, can we go?"

"Yeah, soon as you get the rest of the snacks you keep in..." I spin around to see Liam holding another piece of toast in his hand. How did I not hear him? How did he get so close to me? John and Jarrod both look surprised too.

"Where did you... uhm," I grab at his hand, removing the evidence and turn to walk back to my cottage. Liam's fingers close around my wrist and pull me back.

"Don't be childish. The clan are a few hands short while visiting family and I can help." I cannot fault the perfectly good reason Liam has for being here.

"Which is why I called you too. Lilly is useless, she'll cuddle the things and want to name them. We can do with the hands today, Carmina, as much as I hate to say it." Jarrod backs Liam up, even though I can hear his teeth grinding and the contempt he passes in Liam's direction isn't fake.

"Fine. Can we go *now*?" I ask again, moving as far away from Liam as I can, putting both Jarrod and John between us. Liam shoves his hands in his pockets and shrugs.

"After you."

Patiently I listen to Jarrod's instructions. I commit every word to memory and file it away. Jarrod is an amazing hunter. We do not eat a lot of meat but what we eat is always fresh. Wild meat is part of a weekly diet and usually the group going out is made up of six, sometimes ten, formidable hunters. We have to catch and bring back enough for the clan and I realize we're not hunting rabbits and hares alone. It is possibly a good thing we have both the wolves with us as they can carry quite a bit

more than I can. Jarrod helps me to identify all the sounds as we move along, eliminating the ones that are – as he call them – noisemakers.

I hear the elk long before I see it and inform the men.

When the gentle push comes from both Liam and John, I see no point in refusing the link. It makes hunting a lot easier. My family does not know about the linking yet but I guess every secret has a time and a place to reveal itself. How would Jarrod deal with this? He already picked up that my senses are a bit sharper than before, but this is something different.

John puts a hand on Jarrod's chest and gives him a trusting look.

"Mina, show us where."

Responding to John's request, I turn my head and see the bottom of the bottle appear. The elk is quite a distance off, but there is no mistake about it being there. Under Jarrod's direction, we move around and John suggests that I be the one to flush it towards them. I wait for Jarrod to acknowledge the request and explain to me where to go and how to herd the animal. Liam is quiet but the comfortable familiarity of his energy is hard to dismiss.

I focus on the task at hand and do as instructed. The moment I am sure Jarrod cannot see me anymore, I speed up in the indicated direction, keeping John and Liam moving along with my progress. I feel the pride from both the boys, which obviously encourages my determination not to mess up. The animal speeds off the minute I appear behind it. I don't chase, just like Jarrod instructed, but I keep track of it as it bounces and move towards them. I inhale sharply when I see how fast Jarrod is able to move. I hold my breath with fingers crossed; when he leaps onto the animal, I want to clap in excitement. Liam and John are there in a flash and the animal goes down fast and silently. I go around to get back to the trio just in time to see Jarrod wiping his mouth and hands on a cloth, which he then puts back into a sealed bag.

"*Good work, Mina,*" John cheers inside my consciousness. Liam is silently regarding me with the smallest of curls around his lips.

"Nicely done, Mina!" Jarrod pats me on the back and then thumbs his nose before handing me a small knife. I look at it confused.

"This doesn't count as a first kill for you so the next one is yours and uhm, since you don't do the ... you know..." he snaps his teeth at me and the other two chuckles amused. Nerves set in fast. I will have to reveal myself to Jarrod if I am to pull down any animal.

"*You can do it Mina... he'll be fine. Gotcha back, little Vixen.*"

I look at Liam and the casual distance he keeps from me brings a tenacious pull in my belly. Liam is first to pick up the scent of another elk and, as before, John touches Jarrod's chest while Liam shows us the animal. Jarrod's instructions were precise... if you're a slow human. I listen and modify in my mind what needs doing. I don't have the strength they do, but I have the speed. When Liam is in place to herd the animal our way, John and Jarrod flank me to make sure the elk won't get away if it gets past me. When Jarrod lifts his hand, I set off straight for the animal. Jumping over its back, I slice four times around the vitals on either side of its neck. The animal was stunned

and seconds later bolted onward and collapse bleeding out on the ground. I was sitting, dumbfounded, on the other side and heard the cheers from the trio rushing my way. The smell of the blood rises up in my nose and I swallow hard, trying to figure out the carnal urge to taste the blood for myself. Liam is by my side, taking the knife from my hand, whispering barely audibly: “From Rockflower to Huntress... Be still my heart.”

John and Jarrod catch up to us and Liam hands the latter his knife back. I crawl closer to the animal, making sure it is dead and not suffering. Jarrod pushes his hands into the wounds I made, then steps closer to me. His hands move lightning fast as he draw the hunter’s markings on my skin in silence. I grab his hand to look at the blood, still trying to make sense of the incredible urge that is forcing itself on me.

Liam looks between John and I, who obviously feels the conflict raging inside my body as well. Slowly, my frame reacts and my head lowers, smelling the blood and inhaling it until I can taste it in the back of my throat. It is Jarrod who drops to his knees next to me, his hands moving fast as he expertly slices a piece of bloody flesh from just below the elk’s chest, offering it to me first. After which, with Jarrod’s lightning movements, each of them is standing with a thin slice of warm, bloodied meat.

“Congratulations, my little big sister. Artemis and Diana blessed us today.”

Mechanically, I bring the meat to my mouth. My eyes close as I feel the warm, tender and sticky blood-soaked meat fill me with satisfaction. I wipe my mouth and feel embarrassed knowing how much I enjoyed the hunt and how much I enjoyed the raw meat. Knowing that they know; knowing Liam knows.

The world defrosts around me and speeds up again, and I cannot help but let the absolutely joyous “whoop!” escape.

I look at Liam; he winks at me, just to turn and walk away.

“Good job Vixen!”

“Mina! What the hell! You’ve been holding back on us!” Jarrod grabs me, spinning me around in a twirling hug.

“Dude, I told you to expect the unexpected today. Mina picked that speed trick up when she met the Lynx House.” John explains.

I watch John pick the animal up and drape it over his shoulder without any effort at all, while Jarrod directs me towards the other. When we reach it, Liam has already picked it up in the same fashion, which leaves Jarrod empty handed. Not to be out done, he crouches in front of me and grins.

“Your ride awaits, huntress?”

I giggle and hitch a ride on my brother’s back. The trip home was filled with laughter and playful banter, but the lasting pride that is airily cuddling up to me from Liam is what keeps the grin plastered to my face.

When we step through the courtyard, the family cheers loudly as Jarrod ceremoniously presents the

latest hunter in the clan to them.

Momma and Lady E jog forth and *only* because they outrank my brother does he put me down to face them, standing on my own two feet.

“You should have seen it, Momma!” Jarrod excitedly tells the story “And then she was off like lightning, just a blur!”

Momma listens to Jarrod through narrowed eyes and Lady E snorts behind her hand. It is clear that Momma thinks Jarrod is telling tales.

“Our Carmina, hey? Like lightning?” Momma teases “And if she was fishing, the one that got away was how big?”

“Margarith, believe your boy. Mina has been holding back on you.”

I don’t want to talk about myself anymore. My eyes search for Liam but he’s already taken his loot to the prep room and disappeared. I still feel his link, but it is gentle and distant.

“Not you too, Esmeriska!” Momma looks at the woman next to her who steps back and waves me off.

“To your cottage and back sweetheart, ready... steady... go....” She counts me off. It took a moment for me to register what she meant and I thought I might as well. I don’t go back to them though –instead, I head straight for the bathroom.

When nobody comes to chastise me for cheating, I guess that Lady E knew I wasn’t going to return. I sigh happily, playing the whole morning over in my mind. I put the carnal thing down to the fact that it was my first hunt and I probably just slapped my animal brain into action. I am surprised how well my plan worked and how well Jarrod took the whole thing.

I am to be a regular participant of the hunting party. Jarrod takes his time to explain and answer every question I have. Liam and John both are regular party members too and, at times, Uncle Will joins us. Lilly wasn’t too pleased to know my first kill was ‘Bambi’ but she had no problem enjoying the stew it provided. I have no time to think about the moral implications of our hunts. We are always careful to be as humane as possible and make the kill as fast as we can. Our family relies on the food source and we don’t waste any part of the carcass. There is nothing about our hunts that is thrown away. The skulls and bones that cannot be carved into jewelry are ground up and used as a paste to harden into tiles.

“Thank you, John, for helping with Jarrod,” I let him know directly and the immediate response came back: *“Your fridge is empty, see you at breakfast.”*

SpringTime

I climb onto the window seat and look out at the Volcano in the distance. I cannot believe how fast time has gone by. It is around 6 months since my first encounter with the Morettis and so much has happened. Tomorrow is officially spring day and a week later will be my 23rd birthday. Our family

makes a big deal of spring's arrival. It is a time to celebrate new life and we tend not to hunt much during this time either. If we do, we will not take any animal that is pregnant, nursing or young. It is also a festival day and there will be food and drink, games and dances in disorganized order. We've spent the past week preparing for this event and tomorrow is shaping up to be busy. I am very excited, as it is also the day I choose to celebrate my birthday. It is merely days apart and I see no point in having two separate celebrations. Momma has agreed to this when I was little and told her my thoughts on the matter. We still laugh when Momma tells the story of how the little girl stood and told her "Spring-day or no more birthdays."

Liam has been present but not in obvious ways. He has figured out a way to get around me and shows up at times with logical reasoning behind it. I will confess that I look forward to the hunts if for no other reason than to be connected to Liam. With the hunts being paused for a while, I don't know how I'll get my fix. I've also noticed that my taste for raw meat has increased. For some reason, I am not constantly hungry after the smallest bite of meat. Momma's theory is that my body is straining with the new developments and, seeing as I am anemic, it makes sense that it is not food my body needs, but supplements.

As I sit and watch the sun set, I lean against the windowsill. John and Jarrod's footsteps come towards the cottage, bringing forth a groan from me.

"Mina!" and "Vixen!" drifts towards me as they call out for my attention. I get up unwillingly, opening the door before they reach it.

"What do you want?" I ask them curtly. They jostle at each other, apparently not sure who should go first. I feel my foot tapping impatiently. Eventually, it is Jarrod that speaks up.

"We brought you an early birthday present – but, but – no, Mina, wait!" Jarrod steps back when I move to close the door.

"We know you don't like fussing, and this is not fussing..." John interferes and holds the door open with his foot while he speaks "...we just want you to enjoy tomorrow."

"And it was Momma, Lilly and Lady E's idea... we just came to deliver... *it*..." Jarrod ducks when I take a swing at him and John steps out of my view. Behind him stands Liam. He is dressed in a black long sleeved shirt with white leather string crisscrossing to keeping the shirt from opening over his chest. My hand, still in mid-swing, drops to my side and I gawk like a schoolgirl who's just seen her favorite movie star. John and Jarrod both take this opportunity to run away, still pushing and shoving at each other.

I look both ways making sure my eyes are not deceiving me. My mouth dries and Liam does not move. Unsure of what to do next, I leave the door open and walk into the living room. When Liam doesn't follow I turn back to stand in the door again.

"It is custom, Miss Nightshade, to invite a vampire into your home - certainly a custom created by the movies, but one I like." Liam's voice is slow, soft and alluring.

"Uhm, ok." I decide to play along. "Mr. Moretti, would you like to join me inside my humble home?" A blur passes the threshold and Liam produces a bunch of sunflowers from behind his back.

“I would very much like to take up on that offer Miss Nightshade.”

My hands reach for the flowers and there is no way to hide the shaking. I turn with the flowers clutched against my chest hoping they would cover the erratic beating in there.

“Right then, please make yourself at home while I put these in water. They are beautiful!” The curl on the one side of his mouth as good as stops my heart from beating. This man is downright gorgeous!

I storm into the kitchen, grateful for the opportunity to try and compose myself. I take a few deep breaths to steady the nerves, reminding myself he is with someone else. He is here because very few can say no to the woman who conspired against me. The flowers make their way into the vase and I have to concentrate hard on holding it tight while carrying it out and placing it on the single empty shelf of my bookcase. Liam has made himself comfortable in my window seat, his one leg on the floor and the other pulled up casually for his arm to lean on.

“Nice to see the view from this side, but I prefer the other one.” He states dryly. Why on earth am I so jittery and feeling so awkward? What did he mean by ‘the other one’?

“Yes, tell me why, Carmina.”

“Why are you here Liam?” I ask him directly. I cannot deal with the game anymore and I am drunk on the mixture of hurt and happiness.

Liam looks out the window before he answers, “The Elder of the clan – your mother - and the ... Alpha Female of my house – my mother - insisted that you get a good night’s rest. Their vote was seconded and thus passed by the Elder’s second daughter – your sister Lilly.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what I expected but the formality in his voice is disappointing. “Uhm, but you’re early. I’m not tired yet.” That’s what I say? I can kick myself for being so stupid. I don’t deserve this man even if... even if ...

“Hmmm,” is the absent response I get.

I don’t know what to do with myself. I stand staring at the big man on my windowsill and can’t figure out what I’m to do next.

“Come sit here with me, Carmina.” He is using that **very** kind voice again. I want to be ... anything but weakened by it, but I can’t help myself and my legs walk over to him without my permission. My brain has gone numb and I can’t find anything to say to him.

“Your place is very suiting of you,” he compliments me. The small talk is another wrecking ball rolling through my mind.

“Thank you.”

Liam does not push any conversation; he does not impose on me at all. The marginal indication that he is conscious is the gentle stroking of his thumb over my wrist. It takes some time for me to relax and when I do, it is as if the world’s tiredness descends on me. I sigh and hand myself over to the blissful calm I have yearned for.

Sandman

Liam did not have time to object to the three women who accosted him at the gate. It was too late when he realized his mother had set a trap for him.

Esmeriska called her son with the excuse that they needed him to bring a gift box (which turned out to be empty) because she forgot Mina's birthday present. By the time he figured out *he* was the gift, there was no backing out anymore.

If you've never ran into three pairs of female begging eyes, including that of your mother's, pray you never do. Liam could not even warn his poor brother and Jarrod who haphazardly strolled into the house.

When he saw Carmina opening the door, he had to pull his own desires into check not to push past the twosome weathering the Carmina storm. He had never felt so terrified in all his life. Her heartbeat told him all he needed to know. Holding her like this in his arms is perhaps the most selfish gift anyone has ever given Carmina.

Liam picks her up and carries her with him while he makes himself more comfortable on the glove-seat. He's been in her bedroom countless times before, but he will not take her there like this without permission. When Carmina re-arranges herself with a soft moan, her fists clutching onto his shirt, he let her know he's there. He inhales her scent eagerly, letting it stir familiar emotions. His eyes rest on the picture he left for her in the book. How powerful is this little creature in his arms to so entirely stretch out a man approximately twice her size so efficiently. He pulls a piece of paper from his pocket and, while watching Carmina thoroughly enjoying her painting room, he reads it to her. He's held onto this for the right moment and right now is the last moment he may have with her for a long time.

*"I carry an animal inside my chest where my heart should be.
And you choose to give me a soul.
I crave the depraved taste of your life force to soothe my thirst,
And you choose to give me salvation.
I treat my love for you like nothing more than a lost fairytale
And you choose to give me forever after.*

*How can you see yourself as the monster in my life
When all I see is a flower blooming in front of me?
How can you forgive me my needy greed,
When I scarred you first?
How do I ask for a second chance to show you myself,
When a horror is all I entail?*

You hold the lock while I hold the key,

*Carmina Rose Nightshade,
I beg you, please,
Don't... Just don't turn away from me."*

Liam clasps Carmina closer to him, drinking in the warmth he feels while tapping his foot along with her heartbeat and answering her every time she says his name by assuring her: "I'm here... I'm here."

I wake up when Liam evenly lays me back onto the big glove shaped couch. I know the night before was real because I don't feel the aftermath of nightmares. When my eyes open, he is already gone. Opening my hand, I find a scrolled piece of paper; I read the words I already know. I hold it to my heart for a minute then place it in my most favorite spot by the window. I lean in and inhale, opening my mouth to not only smell but also taste his scent in full force. Time! Furiously I rush to get ready for the day, making sure not to have food in my hair before I bounce out the front door. Not having to hide my movement anymore means hardly any 'Carmina Spills' over the courtyard which, in turn, means I can help getting the last things done.

I watch the wicked trio of interfering women approach and fly around them three times, with each passing landing a kiss on one cheek after the other.

"Thank you! Thank you and thank you!" I am not sure who is more surprised by my behavior but I am happy for the first time in what feels like forever. Jarrod and John approach me with whistles and cat howls, encouraging my good mood.

"Well, in the mood you're in, we might as well make use of it before you turn into the red-head beastly girl again," Lilly twitters at me. She proceeds to dangle a key on a string and I snatch it out of her hands.

"What does it open?" I ask and the group turns along with me as Uncle Will drives up the road to the gate in a brand new light purple Volkswagen Beetle.

"That." Jarrod states the obvious.

"Oh! Thank you!" I say, clapping my hands together. The clan members are enjoying the moment as much as I am and Uncle Will throws the set of keys he had at me.

"You have to wait a day for the plates but it's yours," The impish look on his face catches up.

"The day is yours, my child," Momma announces and, with that, the music starts up; a Celtic selection to ease into the morning. I know the music will be playing all day and I put my face up to the cloudy sky.

I spend the rest of the day moving around with the clan and my family enjoying the carnival atmosphere and picking at the food on every table. It is the one day where every woman who has the inclination shows off her kitchen prowess by making dishes they most enjoy or wish to introduce. I am loving every moment, even the games which I still only watch from the sidelines no

matter the amount of begging and pleading.

John, Jarrod and Uncle Will initiate a King of the Castle type game of tag. The thought of Jarrod behaving very much like one of the wolf pack briefly crosses my mind before I get distracted again. Momma and Lady E sit under Momma's favorite evergreen like the two queens they are and Lilly is running herself ragged with the kids. From where I am sitting on the courtyard wall, I have an exceptional view of everything going on. I welcome Liam with a brimming smile when he makes himself at home next to me. He does not speak at all and I appreciate his tranquility rubbing up against me. When it is time to cut the cake, Liam takes my hand and helps me jump off the wall. I thought he would be walking with me, but looking over my shoulder, he puts two fingers to his forehead in a salute and vanishes over the wall.

When night falls, the courtyard lights up like a fairytale with hundreds of tiny lights draped everywhere. I imagine fireflies visiting only on this day, weaving themselves into the trees. Couples pair off to dance and those who are unattached pair up with family, children or friends. I tilt my head when John asks Momma for a dance - ever the gentleman. I am absorbed in the moment and drift off into my own mind of dancing and twirling, thinking about fairies and romance and banishing suffering. Before the last dance plays out, I slip away to my cottage. I do this every year. Silly as I am, I tell myself that if I leave before the music ends, then it will continue to play and the love and romance flowing through the whole enclosure will forever be dancing there.

It takes a long time for me to fall asleep; I don't want the nightmares to steal my happiness. When I do fall asleep, I dream of wolves and soldiers killing one another, I dream of my clan sacrificing their children to protect me, I dream of the golden eyes following me then telling me that I am not welcome, not worth living. I dream the valley is covered in blood and everyone is bathing in it. I dream of being ripped apart by the wolves and the pain is agonizing. I wake up hearing myself scream about not wanting to suffer life.

History Told

Waking up, I am tired and decide to soak. Only once I feel fresh and relaxed do I find my way to the bay-seat. I sit in the window with my towel still wrapped around me and a steaming cup of warm tea. I watch the clouds rolling in and know it will be raining buckets soon. Over the top of the volcano, lighting is darting like neon pathways. I listen and can pick up the rolling crackle of static before it discharges. The thunder sounds like a grumpy man trying to get the attention of the Fire Goddess who's still sleeping soundly in her volcano. The thought tickles me.

I need to get out for a while. Liam's poem is haunting me and the words are turning over in my head. I stroll over to Momma's house and find her in the kitchen sitting alone by the table. She looks up at me and wordlessly hands me a cup of tea. I appreciate that about my mother. Unlike Lilly, momma has a calm about her that allows you to organize your thoughts. After a few sips I look at her and smile.

"What is your story Momma?" I ask her.

She lifts an eyebrow. “More specific, my girl.”

“Well, you were born, I know that much. Uncle Will is your father and Uncle Darius is your brother. The other Elders are not family, but the clan houses are tied in the Ancient houses. But ... how old are you Momma?”

My mother pushes her hair away from her face and purses her lips.

“Well now, that is a question. I was born 148 years ago, but stopped aging at 36 years of age.”

“And you found me 23 years ago.”

Momma puts her hand over mine. “I told you that story, my child.”

Shifting uncomfortably I avoid Momma’s eyes. “I didn’t read that. I destroyed that part of your letter, Momma.”

Momma’s chuckle catches me off guard.

“I thought you might not have read it. You’ve not said a word about it until now.”

I take a deep breath and weigh up my options. Momma waits patiently for me to make up my mind. When I nod, she sits back in her chair.

“Twenty years ago, I worked in a hospital in London. I wasn’t ready to be an Elder. I yearned to be around people and children. I spent a lot of time in the children’s wards and was often tempted to take a child for myself. Nobody would even notice as the section I worked in was taking care of abused and abandoned babies and children. It was hard, to say the least, but it had to do. This Valley belonged to my brother Darius. He’s always been a little ambitious and took up Elder position as soon as he came to his immortal age.”

Momma’s mouth pulls into a bitter line.

“He never approved of me working, least of all as a child minder. He knew I was barren and counted on me never taking up clan space anyway. But he wanted me to be by his side. I met a young girl, around 15 years old. The night I met her it was terribly cold and she was finding shelter between my car and the garage wall. This was illegal, of course, but it was a bitterly cold night. She was just a child herself, with child. I took her home with me and decided to help her look after the unborn baby she was carrying. I learned Carmen was an illegal immigrant from Spain. That’s what we thought. She was beautiful, Carmina, and I loved her like she was my own little sister. She was wise beyond her age and, in those months, she became my confidant. The baby was growing healthy although fast and Carmen kept telling me that there was something wrong with the baby, with you. She changed her diet and supplemented a lot with protein and iron.

“I asked Carmen about the father of the child and she told me she doesn’t know him and doesn’t remember. My heart broke for her because she was so sad and angry with herself. She also didn’t recall how she came to London or any part of her family in Spain. She guessed she was from Spain because of her language and her name was on the backpack and schoolbooks she clung to. Her English was crass and learned on the streets of London; hardly appropriate. I tried finding answers in newspapers and police and missing persons. Nothing.

“Around the 6th month, you were near impossibly already. Carmen left me a note that she had to go

for a checkup and would be home later in the day. I was worried because, that morning before I left for work, she told me she was in terrible pain and thought you had your foot stuck in a rib. When I came home from work, she wasn't home yet. It became late and I started worrying."

Momma closes her eyes against the memory and I feel her agony and regret.

"I should have gone with her. When I tracked her movements, I realized she kept to the back streets, avoiding police and being noticed. Two blocks from the Clinic there were police cars and an ambulance. They had found a girl who had bled to death. The blood trails lead from an empty warehouse to where she was found. The report stated later that it was a back-street abortion gone wrong and they called for witnesses or family.

"They were wrong. I saw her wounds and that girl was viciously attacked. Carmen wanted you more than life itself. She even knew you were a girl! Already named you Carmina. I waited for the mess of people to clear up and followed the blood scent further into the city.

"Eventually I found a dumpster being wrecked by foxes who were desperate to get inside it. When I opened the lid, you were barely breathing, near frozen and bruised in the strangest ways. I think Carmen tried to hide you from someone and lead them away to where she was found. It took all of over a century's training to bring you back to me... but here you are. I decided there and then that I will claim my clan's ground and make sure that nobody who needs a home is ever turned away. I missed Carmen but she gave her life for you and I wasn't going to let that life be a complete waste.

"I claimed Carmen's body using my old social worker credentials and told the police she was a runaway orphan. I brought her body and you here. Your mother lives on in that evergreen tree."

Momma wipes a tear from her cheek.

"Darius was furious and contested my claim but our father Will, and Esmeriska, were not having his tantrums and as you can see, our misfit clan has grown. I adopted the name 'Nightshade' with permission from the Ancients in order to protect my family. Jarrod came a year after you were born, four years of age and a half-breed. Lilly was brought to me a month or two after."

I remember Jarrod joining us. He was wild and unruly and I wasn't allowed around him alone. Jarrod was a biter. It occurs to me now what that means and I chuckle! He loved Lilly from day one, though. He took his 'big brother role' very seriously with her. As we got older, it was very hard getting out from under Jarrod's protective bubble. I am utterly surprised he has any friends left at all.

Momma was about to get up but I beat her to it. I make us tea while filing away the information she just gave me. Placing the cup in front of her, I kiss her crown before I sit down.

“Why have you not partnered, Momma?” I see my mother shuffling in the chair.

“I am not the marrying type, Carmina. One day, when I meet someone and there is a bond, I certainly will have to swallow those words. I’ve had my fair share of romance and love, but I am bored easily so I stick with what makes me happy.”

She waves her hand and chuckles.

“The very thing I am glad you and Lilly have not done!”

I gawk at my mother and shake my head. “And all those lectures! Oh my word, Momma!”

My mother giggles like a schoolgirl. She regards me with a sidelong look before speaking again.

“Now, my turn to ask you a question, my dear child.”

I know that look and the way her lips are pulled. I know I’m not going to want to talk about whatever it is she is about to ask, but I also know I have no choice.

“Do you love Liam?”

I sigh and the sparkle returns to Momma’s eyes.

“I think I do, Momma.”

“Then why did you leave to come back home without him?”

“I told you, Momma, because I am the beast that torture his nature.”

“How much more torture do you think he endures when you’re away from him?”

“Possibly a lot less? It doesn’t matter Momma, Liam is with Jackie now.”

“Jackie?” Momma nearly chokes. “Hardly, my girl. Esmeriska banned her from Moretti grounds.”

“What?! Can she do that?”

“Carmina, you will find that Esmeriska Moretti can and will do what is best for her family regardless of the consequences. I have no mother but that woman is a very good surrogate.”

“It still doesn’t matter, Momma. If Liam is not with Jackie, he obviously doesn’t want to be with me either.”

Momma’s tutting sounds concern me. When she does that, it is usually an indication that you have just said the dumbest thing she’s ever heard.

“Carmina! Do you know he slept outside your window every night for a month before you met *officially*?”

For the second time today, I gape at my mother who shakes her head. “Ask him about it.”

With those words, the conversation is at an end. Momma walks around the table and gives me a hug, leaving the room to supervise the chores around the estate.

On the way back to my cottage, Lilly and Jarrod wave me over. I look up at the sky, surprised that it is not raining yet.

“The plates for your car,” Lilly says, “Open it!”

Why on earth would she make such a bother over car plates? When I open the plates I knew whose input won the war.

‘*RckFlr*’

“Do you like it?” Lilly asks. Jarrod looks as if he’s hiding behind his wife.

“It is nice.”

Lilly claps happily, as is her particular way and bounces a few more times. “Jarrod and I got you

something for the car, too.”

I hate spoiling my baby-sister’s mood, so I smile and hold my hand out.

Jarrood places the cutest, happiest looking dancing sunglass-fitted sunflower gadget in my palm.

“It wouldn’t be yours if it didn’t have that flower somewhere,” Lilly says and I can’t suppress the bubbling titter.

“It was my idea to get that one. It is happy. We want you to be happy too.”

I catch the slight serious undertone in Jarrood’s words. Ignoring it, I walk away tossing the plates in Jarrood’s direction.

“Fit it please, that would make me super happy!”

“Witch!”

Lilly waves at me and they walk hand in hand across the courtyard.

When I get home, I know John is inside. I head straight to the kitchen, as he never goes past the fridge into the rest of my home. As expected, John is sitting with his feet on the table, leaning back in the chair.

“Jeesh, where have you been, stranger?”

“Not that it is your concern, I’ve been with my mother.”

“Oh. Well, I brought you some fresh meat. You’re looking pale again.”

“I’m not sleeping well,” I confess.

“Liam can solve that problem.” John snips at me, rocking himself on the chair. For a moment, I thought to kick the chair out from under him.

“John, why is everybody pushing me at Liam? What if... I don’t want to be with him?”

“I’ll know if you don’t, then I’ll claim you for myself.”

I glare at him and the idea of shoving the chair is settling spitefully in my mind.

“John, is it true your mother banned Jackie from your grounds?”

“Yeah, you will not *believe* what my mother did after that!” He snorts hard.

“Why?”

“Because you are too stupid to see what you’re doing to my brother.” John’s words are not mean or accusing, nor are they teasing and playful. They are firm.

“It is precisely why—”

John flies off the chair and puts his hand over my mouth. “No, you left because you were scared, don’t use my brother as an excuse. If we are pushing you, then ask yourself what do *we* see that you don’t?” John lets go of my mouth and taps me on the nose.

“Look at *that* rain!”

Getting Lost

I went to bed early last night. Emotionally, I am drained and while I hate the nightmares, they do offer a masochistic relief from reality, which I currently find just as unbearable. When I wake up, I am in a terrible mood. I look at the rain and decide I need to clear my head. Changing into the hockey outfit Lady E bought me, I tie my hair back and head outside; I don’t care which way I’m going, I just need to run.

I start at a steady pace, drinking in the beautiful surroundings. Lush, long green patches seeding the clearings, small wild flowers sprinkled against drenched thickets. I feel my body craving more and more from me. I give in to the sensation and circle around the volcano, through the musky smelling wet canyon and into unknown territory. I don't stop when I notice the unfamiliar area but continue until I reach a part of the river that is under thick cover. The rain is still pouring down and I allow myself the luxury of crying, merging my tears with the purity of rainwater. I feel guilty for allowing my soul's stains to taint nature's lavishness.

I hear the movement and when I look up, Jackie is standing right behind me. She seems surprised to see me, and I suddenly know without doubt where I am.

"I'm sorry Jackie - I didn't realize I crossed the boundaries."

"Oh that is alright, Petal. How are you these days?"

I don't like her tone and her catty friendliness. I know she does not like me much and, admittedly, the feeling is mutual.

"Ahh, welcome Carmina. I am sure Maria and Joseph will be happy to see you. After all, you have an *invite* to our grounds."

I forgot about that; Joseph did invite me after the game. Of course I would like to see Maria and Joseph. Jackie holds her hand out to me and I hesitate before taking it. She pulls me up and motions me to follow behind her. Jackie is fast but I can keep up, and it is not long before we reach a thick canopy allowing small trickles of rain through. I can smell Joseph and Maria close by but my suspicion of Jackie does not dissipate.

"Carmina! My dear girl! I wish you had let us know you were coming!" Joseph grabs me by the shoulders and kisses both my cheeks. "Come, come inside... this weather is appalling!"

Joseph takes my hand, leading me through a small opening and I marvel at the stately home behind it. It is beautifully carved into the volcanic wall. The courtyard is spacious and open with thickets literally growing over and around the home. I am reminded of a hobbit home like the ones from the movies. There are big glass windows facing outwards, looking like mirrors inviting you to look closer.

"It is beautiful, Joseph!" I compliment him sincerely. The man looks like he is about to explode with happiness.

"Such an honor you came to visit."

"I-I went for a run, Joseph, and lost my direction." I confess, blindly.

"Oh, even better that way, dear girl!" He pats me on my back. Jackie is slinking behind us and I am careful to keep my mind closely guarded. I relax somewhat when I see Maria's kind smile. She immediately blurs her way towards me.

"Oh! Mina! You are so wet," she visibly shivers at the notion and I am reminded that they are often times more cat than human... or vampire.

"Come inside, we have a good fire burning. You can dry. Are you hungry?"

I am a terrible liar so I don't even try. "I am, thank you Maria!"

The home inside is spacious with luxurious couches stretched from wall to wall. It is clear that their main room is for lounging about, the fireplace is huge and the fire is casting a lazy heat around the whole room. There is not much else, but for modern pictures in colossal frames. On closer inspection, I blink several times noting that the pictures are of the Valley.

“What were you running from, bella?” Joseph asks. “Nobody runs so far and doesn’t notice unless they are trying to outrun a problem, eh?” The old charmer is very perceptive.

“You are right. I was trying to run away from stories Joseph, I’ve been reading too much and I think maybe my head will explode. So I ran to clear it out. Make space, you know?”

Maria’s laughter rings out as she approaches me.

“Oh, I know what you mean! The old stories can be so heavy. You would not be human if you didn’t try to run away from it,” she teases a little. I appreciate Maria’s gentleness, which is the direct opposite of Jackie’s vicious demeanor.

Memories Shared

Joseph proceeds to ask me about the family, how we are doing. He’s heard that I live with them in my own place now. He opens his home to me by way of invite to come and go as I please.

“Sometimes you need more quiet than the quiet you get.” Maria backs up the invite while Jackie remains stretched out over a couch.

“You have changed your scent, the pine is a lovely touch,” Maria notes and an ardent discussion about the family business and perfumes ensues. I truly enjoy the company. Joseph is a very funny man that reminds me of an Italian vendor taking absolute delight in charming and entertaining his clientele. Maria’s energy is slower but observant. She does not talk a lot but when she does there is a great deal of understanding and encouragement behind her words. I can see why this pair work together as well as they do.

Joseph takes two books from his personal library and tells me to take them. The one is a book used to teach children about cultures, morals and values in the form of legends and stories and the other is a breakdown of the clans and their grounds, hunting grounds and maps.

“It is good to know where you are when you get there,” he winks at me.

We talk a little longer and when I mention that I have learned to hunt, the trio together takes an interest. Even Jackie seems to be impressed.

“I cannot believe that! You have to show us, please Carmina; what a marvel you are!” Joseph asks. Worried about the link with Jackie, I ignore my instincts and allow the three of them to see the hunt, but censoring it to show John and Jarrod, not Liam.

Maria and Joseph were loud in their yowling cheers when the animal came down. I don’t know the protocol of closing the link with other Ancients, so I politely withdrew from them. I should have known Jackie would get her moment.

A quick flash of Liam’s half naked body leaning over Jackie’s sparsely covered features and a deep

growl from him.

“I don’t want *her* like this,” The words come close to collapsing me on the spot. Joseph rises to my rescue by slamming the link shut.

“Jackie!” He growls at her, and I feel Jackie’s satisfaction at closing the link before I could. I look at her, the bitter taste pushing up in my throat. I force a smile and a calm I didn’t know I possess.

Jarrold told me when you hunt, you have to let the animal believe you are their friend for long enough to get close. I also recall Lady E’s warning to pick my battles. Joseph and Maria are a lot less subtle about their view on the intrusion. Their eyes are like daggers, directed at Jackie. I shove the books in under the jacket, knowing it is waterproof, and shake my hair out.

The look of confusion on Jackie’s face gives me unconditional pleasure and I let her feel that too. I let her think I enjoyed the picture she has shown me.

“Oh, it is nothing Joseph, leave her be.” I chime evenly. “I must get back anyway. It was wonderful to see all of you today. A wonderful way to get lost.”

Maria kisses both my cheeks and hugs me close. “I’m sorry. Your hunt was beautiful.”

“Will you get home alright, bella? It is getting dark?” Joseph asks concerned.

“I will find my way Joseph. I will go the way I came. Thank you for a warm welcome today. I am most honored.”

I head over to Jackie, and kiss both her cheeks too. She hisses in my direction and I can’t help but feel sorry for her. She is scratching at the wrong post, as Lady E put it.

Knowing that they will feel my mood and energy for a while, I firmly hold on to the calm and serenity of the day. Confident that they can’t keep up with me, I focus my thoughts around the lovely Maria and her beautiful nature and Joseph’s fatherly warmth, until I know I am far beyond their reach, even if they did try to follow me.

When I reach the courtyard, my legs start giving way but I force myself towards the cottage. I discern John’s presence but there is nothing I wish to do about it. In the back of my garden, I fall to my knees.

John hears Carmina’s heartbeat and knows something’s wrong. He can also smell that hellcat’s family all over her. When she falls down on her knees, John is jolted into moving by the horrifying screams breaking from Carmina’s chest. He thought she had passed out and is dreaming. When he reaches her seconds later, she hits at him manically. John pushes hard to link with her but she has checked out.

“*Mother... MOTHER!*”

“*What’s the matter, John?*”

“*Its Mina, I don’t know what’s wrong... she smell of cat and is ... Look,*”

Esmeriska feels nauseated by the strong emotional bubble all around Carmina.

“Get her Mother and Sister.”

When Margarith and Lilly arrive in the garden, they try to get close to Carmina to comfort her. She violently fights them off. The screams are increasing and getting wilder. The woman sits with her, silently watching and John rubs his hand through his hair, looking around in despair.

“Liam... bro...” John reaches for his brother but Liam is not answering him. Desperately, John walks towards the tree line and howls into the rain. His parents answer in return but not a sound from Liam.

“We’re almost there my boy, where’s Liam?”

“I don’t know... he is not answering me...”

“Nor us...”

I feel the Moretti family push to speak to me but my anger is burning holes in my head. It hurts so much! How could he? Why would he say that if he didn’t mean it? I know he doesn’t want me... but ... but...

“I don’t want her like this,” I hear and see Liam while he is leaning over the half-naked Jackie.

I can’t speak the words in my mind; my body will not let me. I want to die - I want them to leave me alone! I scream again, putting every ounce of muscle, hurt and anger into the scream. It hurts my throat, it hurts my chest but the burning in my skull won’t go away. I feel the claws, the words clinging to my nerves, chewing through them and getting trapped like a rabbit in a snare.

The shared memory attacks my awareness by rolling through it over and over blanketing every other calming thought that may want to rise. She is so beautiful; she is one of them. Of course. Banned from their grounds but he not from hers. I feel myself getting sick, the food pushing into my throat. The rain rushes around me, however it does nothing for the fire that is spreading internally. The small mud splatters assault my clothing.

I want this to go away but the random bouts of mocking and taunting from my own mind refuse to let it. Please, please just let me die... just let me... Don’t touch me. Don’t rescue me. I’ve had enough.

I’ve had enough!

The silence inside was sudden. It was complete. I know what I have to do. I don’t look at the faces. My movement is automatic, mechanical. I know what I need to do. I take my keys, kiss my sister, my mother and my brother. I know what I need to do.

They try to stop me but I know I am faster. Dripping wet and determined, I start my car and drive into the direction of the town. Fast. Half of Lilly’s car cables are on the seat next to me.

When I get to town, I book a hotel, pay for a week, check in and leave my car in front of it. Cutting through the farmer's fields, I run, and run, and run. When the sun comes up, I stop just long enough to catch a few birds and empty their nests of eggs, eating them raw.

At the next town, I use cash and buy a new outfit, buy supplement liver tablets and a backpack to carry food and water, setting off again. I come across a massive open field and choose to sleep there. I can see for miles around and the nearest person is on the far side of the sun. I pull out the book Joseph gave me and study the pages fast and intensely. I make up my mind where I will go and how I will get there.

I am done.

I cannot and will not be a puppet of my own circumstance. If I have to suffer life, it will be on my terms.

Plan in place, I go to sleep.

Missed Opportunity

Liam lost Carmina a few minutes into her run. His own mind is frantic with worry and he cannot find her. He dreads the thought of her vanishing from him again. All day he's been looking for her and at the point his family all reach for him, he ignores them. He cannot let them know he's lost her again. He does not want to hunt with them or see them. He wants to know where Carmina is and they will get in the way of that. Liam regards their feverish emotion as an imagined mix of his own.

It was Maria's effort that grabs his attention.

"William, you have to go to your Carmina." She speaks to him.

"I can't find her." He confesses immediately.

"She will need you. The control she has shown... it is unnatural, William."

"Maria, what do you mean?"

"Jackie... William, you must find our friend. Joseph followed her but he lost her, she is too fast; too clever."

If Joseph cannot keep up with Carmina, who on this despicable planet can! Where would she go?!

"I am sorry, William, she is such a good woman. You chose right."

With that, Maria withdraws and Liam sets off towards the Fire Clan's home. What the hell did Jackie do to Carmina that would worry Maria and Joseph so much?! Dreading the worst, Liam ignores the second round of hits from his family. He morphs into his wolf on the run and speeds towards the cottage. He stops when he sees Carmina's car pass him. He tries to follow it but she is driving too fast and he loses her for the second time that day.

“John!”

“Liam! Where the **hell** were you? Mina has left!”

“I know, I tried staying with the car but she’s driving like... Is someone following?”

“Mina wrecked Lilly’s car. Liam, she’s super charged. We couldn’t catch her. Margarith’s car will never catch up. We’ve called the police in town asking them to let us know if they see her.”

“Maria contacted me... She tried to tell me. What went on there?”

“I’ll speak with Maria,” Esmeriska breaks her silence.

John shows his brother, mother and father. Esmeriska and Will stay silent but Liam’s guilt and anguish when he sees Carmina’s small body in a bundle on the ground rips a clear path straight to his personal hell. He covers his ears against her screams and starts a run towards the town.

“We have to find her. I’m sorry this is my fault! I’m going...”

Liam spends a fair amount of time trying to pin down Carmina’s scent but finds none. When he sees her car in front of the hotel, he thought there is hope. The lady at the desk confirms that Mina was there and had checked in. She said other than being wet, the young lady looked very calm and controlled. No, she doesn’t know if Miss Nightshade is in but she can put a call to her room. There is no answer but she can leave a message. Liam leaves a message and watches for the room number when the girl jots it down. As calm as he can, he head towards the lifts and to the booked room. He didn’t have to go inside to know she was never there.

Jarrold, John and Will join him in trying to try find a scent, but the rain is still pouring. There’s so many disgusting smells in the town. When the sun rises, the three return to the courtyard. Carmina Rose Nightshade vanished into thin air. They take turns to watch the hotel in case she returns.

Margarith and Lilly are huddled on the couch together and Esmeriska is pacing when the men return. Liam walks through the door and it is his mother that glowers at him.

“You, my son, are an *idiot*.”

Liam stares blankly at Esmeriska, his mother’s anger puzzling. Angry and forceful, she shares the image that Maria saw, that Carmina saw, including Carmina’s reaction to it. Maria was right, that was too much restraint. John puts both his hands to his head, using his elbows to cover his face.

Will puts his hand on his wife’s shoulder.

“That’s enough. He gets it, my love. That’s enough. We’ll find her.”

Jarrold walks over to his wife and mother, comforting them both as best he can. He knows Carmina; even when she was little, you would not find her easily if she didn’t want to be found.

“It’s **our** Carmina. We’ll find her, *eventually*.” Says Jarrod, looking at Liam with sympathy but not without accusation. Liam turns to walk away and Jarrod stops him.

“You couldn’t have done anything, Liam. Not today. We’ll help you. We’ll find her.”

John, on the other hand, stays silent, walking outside with his hands over his head.

Runaway

I feel the constant push from the Moretti and Azzara families. I also feel guilty over not answering Maria in particular. I have made good progress and am in Russia within a week. Worried that the main airlines will flag me, I used helicopters and small planes to carry me in stretches, paying cash and running when I can. The book Joseph gave me directed me to Dimitri Thana's domain.

Dimitri Thana is a blood trader; a good one at that. He is also a collector of antiques and is described as easily fascinated by beautiful things. He is an original who lives off human blood, with the exception that it is from humans willingly offering their blood to him or his coven. He is very picky over his 'stock' but I am convinced I'll have no problem getting to him. After all, I have a map from an Ancient's library. Bargaining won't be hard.

I look in the mirror, satisfied. The white figure hugging dress is a dramatic contrast to my crimson-red hair. My skin is healthy and sun-kissed. I wear no make-up other than a slight touch of green around my eyes. Liam has taught me how important eye colors are. I will use this, hopefully to my advantage. My own hazel eyes viciously flash with pain, sadness and hurt. The pull at the corners of my mouth completing the picture I created for this occasion. Slightly smiling. Lilly would have approved. I shake my head, banishing all thoughts of family and ties.

Rostov-on-Don is a flourishing town and I am surprised to see how big it is. I don't bother booking the hotel for any longer than today. Today, I will die or suffer life on my terms. There is no turning back.

I join the tourist group to traverse the estate of Iona Sysoevich. I still cannot believe that all these things are in fact true. I look and listen, but mostly, I am searching. When I reach the Abraham Monastery, I know I am in the right place. I can smell blood. I follow the scent to a small room in the back of an old storage chamber. It has to be here somewhere. The appearance of a tour-guide behind me actually makes me smile.

"Miss, are you lost?" When I turn and notice the hypnotic gray of his eyes, I beam at him.

"I think I found what I was looking for. I seek audience with Dimitri Thana."

The pale gentleman in front of me pretends not to know what I'm talking about.

"What is your name, sir?" I ask and shamelessly read his mind. I don't understand Russian but certain things are not hard to differentiate from everyday babble. He answers with a name that I ignore.

"Ivan Ma'am, the tour group—"

"Vadim, beautiful name. Now, please, take me to Dimitri?" I catch him by surprise. "Oh Vadim, English please! Better yet, show me." I say, putting my hand on his arm as if we're familiar friends. The flashes are quick but I capture them expertly and smile.

"Or I can go back there and go alone, but I think - maybe - you will have trouble for allowing that?"

The young man seems nervous of me now.

“Of course, this way Miss...”

“Carmen.”

“Carmen, yes, this way please.”

I walk fast with the *official* who was probably a guard to stop wandering tourists. He walks in front of me, and I have to jog lightly to keep up. I smile as comfortably as I can to the bystanders that we pass, not wanting to draw negative reaction. I lose all sense of direction after we go through a decorated door, down stairs, up a spiral, around a few bends... LOST. Fear starts hammering against my temples.

As we walk around the last corner in the maze, I stop to admire the beautiful hall that stretches in front of me. Dimly lit, gorgeous paintings on the wall decorated with brightly colored frames, modern furniture placed all around, suspended dance podiums and blue, ice colored lamps everywhere. So... Modern! So... striking! My jaw slacks and I lick my lips. The *tour-guide* comes to a halt and I basically walk straight into him. His light-footed interchange avoiding a collision is no big surprise to me.

I stand dead still. I am making this stuff up as I go and I have no idea what I'm doing. A blonde, blue-eyed man walk towards me; I marvel at the perfect features edged upon his face. He looks more handsome than a statue, and less dead than one. I look down, and notice his feet. He is not walking, but emulating a walk. He is definitely gliding towards me, hardly touching the floor.

“Vadim! Brother, what have you here! A guest!” he claps his hands together in delight. He inspects me from head to toe, his breath on my hair when he speaks.

“Miss Carmen.” I announce myself, nodding to the Adonis in front of me.

“Carmen, forgive me my rudeness! Vadim, bring our guest a drink.” The tour-guide looks relieved at my reception into the hall, and vanishes without a sound or trace.

“Oh yes, a human girl,” he licks his lips as he inhales the air around me. “All dressed in white... how ... fashionable.”

I feel the blush push into my face and my bravery threatens to rush after Vadim instead.

“Sir...”

“Oh no devochka - girl, call me Dimitri, please. Why did you come here so... boldly beautiful Carmen?”

“I have come to trade with you Dimitri. I have something you may like?” I produce the two books to him, not knowing how many rules I am breaking here. The books were given to me, not lent, so I can do with them as I please. I have already read his greedy mind and he is not going to let those books out of his sight. He knows what they are, where they've been and how valuable they are. While the words and the meaning of them escape me, the emotional emanation is vivid and straight forward.

“A trade, *devochka*, would mean that you want something in turn?”

“Yes, Dimitri. I don’t want to sell the books for money. I have lots of that. And I certainly don’t want immortality, I can’t stand the idea.” I hear and feel the amused and intrigued rambling from the man.

“Carmen! Immortality will suit you so well!” he reverts to sweet-talking and the flattery helps my confidence to continue.

Vadim returns as silently as he left. On his arm is a very beautiful, Goth-looking girl. She is partially naked, looking anemic and tired. I turn my eyes away from her. I cannot afford to lose control or contemplate the moral inference of seeing and knowing what Dimitri and his brand of entities do here.

“Before you decide, Dimitri Thana,” I say harmoniously, pulling the small broach from my dress. “I want you to sell my blood and *donate* 30% profits to a children’s home of my choice, until I die naturally, or you find reason to kill me.”

I don’t give him a chance to respond, but prick my finger. Sucking on it, I move closer and plant a bloody kiss on his lips. I watch him as he eagerly licks his lips and the flash in his eyes accepts the deal before his words leave his mouth.

“*Devochka!* You bring *this* to me! So daring! So dangerous! So rare and delicious! You must be tired of your life; you know this is slow suicide?”

“I know. It is my wish and you are my hero if you can make it come true.” I stroke his ego for good measure, applying my own girlish version of the dramatic lady in distress.

Dimitri pushes his face firmly against my chest without warning and for an instant I question my judgment while my heart chases after dandelions.

“A thundering heartbeat. You show fear after all. How superb!” He sounds like a boy who’s discovering hidden parts to his new toy,

“You are too good for it!” he murmurs against my skin. His hand finds my finger and put it to his mouth. He groans, squeezing another drop of blood from my fingertip. I feel the odd warm and cold mixture emanating from him. He sucks hard, his grip on my wrist painful, dulling that of an old scar that refuses to heal.

“Carmen... Какáя красíвая дéвушка!”

** Translated: Carmen... What a beautiful girl!

My name, my mother’s name, sounds like a hot poker in his mouth.

It was as if a spell was broken. I saw men and woman approaching fast, like flickering mirages on the horizon. Before any of them can reach me, Dimitri bundles me in his arms. I feel the strength and restraint behind his every move. His hissing hurts my eardrums. I experience a jolt, hear a thunderous *thump* and the other arrivals look like they are jerked backwards, away from us.

Dimitri marches through to another room, and yet again I stare at the richness of this place. The room is filled with antique paintings, furniture, statues, sculptures and so much more. There are soft dim lights in this room, highlighting every piece of art individually. I feel I’m being watched by the

portraits, as one who is paraded in front of peers to be judged in worth and value. It certainly looks like a museum of relics.

“Vadim, go get Anton and Vasily. I want a new trophy box.” He speaks, initially without slowing down. Eventually, I am placed on the floor thoughtfully, as if I’m brittle. Dimitri does not release me yet and I wonder if he is worried about me making a run for it.

I don’t know where they came from, but in an instant, there are two slender, gorgeous women by my side. Their eyes are shiny and dark; you cannot see the pupils. Their skin is almost see-through with veins visibly networked in hues of blue. Their movements are liquescent. Their heads are bald which enhance the remarkable features of their faces; high-set cheekbones, full, plump, pouty lips and large round eyes.

As wanton as Dimitri acted before, he lets me go now. Still ominously towering over me, he looks into my face with an impatient expression.

“One can easily become greedy around you, Carmen. Your beauty, your scent... Intoxicating. Yes. I will agree to this trade you speak of.”

Relief washes over me and I unwind. I knew he’d accept but finally hearing him say it seals the reality firmly. I have a place and a purpose. My terms.

A tear streaks across my face unexpectedly.

“Alina and Darya, you will guard her. *Nobody* touches her once she takes up her place. *Nobody at all*. Not even...” he gives me one more lustful look. “...Not even me.”

I don’t know what I expected, but I admit that this is a turn of events I did not anticipate. Dimitri would guard me against himself? He must have noticed my surprise at the order and he explains in his most charming voice.

“I like to protect my investments, Carmen. I would not want anything *unfortunate* to happen to something so fragile and yet so... valuable. A virgin human with blood that tastes of a youth fountain, holding relics from Houses that are only rumored to exist. You are going to be very popular.”

I listen, watching him move, as if he’s already lining up a buyers list.

“I see. And these girls...” I look at the two he addressed as Alina and Darya.

“They are my best guards.” Dimitri’s face is solemn and exceptionally calm, which unnerves me and brings me to question his undertaking.

“You will be safe. They know your purpose and your ...our... unique agreement. To seal the contract, dear girl, a drop of your blood for each of them.”

The broach, still clutched in my fist, is tolerantly pried from my fingers and Dimitri holds my hand with exceptional tenderness. He does not break the skin with the pin, but asks me to do it myself. It is as if he is literally trying to avoid any damage to me. I find his behavior peculiar and fascinating at the same time.

In all my life, I’ve stumbled, fell, bled... and not once did the thought cross my mind that someone

may one day consider it an infringement. I quickly dab my finger into the sharp pin, watching the blood pool on the tip of my finger, holding it out to the woman by my side. After repeating it for the second time to satisfy both the women, Dimitri takes the pin from hands, wipes it on his sleeve and places it in a small purple box.

“Your property, Carmen. It is yours to have but I cannot leave it with you. Humans are so... unpredictable sometimes”

Dimitri’s hand moves to wipe away the tear on my cheek tasting it from the tip of his index finger, savoring it. He gives a shrill little laugh and clasps his hands together.

“So much pain, oh dear, so alluring, beautiful.” That is when I realize, when Dimitri says I am beautiful, he is not referring to my body or physical attributes. Dimitri loves the pain and hurt I am carrying inside me; my love lost for Liam.

“Thank you, Dimitri.”

Treasured

The museum empties out, all but for the two girls. I can see that an invisible rope intrinsically binds them to me. When I move, all their attention is focused on me, undivided. The girls move around me, one tucks at me, the other pushes. I shuffle along, and when a panel in the wall reveals the room behind it; a breathtaking picturesque image greets me. Clearly, Dimitri Thana has expensive and immaculate taste.

I walk through the room, letting my fingers touch across the richness that surrounds me everywhere. It is an old, rustic royal sort of depiction from a Victorian era. I feel like the princess who’s locked in the tower. I wonder if the two women can understand me. I guess it won’t matter. I will do what they want me to, and they will do what I feel. I keep my mind closely guarded, still ignoring the intermitted calls from the Moretti and Azzara families.

A soft, urgent push towards the bathroom and nimble fingers help me undress. The bath is warm and soothing but no perfume, no fragrance, nothing to taint my natural scent. The two girls are running water over me; they smell and taste the air, then more fresh water, then repeat. This goes on for roughly half an hour. When they are satisfied, I am dried and dressed in the most exquisite gown. It is soft, pale green in color with gold trimming bundling at my bare feet; the person in the mirror looks like a stranger to me.

The food I am offered is fresh and delicious. I am craving meat and my body is constantly hungry again. I don’t reveal that part of me either; the sooner I fade away, the sooner I can stop suffering life. This way, I will live for long enough to ensure the wellbeing of a few orphans, at minimum.

Sooner than I could anticipate, Dimitri insists on building a new orphanage in my name and honor. Very *thoughtful* of him, he felt that it would be prudent to keep me busy when I am not being a buffet for his clientele. I am very careful with the information I give and manage to get the registration and details done in Lilly’s name. Momma has taught me many things, but the one thing

she has taught me well was how to run a successful company. This is no different. I take care of the children in the care of the orphanage and provide them with bursaries and scholarships, should they need it, all from the safety and seclusion of my vampire sanctuary.

Blood Donor

Time flows differently inside these walls. I cannot tell night from day and I have no interest to know, either. My heart is still aching and there is the gnawing fire in my brain. At *night* I see nothing else but the hateful memory burnt into my being. It plays over and over; sometimes it changes just enough to make Jackie look at me with a victorious expression.

That which is my pain is, too, the highlight of Dimitri's day - or night, as it were. I sleep when I want to, and Dimitri appears shortly before I'm dragged off into a heavy miasma filled with the man I love, loving the woman I have come to hate. He sits there silently, watching me sleep while the two girls stand guard. When either of the women feel I may hurt myself, they wake me up and, in their own strange way, they do try to comfort me.

As for my blood, Dimitri has not touched it again. He teases me, often saying that my blood is like a drug to his clientele and I have made him a criminal dealing in contraband. It is clear from the amount of blood that is meticulously extracted and the financial contributions I am able to bestow upon Lilly's orphanage that Dimitri is making a fair deal at extortionist's fees. On rare occasions, he allows a buyer to sit with me on the bed when Darya or Alina tap the blood. This is **very** rare, as Dimitri is not very trusting of his clients, even if their purses are bottomless. Other times he may invite a friend - with a bigger than average purse - to sit with him and take perverse pleasure in my torture and agony while I sleep.

All the mirrors have been removed and I may catch my own reflection in the glass at times. The images are distorted and I dismiss the thinning features that reflect back at me. Dimitri and his clientele insist that they have never witnessed a "human stitched together with pain, wearing torture so beautifully."

In fact, that is the inscription Dimitri engraves personally, all around my display case in plated gold.

Searching

It has been seven weeks since Carmina vanished. The Moretti family is still not giving up and the Azzara family reach out far and wide to contacts they have. When Carmina left, Esmeriska took matters to the rulers of the Ancients houses. She was not going to let Jackie get away with this behavior without consequences and insists that she be dealt with for interference. Vampires, Originals, Ancients or half-breeds may not have many rules but one rule in particular is upheld to the last letter.

"You do not try to sever bonds between a pair."

Of course, Esmeriska isn't the type to insist on death or torture in the absence of the victim. She firmly believes in consequences and the opportunity to show remorse, too. Esmeriska may be an Ancient but she has a fondness for certain human values she was raised with before she became what she is. Instead, she suggests to Joseph and Maria that Jackie lives with her and execute tasks that will help in the search of Carmina.

Ironically, Jackie has been suffering at the absent Carmina's hand for the past seven weeks. She shows no signs of remorse and fear nor reckoning; quite the opposite. Jackie's hatred towards Carmina is only fueled. Jackie is a proud being and the humiliation of banishment, not only from her own family but that of the Ancient houses combined, seeps poison into her mind. Carmina being human adds to the anger. The fact that the man whose attention she's monopolized for decades now refuses to acknowledge her existence other than to despise her contributes to the intense abhorrence Jackie feels towards Carmina. Jackie harbors only a festering loathing. Revenge is her driving force at this point in time.

Whenever Jackie objects or slacks on the instructions handed to her, Esmeriska is quick to remind her of the flawless reason she has to rip the Lynx girl apart. There is also no question that Esmeriska Moretti could execute this task efficiently should she need to. Jackie is alive at the mercy of Esmeriska alone and it is evident in her character that she is not thankful. The men of the Moretti house would much sooner see Jackie disposed of than interact with her, so they avoid contact.

Liam burnt his den to the ground. He moved into Carmina's cottage, angry with his mother for letting that atrocious woman live. However, Liam understands his mother's reasoning and he also knows his mother's mind. Jackie is being kept alive because Carmina is the one who will be the judge of Jackie's actions. With the ruling as it stands, it also means that Esmeriska can keep a close watch on Jackie.

Liam has searched everywhere in Carmina's cottage for a clue of where she may have gone. He feels closest to her when he is sitting in the bay seat window, but she has left nothing at all to clue him in on her mind's working. He reads her diary over and over and constantly edges against the link between them. It is no consolation, but at least he can feel her alive.

Sporadically, information comes forth where coven members of other clans have spotted a girl running – or most often reported blurring – through their territory. Carmina has become an enigma in some areas and even a pilot or two are not sure anymore if they had genuinely seen her. The most frustrating part about all of this is that there is no pattern to her movements and at times, if the reports are accurate, Carmina has passed back and forth in different directions several times. Liam can't help but feel proud of the girl, considering she has passed through several highly populated clan territories unnoticed or hardly noticed. The ones who have seen her refuse to believe she's human at all.

Jarrold and Lilly are with child. Lilly is not handling her sister's leaving too well and when she discovers her pregnancy, it is a bittersweet moment. The pair are working on a baby room but the joy is blemished by the absence of the one person they want to share this with more than anything. Jarrold still passes by the hotel where Carmina booked herself in, just to be sure she's not hiding out right under their noses.

Margarith is withdrawn and quiet but she has not neglected any of her duties or responsibilities. Her brother Darious is very curious about the incident and constantly insists on updates. This annoys Margarith as she has known since day one that Darious has not been the model uncle. She feels suspicious of her brother's motives but has no reason for it at this time. Margarith is an Elder, though, and she has a clan to run, encourage and support - thus she focuses on that task at hand. The news of Lilly's baby is a welcome change and a joyous moment to Margarith; she insists that Lilly and Jarrold stay in the main house until the baby room is finished and the child is born.

John has not returned to the courtyard since he walked out the door 7 weeks ago. He is in touch with his family, but he is travelling and searching. John is convinced that he will find something to lead them to Carmina. He misses the Vixen and cannot help chasing after any bit of information on the off chance that he will find her. The Houses know Carmina is alive because they can feel the thread of her link woven with theirs - she's just not answering the calls.

John has tried every approach to get through to his Vixen but she is adequately shut down. In his mind's eye, John keeps seeing her body writhing and hurting in the rain and nobody able to do anything. He feels guilty for his own lack in ability to help but he carries a heavy accusation on his chest.

He loves his brother but he is angry at him for his hand in this affair with Jackie. He blames Liam for falling prey to Jackie's tricks and not manning up to the woman he loves. He blames Liam for Carmina's suffering, especially the unnecessary nightmares. John believes that if Liam made use of the opportunities presented, he could have avoided all of the heartache and pain. If there is one thing the whole family can feel without any dispute, it is the poisonous torture that strings together in the fiber of their minds where Carmina's thread is woven. They know she's suffering and there is nothing they can do about it. This is the torture John holds onto to drive him in his searches.

Liam never had the chance to teach Carmina how to sever the emotional link from that of the Ancients. They are thankful for this small connection to her, but they are also painfully aware of her agony. John blames Liam for making her worst nightmare a reality and, while he has not confronted Liam about it, he made it clear to his brother. The last words passed verbally and privately between the two brothers were John's: *"Carmina is suffering life."*

Meetings

I hear Dimitri's excited words drifting into the museum where I live and work in a glass box.

"You will not believe this Elizabeth, but she walked right in here on her own."

Dimitri jokingly laments his regret for getting the better deal. I get a flicker of pride as he speaks to me, once he and the goddess at his arm reach me.

"Oh Carmen! I am such a terrible beast! I profit so greatly from your stay with me, a kept man. How *can* I ever repay you?"

I answer the same way as always. "As long as you pay my fee, we have no other debts to settle." The look on his face is no different from any other time; utter, unadulterated pride. Despite his sense for the dramatic, Dimitri has been good to me.

The goddess at Dimitri's arm stirs marginally when he opens the glass panel for her. Instead of speaking, she waves him off. Her body snakes over mine, inhaling and exhaling with her mouth partially open. I keep expecting a purr from her, like Jackie's. Like with Jackie, I don't particularly care for this woman. Something about the air around her is stale and pretentious.

Elizabeth's breasts heave against my stomach as she moves her face over my chest to rest her ear over my heart. I keep my own breathing stable but there is nothing I can do about the fear beating through my heart. Dimitri told me to be as calm as possible when he lets someone in. He jokes but the serious message behind the joke is clear. The slightest distraction, and these erratic creatures will lose control. Unlike he, who relies on *donations* from humans, these ones are hunters and the slightest challenge will thrill them.

"You know my guards. We've spoken about the etiquette, Elizabeth. Don't make me regret it." Dimitri is not joking in the slightest when he issues this exact and sincere warning to all his clientele.

With the tubing fitted under surgical conditions, my arm is lifted, the first drops of my untainted blood pours into Elizabeth's mouth. The woman smacks her lips and moans in anticipation when a small cup is produced. My heart starts galloping when I smell the blood. I have to fight my own demons so I look away and feel the gentle nudge when the ration is tapped. I open my mouth and breathe in, catching Elizabeth's fragrance. I focus on her aroma instead of the sweet vapor of my own blood. Her perfume smells like something Lilly may have concocted from natural blends and oils. The ache in my chest at the thought of my sister brusquely morphs into extreme tiredness. I wonder, briefly, how long I have been here, and if I have missed my sister and brother's birthday - or my mother's. It is with stubborn force that I remove those images from my mind.

Elizabeth's melodic voice rings around me when she receives her quota and elegantly slides off the bed.

"Oh Dimitri, you have found deliverance!" She teases and walks outside on his arm, every bit the

goddess again while clutching the treasure she came for in a delicate hand. Dimitri looks past her at me. His smile does not reach my eyes. I close and open my eyes, trying to focus on him.

“Worth every curse I may ever incur!” he exclaims, though I don’t miss the concerned look that crosses his face. I am too tired to analyze my life at this very moment so I lay back on my bed and let sleep get a hold of me.

**** The dreams are nightmares are dreams and nightmares****

Scissors in my hand, a grin on my face. I am still human, but not human anymore. The flowers are so pretty. I snip more and more flowers as I walk. Green, blue, golden, white, yellow; a rainbow of colors.

When I get to a ceremonial altar, I turn with a giggle to look at the pretty flowers behind me. The giggle turn into a scream.

What have I done?

The eyes are looking at me. All of them, pleading. They’re hungry!

I look at them desperate to understand. They were flowers! No! What have I done!

The eyes flicker and then close, their last sight of me.

I did this! I am killing them!

I must feed them, they are hungry! I MUST!

I push the scissors straight into my chest.

The blood pours out, streaking down the path towards the flickering eyes.

Not fast enough! I’m not fast enough!

More eyes blink, dim, and then close.

NO! NO!! Please, I can feed you, stay with me. Don’t go!

My own eyes become dull. I must feed them! I am dying!

No, don’t let me die yet; I’m not done!

My eyes blur and I turn back to the altar to place the scissors on it before I cannot see.

A dark misty mass forms a hand and takes the scissors, lifting them up and stabs me in my eyes.

I scream, and scream, and scream.

I hear the soft laughter and when my eyes open; it is a passionately charged Dimitri I see.

“You are so desirable when you sleep Carmen,” His voice is raw with suppressed emotions. “I wish I never sealed this deal with you. I am tired of sharing you.”

His palms are on the glass, his face pushed up against it. I am too tired to answer him so I let him continue his theatrics for a while longer.

“I wish you will tell me about your dreams, Carmen. I want to share in them. I hear your heartbeat; I see your agony. Какая красивая девушка! (What a beautiful girl!). I want you, Carmen, as my own.” he hisses into the glass with a tortured expression.

I gather my energy together and get off the bed. Putting my palm against his with the glass between us, I tease him moderately.

“Are you asking me to marry you, Dimitri? The shame it would bring to your coven, marrying a

trophy! A human girl... it won't do, my gracious host and savior!"

This lifts his mood as it would a child with a new playmate. He turns away from me to sit in his chair but his eyes do not shift for long before fixing back onto me.

"If I asked you, and offered you immortality, would you take it, Carmen?"

I stare at him and then purse my lips together, pouting like a young girl. "I am educated, Dimitri Thana, you would need the permission from the Ancients. Do you think they will allow it?"

Dimitri puts his finger on his chin while pondering. "You **are** educated, and you came with a book from an Ancient's home. Perhaps if I invite them—"

I feel the fear of his words shiver through my body. I shouldn't let this silly game go too far.

"Oh my Dimitri, I told you when we met I have no desire to be immortal. You will have to settle for being my hero."

The good thing about Dimitri is the ease with which I can sway him in my favor. I have learned that he is always looking for a trade or a production. Hero over husband seems to be an acceptable trade and the stage cast for him at this moment is production enough to distract him.

"It is a good thing this devil doesn't have a sweet tooth... you will make it ache, Carmen. So sweet. So beautiful."

In the time that passes, I fight constantly against the tiredness. I am determined that every last drop of my blood will be sold and I will take the children's fee for it. Dimitri has been careful not to place too much of a tax on me. For the monster that his nature makes him, he unquestionably takes care of his *property*. I have seen Dimitri handle some of the Goth-looking girls and it frightens me to think he is able to swing his mood in such a malicious way. He enjoys hurting them, hearing them plea for immortality just to shout at them for being insolent. However, he has never so much as raised his voice at me. Since his last confession and expressed jealousy, the glass box is not opened for guests again.

Dimitri comes to visit me several times a day to see what I am doing, how I am feeling, and, if I am sleeping, to watch me sleep. He does not actively get involved in my business but he will listen when I ask for information and his cunning mind is quick to hatch a plan or offer solid advice.

Today, it is I who wants to speak with him about a matter I know he's not going to like.

"Dimitri, I want to ask for a favor. A promise from you."

His eyes rest on me pensively and he waves his hand as if to hurry me along. Dimitri has a theory that if I am happy then I am less troublesome but I know he means that I am more open to play along in one of his dramas. He has no idea about my abilities and I have been careful to conceal a lot about myself along with my history. Dimitri has become a father figure of sorts. This princess is not in a tower, but in personal isolation. I regard the vampire in front of me, knowing I'll have to word myself properly; he does not like to think of my mortality.

"Dimitri, I will not live forever," I watch the disdain on his face grow, "...you know this. I don't *want* to live forever. We have a deal, you remember that?"

“Yes, yes... why do you torture me by reminding me, Carmen?”

“I want you to make sure that when my heart stops, it is stopped properly. Destroy it. It must not stop only to revive me! I don’t want ... accidents.”

Dimitri looks at me in astonishment. “Why would you ask that of me? I cannot make such a promise to you, Carmen.” Moodily, he paces along the glass window.

“There are only *three* creatures on this whole earth who can call off those two,” He points to Alina and Darya, “Unless they, or you, die.”

“Then let them do it. I am not afraid of dying, Dimitri. I don’t *want* immortality. I want to be sure it will not happen. Dimitri, if the gods could take pity on Ambrogio and save his Selene... can’t you do that for me? Save me.” I gamble on the theatrics Dimitri engages in and it pays off.

“But I am no god, Carmen!” He shouts at me, melodramatically. It is hard to stop the curling of my lips. I know I have won this round.

“No, but you are my champion, Dimitri!” I call back to him with as much dramatic passion as I can pull from the little energy I have left.

“You are *my* champion! It will be my last gift to you, and yours to me.”

I am surprised at how easy this was. Dimitri agrees to, in full, destroy my whole body by using the two women who have taken care of me all this time. For the first time, I learn about the blood servant’s nature and history.

They have been used over centuries by originals to control, protect and annihilate not exclusively humans but other covens too. They are loyal to the blood contracts and contractors, but once they are tied with a charge, there is no manner in which to deter their minds from the tasks assigned to them. They are the ultimate assassins and protectors.

Dimitri explains to me about the *almost* impossibility to get them to break a blood-sealed contract. If they are set to kill, they will hunt for that person for their entire existence. If they are set to protect, they will protect for the same duration. Because Dimitri set the two girls up to keep me safe, the way for them to execute a kill order on me would be if I break the contract agreement in such a way that they are left with no choice. I would have to strike up an arrangement of sorts with their natural enemy.

Their one natural enemy just happens to be the Gello’Des. It was hard to conceal my knowledge of these creatures when Dimitri explained to me how the Gello’Des used to steal the blood servant’s children. The blood servants are extremely protective of their vulnerable young. Because of their nature, fatality rates are high and the servants only ever pair once in their entire lifespan. Therefore, the young are well revered and prized. The Gello’Des wanted to turn the young to join their armies. Their plan failed because the blood servants are hyper allergic to the vampire venom. They die near instantly. It took the Gello’Des a long time to realize this and by the time they did... They have been branded as a *natural* enemy. The blood servants will hunt to extinction, their own or the extinction of the Gello’Des.

“They are not immortal?” I ask surprised.

“No, they can live for over 200 years.... But they are not as me.”

“How... did you get the services of Alina and Darya?”

“Ah, the sisters are childless and without partners. I fought next to them against the Gello’Des and earned myself a willing contract with them for rescuing a few dozen pups.”

“Dimitri! They’re not dogs!” I chastise him.

“No... I apologize, my dear girl, I forget my company sometimes.”

“So they are tied to you by will?”

“Yes, and I can’t tell them to go away even if I wanted to. They are like pets, Carmen. Loyal, dedicated and stalkers.” Dimitri chuckles at his own joke.

“You fight the Gello’Des?”

“Yes, yes... What they are doing is atrocious. I don’t much stand the halfbreeds either, but... in my living life, I was a teacher. Children were my passion before they became my snack.” His crass joke gets another scowl from me and he puts his hands up in defense. “More selfishly, Carmen, I am what I am. If the Gello’Des are allowed to run amok, the existence of my... our... food supply will dwindle and vanish. Not to mention my income and trade!”

I don’t like the picture Dimitri paints for me, but I cannot fault his logic on the matter. Eradicating humans would be detrimental on various fronts for all of *them*.

“How—? Is there no way to keep Alina and Darya as my protectors Dimitri? Maybe get the Gello’Des to ...”

“The Gello’Des will not have an interest in you devochka, unless you are with child... which we know you’re not.” He grins again and I know he is being polite about my virginity. I am so tired but I have to settle this. My rules.

“So, you see, you would have to, in some way... consort with a Gello’Des in order for those two,” he points, “...to turn on you.”

“How does one get a ... what did you call it ... a willing contract with the blood servants?”

“Have you not paid attention, Carmen?! Finding them is the hard part. Fight the Gello’Des and you have a loyal comrade for life. Help their children... same outcome.”

“What’s the catch, Dimitri? There is always a catch when it sounds too easy.”

“You are clever.” Dimitri marvels, “Yes, there is a catch, but revealing that, girl, would be breaking Ancient’s rules. And we’re talking about your death, not your life... Sad as it may be for you to refuse immortality.”

“Will you help me?” I ask; his grin is menacing.

“If my time with you is at an end, **and** I get to kill Gello’Des? What a great funeral it would make for you, Carmen! So very fitting!”

Dimitri sounds almost excited and I wonder if I have conceivably unleashed more than I can deal with. It is too late now. Satisfied with the agreement, I ask him how I would know if he will keep his word.

“Because I am a cheater, a trader, a profiteer, Carmen, you cannot trust my word.” He lifts a finger as he walks, shaking it in the air absently. “Because you are currently my most prized and profitable possession - and I refuse to share your immortality if you will not be with me - you can be sure I

will keep my arrangement.”

I am satisfied and crawl back into the bed.

Information

John’s hands are trembling as he reads the note left for him from the Brazilian coven.

*“Dear Darling J,
I may have met a redhead.
I may have drunk her blood.
I may know where she lives.
Will you come to meet me?
EB”*

It has been just over five months since Carmina left and John has still not gone back to the Volcano. He has followed every possible clue, which sometimes took him in circles. John is frustrated and feels that he has underestimated Carmina. The note in his hand is the last clue he has to follow at this moment. He recognizes the handwriting and the signature.

John met many a person as a soldier and this one is most memorable. There is no way he would be contacted if there weren’t a great chance of the information being relevant. Dutch royals in particular don’t waste their time with idiocies but a chance to make good with an Ancient house is not taken lightly. The likelihood of your coven being destroyed based on false information is a high risk that most are not willing to take. There is also a mutual custom to observe; the military protocol is a camaraderie shared through service. John was good at his job of collecting intelligence in the military and it has earned him a lot of respect with informants - some of whom are not human.

John lets the family know he’s heading for Brazil.

At about the same time, Joseph mentions in casual passing to Liam about the books he gave Carmina. It never occurred to Joseph until he visited Liam in the cottage and realized that his books were not among the rest of the collection. Liam, desperate for any information about Carmina, learned that one of the books in question is a copy of the ‘House & Coven Maps’. Liam didn’t have to know much more than that to have hope again.

“Joseph! She is a clever girl. If you gave her those maps, she has them with her! That is why we can’t find her! We are looking in the wrong places!”

Joseph took a moment to grasp what Liam was aiming at. They sit together with Liam’s family book and help each other understand the changes, fill in the gaps and mark the sightings or mention of Carmina. With the dates reported, they manage to form a loose pattern. Carmina had gone from

land to island to land, often turning back and creating an omnidirectional distraction before moving on. The two men marvel again at her tenacity and smarts. Without the maps, they will not find her; even with the maps, it will take some doing.

VIP

Dimitri is strikingly antsy today. I am struggling to keep focus and the dark edges are constantly drawing closer. I close my ledger with a big smile, knowing that it has been a good period and with the extortionist Dimitri at the helm of income, the orphanage is flourishing with plenty spare to keep them for years to come.

“Dimitri, what is the matter with you today? You look pale as a ghost - and that is saying something.”

“Carmen, I am getting visitors. They are very important.” He announces. I give him my biggest grin and pout playfully.

“I will be on my best behavior.” I coo, trying to settle him down.

“Carmen, devochka, you are always on your best behavior, more so when you are sleeping.”

“Darya and Alina must be bored already for the amount I’m sleeping of late!” I continue to tease, sending Dimitri into a fit of laughter.

“Why do you choose humanity over immortality, Carmen?! Such a waste of your nature.”

“The ones visiting are not social visitors to any coven they choose to call on, Carmen. They bring... Oh, don’t worry, my dear girl. You are safe here...”

I frown at the last statement but have no time to question Dimitri; he is already out the door. It is becoming harder to hide my needs at the moment. I am starving and nothing I eat is helping. I am tired and a few running laps would not go amiss. The pain in my wrist is excruciating and burning constantly. It does not help with the tiredness either.

It is not long after Dimitri’s departure that I feel the fever setting in. Alina and Darya rub me down with cold water. As I try to push my food away, they don’t allow it. The food has no appeal or taste to me and I know that it will not sooth the increasing craving I have hidden from them. I also determine the fever to be a more permanent resident and I decide to lie down to sleep. I hear Dimitri’s muffled voice when he speaks in hushed tones to his guests. He sounds more proud than usual today, even more egotistical than before, though... nervous. He is babbling.

“She is a treasure. If she would have it, I would have given her immortality my Lords and Lady – but, alas, I have a contract.”

I smile at the dramatic tones of mocked despair I’ve come to appreciate in Dimitri. My eyes close and I let the dark haze consume me.

**** The dreams are nightmares are dreams and nightmares****

I am standing at a cliff. No. At a closer look, it is a volcano.

*The heat coming off it is scorching my skin.
Slowly but surely, my skin is heating up, peeling away to expose boiling blood.
I scream in pain.
It hurts so much.
I don't want to care anymore.
I fall to my knees, leaning forward, whispering to the fiery hands reaching for me.
"Just take me. Please... just take me. I'm too tired to fight."
The hands withdraw, denying me my request.
My blood is on fire,
I am standing stripped.
My mind, my soul, my humanity exposed.
"Please, just take me." I desperately reach forward.
The heat is excruciating, seeping into my bones.
I collapse on the ground, twisting and contorting.
I am crippled and cannot jump into the volcano.
My voice is lost in the crackling cackle of the spitting pit.
"You brought this onto yourself, Carmina.
Look what you have done."
Jackie's voice makes me heave when it taunts me. I see Liam's body bent over her.
"I don't want you like this." His beautiful golden eyes stoke the fires that consume my bones to the marrow.
I can't stand it; torture, despair. I can't stand it anymore.
The heat devours me.*

CARMINA WAKE UP! WAKE UP NOW, WOMAN! GODS, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!

I wake up disorientated, calling for Alina who rushes forward with water. I feel Darya's searching hands fluttering over me and instinctively know she is searching for damage. The dream must have been notably worrying for them to wake me with such urgency.

I hear Dimitri's voice sounding defensive and pleading.

"My nobles, Lords and Lady! I have taken care of her; she will witness this for herself. I love this woman."

My mouth is so dry and I cannot move my hands. I want to get up but my body is not responding to the commands my brain is sending. I roll my head in the direction of Dimitri's voice, throwing the accusation in his general direction. "You promised to save me!"

"Oh devochka, I cannot save you from them. Forgive me girl, I am not your Ambrogio..."

I giggle at the drama and waves with my hand dismissively; a lone movement I force from my body.

"I'm not Selene either."

The Rescue

It does not take John very long to track down EB who explains where he could possibly find the human girl in question. Careful not to create false information, the knowledge is extracted with a mere touch of John's hand to the informant's chest. There was no more doubt after that, no more questions to be answered. In shock and fear of the state that Carmina is in, John contacts the family and leaves it to his father to speak with the other Ancients. There are blood servants involved. John turns to the perfect features in front of him with a nod of appreciation.

“Thank you Elizabeth; the Bierman clan has favor with the Wolf House.”

Will convinces Fayola, Elder of the Bearded Vulture House, to join the search party. It was not easy, but Will and Joseph do not allow the third Ancient to reject their request without hearing them out. They use the two most pertinent rules to convey the urgency of their request.

You do not expose the entirety of your nature to the humans.

You do not sever or try to sever bonds.

The bond between Carmina and Liam is weaker but not broken; if the Ancient houses do not act on information they have, they are accountable to the rules too. Joseph acts as witness to the information being passed on to Fayola. Maria was linked in too. Fayola was not too happy about the methods implemented to strong-arm her, but she was impressed by the tenacity of the Houses. She agrees partly because of the evidence held to her, but mostly because she is curious to know what it is about this inconsequential human that has both the Houses in such a state of driven purpose.

Maria was sworn to secrecy. She was not to let Jackie know of the new information but to keep a close eye on her. Esmeriska fears that Jackie will pull another stupid stunt and Esmeriska would have to make good on her promise to kill the hellcat herself. While the prospect of doing just that is enticing, she is nothing if not honorable. Jackie will get her dues as soon as they find Carmina. It is not easy to contain their relief and excitement, but it has to be done. Jackie is an Ancient and her senses are keen and potent, therefore Margarith, Jarrod and Lilly alone were kept up to date with the latest. Jarrod insists on joining the Ancient party with the sound reasoning that if Carmina is in a ‘difficult’ space, he is possibly the exact person that will be able to reason with her. Their biggest fear is that Carmina knows they're coming and will bolt again. When asked about his leaving creating suspicion with Jackie, it was Jarrod's logic that won the argument: “She would be more suspicious if everyone is out there and not me.”

Jarrod suggests that a few of the clan's hunters are also sent out to the immediate surrounding areas at the same time. John was the first to approve of the idea, agreeing with Jarrod on keeping up the regular appearances.

The five Ancients and a half-breed converge on Russia. The stir it causes amongst the local covens is immeasurable. Only once the company assures the covens and acquaintances that they seek

merely evidence are they approached with information.

Dimitri Thana, as expected, is both a loved and hated entity. His enemies try to accuse him and his friends are loyal to a fault. It was not hard to find the traces of Carmina in the memory of several *friends*. It was even easier to find praise for her work in Russia amongst those who cared to know of such things. The company learns about the orphanage in Lilly's name and stand in awe of the amount of work Carmina has done in such a short time without setting foot outside the Monastery. The glass box part angers Liam and John's single comment was a general moody mutter about the inscription.

"It should read: *Suffering Life*."

Jarrold feels the tension between the brothers and points out to them both how childish they are. If they had communicated properly they may have remembered they share a military back ground and called on the troops much sooner. He also points out to them that they need to work together now or there will be a bloodbath INSIDE their Houses that can be avoided...

The information they gather is more than enough prove that Carmina is with Dimitri at the Abraham Monastery. Will was more than amused at Carmina's choice. Rostov is one of the oldest towns in the country. It was also the hometown of Ivan the Terrible who commissioned the cathedral for the Abraham Monastery. Ironically, the Shrine of St. Dmitry of Rostov has no direct link to the Thana estate but Dimitri Thana is said to be an incarnation of sorts to the saint, referring to their shared love for arts and music.

Fayola, who had been keeping her thoughts to herself, could not help but compliment Carmina's choice as well. Nothing about Carmina's history would have given them a clue about this choice, and yet, it is almost poetically fitting of Carmina's own nightmares. Fayola finds herself drawn further into fascination when she learns that Carmina's blood, if reports are to be believed, has a property similar to an elixir, which restores the very rare blood disease found in their kind. Of course, Fayola does not believe any of this; it would be preposterous to think. It is however fascinating and she wants to know what it is about this girl able to capture a race so unconditionally.

Dimitri is a nervous mess when he learns of the Ancient Company heading in his direction. His immediate thoughts turn to the book he received from Carmina. The value of the book is in the leverage of it being from an Ancient's home. That in itself is a prestige you cannot purchase on a street corner. The information it holds is of great value too, especially if you are the warring kind and need information of other covens, their estates and their particular environments. Dimitri has already vowed that he will do all he can to not betray Carmina. She has become part of his increasingly boring life and her presence has brought a vigor to his estate he's not felt since he was in love with Margarith Jane Ivolgin. When the Company arrives and informs him they merely want a tour of his estate and are interested in meeting his living display, Dimitri partially relaxes.

Liam is walking on coals. The nervous energy emanating from him is tangible. With every step he

takes, he can feel Carmina's presence diminishing and it is eating holes in his patience. Jarrod and John are no better either and their clenched fists are not the friendly expression the Ancient Rulers had in mind when they met with Dimitri.

"Dimitri, you have a vast collection but forgive us our impatience, old friend." Will is a poster child for exterior calm. "We have come to you with an intense curiosity of your living display."

"Ah, you mean my Carmen. Yes, of course." Dimitri motions the group to a large arched door.

Liam is ready to open the doors himself but the ranked instructions from Joseph, Fayola and his father prevent it. Dimitri opens the massive doors and continues to prattle on.

"She is a treasure. If she would have it, I would have given her immortality, my Lords and Lady – but, alas, I have a contract."

If there was any doubt in Liam's mind who the woman in the glass box is, it was dispelled the moment Dimitri spoke those words.

"*Father...*" Liam's voice was harsh and reverberating through the link. His eyes focus on the glass box and his worst nightmare is confirmed. Carmina is ill... very ill. Her body is writhing and flailing under the heavy grip of a nightmare. She is small, having lost most of her weight. Her frame is fragile, held together by skin alone, which itself is ashen and swollen, tender, with a pale blue tint. Liam feels himself move as if in slow motion. There was nobody who could stop him in that moment. Jarrod and John could not keep up but they were not staying behind either.

"*Liam, wake her up!*" Will puts a hand on the frantic Dimitri's arm, hiding his own shock and disdain. Fayola changes shape, flying above the glass box. Joseph closes the doors behind them, his eyes looking around for any indication of exits.

"Dimitri, I apologize—" Will is interrupted by a roar which shakes the entire room.

"***Open it!***"

"Yes, of course, I am sorry. I had to protect her!" Dimitri is speaking fast, blurring his way towards the box. "I had to ensure that I cannot get to her myself... the glass won't break, let me just get... She is innocent of whatever crime you think she's committed!"

Unbeknownst to him, Dimitri secures his own existence, as it is clear that he has no idea about Carmina's nature and her involvement with the Ancients.

The mechanism is too slow and Liam begs with Fayola. "*Please... **Help her!***"

Fayola swoops down and grabs onto an antique head sculpture, turning and smashing it into the glass violently. With the pane halfway lowered, it shatters at the second assault from the Vulture.

Liam has already started watching Carmina's dream, and like before, he has to wait for the susceptible opening that will allow him to intrude and wake her. The breaking glass around Carmina spurs the blood servants to her side. When Liam manages to wake Carmina, he hears her call for Alina who rushes to her with a flask cold water.

Darya is flicking bits of glass away from Carmina, making sure she cannot cut herself while she's waking up. When the pair are convinced of Carmina's wellbeing, as it stands, they turn their attention to the party around them. John shifts into wolf and Jarrod starts circling the pair in an

effort to divide their attention. Liam scales one of the posts to determine a way closer to Carmina.

Dimitri watches in silence while Will and Joseph too change shape. He is convinced that he will make good on his promise to Carmen after all. His house is full of Ancients and they have just all converged on her. The blood servants stand no chance.

My eyes categorically won't focus suitably so I close them again. My head is splitting in two. I am too tired to fight it. Am I dying? It would be such a relief. I thought they say that when you die your life flashes through your head. Why is it, then, that a stranger's white and red eyes I see in front of me? Darya and Alina are growling and snarling around me, I feel them move over the bed. My body is numb; maybe Dimitri is keeping his promise after all. He must be so proud. I try to smile but the effort spitefully increases the hammering that threatens to crack my skull.

SNAP!

The echo vibrates through my entirety and I choke on my breath.

“Almost too late, you bastards,” the remaining voice fades from me.

The silence is comforting; the peaceful calm in my body is soothing. Finally. Finally.

A firm female voice speaks:

“Alterius non sit qui suus esse potest.”

[Let no man be another's who can be his own.]

I don't know what it means but the two women at my side stop snarling and growling. They're leaving.

The silence is interrupted by a voice deep inside my soul; his beautiful, tortured and sad voice. I am so happy to hear it. I am ready to let go now. I am complete.

“Carmina... my Rockflower, what have you done?”

My heart is slowing down, not to a calm but far beyond calm.

I feel it stop.

“Liam...”

The Ancients feel the link open, they hear the voice and, as one, reach for Carmina who does not respond. The attention of the Company, including Dimitri, focuses on the single human heartbeat.

“Liam...”

His name resounds in the room, rolling like a rumbling thunder, then fading away along with her heartbeat. The silence in the room is absolute.

“*Alis volat propriis* [she flies with her own wings],” Fayola lays a hand on Liam’s shoulder, sliding it down to glide over Carmina’s red tresses that dangle over his arm.

“No... No... She... NO!” Jarrod rushes forward and puts his head on Carmina’s chest, listening for a heartbeat and trying to feel a pulse, finding none.

The Ancients all grab on to the fading thread in their minds, but it does not respond. Dimitri’s shriek is followed by a series of smashing artifacts.

“She still... I can still change her.” Liam grasps desperately.

“NO!” Dimitri thunders at him and Liam is confronted with snarling teeth in his face. “I promised her. You are Ancient, but I promised HER. You will have to kill me first.”

Jarrold and John storm towards Dimitri but Joseph and Will cut them off.

“He’s right. It would be a dishonor to her.”

“*Liam, put the girl down.*” Fayola demands; when Liam is not fast enough to move, she shoves him hard. “*I said PUT the girl DOWN, boy!*”

Liam kneels in the broken glass. Consumed by hopelessness, he lays Carmina against the bed and strokes her hair.

The Vulture woman moves in closer over Carmina.

“*Your mother is right, boy, you are an idiot!*” Fayola declares and changes back into her human shape, having no preconceived ideas about nudity at all.

“John, your wolf is warm, she needs that. Dimitri Thana, we need blood to go *into* this girl.”

Jarrold is halfway out the door already before Fayola can tell him they need animals’ too.

“Anemia!” he shouts over his shoulder, almost excitedly, at Dimitri.

Dimitri is unquestionably confused. Why are the Ancients trying **save** Carmen?! What interest is she of theirs? Confused or not, when an Ancient demands something, you get them what they want. Especially when the Ancient commanding you is the Vulture Ruler herself. They are known for their thorough disposal of insubordinates.

“I have a clinic nearby, we can go fetch—”

“No, we take her there, it will save time.” Liam is firmly caught up with himself again as is reflected in the lucidity of his thinking.

“You cannot take her, you have no *heat*.” Fayola rolls her eyes at him as if he is a naughty child who is not listening.

Dimitri shouts a short command in a guttural language and Alina and Darya, who have not moved since their dismissal, appear at Carmina’s side. They pick her up with blankets and all.

“She will get there fast, warm and safe this way.”

“Jarrod—” Liam starts, but Dimitri puts his mind at ease:

“I will send Vadim to direct him. Why do you have a half-breed in your party?” The response he gets is a growl that chases him out the door.

The clinic is not a public clinic. As with many things that involve activity of immortals, you would not know of the existence of the clinic or the occupants in the depths of the monastery. Dimitri and his servants see to a change of clothing for the now naked Ancients too while Carmina is rushed off to receive the care she is in desperate need of.

“Liam...bro,” John speaks to his brother for the first time in months. “I am sorry.”

Liam turns towards his brother and then grabs him in a firm embrace. “I am sorry too, John. You were right.”

“Partially. Partially guilty. She needs us both.”

Two howls go up into the Russian night, and two blurs follow the trail of their beloved human.

Reviving a Heart

By the time the group is gathered around the small bed, Carmina is hooked up. Her heartbeat is slow and labored but it is there, to the relief of the strangest collection of immortals. Fayola is leaning up against the wall, observing from a distance. She is still enthralled in the drama playing out in front of her. She cannot decide if the gods of creation and creatures are playing tricks on them, or if they are genuinely interfering in this girl’s life, and theirs. Since the first time she heard the human’s name, there has been nothing but constant disorder in their realm. And yet - Fayola smiles at the thought - and yet, look how she brings them together.

Liam is careful to maintain a constant physical connection to Carmina. He watches and monitor her sleep to make sure she does not tumble into a nightmare. Jarrod’s arrival virtually slays the party when they realize he had caught just about any living thing in a twenty mile radius and compacted it under his shirt. The silly grin is irreversible. He was evasive over a rabbit he ‘found’ for Carmina.

“Why the animal blood? I have enough here for you all to have a feast!” Dimitri looks appalled at the idea of the animals in his clinic.

“It’s not for us Dimitri. It is for Carmina.”

“If you think there is an old wives tale cure for her ailments—”

“Actually, Dimitri, there is. Raw liver and meat.”

While the feeding tube is prepared for Carmina and a blend of raw meat and liver is concocted, Dimitri is informed of Carmina’s condition and developments. The Ancients are careful to reveal a measured dose of information to secure the original’s cooperation without making it a demand. When you have gained loyalty without force, regardless of your own station, it is harder to sway the devotion from such a mind.

It is hard to convince the woman who stayed behind to stay put. If they leave now, if they move away from the clans now, there will be a vulnerability to the members. They still have to make sure that Carmina is safe, not just from Jackie, but also from a few covens and clients who may think about securing the commodity. Dimitri has worked non-stop to show his face of despair at the loss

of his human trophy. Even the staff in the clinic are led to believe that their efforts were without results. The Ancients have to admit—Dimitri’s production was convincing, and self-same diverting. He has left the company to themselves while he spreads his sorrow in heaps and makes arrangements for the work to continue with the orphanage. Dimitri has decided that in supporting this cause, he alone has given Carmina the legacy of immortality and he didn’t even have to betray her to do so. He was rather smug about his plan.

“All this fuss over a human girl,” Fayola breaks the silence finally. “Now I want answers too.” The group turns to her as one; all but Liam, who does not take his eyes off Carmina, his finger stroking over her wrist. She is far from safe, far from recovered. She is breathing, has a heartbeat and a pulse and is warming up marginally, but her dream room is dimmed. She’s not painting. Fayola puts her fingers out counting her questions as she speaks.

“What is the deal with the story of the first - Ambrogio? How does she link? And finally, I get Liam’s obsession with her because of the bond, but everyone else’s?”

John puts his hand up like a first grader. “Oe! Oe! I know the answers.”

Fayola ignores him and turns to Joseph and Will. Will takes the lead answering the first question.

“Carmina has been fixated on the story of Ambrogio and Selene. At first it was the idea of the gods interfering but then it became about the love between human and effectively, the first vampire. Carmina reads a lot of stories about the condition of our souls, or lackthereof. She refuses to accept it based on the story. According to Carmina’s perception, you cannot feel love as deep as all that, or make decisions set in emotional response, if you don’t have a soul. She also feels that to live immortally, is to suffer life.” He concludes that portion.

“So she was not horrified that the man killed his lover?” Fayola doesn’t seem to believe the explanation.

“No, she was not. She felt sad, upset and pity for the man and felt it unfair that he had to suffer for the woman he loved, let alone horrified at Selene for insisting that Ambrogio take her blood.”

“By the gods, this girl is backwards!” Fayola exclaims but then lifts the second finger up.

Joseph steps in.

“Allow me, Will... You recall our first encounter with this girl. We saw her eat meat and then for a brief moment she was literally beating the heck out of our links in one go. We had our hands full to pull her thread from the chaos she became entangled in.” Joseph pauses and continues as soon as Fayola acknowledges the event.

“We have all heard three voices within the girl. At first, we didn’t think she knew about them. There was no indication of acknowledgement, even when their advice was more logical than the girl’s own sensibility.”

Impatiently, Fayola crows at Joseph, “Get to the point, old man!”

“Well, she knew about them; says they’ve been with her since birth. When she met the Houses individually, these voices, one at a time, bridged her into our consciousness and once she was safe, they left.”

Fayola stands with narrowed eyes, watching Joseph. “She had custodians? That is not possible.” Joseph shrugs and flashes the last connection through their link, reminding Fayola of the precise

moment Carmina was bridged back into their links, including the Vulture House's.

"The last one was not too pleased with you."

"Aaaah, I will have to make right by Papa Legba." To Fayola, speaking of the gods and goddesses is as natural as walking. Her African upbringing saw to that. Papa Legba is believed to be the intermediary between the Loa, a goddess, and humanity. Needless to say, Fayola also attributes her own condition to that of the spirits of her mortal teachings. She lifts her third finger and John puts his hand up again.

"John-a-than, what is the matter with you?" She asks, but he is already taking the floor.

"She's like a honey-badger, Fayola. Not fearless, but ferocious. She will take on and probably win against the biggest and foulest of the immortals. She gains attributes from our Houses each time she links and we don't know what your House bestowed upon her. Whatever it is, she is already faster than us. She has better senses than ours, yet she remains human. She is the missing link, Fayola."

Fayola sucks the air in through her teeth to make a *tsk!* sound at John.

"What do you mean? I didn't know there was a link missing, man." She challenges John.

"I don't know, Fayola, but you have seen it. She challenges our races; she steals our dead hearts and give us a soul instead. Can you say she has not intrigued you, Fayola? Can you say she has not touched your mind in some way?"

Defeated by the argument, Fayola admits that she, too, has been drawn in by the girl.

"Even if she is half dead already."

Liam has been listening without a word but at the last words from Fayola he rumbles at her: "She's half *alive*; you may have to consult your spirits on manners, too."

Jarrold puts both hands up to diffuse the change of mood.

"Carmina is Carmina. If we could explain her we would but we could not even find her when she left us a clear path to follow. So, you figure it out and let us know when you do."

"Now you, I understand half-breed and I accept your challenge. The girl needs protection and we need answers. We're linked with her now, our Houses stand united."

Liam speaks over his shoulder without looking around.

"What about Jackie?"

"What about her?" Joseph asks.

"Does she stand united?"

"Jackie will face her trial, Liam." Joseph assures him with a firm pull of his lips.

Fayola sees no further reason to be around anymore and announces that she's going home. Before she leaves the room, she leans in to speak softly and privately to Liam, whispering in a tone and pitch designed for his hearing.

"I will have your marrow myself, Will-i-am, if you lose this girl again." The look on Liam's face is unreadable to the others. When the Vulture walks out the door with a voluptuous swing in her hips, they understand the exchange without question.

Will, Jarrod and Joseph follow shortly after Fayola. The convincing factor for Jarrod leaving was his wife, who may need him sooner than he expected. The baby is causing increasing trouble. Lilly

is convinced that the child misses the Daddy and is misbehaving on account of neglect. Truth or not, Lilly is not having a good time for it. John however, was not going to be dragged off. He helps his brother by bringing food and hunting for the three of them. When Dimitri suggests they use modern supplements to replenish the blood, he was shown Carmina's hunt. In awe, he had to concede that she would not be impressed if she's pumped full of artificial stimulants.

"Is there anything this woman cannot do?" He marvels at Liam.

"She cannot love me." Liam answers, bitterly.

"Liam, I cannot count the times she spoke your name in her dreams. Maybe she cannot show you her love, but she loves you."

"Dimitri, will you show me? Will you? Show me her time with you; the time I have lost." Dimitri feels both honored and reluctant. Liam is an Ancient, what an honor. But he does not want to share his Carmen, their Carmina, with **anyone**.

"Why are you asking like I have a choice?"

Liam looks at Carmina and then to Dimitri, lifting an eyebrow. "Because she would never take without asking."

Dimitri's eyes grow wide, realizing what Liam just told him. He steps forward and allows every miniscule detail in his memory to be exposed. He doesn't have a choice, but he was given a choice; he's made it but the knowledge shared from Liam left him no alternative.

Liam watches and feels in silence and when the memory catches up with the company of visitors at the arched doors; he puts his free hand out to Dimitri in the age-old human tradition of shaking it.

"Thank you."

"She gives us humanity. That is why we respond to her like we do. We don't want to, but that is the truth..." He shrugs and walks away.

"Now that is an answer Fayola needed to hear!" John chimes in, leaving Liam snickering.

Liam does not mention the change in color of the room yet.

When there is a steady beat to Carmina's heart and a healthier color to her skin, Dimitri offers his private jet to take them home. Esmeriska agrees that Carmina needs to wake up at home and have the support of the family around her. Liam was not keen on moving her, but the physicians assured him that there is no immediate danger. After the logistics of the move had been worked out, Carmina, Liam and John fly back to the Volcano Valley.

John left Dimitri a gift in his museum. It is a full body replica of Carmina, lying in the trophy box. It is the image John learned is Dimitri's favorite memory of Carmina. It is macabre and the look on her face is haunted. There was no end to Dimitri's joy. He cannot believe the fortune she had brought to him and thus the inscription underneath the old one (which remained) reads:

"Carmina, suffering life so we don't have to."

Carmina knows she is home. Liam sees it in the colors she uses. She is not painting as fluently, but the colors are changing more regularly now with each person who enters the room.

The light, gentle purple is reserved for Maria. Carmina seems to enjoy Maria's visits, which are at

least once a day.

Maria has taken to sitting with Carmina, reading to her from the books or just telling her stories of growing up and learning. Maria's gentle voice is the complete opposite to John's. When he comes around, Liam smiles at the small lightning bolts that singularly and randomly appear in bright red. John's energy seems to invigorate the painting but also tires her out sooner.

Liam is worried about the amount of time Carmina is spending in the dream room. He is too afraid to bring her out of it and her body is too weak to cope. Esmeriska and Margarith tell him that he will know when she is ready. There will be no argument about it, as they are talking about their Carmina.

Jarrold and Lilly's visit seems to bring Carmina's paintbrush to full strength, at least for a while. She knows about the baby, it is reflected in the little boxes she produces: one pink and one blue. Jarrold explains, "They are the gift boxes Carmina gave us for the babies."

Carmina also knows when Liam brings any of the visitors into the dream room with him. The colors of their eyes are predominant, like the first time when John noticed it. He shares short moments at a time but he keeps himself on the borders of her room. She does not acknowledge him at all.

Carmina's recovery is slow and, at times, taxing, but the biggest worry about Carmina's recovery comes from Jackie. She has been waiting for several days now to get close to Carmina but the hawk eyes, or vultures as it were, are not leaving her alone for a moment. Just one moment alone is what she wants.

I am in my room. I can smell Liam and Momma and John. Why is John in my room? John never gets past the fridge! Why can't I move? Someone need to fix the racket my shower is making. It is too loud!

I open my eyes and see John's golden pair with dancing little devils.

"Your fridge is empty?"

"Uhm, what?" I hear Lilly ask. John is not looking away from me and I can't seem to move my head or body to look at Lilly.

"That was for Mina." He says, waving at me with a silly grin. Has he lost his mind?

Lilly's squeal first shocks me, deafens me for a while, and then annoys me when she shoves her face directly in mine!

"You're awake!"

"Shhhhhhhh," My lips manage to cooperate. I blink against the light, which is seriously too bright. What the heck wattage did they put in my lamps?

"Uh, Jarrold, I think the lights are too bright." Liam is speaking in an even, low tone. After many arguments between my body and my brain, I manage to move my hand towards Lilly's belly. Lilly holds back on the squeal but not on the excitement. She grabs my hand delicately and puts it on her

belly.

“Feel that little monster? That’s your Aunty and she’s got your number now!”

I cringe when I hear the stampede rushing towards the cottage from outside. It is too fast to be animals; it must be more family. Everything in my brain is registering slowly while my senses seem to be hyper perceptive. I close my eyes, trying to categorize things that I can shut away, just like Jarrod had taught me on the hunts.

“Oh, is she sleeping again?” Esmeriska whispers. I open my eyes in time to see Liam shaking his head with a little grin.

“She’s processing.” He is still speaking in the even tone. I like that tone and appreciate that it is not as enthusiastic as my sister’s.

I look at the faces around my bed, count them and then the random thoughts tumble from my mouth without me having any control over it.

“This human stuff is hard.”

I feel my tongue stick in my mouth as the words are made. I feel my voice box croak and I wish someone would cover my ears when the room bursts out laughing. Someone does. It does not help any.

“We’re too loud for her,” Liam speaks again, “Our Vixen is ... super charged, as John puts it.”

Near Death Recovery

The days that follow are mixtures of asleep and awake. I feel like I am daydreaming at times. The pipes and things are starting to irritate my skin. I never could stand needles much. These ones stuck in me are now annoying me. Liam speaks to answer my thoughts and I think that is annoying me too, but he is helping so I don’t give him too much trouble over that.

“Liam...”

“I’m here...”

“I want a bath,” I declare and start pulling things away from me. I forgot how fast he is.

“Ok, ok, but be still. Let me take all this off. Stop, Mina. Let me do it, please. You are going to hurt yourself.”

When he says that, I look around instinctively for Alina and Darya. Are they alright? I don’t remember a fight. What do I remember?

“They’re back in Russia, Mina, with Dimitri.” Liam answers me. “They’re fine.”

Liam had called on his Mother who brings Momma to help me into the bathroom. My legs are wobbly and my muscles are weak. I’m back to being clumsy me again and not liking it one bit. I hear Liam’s soft laughter and feel the blush on my face, knowing he’s heard that thought.

“Slowly, dear girl, I promise we’re strong enough to hold you.” Momma speaks to me with her maternal tone.

I don’t like the brooding pair hovering over me but I feel stronger for the bath. I refuse the scents and oils. Living with Dimitri has changed me. I love the smell, just not on me. If they can’t cope

with what I smell like, they can leave my home, all of them - except Liam. And John. And ... I realized how bratty my thoughts are and I join in with Liam's chuckles drifting towards me. When I get back to my room, Liam has changed the covers of my bed and lit a warm fire in the front room. Momma and Lady E leave after making me a smoothie cocktail of epic proportions.

"Liam..."

"Hmmm,"

"Tell me your story, please."

The pained look crossing his face does not deter me. The new bedding is cold and fresh and Liam produces three warm water bottles. The reason I don't curl myself around it is because my body is not responding how it should yet.

"Liammm..." I egg him on softly.

"Fine. Fine..." I can see on his face he is censoring already.

"Everything." I insist.

"Right... everything."

Liam rakes his hand through his hair before speaking in a soft, monotonous tone.

"My birth mother was an aristocrat. She was 17 when she ran away from home with the local Romany Gypsies. They accepted her with them merely because she paid in cash. Of course, she was well disguised and you would not have known her status if you were to come upon the caravan on the road... Which a troop of soldiers did. My mother was brutally raped and ... I was conceived. It was a shameful state for her, even if the gypsies did not hold the same regards for her, as she was a noble. Their own culture placing high value on virginity in woman before marriage did not apply to my mother. She was with them, not one of them.

"At the next village, my mother chose to stay behind. Esmeriska and Will resided in that village and did their best to help my mother. It wasn't long before my mother withdrew into her own head and practically became a zombie. Being the good catholic girl she was, the shame broke her mind, her spirit and her will to live. She could not kill me so she waited until I was born and then took her own life with poison. Esmeriska and Will kept me to themselves, raising me as their own then already. They had a good standing in the village, therefore I had a decent life, considering the times." Liam pauses for a moment, looking at me. His eyes are hard around the corners.

"Everything?" he asks. I nod.

"Right... well, I have built up a resentment towards soldiers. They were constantly plaguing every village around us. I was 26 years old when I lost my living life to a raid. I didn't want to hide like a coward anymore and decided to bring a knife to a gunfight. Literally. Will and Esmeriska were not ready to be without me and offered me their special brand of life. At the time, all I wanted to know was "Would I be alive?" I accepted the offer and ..."

He opens his hands.

"Here I am. But I wasn't content with just being alive. I decided I would get revenge: for my mother, for the villagers, for humanity. I joined the soldier forces and started killing them one at a time. I became consumed with revenge, and thoroughly enjoyed killing them. The blood was just a bonus. This went on for about... two years... I met a young soldier who was aloof and sneakier

than any human I have ever met. When I realized he was heading towards my mother and father's village, I followed him with the full intent of killing him. When I reached the village, I watched in awe how he aided the humans. He showed me a different way to get at the soldiers. He warned the humans of the upcoming raids and helped them evacuate. He was full of mischief and life, even in those circumstances. He stole food and clothing for the village children and helped them scout out a good place to hide until the raid was over. When the fight came, I turned on the soldiers openly, fighting them off as best I could. Unfortunately I could not help John ... My mother and father did, though, and we worked together from that time on. John ... has not changed much. We took on our father's names. By John's suggestion, we pulled straws. I ended with William and him with Johnathan. Liam and John."

My mouth falls open. No wonder this family is as close as they are. They are a pack thrown together by fate but also chose one another.

"Would you do it all again?"

"Yes, I have no regrets."

"Thank you."

"Hmmm, I have a question for you," He does not wait for me to agree. "Why Russia?"

"I had no idea I was going there. When I studied the map, it described Dimitri's trade and forte. It was the single way I could...live by my own rules," I answer honestly.

Liam looks at me with wonder, kisses my hand and put my diary next to me.

"I answered all your letters to me in there." He shoves his hand through his hair again and rests it on the nape of his neck, walking out the door in that fashion.

I open my diary and underneath each entry is Liam's precise handwriting: "*I love you. Rescued and waiting to be saved. Liam*"

A few answers to questions that weren't asked appear to me. I feel irritated at how naïve I am.

I turn on my side, away from the door, hugging my diary. I feel the gentle nudge and accept John into my internal conference room.

"*Hey Vixen,*"

"*Hey John.*"

"*I'm just checking to see if you still know how this stuff works.*" He teases me and I giggle.

"*Clearly. Now go away, I'm tired.*"

"*You sure you don't just want to hang out ... I can be very quiet...*" I withdraw from the connection in good humor, giving John his answer.

Liam feels unbalanced after telling Carmina his history. He was brutally honest when he said he didn't regret killing the human soldiers and wishes she would have some sort of reaction towards it. He also feels wholly fearful of her attitude towards her own life. It is like she neglects her own state of being human. If this is what she does to live by her own rules, he dreads to think how far she would go if she was made to accept someone else's.

“Bro, heads up... Jackie is skulking,” John breaks through and Liam rushes to Carmina’s room. Carmina is lying with her back to the door, and Liam watches Jackie circling past the bedroom window. He sits down at the end of the bed, resting a cool hand on Carmina’s leg.

Jackie is hoping to find an opportunity to get past the wolves. They are guarding the cottage around the clock and it is frustrating. She has no idea what she wants from Carmina but she wants to see her. She want to look into her face, see her weak and fragile. Perhaps that is it. Whatever it is, Jackie is getting more determined.

Confrontations

I am feeling a lot better today. I need to move around. My energy is up and my body is starting to behave how it should. The hunger is getting the better of me again and I am fed up with the smoothie diet. When I get up, Liam is at my side.

“I’m good for this, Liam. Would you get me something proper to eat please?” I head to the bathroom and draw a full steamy bath. My mind drifts back to Alina and Darya and a strange wave of sadness washes over me. They have been ever present for all this time, and I have grown to know their individual body languages. I miss them.

I brought with me an oversized warm jumper to wear and a woolly pair of socks. I can also smell the food, the fire in the adjacent room and Liam... I close my eyes and inhale. My heart gallops and Liam is knocking at the door half a second later.

“Are you alright?” He asks, concerned. He must have heard the change in pace. I flush and clear my throat before I speak.

I open the door to confirm, “Yes, yes I’m fi—Good.”

“Oh... I made something,” Liam looks awkward and sheepish.

When I walk into the kitchen, I burst out laughing. Liam did not make ‘something’. He just about made ‘everything’.

“I didn’t know what you might want...” The uncomfortable look on his face sends my heart fluttering again, covering it under the pretense of humor.

“You should invite John, Jarrod, and Lilly. Let’s not waste.”

John could not have been far off because as I speak, the back door to the kitchen opens, presenting the devil himself.

“Lilly and Jarrod are on their way.”

Lilly was about to squeal again upon seeing the food. She must have grasped the look on my face as I brace myself for the sound.

“Eeep!” I hear the restraint and watch Jarrod shake in silent laughter behind her, red in the face with his own comical understanding.

“Good morning,”

“Oh hi, what a lovely surprise,” Sometimes, John outdoes himself, and this is one of those times. “Don’t pretend it’s a surprise, wolf boy.” I shoot back at him. Lilly sits somewhat on top of me and Jarrod joins John at the other end. I feel the warmth and support from the small group around me. “Thank you,” I mouth to Liam, whose response is a cheeky wink.

I don’t eat much, but what I eat is suitably satisfying. Lilly’s appetite matches Jarrod’s at the moment, and I marvel at how thoroughly she is putting away the food. When the baby moves, she plants my hand on her belly and holds hers over it.

“I think the baby likes you.”

“How can you tell?” I ask, curiously.

“I don’t know. The baby just seems busier around you; less lazy.”

I raise my eyebrow. “And that is a good thing?”

“Sure.”

I let it go when I see the warning look on Jarrod’s face.

“I have put a blanket and book out for you in the front room Mina... if—”

“In the bay window. Please! Please?” I make my best puppy face and Liam rubs over his face.

“Of course...”

John cleans the plate he was eating from, steals Jarrod’s bacon and with a full mouth, halfway out the door, turns to Liam. “Yeah! Vixen is going to keep you on your toes, Nurse Nightingale!”

The book Liam chose for me is a collection of romantic stories, including Romeo and Juliet, Pyramus and Thisbe, Lancelot and Guinevere, Napoleon and Josephine and a host of others. I look up at him pensively and he answers the question before I ask it.

“Human stories, about human people, feeling human feelings.” He sits down in my glove-seat with a book of his own. I lean to see what it is but he is onto me and points his finger at my own book.

Vixen Vs Hellcat

Liam’s choice was excellent. I skipped over Romeo and Juliet, looking for something a bit less suffering drama so I turn to Darcy and Elizabeth Bennett’s story. Half way through the entire book, I look up to the volcano. The sun is setting and the sky is hazy and on fire. The movement on the treeline draws my attention and the approaching footfall immediately starts burning at my temper. The faint scent in the air pushes a hiss from my lips that I didn’t know formed. I am wondering if my cottage was changed for the amount of activity around my senses.

“Ignore her, she will go away.” Liam says.

“Why is she here?”

“She wants to see you.”

“Let her.”

“Carmina...”

“No, there’s a pink elephant in this room, and now there’s a lynx skulking around my patience. Bring her in. You know I don’t need you to do it for me Liam.” I remind him firmly.

I feel Liam's request, along with Will, Joseph and Jackie. I accept them all.

"Mina... *Carmina wants to see you, Jackie.*" Liam announces. I know the protocol. Any confrontation between the two of us has to be monitored and witnessed.

"*I want them all. Lady E and Maria too.*"

"*Hum, Mina... all includes Fayola, Alissa, Dian and Amber.*"

"*All. Of. Them.*"

"*Why? Who says...?*" Jackie sounds flabbergasted and panicked.

"*I do.*" I answer her. I don't care what the question was. I said and that is final.

The group is complete and Liam being the conduit goes to open the front door of the cottage for Jackie.

"*Well met Car-mi-na,*" Fayola speaks and I immediately fall in love with her energy.

"*Well met. Thank you and sorry.*"

"*Oh you are welcome honey-badger. It has been a long time coming.*" I frown at the honey badger reference but don't have time to figure it out now.

I don't move from my seat, even when I smell, hear and feel Jackie right next to me. I also hear John's thunderous run.

"*John, you don't sneak well.*" I tell him and a round of sniggers makes way.

Looking out the window, I ask Jackie: "Now you've seen me. What do you want from me?"

"Nothing."

"Hmmm, well I want something from you. You can give it, or I can take it." I am still not looking at her for fear of losing my temper.

"I don't think so, Carmina."

I put my book down and swing my legs from the seat. Liam steps forward but my mind is made up. I tie my hair back and push my chin out. Liam puts his hands palm up in front of him, honoring our clan tradition, John who appears in the kitchen entrance follow suit.

"Like puppets," Jackie snaps angrily.

"No, Jackie, like honorable people. You are in **my** house now." I wave my hand around. "Not much, but it is mine. Here... I rule Jackie." I measure my words before I speak. I control my breathing in the same way I would do around Dimitri's clientele. I don't allow my heart to run away with me either.

"Why am I here?"

"You wanted to be here, Jackie. I watched you, I heard you, and I smelled you... felt you and I tasted you, all the way from..." I lift my head. "From Liam's den, that smells of smoke?"

The silence is palpable inside my head. I feel the bewilderment flickering from the audience, but I focus on Jackie's signature.

"I wanted to confront you; to see you, weak and fragile," Jackie confesses, hatred seeping from her words.

"And are you satisfied, Jackie?" I ask her but the reply I receive is in a crackling static. I react to the sound spontaneously. Jackie was confused to see me at John's side before she was done changing.

"*I see. I refuse to fight with you Jackie. I want the truth from you. I can take it, or you can give it to me.*" I let her know in the conference arena.

“Carmina...” Liam starts but my hand raises up at him.

“Not yours to give, Liam, and not yours to interfere with. Witness only.”

I know I am faster than Jackie. I know I am also weaker than her. My body is not following orders as it should. The stubborn and determined side of me wants this to end.

The scuffing sound of Jackie’s claws on the floor alerts me to her leap and I move out of her way, watching her fly into the wall. John does not flinch and I end up right next to Liam.

“Third and last time, Jackie. I just want the truth. From you. You can give it, or I will take it from you.”

Jackie’s fall infuriates her more. “*Who give you the rrrright?! You are a filthy human, I am an Ancient!*” she shouts at me.

“*I do. My house, remember Jackie? I invited you here. Had I not done that, you’d still be playing kitty purr around my cottage.*” I taunt her.

In our many discussions, Dimitri told me about a method he’s employed against the Gello’Des in fights. He would irritate them to the point where they practically turn blind with fury. It weakens their attacks because they do not focus their strength or strikes.

It works, and Jackie storms at me. Then the world slows down. The bottom of the glass appears. I see the saliva foaming in the corners of Jackie’s mouth, and the tension in her muscles. I see her skin where it is loose and where it is tightest. I wait for her paws to extend and then walk directly past her and embrace her from behind, driving her legs and claws into the wall with my body. The grip around her neck and throat locked in place. I hold her there, pinned up against the wall and yowl into her ears: “**GIVE!**”

Jackie does not hold back and I find my mind flooding with the whole memory.

The Memory

Liam is searching frantic along the river for Carmina. He keep losing her scent and is getting frustrated and concerned. Jackie finds Liam and helps him search but, when nothing turns up, she invites him back to the Lynx House for something to eat and drink.

They’re both soaked, and Liam dries his shirt over the fireplace, Jackie half stripping down to do the same. Jackie and Liam get into a confrontation about Carmina and he pushes her aside. When Jackie trip over the couch behind her, Liam leans over her and proclaims, “I don’t want her like this.”

He lean further into Jackie and hisses in her face, “I want more than what she will give me.” Liam leaves the residence and Jackie is left alone.

Liam and John are still not moving when the memory ebbs away. I feel my legs buckle and stumble backwards. Liam’s arms catch me before I land on the floor and John catches Jackie before she

lands on me. I feel the flow of contempt from the onlookers while my attention is still on Jackie's energy. Humiliation and shame, anger and pain roll over us in waves.

"I am sorry, Jackie, are you hurt? John, is she hurt?" I ask.

"Nah, Vixen, just a little ego bruising. You did good." John assures me.

I get no answer from Jackie but I hear the wing fall of the Vultures and seconds later, they land on the roof.

"Jackie. It is time to go home. We are done here."

Fayola's screechy call lifts from the roof. The padded footfalls from two more Lynxes come into range and from another direction I hear the wolves.

"We will decide what—" Joseph offers but I cut him off.

"No, no please... I don't like what she's done, but I understand it. Just leave her be."

Another round of silence and mixed emotions flood around me.

"How can you understand?" Jackie's wild voice punches into the energies.

"Because I know how hard it is to love someone and not get crazy when they don't love you back."

I hear nothing more from Jackie; she snaps the link between us closed and walks out the front door.

John is right behind her and the three Ancient Houses escort her off the clan estate.

"If that girl is human, I'm a monkey's uncle." Fayola declares and the houses withdraw under a series of jokes about early birds and honey badgers.

The exchange has taken more out of me than I would have liked it to and my body starts trembling. Liam marches me to my room, tucking me into bed. He kneels next to the bed, watching me with those big, beautiful eyes of his. I put my hand out and slide my wrist under his cold palm, close my eyes and enjoy the throbbing being mollified by his touch.

Liam sits quietly with Carmina's hand under his palm. He is not sure how to react to what he had just witnessed. He hears the words from Dimitri floating at him, "She give us humanity..." and truly understands what he meant.

Liam sits at the edge of Carmina's dream room, keeping watch, as always. She turns to him and hands him a brush. Liam reaches for it, unsure what to do next. She draws a line and waits. When he draws a squiggly line, she makes a circle... he follows her circle.

He senses her saying, *"Dream with me, Liam,"* and he is convinced, had he possessed a beating heart, it would have stopped in that exact moment. In a dance that speeds up, they move around the room – Liam chasing her patterns and Carmina takes delight in leading the chase.

Gipsy Brats

The smell of ice is on the air. I stir and feel the tips of Liam's fingers reaching over the side of the

bed for me. Rolling my head towards his, I stare at him. His forehead is leaning against the bed and his black hair is inviting me to stroke it, but I don't. Closing my eyes again, I feel pent-up energy in my body. I need to get out today.

Without a word, I get up from my bed and saunter to the bathroom for a shower. Before I get dressed, I regard myself in the mirror. My hair is long, below my waist and it is going in every which way. I blame Lilly. Since the day of her wedding, my hair has taken on a life of its own and no matter what I try, it just bounce right back to being a nest. Reaching for the scissors, I cut half the hair off in hopes of taming the burning bush. This made matters worse. The weight of the length helped but with a lot of it gone, my hair springs into a fluff around my shoulders that reminds me of candy-floss. I groan at the sight.

Dressing quickly in denims and a jumper, I enter the kitchen looking for food. I'm starving again. Liam silently appears behind me, his eyes following my every move. There is a possessive glint playing around in the golden flecks and it sends my heart fluttering.

"I'm going to have breakfast with the clan today." I announce.

The gong responds before Liam can and then I hear the long, drawn out trumpet of a horn. Liam's head lifts with a frown and I squeal in the super girly version of Lilly.

"ROLAND!"

"Who is—?"

There is not enough energy in the world to get my shoes onto my feet fast enough. I don't answer Liam in my excitement and rush out the door. Halfway to the courtyard, I realize I should slow down to a human run.

Roland is a gipsy brat. His family visits our clan on rare occasions and I have had a schoolgirl crush on this boy since I was 11 years old. Jarrod approves of Roland simply because the gipsy boy has no interest in me romantically. His mission has always been to try and be the biggest pest around the courtyard, and that is saying something considering I grew up with Jarrod around! As I grew older, I realize that my infatuation with Roland wasn't romantic in nature. He is simply the fact that this wild boy understands my soul; a kindred spirit.

The family is Romany, and made up of five people: Sullen and Briaan, the mother and father; Bianca, Lucas and Roland, the children. I know now that they are half-breeds too and avoid city limits as much as they can. Our clan is the one place where they will stay and mix with the families for more than a few hours at a time. Momma's family is seen as 'Friend-Family' by the group and treated in that way. They always seem to know what is going on and always show up at the exact time of major events. Momma says it is because Sullen has a gift that far surpasses anyone she has ever met. Sullen insists that she does not tell the future; she simply pays attention and listens to the world around her. Bianca is nine, the newest member of the family, and Lucas is twenty-five years of age. Roland is twenty-three years old, my age. Sullen and Briaan are spectacular performers and bring with them stories and songs both old and new. The whole caravan certainly lifts the spirits

around the courtyard.

I spot the boys all standing in the square. Roland takes a running flight at me when he sees me and swings me over his shoulder to spin me until I'm dizzy.

"Carminaa!! I thought these two were joking but, by the gods and the devil's coin purse, you look delicious!"

In true *me* style, I not only blush but trip over my own two feet while trying to find something not spinning to focus on.

"They know, Mina," John calls out to me, "Been traveling with them since before the sun. What did you do to your hair?!"

With the comfort of shared knowledge, I can't help but tease Roland.

"In which case, fast mouth, you will go hungry because I am faster than you." To John: "I ran with scissors, it fell into my hair."

The roaring laughter goes up from the boys and it is Jarrod that confirms my claim to speed.

"Yeah, she is fast, sadly..." John makes stabbing motions at his heart, stumbling around like an overdramatic death scene in a badly produced movie.

"If I dinna see it, it isna true." Roland reverts to his brogue accent when he's issuing a challenge or being charming.

"Tag! You're it!" and with that, the courtyard blurs into three black haired hazes with a red stripe darting between them.

Momma's call from the hall puts an end to the game. With Roland on the one side and Jarrod on the other, locked around my waist, we head towards Momma.

"Grown men and woman behaving like children! For the life of me, you're keeping everyone!"

Momma pretends to scowl.

"Sorry Missus," Roland's charm is on, "I had to chase down this beautiful wild fire that was threatening to burn down yer whole back garden."

Momma rolls her eyes and swipes the tea towel towards Roland. Her eyes are soft when they land on me.

"Good to have you on your feet, my child."

John pushes us from behind like a bulldozer and it is all we can do not to run Momma over.

"Now get yourselves inside... Lilly is going to eat the table if you don't."

The mood inside the hall is already festive and light. The eyes turn on us as we walk in and Lilly squeals as Lilly does. Thankfully, my senses have settled to normality and I have found the volume control to regulate that squeal. Lilly doesn't understand her own pitch even though John and Jarrod both have hinted at shattered glasses when Lilly gets excited. Heading to my regular seat, I watch Liam stride past and claim the one next to me.

During breakfast, Briaan and Sullen take a more serious tone, speaking to mother about their travels. They have spotted a lot more Gello'Des in the area and they worry about Lilly and the baby.

Sullen feels that neither would be safe, considering the encounter with Teresa Gello'Des and I, which also may have fired old sparks of interest in Lilly.

I listen for a while as they try to work out the best course of action, eventually breaking in: "You should speak to Dimitri. He told me about his personal vendetta with the Gello'Des and why they are considered the natural enemies of the blood servants. Darya and Alina would be more than happy to help where and how they can."

Lilly's face was one big objection. "I can't leave home!"

"I think Carmina is right, Lilly. For the baby, you can do anything you want. Russia is a good place, and you have an orphanage with lots of children there who can do with a mothering hand like yours." Sullen backs me up.

"Dimitri is a bastard – but he is a bastard with means." Briann adds.

Jarrood puts a hand over Lilly's and squeezes it tight. "If you don't want to go, my love, we don't go."

"What about Mina?" Lilly asks. I look at her surprised.

"What about me?" and "What about Mina?" say Momma and I, simultaneously.

"You are in danger too."

"Carmina is in no immediate danger, Lilly. She is not with child. You are. Carmina also has a direct line to the Ancients... you don't, my darling. Your baby is precious... you are precious. The threat for you is bigger." Momma speaks in soothing tones.

"Perhaps Momma could go with you; it won't be permanent, at least for a while, Lilly." I encourage my little sister.

"Fine. Will you speak to the original?" she asks me.

"I will do it myself. I am the Elder. I will also ask Will and Esmeriska to help Carmina out."

My head jerks around to Momma and my eyes grow. I can't speak because, as is the norm these days, my mouth is full of food.

"Don't look so surprised. You are my eldest daughter and the clan will need a figure head, if not an Elder."

I chew, feeling anxiety filling the space between the bites.

Liam, who's been deathly silent until now, rubs his palm over my back. He must have felt the change in my energy.

"You'll manage." He whispers.

Roland nudges John next to him and points a finger between Liam and me.

"Time to break out the bosh for a wedding tune?"

"Nah dude, the fiddle will be wasted on them two at the moment. My brother is a slow mover." The two of them snigger together.

This brings forth, from Roland, a modern folk song by the High Kings – an Irish group: "It's no! Nay! Never!" drawing laughter and attention, three claps in succession from the clan and a scowl from Liam.

Breakfast runs its course. After clearing up, we stroll outside into the courtyard. The various members head to their jobs or homes and I spot the little blonde girl on the wall. I know she is with

Briaan and Sullen but I don't know her. I've seen her at the side-stall where I buy Momma's licorice. Her eyes don't leave me for a moment and I head towards her to investigate.

"Carmina Rose," I put my hand out to greet her.

"Raina. I know who you are. Is it true you were a blood donor?"

I stare ahead of me, swinging my legs, pinching one eye closed against the morning sun.

"Yeah, it's not all it's cracked up to be." I answer dryly.

The giggle from the girl is sweet and almost enchanting.

"I wish I knew it was *you* they were talking about. I'd have told them I know you, which would have shut them up."

"Who?"

"My family and those who were asked if they've seen you. They made you sound like a myth; said you couldn't be seen, just black and red flashes as you passed through."

"Hmmm, they're silly for their fanciful stories. I am pretty clumsy."

"What is it like to be human?"

I turn to the girl and give her a big smile. "I don't know how it is for other humans, but for me ... It is like being exactly like you. I am clumsier though, as mentioned, and not so clever at times." I knock against my head.

Raina then repeats my own line back at me, using the exact same dry tone I did.

"So, not all it's cracked up to be?"

"You got that right!"

I spend more time with the girl on the wall and learn that she is the daughter of Sullen's family from another caravan. She tells me that she has an infection that makes her look much older than the 13 years she is. This caused trouble amongst the travelers, as she is seen as 'on the shelf' and impure. In order to keep her safe, Briaan and Sullen took her in. They are not traditionalists where it comes to certain problems. I put my hand on her leg and assure her she's not impure.

"Some human girls would give anything to look older."

"Really?"

"Sure, but it is because they can get up to more mischief, so don't get any ideas."

I sit for a while talking to Raina about many things, including the licorice she sells at the side-stall. We look in the direction of the boys when there's a squeal or a growl thrown at them from various corners of the courtyard. They are running wild. The day was speeding along lazily and I am starting to wonder if the clan will survive the trio-trouble of Jarrod, John and Roland. Of course, they tend to pester the women somewhat more, and I know how much Roland will be missed when they leave.

Green Monster

Rushing to the cottage, I am feeling hungry and in need of a snack. The moment I open the fridge, the door opens behind me.

"Got some spare?" John asks.

"No." I snip at him.

“I think she’s a liar. We should check her pockets,” Roland puts his hands out and I know the moving fingers means tickles. I use a drumstick as a sword, eating the other while running around the small table in my kitchen. John corners me and I throw the cleaned bone at Roland. I miss. Roland scoops the bone up fast and grins menacing.

“John, what is that song – fer throwing things and missing, ye ken?”

“Miss me, miss me, now you gotta kiss me!” John sings and herds me into Roland’s arms.

I giggle when Roland produces the chicken bone in front of my face. I put my hand to my forehead and flail over backwards to find my view filled with an upside down Liam, who, overall, does not look impressed at us.

“Oh, by the luck of the gods, she’s fainted!” Roland protests and let go of me. I yelp but don’t hit the floor - Liam gets hold of me, pulling me to my feet.

John opens the fridge and shouts over his shoulder.

“Too late, big brother’s got her now, we best scram!”

Roland strolls up to the fridge next to John, but waves the chicken bone over his shoulder at me.

“A token from the Lady, I will keep it and cash it later. Ye owe me.”

Roland and John skid out the door with most of the contents of my fridge in their arms.

Liam is still holding on to me.

“They are going be the death of this clan.” I tease. “Thanks for the rescue...” I look up to Liam, pulling my arm away from him.

Liam tugs me closer leaning his head down and in a low voice whispers to me.

“I’ll take *my* reward now.” His lips steal over mine for seconds, leaving a cold impression on my mouth. My hand moves up to my lips when he leaves as quietly as he came, staring after him. My heart marches to its own drums again.

In the front room, Liam is licking over his lips, tasting Carmina’s sweet scent. He closes his eyes and fights the idea to march back in there, desire burning into his fiber. Seeing Carmina so happy and vibrant is not helping the growing need he feels towards her. He has to get out of the cottage, put distance between them. Liam leaves through the front door and his eyes catch the movement of his brother and the gipsy boy. Irritation grinds him to a halt. What does Carmina see in that guy?

Liam chooses to go in the opposite direction to avoid contact with the man that is grating against his nerves like a pot scour.

There is time before dinner, and with Liam out the cottage, I can take my time getting ready. I make extra effort to look good. I know Momma is watching me closely. Any indication of me not being well will result with her possibly locking me in here herself. I contemplate my stay with Dimitri and feel a pang of sadness drawing closer. I know my time with him was unhealthy but it wasn’t bad. I

miss him. I miss his strange accent and his flair for the dramatic. Dimitri taught me a lot while I was there and maybe that is what I miss as well. I miss not having Darya and Alina by my side. Not because they were servants to me, but because in their own distant way, they were supporting and encouraging me.

When the gong sounds for dinner, I firmly push the thoughts and memories from my mind. Briann and Sullen will be telling stories and singing tonight and I am excited. Reaching the hall, Roland is waiting in the doorway to snatch me away. He takes my hand and as always, drags me off to a dimly lit corner out of the way. The dinner hall has been transformed, all the tables removed and humongous, brightly colored pillows are scattered around the floor. Low, round tables are laden with finger foods and all the hearths are crackling. Roland flops down on a pillow and pull me down to sit between his legs. With his knees bent and his arms around my shoulders folded in front of my chest, he rests his chin on my head.

“Your leg fort, Ma’am,” he teases mischievously. This has been our dinner seating arrangement since I can remember. I used to think that Roland was taking pity on me for missing so much out during the day on account of my clumsiness. Now I am thinking it was his way to protect me, and possibly the reason Jarrod allowed it.

I am still trying to fix my hair out of Roland’s view – trying to stop him from chewing on it too – and don’t notice Liam entering the hall. It is Roland who points him out to me by dropping his mouth into my hair and whispering, “Big bad wolf is huffing.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll protect you. And you have a chicken bone. If all else fails, try feeding him.” Roland’s roaring laughter draws several looks in our direction, including a dark glare from Liam, which I promptly choose to ignore.

Liam feels the tension rising when Roland’s challenging eyes lock on his. The gipsy doesn’t look away from him, but leans into Carmina to speak to her. Liam’s jaw tightens and he looks around the room to find his brother. John is stretched out on a pillow with Bianca and Raina, the two travelling girls. Strolling over, Liam sits down with the poking push of his brother in his awareness.

“Relax bro, they’re friends.”

“Why is he so close to her? And does she have to be so... much of herself around him?”

“Dude! Chill out, Carmina is always all of herself, you’ve just been too crabby to notice. They grew up together.”

“All the more reason....” Liam lets the rest of the thought hang in the air when he turns at the roaring laughter behind him.

“I’ve... got... a ... tiger by tail...” John sings to Liam and fades away from the brewing storm.

Upon asking, Roland tells me that his brother has a fiancé and is with her family’s caravan to

negotiate the marriage. Lucas is as rowdy as Roland, but he hardly pays me any attention. He takes traditional roles very seriously and, not being a traditional clan, he is always picky about the company he keeps.

“How long are you staying for?” I ask.

“For as long as it takes to move a mountain, or a volcano... or a wolf.”

I elbow Roland hard, knowing he’s teasing about Liam. Roland proceeds to fall over onto the pillow, crying out in pain and agony drawing all the attention to us again. John calls out to Roland asking if he needs help taming a redhead Vixen and the answer from Roland sends me squeaking into a flush.

“Lovers’ quarrel John; I lost!”

The room is chuckling and snorting and I notice Liam’s back straightening and tensing more than usual.

The evening was pleasant and my sides hurt with laughter. A few times I had to wipe a tear at the sad love stories from Sullen. When that happens, Roland does not tease me; instead, he hugs me closer. Some of the stories are hysterical yet... I have learned to listen to them differently. I am living a life woven from the fabrics of myth and stories and there is no denying a few hidden truths in each piece of tale told.

The final song for the night is the same one I know and have come to love. Sullen taught me the song when I became anxious or scared from the nightmares. She says that if you get lost, there is always a rocky road that will take you to somewhere better. When Briaan starts playing the tune, Roland picks me up and hoists me over his shoulder again, parading me like a hunter’s prized catch. The room is clapping and whooping.

“We’re not from Dublin, but there is always a rocky road...” Sullen says, “And we’re happy that our Carmina is back on the road and Lilly is taking a new one.”

And with that, the song sounds into full swing. The clan members join in by clapping or dancing or just shouting the chorus along. Roland puts me right side up and takes my hand into a tango dance. “We’ve never danced before Carmina. Me kamav te khelav! [I want to dance!]” I feel the happiness bubbling at hearing the Romany language, which I have always found to be very pretty.

“Then, let’s dance.”

Roland whirls me around the room, guiding my every step and firmly holding me to him. I suspect he’s still worried that I may fall but soon enough he relaxes, reciting to me from an obscure poetic gipsy song.

“Voliv tut ages [I love you today];

Voliv tut tehara [I’ll love you tomorrow];

Voliv tut nai [but I’ll love you much more];

Desar mai anglal [Than ever before];

Khel, khel, khel thai gilaba [Dance, dance, dance and sing];

Av, av, av vesolo [Be, be, be happy!]”

When the Rocky Road to Dublin song ends, Roland dips me over his arm and produces the chicken

bone with the other.

“I am cashing in. You owe me.” Sliding his arm around my waist, Roland tucks the bone into my back pocket and plants a soft, lingering kiss over my heart. “For as long as your heart beats, Carmina, and even long after it doesn’t – you will have me.”

Standing upright, I hug Roland.

“Thank you,” I whisper to him and turn when I feel a big, heavy hand on my shoulder.

When the music starts up and the final song gets into full swing, Liam wants to leave. He just couldn’t bring himself to do so, knowing that Carmina is still attached to that gipsy’s arm. The unmistakable provocation in Roland’s eyes as he leers at Liam before he kisses Carmina’s heart moves Liam in long strides towards them. He reaches the pair just in time to hear Roland’s declaration and it is with effort that he does not punch a hole in the man’s head.

When Carmina turns to Liam, he scoops her up effortlessly and without a word march her towards the cottage under the gapes of just about the whole clan.

“Bed time. You’re dead on your feet.”

“Liam! What are you doing? That is ru—”

“Rude; spare me the lecture.”

“I never got to say goodnight!” Carmina yells at him, fighting against his arms to be set free.

“All the better to say good morning when you’re rested.”

No matter how hard Carmina protests, Liam does not stop, put her down or speak again. When they get to the cottage, he unceremoniously dumps her onto the bed, shoes and all.

When I hit the bed, I am fuming. How dare he?! I cannot deny I am shattered but Liam has no right to embarrass me like that. I also know there is no point in continuing the fight because I have already lost this round. I turn my away from Liam and feel the tips of his fingers resting against my back. Tears well up and I fall asleep crying.

There is a deadly silence when I wake up. I am still furious at Liam and I don’t move when he gets up to leave, slamming the door behind him. When I drag myself out of bed and into the shower, I try to make sense of it all. Giving up, I wear a simple dress and head to the kitchen. I hear the stampede coming towards my door and stand facing it with my arms folded. The three bodies shuffle and jostle, trying to get inside at the same time.

“We’re hunting before breakfast, you coming?” Jarrod speaks, the first through the door.

“Su—” I start but am cut off by Roland.

“She dinna look like a hunter Jarrod, are you sure you have the right place?”

“Dude... you’re in for a shocker! But honestly, Carmina, you’re dress will get ruined...” John

proclaims.

I don't try to answer. Grateful for the distraction, I fly into the bedroom to change. I tie my hair back tight as it would go and present myself for inspection to the trio.

"Let's go." I command.

"You're not ready yet." Roland steps forward and unties my hair, messing it up to the point where I can feel static charging through it.

"**Now**, you look like a huntress." John and Jarrod whistle their approval. Only when John speaks to Liam do I turn my head in part to look at him, again not having noticed his appearance behind me.

"Bro, we're out hunting, you coming?"

"No thanks, John, I have a few things to check on at home with Mother and Father."

I don't miss the tightness in Liam's muscles when he speaks. I shoo the guys out the door and hear a soft growl when Roland asks me a question once we're outside.

"What do you want with that werewolf, Carmina? You need a man who will run with you!"

I grin and shout to Roland, "He can keep up, can you?" sprinting off towards the gate.

Standing in the kitchen, Liam is seething. Someone better put a sock in the man's mouth.

"So help me..." he growls to himself.

Giving a Push

The hunt is a great success. I feel proud, like every hunt before, able to hold my own and bring down my target alone this time. With winter upon us, we had to move further out than usual to track and catch our meat. This made the trip more charged with anticipation and energy. As before, Jarrod presents the blessing of the hunter god and goddess and we share soft, warm meat from our catch. Roland decides it is time that I learn to drink blood from the animal myself.

"You never know when you are going to get stuck, and there is not always a cup. You need blood more than we do, Carmina." Roland speaks practically, "And while it will not provide you hydration it will keep you healthier and fed."

With that, he shows me where to make the incisions to gain access and easily massage enough blood into my system. John and Jarrod look proud as punch when I pull away from the animal.

"You do not want to get blood all over yourself, Carmina." Jarrod continues my lesson. "In the woods, you are not the only hunter. If you must take food with you, find a way to seal it, or hunt small and eat what you can before moving on."

With the lesson complete, I get my 'Girl scout' badge in the form of a line from each of the men with me. Roland carries my catch in one hand and his other is wrapped around my waist.

"I am so proud of you. John is right, you are a natural huntress." He compliments me, the serious chords far removed from his voice.

I cannot help but wonder what is happening to me. I enjoy the taste of the blood; I enjoy the taste of the raw meat. I know it is healthier for me than the medication we once tried, but ... am I becoming a monster too? I shake my hair out and put the memory in the 'sort later' file. Right now, I am happy and proud and amongst the best hunters I know.

When we get to the courtyard, John and Roland take me to the kitchen to show me how to skin, clean and prepare the meat. The process is harder than I imagined but after a few tries, I find my way around the sharp blades.

"And now you are a true wild woman; I like seeing you like this Carmina," Roland speaks sincerely.

John shoves at me with his shoulder, "Good job Vixen. I am proud of you."

I clean up in Momma's house before breakfast starts and make my way to the hall joining the rest of the clan. The terrible trio is already in full assembly. Lilly is struggling hard with the laughter, and was rushed to the girl's-room on more than one occasion. A baby in the belly, breakfast juice and laugh-a-minute comic relief does that to one's bladder.

I see the snow through the window, drifting to the ground and for the first time it dawns on me: a year ago I met the Moretti family, Lilly got married and things changed so much. I am still me, but I know there are parts of me that have been altered to extend far beyond my own comprehension. After breakfast, I seek mother out in her kitchen. She was expecting me as my cup is already by the kettle with the honey and teabags, waiting.

I make us each a cup and sit down, eyeing all the ledgers and books Momma has spread out in front of her.

"You're working already, Momma?"

Momma's office has always been in the kitchen. She prefers to work here where she can be close to her family. The office for the company is not far away from the house, but Momma is a creature of comfort and this is where she's most comfortable.

"Indeed, my child. How are you?"

"I feel great, Momma. I think I'm mended and ready to get back to life as a whole."

Momma looks me up and down and then taps her chest with the pencil.

"And how are **you**?" she repeats her question. I know what Momma means by this and I take a moment to do a self-search and internal stock-take.

"I don't know, Momma. I try not to think too much at the moment. I have a million questions but I am afraid of the answers I may get."

Momma puts the back of the pencil against her chin, tapping it a few times then speaks earnestly.

"Do those questions include you and Liam?"

"Just about all of them do, Momma. I came to the conclusion that there is no 'me and Liam'. There is me, and there is Liam. We are just sort of... ships passing in the night."

"Roland?" Momma asks outright. I love this about my mother.

"There is nothing romantic going on with Roland, Momma. He's a kindred spirit."

“Hmm.”

“Momma! You don’t believe me?”

“I believe you, Carmina; you’re a terrible liar. I can’t help but think Roland has ideas, though.”

I laugh at my mother and wrinkle my nose. “Roland is what he is Momma. He’s just being himself.”

I point at one of the ledgers, showing Momma a mistake and fixing it. She asks, “Why don’t you take this task off my hands? You have a good eye and a good head for numbers.”

“I like the designs, Momma.”

My mother looks at me and makes that tutting sound again. Obviously I said something dumb again.

“Who said you had to stop? Besides, that last design of yours received a lot of attention. Just give it a try. I may have to leave for long periods at a time and I don’t trust anyone with this.”

I smile at my mother and pat her hand.

“Fine, I’ll take it over from you. It’s the least I can do to make up for the distress I caused you.” I pull an envelope from under one of the ledgers.

“Uncle Darius? How is he?”

My mother’s face darkens and I frown. “He’s a pain. Fitting of the job description for brothers, I suppose. But he’s too keen on knowing my clan’s business. I think he worries about you taking land or something.”

“Really? He knows I have no claim and I have no interest.”

Momma looks pensive when she speaks next. “A man cooking without meat in his pot, Carmina, is a hungry man.”

“Momma, I am sorry for the troubles I brought to our clan.”

“Carmina Rose Nightshade, don’t you dare – I should go see to lunch.” My mother says, leaving me with the books.

I pull them closer and finish a few of the orders, organize the filing and jot down notes in the margins of the marketing campaign Momma is contemplating. I decide to go home for lunch. I am tired.

When I get to the cottage, Liam is there and he has already put a plate out for me. He’s sitting in the glove seat with a book open in his lap.

“You done consorting with the enemy?” He asks too sharp.

“I wasn’t aware Roland was an enemy.”

Liam picks up the book and starts reading without saying another word. I take my plate to the bay window, along with a book of my own. The snow is densely settling and the landscape is becoming washed in white. For a moment, I am reminded of a snow-globe.

Moving around to get ready for dinner, I feel Liam’s eyes following me. His bad mood is starting to rub at my patience so I leave without a word.

When I get to the hall, Roland is standing in the same place as always. This time I walk inside with

him but ask to join my sister instead. Roland makes a horrified face and shouts at Jarrod about being dumped by a human snack! John responds by saying it's his own fault for choosing food that can run faster than him. I sit down next to Lilly and ask, "When are the 'eat Carmina' jokes going to end?"

"Never. You're food, they're always hungry." She sides with the men.

I ask Lilly how she is and we speak about her trip to Dimitri's. She informs me that they will be leaving the day after tomorrow and that Briiaan and Sullen will ride out with them to the city limits. Dimitri was in his element and offered the jet service to get them there. As far as he is concerned, tin cans should not fly, and if you are going to fly in one, it better get you where you're going fast and comfortably. I can vividly imagine the production.

"You are doing the right thing, Lilly," I encourage my little sister while rubbing over her belly.

"I know. But are you, Mina?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you honestly think you should stay behind? You are in danger too."

"I will be fine. Or would you have me run off with Roland instead?" I tease and Lilly rolls her eyes. Shortly after I feel the baby kicks into my hand and Lilly yelps. This brings Jarrod out of thin air to appear at his wife's side.

"Shoo, go find your own couch."

I get up to make space for Jarrod who jumps over the back of the couch and slides in behind his wife, wrapping his hands over her round belly. They look a picture of happiness. My heart aches and I know I am envious.

Education Overdue

I look for my mother to check about the work I did for her; instead, I find Liam and Roland glaring at each other in a showdown. I don't know what it is with those two, but I'm not in the mood to deal with either one of them right now. I turn and stand toe-to-toe with John.

"Jeeesh! I can't turn myself around without one of you in my face!" I whine.

"You'll live. Where are you heading?"

"To my mother."

"Better prospect," He grabs my hand and drags me off to Briiaan and Sullen, where he triumphantly lifts it up and shouts, "I found her! I deserve a treat."

Sullen laughs and tells John to wait with the rest of the family. He may be Ancient, but he has no special rights where she's concerned.

John pouts and sits down like a well-chastised toddler.

Briiaan holds a book out to me.

"We want to give you this. You have been reading and learning a lot about your family. You are our friend-family and so you should learn about us too. Everything in there is sacred to our families. And true."

My mouth hangs open in awe. The book is wrapped and tied in sturdy dark leather with what looks like a burnt branded Celtic emblem on the outside.

I hug both of them to me and thank them emotionally.

“Do not forget who you are, Carmina, but do not forget *where* you are either.” Sullen speaks as she gets up and Briaan follows his wife out.

John leans over my shoulder and I feel the energy floating around him. “Trusted by the gypsies. That doesn’t happen often.”

I turn to speak to John but Roland, who had just jerked the former backwards, has replaced him. I hold the book up to Roland; his eyes soften when he smiles.

“You are one of us, Carmina. You should not be kept in a box.”

I laugh and push him against the shoulder, protesting: “I am not in a box; you’re being a beast.”

“Then marry me!” He shouts loudly. “Let me show you what it is to live like a real woman. We can have many children... or practice for them often!”

I hear the teasing in his voice and the crude connotation of his joke flushes my skin. “Roland! You are incorrigible!”

Two things happen almost at once. Roland rubs the corner of his mouth, drops his head and chuckles. “Sometimes you just need to ask the right questions.”

The next thing that happens is Liam’s sudden appearance. He punches Roland in the jaw so hard I hear the bones shift. I shout at Liam but he points a finger at Roland who’s rubbing at his chin.

“We’ll talk later.”

Roland seems to be enjoying the exchange to no degree, waving at me when Liam picks me up and for the second time in two days marches me out of the dinner hall.

“I count on it.” Roland’s cocky answer floats behind us.

It takes a while for me to catch my breath and slow my heart. Choking with anger, I beat against Liam’s chest and furiously shout at him to put me down. Liam is ignoring me, which serves to make me more stubborn and angrier. What is his problem?!

When we get to the cottage, Liam does not put me down but locks both doors behind us. He then drops me in the living room, his eyes blazing in anger.

“Why are you being a jerk?”

“Carmina, I’ve not started being a jerk yet.” Liam warns me. I know I should listen, but I don’t.

Liam’s voice is cold, calculated and immensely calm.

“You behave like a cave-man, Liam! You are rude and obnoxious to *our* guests! You have no right!” I scream at him.

Liam takes his shirt off and throws it in front of the door, using his foot to jam it in well and truly.

My eyes stretch knowing that what he’s done is an easy way to stop someone from opening a door fast to escape. The shirt jams it and makes it stick. I look at him and frown.

“You like playing with the Devil’s tail, don’t you, Carmina?”

Liam is circling me and I turn to keep facing him, when my back is to the fireplace, he moves the glove seat to block the kitchen entrance. I feel anxious and push firmly at John’s awareness. When he does not answer, I try the Ancients one at a time, but nobody lets me connect with them.

Liam whirls towards me and grabs me by the shoulders, his fingers digging in hard.

“Answer me.”

“You’re not the devil, Liam – you won’t... you can’t hurt me.”

“Which is it, Carmina? Won’t? Or can’t?” His hands push harder into my skin; I feel the pressure against the bones.

“Liam, what are you doing?”

“**Answer me!**” Liam hisses at me and I stumble backwards a few steps.

“You can’t! You can’t hurt me!” I scream at him. My mind is racing to justify my own answer.

“You’re wrong, Carmina.” Liam’s deadly calm grips tight into my chest and squeezes fear into my bloodstream. He picks me up at the shoulders, spins me around and shoves me into the leather seat. I hear the scream pouring over my lips and it sounds distant. Adrenaline and shock spurs me into action and I find my feet, ignoring the burning in my shoulders where his hands held me moments ago. Liam is moving calmly, like a hunter stalking his prey. For a moment, I see the face of a big wolf snarling at me.

“Liam, don’t do this,” I beg, the tears streaming down my face.

“***Don’t worry, I’ll protect you. And you have a chicken bone. If all else fails, try feeding him.***” A chill chases through me just as Liam mimics my voice, repeating the words I told Roland.

“Liam, it was—”

“A joke? Sure it was. I am nothing if not a joke, Carmina.”

I dash for the bedroom door, getting in behind it but not fast enough to close it. Liam’s palms lands against the door, tearing it down and sending me into the opposite wall with splinters travelling half the distance with me.

I don’t move again. Pulling my legs up into my chest, I sit with my head on my knees. I feel Liam’s firm push against my energy and refuse to accept the connection. He roars loudly, grabbing my wrist and picking me up.

“Carmina, don’t push me.”

This time the warning is tumbling around me along with the memory of a previous encounter with the same words.

“No Liam. You can’t—”

“You still don’t get it, Carmina, do you? **I CAN!**” This time, the force from the link was not a request. Liam barges into my mind like a bulldozer, the power of his energy creating a vibration through my nervous system; I start trembling violently.

Liam jerks my body against his naked chest and the cold pushes against my body. One arm snakes around my waist and his free arm moves up my back and into my hair. I feel the firm twist of my hair into his fist and him pulling my head back forcefully.

“**I can** Carmina.” He says, dipping his head and sinking his teeth into my exposed neck. I feel the sharp cold scrape; I feel the sucking motion of his mouth and tongue against my skin.

Convinced I am in a dream, I start screaming, and screaming. My head swims with panic, anxiety, fear. Liam lifts his head away from me and I feel myself flying onto the bed to be left alone in the room. My hand moves to my neck and upon not finding blood, relief washes over me.

Declarations

Liam feels the emotions pushing up into his chest. Carmina has a way to get into his head and what may be considered his soul without trying. Every control mechanism he has ever formed *has* to stay in place today. The animal rises inside him with vengeance and Liam is fighting a battle within a battle. He listens for movement and monitoring Carmina's heartbeat while standing in front of the window motionless. He hates what he's done to her. He hates that she is hurting physically and emotionally. He wants to make it better but he dare not. The woman he loves will not understand unless she is made to. She is in danger. Not only from him, but from whatever is heading their way. He loves her with every aspect of what he is, and that is dangerous too. Only when he is sure of having contained his beast *and* his nature does he walk back into the bedroom.

"Carmina."

I hear him approach and curl into myself as much as I can. I feel him move onto the bed.

"Look at me, please."

I am frozen; I can't obey the request because I am petrified of what I will see in the face of the man I love.

"Mina..." He speaks again and I feel myself being uncurled by big, strong and gentle hands. He moves the hair from my face and the gold in his eyes is sparking and reaching out to me. I want to speak, but even thinking seems to be an obstacle I cannot get over right now. Liam lifts me from the bed and cradles me against his chest.

"I love you."

I know it is true. I feel it pouring into me from his mind. I hear it in his voice, soft and soothing. But I don't trust it.

When lifting my head to him, Liam's head moves closer.

"I need you." He speaks and my body betrays me. I close my eyes and let him know how much I love him. His lips find mine and the more I defrost against him, the stronger the helix of fire and ice bind us together. Liam lifts me up against him and my body moves in order to wrap my legs around him.

Liam's emotions are spiraling along with hers. When Carmina's arms move around his neck to pull herself into him, he can feel the passion and acceptance thundering between them. The strength and power she displays closely matches his own and Liam feels his control slipping. He did not expect the intensity in her response. The heat from her face as she buries her head into his shoulder biting down hard on his neck met with the ice in his body. He hears her moaning as she pull her mouth back into a warm pulling kiss and Liam responds with a sensual, powerful growl. His hand finds her hair again and he pulls her head away just far enough to search her face. The hazel-green eyes that meet his somewhat choke him. The bright gold tint glows past his own and it is the gaze of the Wolf soaking up her features.

I feel the change in me. My own desire rises like an animal and I have no control over my body. The guttural sigh escaping Liam's throat causes a frenzy inside me. My heart thunders in my ears and I can hear my blood rushing through me. I don't know where the sound comes from that breaks over my lips but I feel it breaking free from my stomach, pushing into my chest and escaping into the air around us. I see the Wolf, I feel the nature and there is nothing I want more than to belong to this man.

I feel Liam's arm tighten around me, wrapping all the way around below my waist. The other snakes across, his palm flat against my shoulder blade, pulling me into his chest. The embrace is a gentle power, slow and intense and the energy flowing between us twisting and turning, spiraling around us. Liam's figure cradles around me and I close my eyes. I feel his lips pushing down, the pressure and urgency bruising against mine. Like before, I taste my own blood and push into him harder, bathing in his response to the taste. The first kiss we shared tumbles down in memory around us, sharing the intensity that existed since then.

"I'm dangerous for you," I hear him inside my consciousness.

"And I am dangerous for you." I answer without hesitation.

Liam's arms tighten and the air blasts from my lungs. I notice his hands closing into a fist, grabbing the material underneath them, tearing into the fabric. The kiss slows down, becoming more sensual, enticing. Slowly, Liam lifts his head away from me, licking his lips turning his face up to the ceiling. When I move, he twitches into a powerful hold keeping me still but, otherwise, he does not move.

After a time, I feel the tension ease, his arms relaxing around me, his fists opening and cold palms pressing on my naked skin. I lean against him and rest my head against his chest, forcing my body to relax. We sit like this for the longest time before Liam speaks, in a throaty voice: "I love you Carmina. Don't leave again, don't choose someone else and please... don't close the door between us."

It was some time before I found enough control over my emotions and trusted my own voice to speak.

"I am not afraid to suffer life anymore,"

Liam's body stiffens again; he leans back and lifts my face to his. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes."

My body willingly moves along when Liam gradually lays me down, sliding his body over mine, putting his ear to my heart, his hand searching and finding my wrist, clasping it firmly.

Hearing Carmina's confession cause another frantic grab at control from Liam. She has that effect on him. *Just* when he thinks it's safe, she bowls him over and tests his resolve once more. Carmina is not afraid of suffering life anymore, and Liam knows what she means by that. The implication of what she tells him beats hard against any logical and sensible thought process. He wants to hold her to it, he want to ensure she will not change her mind again. Carmina is not afraid of suffering life anymore – the thought churns in his mind - and right now he's fighting the selfish desire to follow through and claim her soul. He feels the heat seeping into his palm where he holds her wrist, feeling her reach for him through the link. He hears her heartbeat under his cheek and he knows she is telling the truth. His Rockflower *now* accepts him.

"Let's try it your way first." He croaks.

"Let's." Carmina responds, and the silence grows into a dream, with warm, passionate colors flowing between them.

I wake up during the night to feel Liam curled around me, his body cold and still, but I know he is awake. He is always awake. His finger strokes over the back of my hand.

"Liam?"

"Hmmm?"

"Will you stay with me? Here?" I am anxious to hear his answer.

Liam pushes up onto his elbow, pulling my hair away from my face again.

"Our... den?" He asks.

"Uh huh."

The gentle kiss and the happy curl around his lips gives me the answer.

"But we'll have to make changes."

"Of course... Starting with a new door?" I tease lightly.

Liam strokes over the bruises on my shoulder. "I'm sorry about that."

"I'm not. You are right. I didn't understand the difference. I now know you won't hurt me, but you can."

Liam kisses me softly and then gets out of bed. "Come."

I stare at him but in conclusion make my way onto my feet, following his long strides. He leads me out to the small back garden of the cottage and into the snow. He inhales excitedly and lets out the most beautiful, raw, passionate howl I have ever heard. My body trembles under the command and, watching this beautiful man, walls break down that should never have been there. His power and raw emotion swirls inside my mind and wraps me up against the cold. I have no choice to obey the call from nature, to answer the Wolf and the man. The sound breaking from my lips was not a howl, nor was it a screech or a growl. It was an unearthly sound carrying with it my answer to the Wolf who asks the question. Accepting the tie on three plains: the man, the beast and the vampire. I seal an oath with Liam in the same way he has just sealed one with me.

Liam snatches me to him especially roughly and his kiss is uninhabited and icy, igniting the fire that will never burn without the ice again.

Paired

When I hear the gong announcing breakfast and the horn following shortly after, I am slow to move. Liam, however, is already moving and clearing out the broken door pieces. I stretch and minutes later find a big man dragging me out of bed with a mischievous curl at the corners of his mouth.

“We’re going to be late.”

“Won’t be a first....” I stretch lazily, eyeing over his half naked body. My heart starts rambling along and a cheeky grin stretches itself over my face.

Liam moans and bites the knuckle on his fist.

“Temptress,” he accuses me past his hand and I giggle.

“I’m going to have to borrow a shirt. Get dressed my Rockflower, I’ll be a moment yet.”

Today I am choosing conscientiously: black it is. I feel the need to be vivacious. I brush my hair out, pulling a face and giving up on the battle when it pokes in every which direction. I find my boots and strap them on as fast as my hands will work - which is pretty quickly when I don’t have to worry about being more human than fast. When Liam walks in, he is wearing a fresh white, long sleeve shirt. I love the look of approval he casts casually my way.

“HmMMM, maybe we should skip breakfast.” I wrap my arms around his neck, pull myself up onto my toes and kiss him fast on the lips.

“Argh! Mina... let’s go. Come, before we need more than a new door.” Liam takes my hand in his and we walk like two unruly teenagers towards the courtyard.

The terrible trio is waiting on us and I cringe at the sight of Roland’s jaw. It is sporting a dark red and purple bruise.

“Mina! You’re an animal!” John teases and Jarrod’s constant nodding makes me fear that his head will come off. “We alllll heard it!”

The blush spreads, making my face match the color of my hair.

“Come on guys, enough.” Liam comes to my rescue.

When Roland steps forward, there is a smirk of utmost accomplishment on his face.

“I will not ask forgiveness,” he tells Liam, holding his hand out to shake on it.

“I would not have given it.” Liam answers him, taking his hand with a grin.

The trio breaks out cheering, howling in celebration and by the time we enter the hall, every person inside is turning to see us. Liam puts his arm around my shoulders protectively and whispers “Hang in there” in my ear.

Lilly double-hand flags me and I take a deep breath, turning down the Lilly control volume in my head. She is squealing and bouncing and I worry about the baby falling out.

“You have a beautiful call, Carmina” Lilly sparkles at me, “I am so happy for you both. Who

knows, the next clan baby—”

“Lilly!” I cut her short “We’re not—We’ve not... Ugh. It’s not like that!” I end up stuttering my way through the sentence and feel Liam chuckling next to me.

“Yet,” Lilly chirps, just in time Jarrod to hear.

“Yet what?”

“Nothing?!” I shout and give my sister the dagger look. She puts her finger to her mouth and giggles.

“You’re such a prude, Mina.”

I ignore my sister and reach for the livers in front of her, just to have my hand slapped away.

“Get your own.”

I look up with a happy smile to see Lady E and Uncle Will walking through the doors. It is no surprise that they would be here. I guess they have accepted Momma’s request for help and good news travels fast.

While we’re eating, John and Roland take turns to inform us of a conversation they had. When John mentioned that Liam is a ‘slow mover’, Roland decided that he is the man to speed things along. Of course, John was obliged to warn Roland to take it easy on me because I am still recovering from my last adventure. The simplest warning Roland received about Liam was not to push him too far. John tells us that he thought of doing the same thing, but would have to face his mother and that was a prospect he did not fancy. Roland was not too bothered because he trusted that I knew him well enough not to be too taken in by his behavior. Of course, Roland is also a Romany gypsy and expected far more than the one punch that landed.

Lady E takes Roland’s face between thumb and forefinger, turning it side to side having a look.

“Liam’s handy work?”

“Yes Missus. For no good reason, may I add!” Roland whines and Lady E lifts an eyebrow.

“Did I not teach you to use your words, my boy?”

“I used it afterwards.” Liam answers his mother. Lady E kisses Roland on the cheek and, with a happy look, thanks him.

“Was worth it Missus, if just for the honor of your gratitude.” This time Roland means it, as he proudly juts his chest out.

Lady E rests her eyes on us and there is no denying that she is pleased. Uncle Will winks at me, pulling out a chair for his beautiful wife. Every time I see Lady E, I feel in awe of her beauty and how well she fits with her silver haired husband. I didn’t realize I was staring again until Momma tells me to close my mouth.

The rest of breakfast proceeds as normal but I still had one unanswered question. I find John’s energy and connect almost instantly.

“*Where were you last night? I called and...*”

“*Liam told us to stay away and keep the clan away from the cottage too. Are you alright? You have*

a rather big bruise on your neck.”

I put my hand up and cover the bruise. I know where it is as it serves as a great reminder of the ability of the gentle giant sitting next to me.

“I’m fine. What if Liam didn’t stop last night John? What if...”

“Carmina, it was the exact point Liam was trying to make. You’re always at risk. You forget too quickly what we are and that not everyone is like us.”

“Thank you, John.” I speak sincerely and John’s gentle mood rubs up against mine.

“Don’t thank me, thank my brother. He’s not the only one who loves you, Vixen, and Jackie and Teresa aren’t the only ones who hate you either.”

John fades from the conversation and when I look over at him, he salutes me with two fingers to the head. I salute him back under the raised eyebrows of the Elders at the table.

I hear Liam’s words drift towards me *“I’m dangerous for you.”*

I look at him with a smile to which he answers by stealing a kiss. After breakfast, we find the cottage to fix the door and shop together for a less *girly* setting. Once done, I spend a lot of time thinking. Lilly and Jarrod will leave tomorrow. Momma will join them and the caravan will escort them.

Things are about to change again but at least for now, I have *my* Liam. I re-live the moment when I thought Liam had lost control and was going to make me immortal, or kill me. Now, for the first time, do I understand how dangerous this man is. I relied on my speed and senses and the strength of late to see me through – but the Wolf inside the man is a combination I never reckoned with. I love him so much.

“I love you too, my Rockflower.” Liam answers, kissing the back of my head. I watch the snow fall, cuddled up in his arms on the bay window, the fire making me lazy and dreamy.

Momma sends a message to meet at Jarrod and Lilly’s. We help them pack and sort through their belongings. The time passes quickly and the work gets done. Before we leave to get ready for Dinner, Lilly holds a gift out to me. Upon I opening it, the tears flow freely. It is a picture of the Moretti family and ours at her wedding.

*“Your first new *together* item.”*

There is a mixed energy in the dining hall. It is the last night of a full house, and a tinge of sadness stains the celebration. Still, there is plenty of laughter, in particular when Roland decides to teach Liam how to make my ‘Leg Fort.’ Sitting in the newly found castle – the fort was upgraded because of Liam’s size, I was told – I thank Roland for his meddling but warn him not to do it again. He smiles and kisses my hand, then puts it against my chest.

“For as long as you have a heartbeat, Carmina.... Forever.”

I feel the strong protective flow following his words and I know and fear that Roland will give his life for mine.

“Just look after yourself.” I ask him and he wipes over his nose with his thumb.

“Hey, don’t you worry, pretty lady. I lived to tell the tale after being slugged by an Ancient. I think I’m going to be alright”

Before dinner comes to an end, Sullen, Bianca and Raina go around with baskets, handing each person in the clan a gift. I clap and do my best Lilly impression by squealing. Liam leans over, frowning at me, not understanding my excitement. When everyone receives and opens their parcel, the pink puffer balls make their appearance. The Moretti family stares. It is clear that Momma explained to the Rulers but I prefer not to spoil it for the two younger Morettis.

Sullen and Briann thank us for our hospitality and toast to our clan’s health. Then, under a fast, happy tune, Sullen holds her hand up and counts down from five. When she makes a fist, we all bite into the firm balls in our hands and puffs of sherbet and laughter fills the air around us. Briann claps happily at the tradition while John and Liam and take their turn under loud cheers. White powdery faces and bloody red lips are all at the order of the day. The gentle nudge from Roland against my leg reveals a gift box.

With sticky fingers, I open the gift and feel the tears streaking down my face. Inside the small box is a carved, bleached chicken bone with the words ‘forever’ edged into it.

“Oh you silly, silly boy! Thank you so much.”

Roland gets up, taps his chest twice, kisses his fingers and waves to me before he leaves through the door. I know I won’t see him tomorrow. He will scout ahead. Liam’s arms close around me.

“He’s a good man, he’ll be back.”

To make it easier on our clan, we have always said our hard or sad goodbyes the night before. That way the departure is not delayed and the trip starts measurably less emotional. I head over to check with Momma if she has all she needs, assuring her I’ll stay in touch and then kiss her goodbye.

“Carmina, don’t tell Darious where we’ve gone yet. I think it is better that way. We’ve kept it under wraps with the clan too.”

I frown at my mother’s cloak and dagger approach but don’t question her.

“Sure thing Momma.”

Lilly and Jarrod join us and I hug them.

“I love you both,” I say, slipping a gift into Lilly’s hand, “Only when you get there. Not before.” I then do the same with Jarrod.

Liam and I head outside and towards the gypsy camp. I hug each of the family and wish them health and prosperity. Raina comes closer and hugs me tight, too, as I slip a small token into her hand: a small wooden disk with a wolf and volcano on it. On the back it reads: “*To Raina, with love – Ancient Liam and Human Carmina.*”

Liam smiles at the girl, whispering to her, “If any of those fools question your purity, you send them my way.”

We hand Bianca the same coin with her name on it, inscribed just like Raina’s.

“And if you find a boy that is a slow mover, you bring him to visit.” Liam grins at her.

The blushing girls rush off to show their gifts to their parents; they wave us off as we leave.

When we get home, Liam takes me to the mirror first and I gasp at the look. My face has two red streaks where the tears have mixed with the sherbet down to my chin. After I shower and clean up, I head to bed. It was a lovely, long, emotional day. I drift off into sleep almost instantly.

Changes

Silence has descended on our courtyard. With the gypsies gone and Momma, Jarrod and Lilly in Russia, I am utterly appreciative to have Lady E around. Uncle Will has taken on the hunting expeditions from Jarrod and life continues as normal. Time has sped along again; it is almost a month since they left.

Lilly's baby boy is born healthy and busy. We speak just about every day as well as e-mail or texting. Lilly tells me about the developments between Momma and Dimitri, which is a little crazy to imagine. I can't envision Momma with someone like the flamboyant Dimitri but Lilly assures me they are a formidable pair together and she's convinced there's a history that we're not aware of. Jarrod has taken up his place amongst the local group of hunters and scouts. Lilly says he is in his element with so many new things to learn. She also tells me about the gift John had left Dimitri for his Museum. I found the description disturbing but she assures me it is very beautiful.

When I ask about Darya and Alina, I was extremely happy to know that they are the appointed nannies to both Lilly and Baby J.J. – named after John and Jarrod. The orphanage is thriving and Lilly is amply proud about the success rate of the kids who are not adopted but manage to work through education. She speaks of 'her' kids and I know Lilly means it when she says it.

Waking up with Liam by my side has been more wonderful than anything I've known. He has taken to shifting into wolf shape at night. While the fireplace is constantly crackling, Liam's cold body leaves me shivering at times. I tried to hide it from him but that did not last long. Liam doesn't sleep like I do, and therefore he is aware of any change occurring in my body. Being so close to him and having to use so much willpower to maintain a safe relationship is difficult on both of us. Liam wants to kill me and I want to let him; not exactly a healthy combination!

"Carmina," Alissa, from the Vulture House, speaks fast when I allow access to let her into my mind. *"Your uncle is an hour away. Darius? He's not alone."*

"Thank you Alissa, who's with him?"

"Jackie," Dian answers with a slight irate tone.

I push the ledgers aside and drop my hands into my palms. It is not truly a surprise to know that Darius is on his way. Even without Mother's projected speculations, it would be a natural development to have my uncle check in on the clan and myself. I did not expect to hear that he has Jackie with him. What does that woman want?!

"She's still an Ancient, but she is interfering with my house," I hear Uncle Will's growl. *"We're*

heading to Edward and Joshlyn's to check on reports."

Before I could ask what sort of reports, the two younger Vultures close their link with me. It is obviously on a need-to-know basis.

"How are you doing with the emotional front, Carmina?" Maria asks.

I learned recently about the inability to disconnect expressively from the Ancients. While it is true that I can close links, and even true that I can learn to fade the emotions, it is also true that there is no way to remove myself from their consciousness completely. They can feel my link like a nerve burning through their awareness.

Liam reminded me of the time when I first met the Lynx house, and how I faded to the background, making myself almost invisible to Jackie. He suggests that I try to do the same with my emotions. Jackie cannot be disconnected from the fibers; meaning she will always have a margin of information about myself and everyone in the Ancient Houses. I have to learn to disguise my thoughts and moods from her. To do so, I have to constantly be aware of her connection and steer away from it as far as I can.

"I don't know, to be honest. But I will not shy away from Jackie. What passed between us is in the past. I will not be the escape code for her to get at the clan or the Moretti House."

"We'll be around Carmina, we're not far off." Joseph assures me and I thank him.

"Where is Lady E?"

I hear her quick steps coming up the stairs from outside and laugh. Of course, she would not be too far away. Lady E has stepped into Momma's shoes with vigor and sometimes I'm convinced she can be in two places at once.

"Right here, sweetheart."

I feel the links fading one at a time. The comforting energy privately stays connected between Liam and I. We have not broken our network since the night he broke through the door, physically and mentally speaking.

I start tidying up the books and ledgers, keeping the design papers and coal pencils out.

"Carmina, you don't have to let Jackie on the grounds. You are speaking for your Mother."

"And speaking for my mother, she will be allowed. I cannot give them any form of upper hand by causing dissention in the Houses. How much does she know about... my skills?"

"Not much, she knows you can link. You are fast and your senses are developed. Everything after that has been kept from her, for obvious reasons."

"Then I hold some advantage. The clan is safe too; they don't know about the other thing either."

With that, Lady E opts to be at a distance and ducks out into the back. I don't move from the kitchen table, but focus on drawing the design in front of me. I hear the pair scuttling up the stairs and enter without knocking. Darius is Momma's brother and, just like John doesn't knock to raid my fridge, Uncle Darius comes and goes in Momma's home as it pleases him. I don't realize how tense my body is while waiting for him to speak. I know he is there but I focus on the paper in front of me, waiting.

“Good evening, Carmina!”

When Uncle Darius speaks, I jump and knock my cup over with a yelp. I muse how much it is like watching a scary movie. You know it is coming but still you jump when it does.

“Eep! Oh! Uncle Darius, I’m so sorry!” My hands tremble as I mop up the mess I just made, trying to rescue the design.

“Oh, I am sorry dear girl, did I startle you?” He is laughing openly at me, taking the towel and wiping down the table.

“You did! It’s so good to see you!” I fling my arms around him. It *is* good to see him. I know he’s never been fond of being around me, but he has never been cruel to me. In his own way, he tries being civil and I always accept his efforts without question.

“Come in, Jackie,” I call to the woman I know is waiting in the hallway. Uncle Darius looks surprised.

“*She’s so human. Clumsy. Ugh.*” I hear Jackie’s mind and withdraw firmly into a corner. I have never used this ability on the clan. Hearing someone’s thought is a choice that I don’t make. I feel it is rude and intrusive. I ask what I want to know, and will go about finding out things in the natural manner that is my human nature. However, with Jackie and Uncle Darius, I am not comfortable making the same choice. I shamelessly listen, and know that Liam is listening with me. There is also the added skill of not reacting or responding to what is said. This is as a result of living with three voices in my head for twenty-three years. I became so good at it that the Ancients questioned my knowledge of them. I apply the same skill now.

I offer the pair a drink, inviting them to sit down.

“How are you, Uncle Darius?”

“Oh, same day, different weather. So, I’m good. How is your mother? Where’s she off to, then? She never said where she was going?” He asks.

“Oh, Momma is with Lilly and Jarrod sorting things for little J.J. He is the cutest thing! Have you seen the pictures?” I coo.

Uncle Darius chuckles and nods, “He does look like his father.”

“I don’t know where they are at the moment.” I continue, “Lilly got it in her head that the best will do for J.J, so they are going from place to place. They spoke about shopping in Italy and New York.” This is also not strictly the truth, but not a lie. Lilly is online shopping for the baby in both the places mentioned.

“Your mother spoils you girls so much,” Uncle Darius comments, curtly.

“She does. I realized that while I was on my own *holiday*.” I say, referring to my stay with Dimitri.

“How are you, Jackie?”

“*Wishing you were dead.*” I hear the snide remark and ignore it neatly.

Outwardly, Jackie shrugs at me but doesn’t speak.

“I hope you will both stay. It is so good to have family around. I have no clue about all this clan stuff and a little help won’t go wasted. Lady E has been a marvel. I’ve been terrible, she’s been taking care of most the day-to-day stuff.” I invite Uncle Darius.

“*Lazy too. What does the mutt see in her?*”

The eager look on Uncle Darius' face when he replies is riddled with greed. "Of course, child. You've never taken an interest, have you?"

"Nope. I prefer my pretty pictures," and hold up the soaked design to him. Tentatively, I check the air in the room. The energy circling up from Uncle Darius and Jackie is one of pacified contentment. It is obvious; whatever their reason for being here is, it is going better than they both expected.

Dinner comes around and, as is the custom, Uncle Darius takes up Momma's seat in her absence. Uncle Will and Lady E have not joined us, nor have I seen John today. Liam's hand squeezes mine when I brace myself to enter the hall. Jackie is sitting in my place and I close my eyes for a brief moment.

He kisses my cheek and whispers: "Armor yourself, my lovely, and smile."

I feel anything but smiley. Squaring my shoulders, I head towards the table; halfway, I stop to look at the opening doors behind me. John bursts through with Roland shortly on his heels.

The thought passes through my mind: The Cavalry has arrived.

"Mina!" John shouts jovially, "I turn my back for one day and you shirk your responsibilities already! What will your Mother say?"

I roll my eyes at John but thank him in private.

"She will say I am a good daughter for respecting our clan customs – and that I'm lazy, and maybe that poor Uncle Darius has a soft spot for me after all."

"Poor Uncle Darius. If only you knew, little brat."

Jackie glares at John, who unceremoniously lifts her from her seat and points me to it, "Ancients have no business sitting in clan positions. We're not peasants. No offense, Darius."

This causes me to smile at John. It is not often that his passive aggressive nature shows. When it does, there is no mistaking it for kindness. John the Ancient is not the same person as John the clan-friend.

There are chairs on the right side of the table that will always be open, unless there are Ancients or visiting Elders in the house. John has always taken up place there, while Liam would take a seat next to Lilly and I on the left. Uncle Darius' skin pales noticeably and I watch as the vein in his head become more pronounced, but John is an Ancient and that counts for something.

"None taken," he responds, but it is clear he is showing great restraint.

Liam sits down next to me and, before the words come from Jackie's already open mouth, Roland chirps in behind John.

"Except your brother, John. He's dating a peasant, totally under the influence of a bewitchment!"

It does not take long for Jackie to get up and leave. Uncle Darius stares after her with a passive disinterest. I realize that my Uncle is where he wants to be: at the head of Momma's clan. I search Roland's face but there is no indication why **he** is here. He looks relaxed and comfortable, like this is an everyday event for him. Which I know it's not. Why is he here? What is going on?

Dinner drags by painfully slow. I was relieved to be leaving after settling both Momma's guests in

her home. It is custom and there is no other way. Thankfully, Uncle Will and Lady E stay there too. This makes me feel a little more at ease. When we get to the cottage after dinner, I find a note from Lady E.

*“Dearest Mina,
Moved all the important documents to our home.
Keep your guard up around Jackie – I don’t like that thing.
We’ll be back but don’t worry if you don’t see us openly,
We’ve chosen to work behind the scenes.
Don’t bother yourself with the day-to-day stuff,
I have it in hand and the hunts will continue under Will’s direction.*

*Sorry for not speaking in person, but some things work better when they are less obvious.
Roland is here on business, so don’t stress over his appearance either.
We’ve got this.
Remember: your Mother’s clan, your decisions.
EM.”*

Being... In Spring

Liam laughs at his mother’s devious streak and comments about the person to outsmart her having to be born or created, still. Sitting in the bay window with Liam, I tell him about my fear of us being driven apart again. I confess that I am afraid Jackie may have more tricks up her sleeve and will try again to provoke me in some way.

“I don’t think I can stand it. Please, Liam, tell me there is nothing else that woman can use against us. I can’t always control what happens in my brain.”

“I *do* have something to tell you, Carmina. Once I do, from my side, there is nothing Jackie can spring on you. I... am sorry about this, and for it coming out this way. I’d have preferred it never come to light at all. But if Jackie is devious enough, she will still try to use it. She knows you weren’t told before.”

I turn to Liam, who looks nervous, “Liam, you make it sound so serious.”

“It is. Carmina, something happened when we first met. Something I didn’t expect and by all accounts should not even be possible.” He wipes over his face and I watch as the resolve sets into his posture, making him rigid.

Eventually, Liam gets up from the bay window and goes on one knee in front of me. He takes my wrist in his hand and kisses the pulse. He opens his mouth and gorgeously rakes his teeth over the gentle throb close to the surface.

The fire ignites immediately in me, thundering through my blood like an angry ocean. My breathing

becomes rushed but there are no words forming, just a raw charge escaping in the form of an indulgent moan. When Liam gradually lifts his head to me, I see the gold in his eyes turn to burning liquid. The essence we share flowing from him in a cold fever. His voice is measured and edgy when he speaks again.

“I soul-bonded with you, Carmina.”

“What does that mean?” My mouth is dry and I’m licking over my lips. My view is filled with his mesmerizing eyes.

“It means,” Liam kisses my palm, “that there can never be anyone else for me in this world. If you die, my love for you will live on. If you leave, my love for you will stay. I cannot stop it, or make it go away, nor can you. I marked – no, branded – your soul with my desire for you, Carmina, and no matter where it goes... I will forever be searching for it, wanting it, and needing it.”

“What does it mean for me?”

“I don’t know Carmina. Nobody knows. You and I... There’s no way to tell. A bond like ours happens amongst Ancients – only after they are made immortal, and only in pure blood.”

“I don’t have pure blood Liam, I am sick, and human.”

Liam closes his eyes and puts my hand to his face. “And that is all the more reason why nobody has a clue about you, or us.”

“And Jackie knows ...”

“All the Ancients know. Initially, that was the singular reason my folks requested permission to... teach you about us. I didn’t do so well without you and, at first, didn’t tell them.”

“Liam... I don’t think you did this by yourself.”

He frowns at me.

“Well. I didn’t remember you for a time after. And other than the ache on my wrist, I didn’t feel like there was anything wrong. You didn’t do this to ME.”

“Carmina...”

“No, hear me out, Liam. I don’t love you because of this soul-bond thing. I loved you from that first moment I met you. Before you even touched me. I didn’t run away. I didn’t scream. I wanted to know you; my entire being wanted to be with you. I was given a chance to test that with our second meeting. I didn’t recollect, I wasn’t drawn to you because of this.” I move my arm.

“I fell in love with you all over again, without your help or interference, Liam. With or without this... hold... you think you have on me, I’ll love you. What if... what if, Liam, it wasn’t you? What if it was me? How can you be sure?”

“I can’t but—”

“You can’t, nor can I.” I cut him off. “Don’t be so hasty to claim my soul Liam, for all you know, I claimed yours. I have been doing a lot of ‘impossible’ things as of late, so don’t tell me it is impossible either.”

I kiss Liam thoroughly, feeling him respond to the heat. I don’t want to talk anymore. I just want to be with him. I have felt a power inside me all day and, right now, it is not drawing back.

Liam feels light, triumphant and elevated from a dark pit. Carmina's words are absurd, but they are also a source of light for him. She is right. Nothing about their relationship is straightforward. Nothing about their selection is 'natural' to their natures. She's not angry, or upset, or shocked. Liam marvels at her control and the kiss threatens to disband his logic and senses again.

"Mina..." he whispers against her lips.

"Not listening." She objects to him and Liam feels the usually dependable instruments, designed to regulate his actions, fade.

"Mina... please..."

She does not answer him with words. Carmina kneels in front of him, her body moving slow and with purpose. Her hands on his bent knee, she leans close to his skin and inhales his scent. She's his huntress again and a frenzy creeps through his bulk. Carmina bites into the inside of her lip sharply, filling her mouth with as much blood as she can coax from the cut and kisses Liam again. He can't take what she's doing to him and the passion beats down any measure he tries to implement against her assault. She tastes... so... good. His hands grab onto her hips and yanks her into him.

"You're dangerous for me," She tells him with heated words, sending shards stabbing at his resolve.

"And you, Carmina, are dangerous for me." The warning is sharper than he intended.

Liam closes his eyes, groans and then pushes Carmina away from him firmly. He ejects himself from her embrace to the opposite side of the room, his back against the wall and both his hands resting on the nape of his neck. The wild look in Carmina's eyes lures him towards her, the seductive sway in her body seducing the creature he carries inside. The gold is back in her hazel-green eyes again, and it is welcoming him nearer; fearless and sensual.

Liam takes a step towards her just to stop in his tracks when the kitchen door opens and John shouts from inside.

"Break it up, we're hungry."

Roland's unmistakable laugh follows John's words.

Liam speaks to his brother: "*Carmina... needs a little more time.*"

Carmina's head lifts towards the kitchen and Liam fears the worst for a moment. His body tenses as he watches the huntress turning her gaze back on him.

John sticks his head around the corner. The grin on his face twisted.

"*Bro, what did you do to her?!*"

"*More like, what she is doing to me?*"

"*Yeah. I smell blood? You didn't...?*"

"*She did. She's ... electric. Thanks for coming; I might have lost this round. She's precarious*"

John laughs and withdraws into the kitchen. "*Is this a bad time to say 'I told you so'?*"

I hear John and Roland and I want to tell them to leave. I want Liam to give up control. I want him give in to the creature he is meant to be. My hand moves to wipe over the inside of my mouth. The bleeding has stopped. Why do I wish it hadn't? I keep my eyes on Liam, watching the wolf behind his eyes retreat and the burning golden orbs return. The coil inside my belly unwinds and my

muscles relax. Slowly, my body returns to itself and I get up. I shuffle towards Liam, who's holding his arms out to me. What is happening with me?

"Liam... I hate you."

I mean what I say but the meaning is understood between us. I hate that Liam has so much control and won't give in to his desires. It is a hate that burns my craving for him brighter. It is a hate laced and lined and dunked in love.

"I hate you too, *especially* right now..." Liam laughs.

He takes my hand and drags me into the kitchen after him. John opens his mouth but Liam points a finger in his direction, which shuts him up.

Roland dances closer to me, giving me a hug to say hello and breathing the air around me.

"You two are remarkably clueless!" He says, turning back to Liam and John.

Liam's eyes widen and John erupts with laughter. I know Roland speaks to them privately in this way, by choice and permission. I wasn't invited to the inside joke.

I lean against Liam who pulls me in closer to him with one arm, holding a dish with cold meats and cheese to me with the other.

I feel the warm emotions bubbling from him and try to eat away the new surge of yearning being shaped.

"Fill me in?" I ask.

Roland puts his hands up. "Not me, I may get slugged again."

"Nature is taking her course, my Rockflower. You are in... spring." Liam answers with a peculiar, concerned look on his face. I sense the context before the meaning registers in its entirety.

John near falls over and Roland is folded double, holding onto the table.

"Oh! Oooh!" I catch on and blush, turning my face into Liam's chest.

"Yeah... we will need... supervision," Liam is chuckling and I can't help but see the humor in it all as well.

There are no guidelines to our relationship, no psychology or physiology to explain it. We will have challenges to face which, bond or no bond, couldn't have been foretold. And this is one of many. I thank John and Roland for their help and understanding when they offer to hang out a bit closer to home for a few days. Of course, they don't do this without lamenting about the danger they put themselves in for our pleasures.

Liam changes into his wolf and we go to bed. Tomorrow is going to be yet another tough day, having to come to terms with Jackie in the backyard, as it were.

Getting up is a slow process. I feel like a teenager wishing for a holiday. I want to tell my mom that I don't want to while pulling the blanket back over my head.

"Your mother isn't here. Morning, sleepy head."

I hear Liam's mocking words and growl under my breath. When I turn my head, he's already changed back to his gorgeous bulk. I take a moment to drink in the view and, when Liam turns to face me, my heart refuses to settle down again.

"Hmmm? Why do I get the feeling you're sizing me for a spit roast?"

I don't know where the energy comes from, or when the thought took hold of me, but before Liam could turn away again, I'm moving fast at him. My body rushes into his and he takes a step back, bumping against the dressing table sending every item on it into a rattle. His arms spontaneously fold around me and the opacity in his eyes burn down on me.

"Carmina...."

I refuse to let him drive me away. Talking is highly overrated. When pulling his head to me does not work, I hoist myself up using his body. My lips finds his and I close my eyes in delight. Liam's response was instant. His kiss a frozen promise on my burning lips. A minute later, "*Oh the gods give me strength...*" I hear him breaking through the mist in my head before I feel him marching us both off. Too late do I realize we're in the bathroom. Liam walks us both into the shower and opens the cold water.

"Liam!" I scream as the cold hits my body and soaks straight through the clothing. He lifts his face into the water, still holding me to him. When the fire in me is well and truly put out and my teeth start clattering, Liam opens the warmer water and leaves me standing there. At the door, he turns to look at me and I feel happy to see he is struggling too. His eyes brush over me with absolute precision, taking in every line.

"ARGH!" he yowls and slams the door behind him. My eyes follow the wet line from the shower to the door and I can't stop giggling.

I manage to pull myself together and get out of the shower just in time to hear the breakfast gong. Liam is changed and dry when I find him standing on the front porch. He turns and the big, knowing smile, a mixture of pride and humor, sends butterflies into my stomach. Liam holds his hand out to me and we play around the snow towards the hall.

After breakfast, Liam joins John and Roland in a run. John has been teasing all morning about spring dances, spring in steps and spring blossoms and Roland backs him up all the way. I am glad that Liam is getting away from me. It is hard to concentrate with him around when what I *want* to do is *not* control myself.

In Momma's kitchen, I bring out the ledgers that need work and dump them on the table. Instead of starting on them, I first pull the project paper out to rid myself of a gift design I want to style. Uncle Darius finds me there, as I hoped he would.

"Busy already?"

"Only with pictures." I wave my hand over the ledgers, "This stuff can wait."

"May I?" He eagerly offers and I find it difficult to hide the smile.

"Will you? Oh please, thank you Uncle Darius!" I jump up to make him a warm drink and load the woodstove. I listen for Jackie, who is suspiciously absent.

"Margarith should work in an office. The kitchen is no place to conduct business."

"If Momma's not happy, ain't nobody happy, Uncle Darius. The month she tried working from the office, she was so grouchy we begged her to work from the kitchen!"

"Are these all the ledgers?" He asks. I'm scanning his thoughts and I know what he is looking for.

“It is what is here.” I answer, truthfully.

“I see. Well, it shouldn’t take long to update them, then.” He pretends not to be bothered but I do know better.

“Uncle Darious, why is Jackie with you?”

“She’s... been advising me about our clan business. Jackie has a good head on her shoulders.”

I don’t need to read his mind to pick up the scheming undertones.

“Well, I’m glad she has you. I feel sorry for her.”

Uncle Darious looks up at me with surprise. “Why?”

“She’s a woman, Uncle Darious, and she’s been hurt. Hardly fair that she is punished for that.” I am sincere in my thoughts and Uncle Darious knows this.

He may not like me much but he knows me pretty well. “She does not feel any pity towards you, my girl.”

“I know.”

I put my head back and concentrate on my design. For all his annoying habits, Uncle Darious is thorough and, as promised, finishes the work before lunch.

I miss my mother a lot, and the stress of playing cat and mouse with the Lynx girl and my Uncle is weighing on me. I try not to let their thoughts shake my calmness, but it is hard sometimes.

Thankfully, Lady E and Uncle Will are my rocks. Liam is a great distraction too. I can’t help but feel the uplifting smile when I think of *Liammmmm*.

I excuse myself from dinner early. Liam is spending time with his family and I seize this opportunity to do some research on the bonding thing.

It turns out that humans have an innate ability to ‘soul bond’ with entities. These entities can advise them, speak to them telepathically and, while not always, can at times take on physical appearances. It is advised that a ‘soul bond’ is not confused with soul mates, but can be likened to twin souls. It is not the answer I was hoping to find, so I turn to the books on my shelf.

It is in the gipsy’s book that I find an answer. It describes in detail a ritual that would bond two people together on a soul level. It speaks of this rite solely performed by the Ancients due to their shifting ability. The Vampire has no soul to bond it to the other, and therefore the bonding is between the animal souls. While I completely disagree on the statement about the vampire soul, I do not dismiss the information outright. It cautions against trying such a rite amongst humans or half-breeds, as it entails a deep connection that cannot be severed easily, if at all. The fears among the travelers are in the return of the dead, who would then raise armies of corpses to avenge the party responsible for separating the bonded.

The book also shows that the bond between two is deemed sacred and, therefore, the Ancient Houses are the protectors of the law prohibiting interference of any kind. The penalty of said interference is death – this includes the members of the Ancient houses, too.

I put the book down in my lap and inspect my wrist. It is throbbing slightly and I close my eyes, enjoying the feeling. Since Liam has told me about the bond thing, I have taken comfort in the pain. It is a tender reminder that I am loved – by someone dangerous. When I pick up the book and read the rite, I decide that I want to do this. I want to make our bond an official understanding between the two of us. I want it to be an agreement, not an accidental love-curse. I will have to speak to Roland as there are some words I don't understand the meaning of that he will have to explain it to me. I wish Lilly was here; she's good with this stuff and would have had it sorted in a few minutes.

When Liam walks through the door, I practically mew at him and bounce over. He looks happy to see me too and twirls me around the room.

"I missed you."

"I missed you too, my Rockflower..." Liam picks me up over his shoulder and marches me into the bedroom. His hands rest on the doorknob as if deciding what to do. He leaves the door open before dumping me on the bed.

"Escape route?" I tease him, watching him remove his shirt.

"Safety precaution." He admits, sliding over me, inhaling from my feet all the way to my face where his lips lock to mine with a sigh.

I want to stay like this with him, I want more. I want everything. I love this man so much, I am not afraid to hate him. His fists close in my hair and, rolling me onto his chest, he pulls my head back playfully.

"Behave..." He teases.

I claw my nails into his chest. "Make me."

Liam feels the change and knows Carmina is awake. Her lighthearted mood matches his perfectly. He did make her behave the night before – or, more to the point, he made himself behave. No small task at that. The beautiful image of this girl sprawled out all over the bed, flaming red hair set against the white bedding, brings a longing into his day. He waits before speaking.

"Hello, trouble."

The setting of his mouth is a teasing crumple. Carmina's stretching arm reaches for him and he takes it into a kiss.

"Good morning,"

Liam admires the coaxing spirit in her simple words.

"It's the weekend, what shall we do today?" Before she speaks, he puts a warning finger up, "Other than you testing my every last nerve."

"Oh." She pouts and pulls the blanket over her head. "Then I'm not playing."

Liam laughs at the mischievousness and leaves their bed.

"I see you were reading the gypsy book. Liking it?"

"Hmmm, I don't want to talk about that now. I'll tell you about it later. You should go hunt with your family. Your Mother is probably fed-up with all the human stuff around."

Liam finds his shirt and walks out the door, Carmina short on his heels.

“John and Pops are taking care of that. My mother is a demanding woman, but you don’t wait for her to issue a mandate first!”

“Perhaps we could—” She is stopped mid-sentence by thundering approach to the cottage. When Carmina opens the door, she’s met with a young clan girl looking scared.

“You have to come, Carmina!” She screams hysterically.

It does not take long to see what the problem is. John is standing with Jackie hoisted by the throat, snarling. Roland is holding his side, blood seeping through his fingers. Uncle Darius is standing a short distance away with a conceited look. The clan members, who were on their way to breakfast, are forming up behind John.

“John! Put her down!” I shout while catching my Uncle’s thought.

“Girl’s got steel getting between those two, will serve her right if...”

I turn my mind to John, laying a hand on his arm trying to change his attention.

“John... She’s not worth it. Listen to Mina, put her down.” Liam lets his brother know when he catches up.

Liam’s words seem to spur the fury in Jackie; she hisses and fights even more, clawing deep into John’s arm. I recognize the color in John’s eyes to be the same as Liam’s when he’s angry and it scares me.

I leave John to his brother who is far better equipped to deal with him.

I turn my attention to Roland. “What... happened to you?” I ask, moving his hand away to see the wound. It is not deep but it is clear that a human did not make it. My temper flares up viciously. A deathly calm sweeps in over my nerves and, for a while, I thought my blood was on fire. I get up from where I found Roland.

“I caught a snooping cat and she didn’t like being caught,” He answers, mockingly.

I wipe the blood from my hands against my shirt before tying my hair back. The clan women follow suit and the men put their palms up front.

“Krista, patch that gypsy brat up.” I command the nearest clan girl. “John. **Put** that cat down.”

Uncle Darius steps forward but I put my hand up. Not even *he* would dare interrupt me now. Liam looks at me in shock and the murmurs behind me blend into fading whispers.

John is in a frenzy.

Liam shakes his head while I move closer to his brother. “*Careful Mina, he is fighting his own battle and not hearing us.*”

“Chantico, give me strength today...” I speak, referring to the Aztec Fire goddess of volcanoes.

Holding my breath, I focus all my anger and energy into my next few words. It is not a scream or a shout that breaks from me; it is a deep, commanding reverberation.

“**This ends now!**” As the words rumble from my chest, the volcano rumbles from her depths and

the earth trembles, smoke rising up into a dark shadow against clouded sky.

Silence falls on the courtyard. Even Jackie stops her hissing and spitting and John drops her to the ground looking at me in shock. The trembles ebb away and I glare.

“Those of you who are not witnesses or involved, breakfast won’t eat itself,” I speak again. The courtyard all but clears out; I look around at the few who are still stood and nod to them in acknowledgement.

“Does anyone want to speak?” I ask. A young couple step forward as one and I open my palm to them.

“Mikael and Tansin Grant,” they speak their names.

“We heard the noise by the window and, when I looked,” Mikael explains, “A cat was stood up over our baby’s room. I was fearful and shouted. Roland confronted her and—” he looks to Roland, “—she hit him. I don’t know when Master John came because we went to check on our baby. We didn’t know it was an Ancient.”

I look at Liam who nods. “Truth.”

“And Margarith thinks this stupid girl doesn’t want her place? Look at her mighty majesty. This has to be stopped.” My Uncle’s thoughts drift towards me and I beat them into a corner.

John is still gawking at me and Jackie is defrosting, slinking away from us. I blur my way towards her and take her by the arm.

“What did you want with this family’s home?”

Uncle Darius steps forward to speak but I don’t let him.

“**My** mother’s grounds, my mother’s rules. This family has a right to know.”

“I’d sooner kill you than tell you. Who do you think you are?” Jackie doesn’t answer me, though her thoughts are crystal clear.

I look up when I hear the Vultures call from above and tilt my head to Jackie.

“Fine. I have saved you twice now from your own. Maybe the third time you can do it for yourself? You are no friend of our clan, Jackie. You have attacked a guest and threatened a family on our clan grounds. This we will not tolerate. You live because I allow it. Don’t you **ever** forget that, kitten.”

Jackie opens her mouth to speak but I clamp my hand over it.

“You had nothing to say when I asked you to speak. I have nothing to hear now.”

I turn to my Uncle. “Your...*advisor* is no longer welcome on my mother’s grounds. If she is caught near our homes, our clan or our grounds, I will personally make sure she is put on trial before her peers.” I point up meaningfully then thank the couple that spoke as witness, sending them off along with the others who stayed.

“Jackie didn’t mean any harm... Carmina, I am the Elder here...”

John and Roland both take a step back when I turn to face my Uncle.

“Yes, Uncle Darius, you are. But clearly you don’t know how to manage our clan or abide by our *modern style* of living. I am the first daughter of Margarith Nightshade. I am also the one put in charge in her absence. Your stay here is by my grace and my mother’s rules. Stay or go, but Jackie Azzara is **not** welcome here. I wanted peace, but she brought this conflict.” The biting authority in my words is intentional as I let as much vehemence seep into every word through a clenched jaw.

With that, I walk away towards my cottage, waving Roland and John after me. I blush when I realized I am stood in the snow, in my PJs and socks. Liam's blur streaks around, gathers me up and takes my rattling bones to the fireplace in our den.

When John and Roland stroll in through the back door, I am warm enough to get dressed. I let them stew while I continue to make sense of this morning. One day. One day is all I ask for and that woman had to spoil it? I've had enough.

I stroll into the kitchen and pull a chair out. Putting my head in my palms, I speak at the table.

"What is going on here? Roland? John?"

I expected a quick chirpy response from both of them; instead, the kitchen stays silent.

Lifting my head, I stare at them. "Well?"

"Well, it is as the Grants said. I was on my way back from a patrol route..."

I put my hand up to stop Roland. "Why are you patrolling?"

"Carmina... I am here because there's been serious reports about the Gello'Des stirring in the Volcano Valleys."

"But Lilly is gone. Why?"

"We don't know. My family is on the outskirts of Joshlyn's territory and Lucas, with his new bride's family, is working on the perimeters of Edward's. They're coordinating with the clans. Something is off about all of this. Joshlyn's clan reports a missing young girl. We can't find a trace of her. That is not normal either. The Gello'Des are behaving strangely."

Panic is starting to rule again.

"What about Uncle Darios' clan? Who's looking after them?"

"He is placed between your grounds and Edward's on the outside, so naturally he is covered... but that is the off part Carmina. The Gello'Des does not seem to go near his estate – any scent we pick up from them ends at his borders and ... dissipates."

I rub over my face, hoping to wipe away the terror that is building.

"How are your wounds Roland, are you ok?"

"Just a scratch. Literally." He says dryly. I turn to John who's not said one word since I came in.

"John?"

"You should have let me kill her, Carmina." There is still a distant look in his eyes.

"No, John. You once saved me from myself. You reminded me who I am. I would like to believe I have done that for you today. Not even in your life would you have done this, why do it in this lifetime?"

John looks up at me and I feel the dark clouds retract from his mood.

"You're right. Thank you, Vixen."

"When did she become so good at this stuff?" Roland chirps and I can hear the humor returning to him.

"When she woke up and decided to invoke a goddess in her PJs," John immediately jumps in and I know that the world will be good again; that, for now, my family is safe.

Liam quietly adds his view. "And all before breakfast. So proud of you, my Rockflower."

Intimidation

I make for my mother's house, leaving the men in my kitchen. I still have a stack of work that needs doing and I suppose I have to check to see if my Uncle is going to stay. When I get to the kitchen, he is standing there, tapping his fingers on the table. I move past him and make a cup of tea.

"Carmina, you have overstepped your boundaries. You do not command Ancients, my girl."

I make my tea and sit down.

"Did she tell you, Uncle Darius, that if I order her dead or kill her myself, it is my full right to do so?"

"You cannot mean that!" It is clear Jackie has not been truthful with my Uncle either.

"You should ask her about that." I say, pulling my design paper closer to me.

"*How do you get the right to kill an Ancient? You're a filthy human.*" I keep my head down and force my hand to relax around the pencil when I hear the thought from him.

"You must be careful, Carmina. You are only *human*." He speaks out loud and I look up at him with a big smile and a sadistic craving on my tongue. I rub my wrist when I speak to him.

"Of course, Uncle Darius. Will you stay for lunch?" I invite him, throwing him off balance again.

"I ... think I will take my leave tomorrow. It is hard to communicate with my advisor if she's miles off. "

"Such a shame. How is your clan doing Uncle? With all the reports of the Gello'Des, I am greatly worried." I look at him now and the uncomfortable shuffle is not missed.

"We're not too worried. I believe the travelers are scouting and reporting – we'll hear of trouble before it appears."

"I hope so. Aunty Joshlyn has her hands full at the moment, with the missing girl and all." I watch my uncle, looking for any indication of knowledge. This time he seems truly taken aback.

"She... There's a girl missing? Are you sure? How old is she?"

"Roland reports the girl is 17 years old. I think perhaps a bit old for the Gello'Des, but..."

"I am sure the girl is probably hiding out with a boyfriend or maybe even one of those caravans."

"Hmmm."

My Uncle vanishes for the rest of the morning and I continue working on the sketches, ignoring the call for lunch. I am hungry but Liam, John and Roland went to the frozen river to meet with the rest of the Ancients. They are meeting to coordinate their efforts to monitor and report about the brewing situation. It is the weekend after all, and while I have the creative capacity and peace, I should make use of it.

I listen to the clan moving across the snow-covered courtyard and stand in the door to show my face from time to time. A few wary eyes are cast in my direction and I wave friendlily. Perhaps this morning's performance was a little dramatic. Had Dimitri rubbed off on me without my knowledge? I can't help but think of Raina telling me about the stories she heard when they were looking for me. This should go down well! It is not like the Volcano doesn't rumble at any other time either. It was pure coincidence that I chose **that** moment to recall the right entity to appeal

to... And in my PJs. I can just hear Jarrod's comments and none of them will spare me!

Talking of which, I need to let them know what is going on. It is a hard decision but Momma is the clan Elder and, while I don't want to worry them, they have to know.

When the sun draws into dawn, I decide to leave for our den. I pace myself to the clumsy speed and take in the beauty of the snow and folding darkness keenly. I still have to concentrate on not falling when I walk naturally, but it is becoming easier to organize my body to follow my brain's commands. I stop for at Momma's evergreen and inhale the pine scent. Here lies my mother, but it is Momma that I come to find here. The thought reminds me about my odd ways and thinking.

I've not seen Uncle Darius since the morning and I know the Ancients are on their way back with Roland. I am not in the least surprised that they would allow Roland into a meeting like theirs. The gypsies are half-breeds and they keep to themselves, but when trouble is brewing you want them with you, not against you. Roland also has John to back him up and, of course, Roland has a tongue that can talk a road through a mountain.

I should check to see if there's food in the fridge for the boys or I will never hear the end of it. I still feel emotionally drained. I question the wisdom of letting Jackie go *yet* again. I just can't find it within myself to hurt that girl or let her be hurt – and it is not like I don't want to. What good would it do? I am struggling to remain the human I'm constantly reminded that I am and killing... It's not a choice I can make.

Approaching the cottage, I stop halfway to listen. A nervous energy takes hold of me and I look around searching the tree lines and shadows. I feel like I'm being watched but I cannot hear or see anything. When I open my mouth to pick up a scent, my brain cranks my movement into a gale-force towards the front door. It is standing wide open. I know it was closed when I left. Liam has not been home and the John-Roland duo uses the back door. When I get inside, I feel a sense of anger and despair. My beautiful home is trashed. Completely. Even the floorboards are ripped up. My eye catches the Moretti Emblem on the window and tears well up at the dark red color that has been painted over it. I reach it and my heart starts pounding when I manage to identify the smell on the windowpane. It is blood!

I open my mouth and turn my head to inhale the air around, categorizing and eliminating the known scents. The emerging taste is the same as the one I picked up from outside. I don't recognize it at all but the smell of blood is coming from my bedroom. The door is closed. I listen intently but there is no indication of anyone being on the other side.

When I push the door open, I don't scream – I want to, but I can't. The ghoulish, horrific picture that greets me imprints firmly on my mind and I start shaking. I sink to my knees and hear myself whisper: "Wake up, wake up, wake up."

There's so much blood in my room, the floor, walls and even ceiling is covered. My bed is a pool of

blood, like a scene taken from my nightmares. The smell is overwhelming and I feel myself gag.

Liam feels the change in Carmina's mood and hurries towards the cottage with John and Roland in tow. The scene greeting them from the kitchen rushes the three of them to Carmina's side where she's sitting on the floor, rocking back and forth. John does not enter the bedroom and Roland turns away to look around the living room, meticulously taking inventory.

Liam's eyes fall on the bed and his fists clench. The white bedding is soaked in pools of blood. On one side of the bed is a wolf laid out with flesh still hanging from his mouth; opposite is a young girl, her neck ripped open and her body covered in massive claw marks. Between them is a doll that looks like a baby, torn up and stuffed with parts of the wolf's pelt. The image is vivid and relentless in the representation it portrays. This was a direct assault on Liam and his home but, more so, on Carmina.

Carmina is sitting by Liam's feet, the blood on the floor seeping into her clothing. He kneels next to her and tries to gain her focus.

"Mina... Look at me. Please look at me."

She turns to crawl out the door, the tears streaking down her face. Trying to see, Carmina wipes the tears from her eyes, smearing the blood into her skin. Pulling her hands away, she stares at them and cries out in agony.

"I did this... this is my fault..."

John kneels in front of Carmina along with his brother.

"No, Vixen. No, *you* did not do this."

"I-I- did not hear them. They were alive!"

"You couldn't have heard them, my Rockflower! Our space is insulated specifically to keep sound inside."

Carmina looks up at Liam and her blood-smeared eyes grabs him by the throat. He swallows at nothing and picks her up to her feet.

"*John...*"

"*Gotcha back bro.*" John answers the wordless request to take care of things in the cottage.

"Liam..." Roland moves towards us, "Jackie was here too, or at least, she was part of this." He dangles in front of Liam a small bit of Lynx fur soaked red.

Liam's body stiffens and he nods Roland toward John.

"I'll stay in touch. Our girl needs to get out of here."

Liam keeps me wrapped up against his chest while the water runs into the tub at my mother's home. I feel sick and my body is shaking. Slowly but surely, Roland's words sink in.

“Jackie was here too.”

The words play over and over in my head.

Jackie.

Liam removes my shoes and I react instinctively.

“I’m fi—I have this.”

He gives me a searching look and when he leaves the bathroom, I hear him lean against the frame behind the closed door.

The links grab at me from all directions and I answer them one at a time.

“*Mina, are you alright?*” Lady E’s concerned voice is the first to speak up.

“*Yes, thank you.*” My answer is mechanical.

“*I’ll let your mother know, don’t worry about a thing.*”

I nod, forgetting they’re not here.

“*John?*”

“*Vixen is right, Father, they were brought in alive. It is Joshlyn’s missing girl.*”

“*Jackie was there?*” Fayola asks.

“*Yes. Or at least... she was helping. Roland picked up one familiar Gello’Des scent, the other is new.*”

“*Carmina... girl. The Lynx is afraid of you.*” Maria’s gentle voice makes me sit up.

“*Why ... do you say that Maria?*”

I am confused. Someone afraid of me wouldn’t do this to us.

“*She wants to break you; wear you down. You must be resilient, my friend. If I know that girl at all, the fight is just beginning.*”

I feel the anger rise along with the images. I hear Liam growl behind the door and try to contain my emotions.

“*Jackie Azzara will get what she has coming.*”

I wash the blood from my hands and face, scrubbing my skin over and over. The tears run freely as I think of that poor girl, that beautiful animal. Trembling, I get out of the tub. I wrap myself in my mother’s robe and open the door.

“*My life. My rules.*”

I let the sadness, anger and intention run like acid through the link before I close it. Liam narrows his eyes at me, still searching to figure out my thoughts.

“*Let us handle this. She’s House family.*”

“*No. She lives because of me. She ran because of me. She returned because of me. She killed because of me.*” I repeat my stance to Liam through a tight jaw.

“My life,” I hit against my heart.

“My rules,” I hit again, holding back the tears.

Liam watches me, concerned. Taking my hand in his, we walk to my old room. I stop to turn and look down the hallway at my Uncle who arrives at his. I narrow my eyes and lift my head.

“Goodnight Uncle Darius,” I say in what I hope is a calm voice.

I don’t have to read his mind to know he is surprised to see me. I smile at the reaction and start

contemplating on how to get a cat to catch his tongue.

Sleep does not come. I don't know what is worse: the nightmares or being awake. A year ago, I was in this room with Liam. The last time I was here, I found out ... Full circle. Here I am again, being protected while my every, living breath affects those I love. I turn to Liam.

"Change me."

"What?" He sits up, confused.

"I want to... be like you. Change me."

"No." The answer is firm and final.

"Liam. It is because I am human – all of this. It is because I am human." I hiss at him.

"No Carmina. It is because you are you." Liam strokes his fingers through my hair. "It is because you are a myth. You defy every rule, every ideal. You, my Rockflower, are a paradox. Immortal or human, you will continue to be just that.... Because you are you."

I close my eyes and try to find enough reasons for Liam's denial to be dismissed. I find none. I am the weakest link in the dynamic of the clan. I am the torture they endure in order to live. If Maria is right, and Jackie is afraid of me, then I will give her reason to be afraid of me. Jackie Azzara went too far this time. Hurting me is one thing, but killing clan is a whole different ballgame.

The lack of food and the emotional torture takes its toll. I hear Liam move to cover me with the blankets, sitting with his back against the wall while his hand rest against my cheek.

I fall asleep with a plan forming in my mind.

Taking Charge

Waking up was less than pleasant today. I roll my head to the side to see the sad look on Liam's face and, out of nowhere, anger fills me. Liam must have noticed; his eyes open and he stares at me intently. I offer a smile and get ready for the day.

"Breakfast with the Clan. Uncle Darius will be leaving today." Liam's eyebrow raises but he gives me a small kiss on my forehead and waits outside the room.

I am in the hall when the gong sounds. I wait behind my mother's chair at the head of the table. When Uncle Darius enters, I smile my prettiest smile at him but stay firmly put. There is no mistake of my intentions today.

Today, I am the first daughter of Margarith Nightshade, and leader of this clan. Uncle Darius walks silently around me to take a seat. When the clan gets together, they do not sit down as usual. They wait. They know this method of assertion and they will not move until I do, or tell them to. Uncle Darius is seated already and the looks towards him are not without contempt at his disrespect. John and Roland summarize the situation in seconds and follow the custom.

I smile at the clan when they're all together and flick my hair back.

"Good morning, Fire Clan," I give the official greeting, and the family looks almost relieved to be

addressed in this manner.

“Please allow me a moment of your time.” I do not tie my hair back but hold my hand up by way of taking the floor.

“Some of you may have noticed my Mother’s absence. I assure you she misses you all. Let’s not forget to thank Lady E, who has been graceful in assisting us; as an Ancient, she has no obligation to take up any course of action to do so.”

I lift my hand higher and drop my head, encouraging whoops from the Clan by way of giving their thanks to the woman. I know Lady E is listening but not visibly attending.

“Let us thank my Uncle Darious, too. I assure you it was not his intention to bring the wrath of the outcast Lynx to our clan. I am sure he has *nothing* to do with the death of Aunty Joshlyn’s clan member either and I am thankful for his help.”

The clan nods in his direction but it is clear they are not comfortable with him at the table. I feel the shock rising up from my Uncle. He clearly didn’t know about the death of the girl.

“As for the girl and wolf scene that was left in my cottage – please don’t be too worried about that. Make sure you take care of your homes and your families. If you see or hear anyone or anything suspicious, report it immediately – gather witnesses. We do not speculate, gossip or assume, so if you have any concerns or questions, you know where the Elders’ kitchen is. I’ll be happy to answer and help where I can.” I see the supportive nods around the tables and smile confidently again.

“Now, I am not your Elder, but I am here with plenty of support from those far superior than myself. I am, however, the first daughter of Margarith Nightshade and this is our clan, our family and our united front. Uncle Darious *will* be leaving today and I will be staying in my Family home until such time as my cottage is repaired. None of you are under obligation to help with the restoration, my main concern is that the business is taken care of, and our families are safe. Our Elder is informed and she will be advising me soon.” Uncle Darious look furious but I press forward.

“Now, as my mother would say: I’ll be damned if the food on my table is spoiled by a little controversy! Let’s enjoy breakfast together.”

I drop my hand and, under loud support and appreciation, the clan sits down to eat.

“*Spoken like an Elder, sweetheart. I am so proud and thank you for that wonderful mention.*” I hear from Lady E.

Uncle Darious leans in and hisses at me. “This does not make you an Elder, girl; don’t get used to the power.”

I put my hand over his and smile bright at him.

“You’re right, Uncle. This makes me Carmina, as was pointed out to me.” I wink at him and focus on my food.

From the other side, I hear John and Roland putting up a production of Shakespeare.

“To be, or not to be, that is the question—” John begins the rendition.

“Whether ’tis Nobler in the mind to suffer the wrath of a woman scorned!” Roland supplements his own version and the clan is in stitches.

“Please see me before you leave, Uncle.” I make sure that he knows I’m not asking. “I think you need to be informed of a few things before you go.”

Uncle Darios throws his napkin on the table, storming off. Liam looks at me with a crooked smile. “And here I was worried about you this morning... You are extraordinary, Carmina.”

I lean towards the man I love and give him a warm kiss, whispering.

“I’m only getting started.”

As I walk out into the courtyard after breakfast, I hear the conversation from a few families. They are surprised and relieved that I did not break down last night. They were exceedingly impressed at me showing up at the table, let alone in Momma’s place. Many of the conversations are filled with pride and expressed happiness. The clan does not know where Momma, Lilly and Jarrod have gone to, but they know why.

I make my way to the kitchen after breakfast, with Liam close by my side. When I walk in, a young member is already pacing. I invite her inside and make her a cup of herbal tea.

“Trinity? What is the matter?”

Her eyes fly to Liam and I smile warmly, putting her mind at ease. It is hard for the clan to be around the Ancients. Liam in particular as he has a more serious disposition than John, who integrated with the clan as he, and he alone, can. Liam is also respected and revered for his outer calm but feared for his inner wrath. I’ve heard the stories told amongst the clan about the exact roles of the Ancients and it is brutal, to say the least.

“You said... I have been working on the designs you made, Carmina.”

I smile again, honored by this. Trinity is spectacular and meticulous and if she works on my designs, they are as close to my own hand as I will get.

“Well, before you left, you made the ‘Arrowhead’.”

I recall the design. It is a small hollow metal casing that folds close to look like an arrowhead with a stem. When you tap the stem, it opens up to expose a porous round lava rock, ideal to use as a fragrance dispenser with Lilly’s oils.

“Well... we sold a lot of those. Then suddenly the buyer stopped buying them, so I put the design away. Your Uncle asked about the design yesterday... and when I went to find the technical draft and design notes... it was all gone. I know I didn’t lose it Carmina, I am very careful, especially with your work.”

I rub the girl’s arm to let her know it is alright, and I am not about to fly off the handle.

“What did you tell my Uncle?” I ask as naturally as I can.

“Well, I told him that he would need permission to book out the design, and that it must be in the archives because it is so old.”

I smile at the clever answer from the girl and nod in approval.

“Good job, Trinity. Thanks for letting me know. This is important. Please... if you can think of anything else...”

The girl’s quick response catches me off guard. “Carmina, you will make a great Elder. I’m not just saying that. You are your mother’s child.”

The honesty and sincerity in the words hit me in the chest. I feel the tears well up but bite them back with a quick reply.

“Oh dear me, Trinity! What a lovely thing to say... but don't get your hopes up young lady! I'm going to keep you busy with designs for a long time yet!”

Trinity laughs and looks at Liam. She bestows a smile on him too and nods respectfully before she leaves.

When Trinity leaves I rub over my face. Why would anyone want to steal my designs? I look at Liam for an answer.

“I don't know, my Rockflower. Let's first find out whom was the original buyer. Go from there. I'll let John and Roland know. “

“At least I know now what my Uncle was after.”

And as if on cue, Uncle Darios walks into the kitchen.

“The pretend Elder summonsed me?” He chides and I find it hard not to snap back at him. Instead, I revert to theatrics.

“Oh Uncle Darios! That is so funny; it is much harder than pretending to be a princess. I think I prefer that!” I hear Liam cough and see him turn away knowing full well my answer caught him in a humorous surprise too.

“Why am I here?”

“I wanted to inform you, Uncle Darios. Jackie was involved in the scene around my cottage last night. In fact, the girl and the animal that were left for me to find...” I can't help but feel the emotions well up at the memory and my voice cracks when I finish, “...was alive at the time they were brought there.”

Uncle Darios is upset.

“Also, the design you were looking for. It's gone. Stolen. May I ask why you wanted it?”

A few more shades lighter and my Uncle is visibly shaken.

“I-I wanted to have a look at the design, the mechanical structure intrigues me.”

“*Jackie! Did that Lynx betray me?*”

I hear his thought and bite back a smile.

“I hope you understand, Uncle Darios, Jackie cannot be trusted. I do not know what the deal is between the two of you, but... Jackie is looking out for herself. It was Gello'Des in my cottage, it was Joshlyn's missing girl that was killed there and Jackie also attacked Roland. Please, Uncle. Be careful. I beg you.”

“How can you be sure about the Lynx?”

“Roland found Lynx fur in the cottage. Regardless of her being there or not, she was involved. It wasn't much but enough to identify the scent.” I look to Liam. “The Ancients don't make mistakes with those sort of things.” Liam does not speak but he looks at my Uncle who takes a step back.

“I didn't know, girl. I swear I didn't know about the ... situation until this morning.”

I put my hand on my uncle's shoulder.

“I know, Uncle. That is why I asked you to come here to speak to me. The members of our clan are suspicious of you because... well, you know. Jackie has not told you why she is indebted to me for her life. But she is obviously keeping more from you. If we can help...”

“No-no. I need to go. Thank you, Carmina.” My Uncle becomes very hurried and I grin at his back.

“Carmina, you are devious. Your Uncle is truly worried about Jackie now.” Liam cheers.

“My life. My rules. It is not devious, Liam, if it is all truth. My Uncle may be many things, but he is loyal to the safety of the clans. I suspect there was a clause to whatever plan they were hatching. Jackie... overstepped in her false confidence. I don’t think we were meant to tie her to the scene. We need to know why they wanted my design. I don’t understand it.”

* * *

It takes a few days for me to relax. I make a point of being at every meal, taking up Momma’s place at the head of the table. Lady E and Uncle Will join us again as soon as Uncle Darius leaves. He left without a word to me but the Ancients confirm he was gone and reported immediately when he reached his clan grounds.

I don’t trust the peace at the moment and spend a lot of time in my mother’s kitchen with her files and documents. Trying to trace the initial buyer is harder than we expected. The orders were placed through the tourist company who then sold on to a cash buyer. They were profoundly disappointed when the last order was not picked up. The description of the older lady that bought them fits nobody we know. The tourist company speculates that she probably sold them on at a higher profit. I am not convinced.

My cottage has been restored but I am still too raw to go into it. When John asks about removing the Moretti emblem, I told him to leave it as it is. The blood smears over the emblem will forever be my personal reminder that I bring blood with me. To keep my feet on the ground and my head level, I have to face my demons every day. It also serves as a memory to the pair that was slaughtered in my home, not to let their blood have spilled in vain. The emblem as whole serves as my strength and my love for the Moretti family.

Momma decides to stay with Lilly and Jarrod as per the original agreement. She says it will bring less suspicion than if she were to show up without the newlyweds. The Ancients agree with her. I decided that while there is a calm before the expected storm, I would speak to Liam about the soul-bond thing. Unfortunately, the gypsy book is gone. I don’t know who may have taken it or why, but it is the only missing book. The others were torn and bloodied, but that one vanished. I am heartbroken and feel terrible. Sullen entrusted the book to me!

The more details come to light, the more confused I am, and bigger the shadow of dread casts itself. Roland reports increasing movement towards Uncle Darius’ grounds from the Gello’Des, and there are rumors doing the rounds from clans outside our own circles of a traitor amongst the half-breed clans. The Ancients’ clarity in the matter is being questioned. Maria was right: if this is Jackie’s doing, I have an uphill fight ahead of me. How can I go against a whole race of beings whose every instinct is to destroy me, even those that love me?

It is a week since Uncle Darius' departure and I am catching up with the work in Momma's kitchen. I've been neglecting it. Focus escapes me and I find my mind drifting. Before I know it, another day is gone and nothing is done. I am determined to do this today, and make sure that there is no reason for further concern to Momma.

A gust of wind rushes through the kitchen and immediately I pick up the wolf scent, as well as Roland's. Excited to see the duo, I rush to the door. They've been gone since the morning.

"*Carmina!*" John shouts into my mind and I gather the panic straight into my heart.

"*John? I'm here...*" I say reaching the front door.

Opening the door, I have to narrow my eyes to see the pair, the glare of the full moon bringing the picture in focus just before they enter through the gate. John's massive brown wolf is dragging Roland along. There was no time to think; my body was moving before my brain gave the command.

"*He wants you Carmina, I couldn't help him! He only wants you!*" John shouts, frustrated and angry, into my mind. I can hear the despair and effort of dragging Roland's body along with him. They were hardly through the gate when I reach them. John drops Roland on his back in the snow and is pacing frantically around him, making yipping sounds and nudging him.

The gash in Roland's chest is shocking and I can see the bones of his ribs protruding. The blood is still pouring unnaturally from the cavernous wound.

"Oh gods, no no no!" I mutter as I roughly tear my jacket from my body. Laying it on the ground, I fill it with ice and compact it into a wrapped ball. Roland moves unnoticeably as I slide in behind him, pulling him against my chest and using the ice-packed jacket as a compress in hopes to stop the bleeding.

"Roland? Roland! Wake up, please, please, stay with me..." I beg, worried about the broken bones and panicking, not knowing if I'm helping or making matters worse.

"Hey... devil's... advocate," Roland's whisper is breathy and faint. His coughing brings more blood from his mouth. Roland turns his head to face me.

"Roland! We'll fix this... someone **HELP ME!**" I scream, nearly hysteric.

"It's in your blood, Carmina. It's in **your** blood."

My mind is racing so fast I nearly didn't hear him. Why is the bleeding not stopping! Where is all the blood coming from? My hands start trembling when I see the grin spread over Roland's face. He's always said he will face his maker with a grin and a string to tie up the angels for ransom. I look over his body for other wounds that could be the cause of all this blood... but there is none to be found. Even the scuffmarks from John's carrying are slight. John's wolf form is big and I suspect not much of Roland's body touched the ground.

Several hands rush towards us but John puts his whole body between them.

"*They can't touch him!*" He sounds feverish. I wave the hands off, feeling Roland's body slump against me.

"No, Roland! You said I'd always have you!!" I shake his shoulders. The tears are streaming. I register the confusion when the clan members step away from John, who's snarling and snapping at them. With Roland's body wrapped in my arms, my heart explodes. Not my Roland, not my gipsy

brat! Why?! How many more would have to die before this stops?!

I see Liam rushing towards us, his black and red fur streaked with blood too. A new dread burst from my lips.

“Liam? *LIAM?!?*”

“I’m alright, I’m alright Carmina... it’s not my blood... calm down! Don’t let anyone touch Roland’s body.”

I wrap myself around my beautiful gipsy brat, still holding the jacket to his chest. My hands are smeared with blood and I feel misery closing in fast; more blood on my hands. He looks so happy. He can’t be gone.

“Roland, wake up, please... just wake up... you promised me!” I cry into his hair.

“Mina... I’m sorry, we were too late...”

“What do you mean?! Who did this?” I scream, frenzy circling in my voice with the wolf yipping around me, licking my face.

“Mina... they’re all ... I’m sorry, we were too late.”

“John, go clean up. Go.” Liam pushes his brother who’s pacing in a circle around Roland and I.

“Liam? He can’t be dead... please... tell me...”

“We have to burn his body, Mina.”

“NO! NO! You can’t! It is sacrilege. He has to be buried, properly. With a funeral and everything. It is their custom!”

“We can’t do that Carmina... you have to let him go...”

“NO! Liam! NO!”

I feel two strong hands grabbing hold of me, dragging me away from Roland’s body. I scream and fight them, but to no avail. Uncle Will’s silver streaks wave past my fury. I watch Liam set fire to my beloved brat and the screams are riddled with agony and heartache. I breathe in the smell of fire and flesh burning and my body heaves. How could Liam do this? The haunting grin is clearly visible on Roland’s face. How could he leave me? He promised me!

My chest hurts. My head hurts. My body hurts...

“Wake up, wake up, wake up. Rocky roads. They take you to Dublin. Sullen said all rocky roads can lead there... wake up!”

“Mina...” I hear Lady E’s voice and I open my eyes. I am inside my mother’s home and I don’t want to be here.

“Come on sweetheart, drink some water” I sit up, pushing the water away and fly towards the door, but Liam is there. His bulk is blocking the door liberally. The anger and hatred I feel towards this man in front of me force itself into my fists and I hit him against the chest, screaming.

“You monster! How could you do that?! His soul will not rest now! How ... could... you?”

“Carmina... come sweetheart, calm down. Let Liam explain.” The strength of Lady E’s embrace is the shock that drills through my anger and brings me to a standstill. Liam has not moved at all and has made no defense against my assault. The pull around his lips is tight, drooping down. His eyes are on the floor and he does not look at me.

“Carmina. The caravan was attacked. When Roland and John went to check on the family... their corpses were piled already and ...” Liam pauses. “There was nothing we could do for them...” His voice is distant, iced and ... hurting-raw.

“Roland rushed to his father’s side, but when he hugged Briiaan, a small explosion went off against his chest.”

Liam pulls his hand through his hair.

“We... couldn’t do anything. His blood turned toxic, where it touched his family, it started... We can’t touch the blood. It had to be burnt. I’m sorry, my Rockflower... I’m so sorry.”

“They – They – They’re all gone?” the tension in my chest tightens again and the sobs threaten to pull me apart at the seams.

“Yes. Lucas and his new bride... I’m so sorry... Carmina... we couldn’t...” Liam seems to be asking my forgiveness but there is none to be given.

“But how?! HOW is this p-possible? And why t-them?”

“Sweetheart, we don’t know. We’ll figure it out. I promise, Carmina.”

“NO! No promises, none of you can keep them!” I shout at her.

“Mina...” Liam speaks but I cut him off too.

“Liam... i-t makes no s-ense,” I weep, “someone had to know where they were. Y-ou don’t just f-ind a-a g-ipsy caravan.... If-if-if they don’t want to be f-found...”

“I am sorry Carmina...” Liam reaches for me but I pull away from him.

“Roland insisted John bring him here to you. The only way we could do that was in wolf form...”

I lift my hands to my face and stare at the dry blood.

“I did– I did–” the words won’t come out, the sentence is stuck, a rippling sigh later “Liam... this is all my fault... look what I am doing to those who love me.”

Liam moves fast and grabs me into his arms, snatching me away from his mother. “No, my Rockflower. You are only the paint that marks the target. “

“I’m sorry, dear, sweet girl. Now more than ever, you have to show strength. For your clan, for your family and for yourself.”

I lean my head against Liam’s shoulder, feeling the comforting strokes of his hand through my hair. How many more will have to die? Where will this end? Roland... he’s gone. Briiaan, Sullen, Lucas, Bianca, Raina... a whole bloodline wiped out and it is because they cared for me.

“John...”

I gave them no time to think, pushing away from the pair in front of me.

John! Roland was his friend as much as mine. Oh gods... I run outside and lift my head finding John’s wolf scent and following it as best I can. It was not hard, with the fully lit moon casting clear snow sparkles over the enormous paw prints.

“*John?*” I keep calling to him internally. Eventually, I track him to the far side of the Lynx territory. There are no words to offer him, so I sit down, wrap my arms around his shoulders. His body is lightly swaying, and John pulls me closer to him. I feel his energy, seeking and finding comfort in me being there. Sadness and despair, anger and anxiety dart between us. John lays a soft kiss on my head.

“We’ll find them, Carmina.” The words crack under emotional pain and hurt, but there is an unspoken promise of vengeance and justice. I believe John.

“I am sorry John. . . . I’m so sorry.”

John does not speak again; he hugs me to him tight and I cling to him. When his howls go up into the air, it is sad and yet an honor.

Honor

I manage to pull myself together for long enough to honor the Romany family; my extended family. I know how important birth and death is in the culture. Briaan and Sullen would not forgive me if I didn’t do right by them. *I* would not forgive me. Without the book to help me, I had to rely on memory and Internet information to put together a suitable, if not traditional, funeral. The deeply spiritual nature of this procedure is also a healing focus for me. I sit with John and Liam, carving a coffin with each their names on it and, sorting through their worldly possessions, I fill each one. I didn’t know the name of the new bride-to-be, and so I called her “Lucas’ Love”. Raina’s coffin was empty barring the token Liam and I gave her before they left after their last visit.

It was important to them, as it is to me, to give them a big send-off. I gathered the clan and together we lit candles in storm lanterns, filling every open space, even the trees. Every meal for the next three days was dedicated to their memories, recalling the happy times. It may have seemed horrific in every sense to see us laugh and joke, even sing from time to time – but this is what needed to happen. They were loved. They are remembered and as a clan, they will be missed.

Momma and Uncle Darious arrive at the gate almost simultaneously. Momma would not hear of Lilly and Jarrod returning, but she was not going to dishonor her friend-family by not being here. I am confused as to why Uncle Darious is here, and it is clear that Momma is at the end of her patience with him, drilling past without greeting.

Grabbing John, Liam and myself into a group hug, Momma does not shed one tear. She turns us around and ushers us into her kitchen, ignoring her brother’s gruff remark about life going on after death. Momma’s eyes are dark and brooding. It is clear she’s not in an accommodating space.

“Darios, what do you *want*? Have you not done enough to hurt my family?” Momma lashes out at him the moment he appears in the kitchen. Uncle Darious pulls a wry, bitter face and spits when he speaks.

“Me?! Look at the filth sitting at your table, if you want to point fingers.” He glares at me. There was no warning at all. Momma’s billowing dress leaves a black blur as she whirls around the table, pinning her brother against the wall, lifting him off his feet. I feel my eyes stretch and the surprise from the witnesses. My mother does not lose her temper, or so I thought.

“*What* do you *want*?”

I am frozen in place; it is Liam who steps up to Momma, placing a hand on her shoulder. Momma’s eyes flick quickly to Liam and back. Lady E appears in the doorway as if she’s been there all along. She lightly clears her throat, like a mother mediating between two children.

I am gawking at the passion blazing around the two women and John slides across the floor towards his mother, who gives him a warning look. Liam does not move away from Momma, keeping his hand lightly on her shoulder. I watch, as if in a dream.

“I came to call Carmina to justice,” Uncle Darius speaks when Momma lets go of his throat. My head lifts to my Uncle and I feel the anger sting behind my eyes. I bite down on my lip and swallow. I do not read his mind; there are enough Ancients in this room to deal with him. Right now, I don’t have the will or the energy.

“To justice? What is she accused of?” Momma growls.

“It is clear, Margarith. This little human scum brought this onto our clans. She is responsible of the deaths at the caravan! She knew where they were.”

Lady E, dainty as a flower, steps around the doorway. Her wild hair fizzles in the air and her voice is like a bell when she speaks. I have never heard anything so beautiful and so chilling at the same moment.

“Will you bet your life on it, Darius son? Will you bet your Father’s wrath on it? You know how your daddy just **love** sibling rivalry and false accusations.”

Darius shambles around and Lady E lifts her hand in a threatening manner.

“So, let me read your memories. Let’s see what you are hiding, my dear boy.”

“She is going to be the death of the Moretti name, and she will take every clan along with her. She caused trouble in the Lynx house and ours... yours... is next!”

“Ours.” Lady E purses her lips as if to think about the word being used. “So you think us weak, dear child? You think the Morettis are incompetent or incapable or both?”

“You are under the influence of that *thing*. All and sundry speak of it. Listen to the clans. You have a traitor and she is sitting at your table!” Uncle Darius is shouting. Lady E pulls her hand away and bestows a gracious smile upon him.

“Under the influence of a human? Don’t be absurd, my dear. Is this the story the Lynx is spreading? The same Lynx who was spared by that ‘thing’? Twice, or was it three times now? It is not Carmina who caused the trouble in the Lynx House. It was that hellcat.”

“Jackie is trying to help you! It make sense for the brat to get rid of the gypsies, they were in on it!” The words were not cold when the knife from the stand in front of me flies at him. Lady E moves him out of the way without turning around. I wish she didn’t. He has no right to speak of Roland and his family in that fashion. If the dead can’t defend themselves, it is easy to make them guilty of crimes they did not commit.

“I don’t think our *girl*, our *clan member*, Darius, the one sitting over there by the pile of knives – Carmina – likes you slandering the dead. I will send your father to speak with you. Go. Home.” Lady E’s movements are perceived to be light, but the stumble from Uncle Darius out the door indicates the light shove against his shoulder held more power than not.

Uncle Darius’ visit was brief, but there is a sense of urgency when he leaves. I have heard the rumors about the traitor amongst the Valley Clans. Are they thinking it is I? The death of the Romany travelers is going to serve as confirmation and if the Ancients don’t react to the direct accusations against me... I dread to think about it.

“They think... I did kill them, but not how they...” I look at the faces in front of me in desperation. “I need fresh air.”

I want to run but the energy levels are too low and perhaps a view of the world that is not blurring may help me find my balance again. I look towards the volcano and to the puff of dark smoke still lifting sinisterly against the light sky. Maybe I’ll go to the clearing.

When I get to the courtyard gate I see movement among the tree lines. I narrow my eyes but it is gone before I can focus. I inhale as deep as my lungs can allow and open my mouth to smell the air, and listen. The gushing wind sweeps any trace away before I could get a fix on it. I stand and wait, but there is no more movement. I look back at my mother’s door and change my mind.

I have not been inside my cottage since...

The inside has been modified and there is no solid wall dividing the bedroom and the living space. Between the two rooms, serving a dual purpose, is a modern fire pit reachable from either side. I smile at the recognition of Liam’s input. He has never liked being enclosed, and he always worries about me being cold.

Another window has been added to the front room and the bay seat was moved. The darkened Moretti Emblem is on the old windowpane but the window itself has been made small, like a gap filled with glass. I lean against it, tracing my fingers around the edges.

When I hear the soft, shuffling approach, I am ready to attack. Taking a crouching stance, my attention focuses on the front and side doors. My entire body is tense and I can’t smell anything. The doors are closed and the room I am in is filled with newness and the smell of paint.

“Mina,” I hear my name too faint to be sure it was not the wind.

“Help me.” This time, it is louder. The thud just outside my door rushes me towards it without thinking. The small body of a young girl is lying face down, smeared with mud and soot. I can hear her heartbeat, and with strength I did not know I had, I hoist her over my shoulder and blitz her into the front room. Her blackened hair is matted to her face. I light a fire and rush to get warm water.

It is when I manage to take the outer layer of sulfur-smelling, smoke-coated clothing off that her scent rises up and fills my body with shockwave after shockwave.

“*Raina!*”

It didn’t take long for Liam and John to arrive with help to get Raina back on track. The girl’s a fighter and while her condition was one of dehydration and near starvation, she recovers pretty quickly. I help her through the bath and after a few tries, the blonde color of her hair returns. I keep her a secret in my cottage; Momma, John and Liam know she is here, but nobody else. I am learning the importance of not trusting just anyone.

After a day, Raina is getting color back in her cheeks too and the sadness in her eyes is becoming more prominent. It is easy to forget that she is thirteen years old. She looks near my age and, while she has a very small frame, the wisdom in her eyes already far surpasses that of most people older.

Raina is weary of the two Ancients around us. Of course, John has re-stocked my fridge and pretty much moved into the kitchen. I worry about him too, as he has become more withdrawn since... Well, he lost one of his closest friends too. And these vampires want to tell me they don't have souls? Yeah, right.

I have to find treatments for Raina's hands. The child has dug into snow and iced mud for days to disguise herself. I am astounded at how well she managed on her own. Raina tells me that she went hiding around the volcano. She figured, in all her child-like innocence, that if the volcano goddess Chantico is a friend of mine, then she will be a friend of hers too. I swallow hard at the thought. I tried explaining that the incident was a coincidence and Raina smiled a knowing smile at me and said, "Sullen says there's no such thing as coincidence. She says there are actions and reactions. She says you take action and therefore, even in faith, there will be a reaction."

I didn't want to argue over this. It is evident that Raina has a very fond and admiring love for Sullen. I'm not about to convince her otherwise.

When Raina is ready, she tells us about the day her family died. Sullen and Briaan had been worried for a while about being tracked. Not to distract Roland from his work, they didn't tell him. They tried circling back to the friend-family estate to replenish their food and water supply, and to speak about the growing concern. The pair was worried that the tracker was after Raina because of family history and problems. Raina is considered impure by her home-family and some of them were less than accommodating. Sullen instructed her to head to the borders of the friend-family, our clan, and hide out in the trees until they catch up. When the caravan did not arrive as it should have, Raina headed back but saw John passing with Roland and she knew that Sullen and Briaan's worst fear had come to pass. She was terrified and didn't know what to do, so she went to the volcano to hide out. Hunting was hard for her. Eventually, she was driven to the tree line and when she saw me at the gate, she knew I was safe. She's been watching for days to see me, not knowing if I was attacked too.

Raina tells me that she and Bianca were taught by Sullen and Briaan to always count me as a friend. If anything should happen to the caravan, they should try and get away and find the friend-clan.

"Briaan said you are the warrior to end the wars," Raina looks at me with a tilted head.

"I didn't know there was a war..."

"Well, there is. Briaan would not tell stories about that. He says there's a big war coming and you will be the one to end it."

I sigh and shake my head. What do these people think I am? I am nothing but human. I am the original carbon print for bad luck and now they put this stuff in the kids' heads?

"Well, let's hope there is no war."

“Sure. Sullen also said that your circle would be complete when you spill blood to love. I don’t know what that means but it sounded important.”

I gawk at Raina and shake my head again. “I have no idea what that means Raina... Sullen has always been cryptic.”

“Yeah, that is because if you tell the future in any way, you change it, thus becoming a liar by your own design. Sullen doesn’t like liars.”

“Raina, I know it is hard, but do you remember anything else said about the trackers?” I am careful not to stress the girl.

“No. But I don’t think it was one of ours.”

“Why?”

“Because ours would not poison Carmina. That would bring the dead back because they passed in unhappiness, and nobody in our caravans wants the wrath of the dead. It’s impure and very bad luck.”

“You know about the poison?”

Raina’s eyes filled with tears. “Yes. I watched him...” she points to Liam, “...burn my brother. I ran to the caravan but when I got there, I understood why. It was horrible! The smell was so bad. I think whomever did this is going to be haunted for a long time.”

I rub over her hand and nod, “I hope so. They’ll deserve it.”

I write in my Dairy the three things that I’ve been told by the gypsies:

“There’s no myth not founded in truth.

It’s in your blood.

The circle will complete when you spill blood to love.”

I wish I could find my book. I am still torn up over that, too. What a mess I have made of things! Momma leaves for a short while and I destroy just about all her hard work and initiate a fight with her brother. I get a clan girl killed and I am responsible for a whole caravan’s...

The thought bring tears to my eyes, so I focus on Raina’s safety instead.

It was hard to convince Raina to move into Mother’s house, but when she learned she could stay in my old room, she seemed very pleased with the whole idea. I worry about the child’s perception of me, as well as the high expectations. I also tell Raina to use the Hidden Carmina in her bathwater and hair. It was a comical moment to see her face pull at the strong scent and for a moment, a glimpse of the old John pokes around the kitchen door.

“Ooooh, Carmina caught Liam with that scent!”

Raina giggles, instantly more at ease about the oils. In that moment, she also attaches herself to John in the kitchen. In the end, John takes Raina to my old room, keeping her wrapped up in his big bulk and speeding faster than lightning.

I cuddle with Liam in front of the fire afterwards, our first real alone time.

“What on earth am I going to do?”

Liam rests his chin on my head before he answers.

“We start over. At the beginning.”

I feel frustration knocking again. Where is the beginning? We’ve not seen or heard from Jackie in a while and that makes me more nervous. Uncle Will has been with his son’s clan along with Lady E, and I feel bitter about Darius’ involvement. How could he even think to accuse me? He knows that the whole Ancient house would know if I lied. Or . . . does he? Has the Lynx told him about my relationship with the Houses on that level? Has Momma? I should check.

I am told time will heal all wounds. I’m not so sure about that anymore. John has taken to caring for Raina over the past few days. It is like she attached herself to his hip. There is something surreal in seeing the blonde girl with the wolf running around the courtyard; so much for keeping Raina a secret. I sit and watch them play and feel the smile creeping up on me. Momma has announced that she is going to make an official offer of adoption to Raina. I think the girl is fitting into clan life much easier than any of us expected. She has even taken up chores and is helping with the cooking. Raina has an exceptional ability to create food that is different and oddly combined, but ridiculously scrumptious. She is thriving, even under the threat of whatever is headed our way.

I have decided it is time to go pay my Uncle a visit. Raina insists on going with me, no matter how much we try to reason with her.

“I know a short-cut,” she states in a bland manner.

“Raina? What do you mean?” John asks.

“Well – I do, but I’m not telling unless you take me with.”

Finally, I understand the motion Liam makes when I am testing his patience: I rub over my face and feel my hand rests on the nape of my neck. “Raina, we can drive...”

“No, this is better, and shorter, and... You’ll see.”

There was no reasoning after that. It would be easy to extract the information from her, but that would damage the relationships we’re encouraging Raina to form. In the end, we agree to let her join us on the condition that she does not reveal herself once we reach the border and she will stay with John until Liam and I return.

We set out just after breakfast towards the border, under Raina’s direction. There are so many scents mixed in the air. John recognizes some of them as being Gello’Des, and we become wary all the more.

“Raina, you came this way?”

“Yes, you will see,” is all she says when we reach a thick bramble part of the border. There is a familiar feeling to the space I find myself in and it’s Liam that comments on it first.

“This is very much like the Lynxes’ hidden entrance to their dwelling.”

When we reach the small stream, Raina bounces ahead but John was quick to cut her off, “Raina, careful. Some of the scents are fresh.”

“I know, but they’re not here. They mainly come at night.”

I look at Liam. Even John seems as surprised as we are.

“How do you know this, Raina?”

“Oh. I watched them. I was hungry and...” She looks guilty.

“I didn’t want to steal from them, but Roland always says finders keepers. They keep human girls in there.”

I feel my body tense and clench my teeth. Raina must have noticed, because she quickly adds: “I didn’t take from them. The rats were good enough.”

When we cross the stream and tread along it through a small pouring waterfall, the chill sets into my bones. No wonder the scouts lost their scent! The water washes it away, sealing the entrance well enough to confuse the scents. The space behind the streaming water is a long, thin slit; easily missed. It is big enough to squeeze through sideways but low and thus you’d have to lean through the opening. It opens up into a small cavern that spirals downwards. On the other side of the entrance we use is another opening but much smaller; you need to slide out from it on your stomach and elbows. The cavern is lit up with oil lamps spaced evenly to create a dim light.

Once we manage to get inside, the cave is an awful concoction of putrid smells. Death, rot, blood and flesh hang around everywhere, mixed in with unfamiliar musky scents.

“There’re at least 30 different scents here!” Liam exclaims, his body tense. “None of them are new or present. And your Uncle’s along with Jackie’s... I’d wager about a day old.”

I look at John who confirms.

I slide ahead towards the downward slope, focusing on the blood smell coming from there. It is human blood. Raina takes hold of my arm and the look on her face is fearful.

“Mina, it is not pretty back there. I didn’t...”

“Stay here with John,” I speak evenly, though I feel anything but.

I take a deep breath, trying not to taste the vile air all at once. There are scuffling sounds and I steel myself against the aforementioned rats. When I get back upright and my eyes adjust to the faint light filtering in from behind Liam and I, I had to put my hand over my mouth to stop the cries that jerk loose. I feel the bile pushing into my throat. The shock is two-fold. Some of the girls are dead, their bodies piled in a corner. Rats aren’t even trying to run away when I go closer. Some of the girls are eating from the rotting flesh of the dead ones; others lie in the pile as if to cuddle up to them.

I look at Liam with a manic anger.

“They all look...” I cannot finish.

“Like you. Yes.”

One redhead after another, seven of them alive. Their skins are pale, their faces sunken in and black circles around their eyes. They look dirty, drained and their bodies are covered in sores and marks. Most of them are half naked and bruised.

Liam’s jaw clenches. I step forward to the nearest girl who gives me a breathtakingly beautiful

smile, as if she's proud to be here and happy to see me!

"She serves," and holds her shaky arm out.

When I get close enough to put my hand to her chest, there was no denying it. These girls are here of their own free will – but they have lost their will to be or know anything else. I share the memory of them coming here with John who lets out an audible growl upstairs.

"Liam..."

"This is the reality of what we are, Carmina." His voice is cold and curt. I feel like I may have upset him by feeling so much turmoil over the scene in front of me.

Liam watches and feels his instincts react. He cannot deny his own nature. They are human, and there's blood - some of it fresh. It is vile and tempting at the same time. They all look, to some degree, like Carmina. They were selected in this manner. But why? Why would the Gello'Des make such a selection?

Liam looks at Carmina and tries to mask his thoughts, but it is too late. It would be merciful for them. It won't even take much. His thirst would be satisfied for a while longer which would make being near his Rockflower more tolerable. The look on Carmina's face stops his thoughts in their tracks.

"Liam **no!** Get out! **Get out.**" The hiss was not intended but there is no manner in which I can do this calmly. I follow Liam's look to the girl with the outstretched arm and feel his thoughts and desires as clear I can hear my own heartbeat. I push her hand away and she moves back to the pack that is tearing morsels off the bones.

"*Bro, we have to get out of here.*" John stresses to Liam, having picked up on the thread of his mind too.

"*It would be merciful to...*"

"*No. Vixen won't forgive us. Bro, come back here. Let her deal with this. We can't.*"

I look at Liam and use every bit of anger and sadness to push him out of the way.

"*Take Raina outside, on my Uncle's land, find a place to stay with her. I'll... find you.*" I command them both. My disgust rises up along with the ghastly smells surrounding me.

"*I'm sorry Carmina,*" Liam whispers and leaves the room. I crouch and watch the girls. I don't know what I'm supposed to do with them! They cannot be rescued anymore.

Another girl steps closer to me, looking healthier, with clarity in her eyes when she circles me.

"You come to serve too?" She asks, and the shock of her words ripple through me. She is chewing on a decaying finger noisily. I realize she why she thinks that, as I look like them.

"Yes."

“Where is your blood-other?” I have no idea what she’s talking about but assume it has something to do with the person who brought you or drinks from you.

“He... he just left.” I point to where Liam went.

“He’s too old. You are lying.” She hisses at me and the others lift out of their daze to join her.

“I– He is original, from Russia. He–he trades.” I am making this up as I go along, trying to read their minds but it is so jumbled in there. The dominant, coherent thoughts are the ones that come from her mouth.

“You are fresh. They will kill us now.” I don’t know if she is lamenting or hopeful.

Everything is confusing to me at the moment. I feel like I’m not here, as if this is not happening and I’m watching a horror movie. This does not even feel like one of my personally branded nightmares. I feel my head swimming. My stomach is turning and it takes so much control to stop the heaving that threatens to dunk me under.

“You should eat, to stay strong.” I advise her and that puts them all back at ease. Food is their main concern, not death. When the girls are all back around the decaying pile, quieting and settling down, I come to a decision.

Trying to rescue these girls is futile. They are too far gone, mentally, and they’d end up being killed by the feeders even if they do recover. They have knowledge that is off-limits. I hate myself for what I am about to do, but the alternative would serve to make me hate myself, and the man I love, even more.

I find my hunting knife in my boot and clasp it firmly in my hand, I coil my muscles, plot my route and move among the girls like a ghost. It was quick and hopefully painless. They went down fast and without a fight, without noticing their companions either. The blood on my hands is accusing me all over again. This time, I *am* the murderer.

I shuffle to the front room and gather the burning oil lamps in a hurried distortion. It takes hardly any effort at all to pile the girls into a corner, even if they are deadweight. Finding as much dry wood and leaves from around as I can, hoping it would be enough to burn, I stuff it between, and around the bodies.

I throw up so many times, soon feeling weak. Building a stone ridge around the bodies, I smash one oil lamp and another and another and another until the air is filled with the smell of burning flesh, hair, oil and clothing. I throw my own jacket into the mix after wiping my blade on it, I curse when some of the flames dies out. I take my shirt off to fan the fire back, putting it back on once I am sure everything will burn in time.

Going back the way we came, I rinse myself in the shockingly cold water, watching as smoke spirals out from behind the waterfall. I don’t want to go through the tunnel again but I have no choice, as it is the shortest way to my Uncle’s estate. I blitz through to the other side, trying to steady myself when I get there, coughing up the appalling smoke that fills the back of my throat

with every vile taste I have ever endured.

“It’s done.”

“Vixen, thank you.” John offers but I am not ready to hear it.

How can John thank me for killing? I don’t answer him; instead, I start walking towards my Uncle’s home. I am beyond angry. He has a lot to answer for.

Liam catches up with Carmina and clasps a big hand firmly around her arm. He can feel the anger inside her, as it fills up his entire body too. Holding her back significantly, he slows her down. She needs to clear her head before she confronts her Uncle or she could have another claim against her. She would never forgive herself.

“Mina... slow down.”

“I don’t want to,” comes the short, angry reply.

“Mina... my mother and father are there, they know already.”

“I don’t care.”

“Carmina!” Liam pulls her firmly against him. “Stop!”

Carmina flies into a fit of rage. Her small fists hit against his chest, her legs kicking and the yowling from her lungs burns into his memory. She has never looked more beautiful to Liam. Her wild red hair unruly against her pale face bringing out the intense green colors of her hazel eyes. Liam has his work cut out for him, as the assault against his body is relentless. He allows a little smile to himself at the thought of the honey badger. She is more than that. Right now, this volcano goddess in his arms is erupting and he cannot deny – he would rather die than live without this woman.

When Carmina’s energy runs down, Liam put her down but keep his hold on her arm, lifting her face to his. He plants a soft but firm kiss on her lips while holding her chin between his fingers. Lifting his head, he speaks against her feverish lips.

“Much better. Let them deal with this, my Rockflower... Let’s go home. There is nothing for you to do here anymore.”

The view of the wild redheaded girl and the big black and red pelted wolf is something to behold. Esmeriska and Will stand hand in hand, watching the pair with pride.

“They are good for one another,” Will says to his wife. She responds by nestling against his shoulder.

I am so tired when I get home but I first have to wash the grime and dirt from my body. I scrub myself several times, feeling the pain and guilt as the skin comes off my hands.

“Rockflower... stop that and come rest. Please.”

I emerge from the bathroom wearing one of Liam's shirts. I listen to the raindrops beating against the rooftop sitting in the bay-window. Liam brings me food and while I don't feel like eating, the storm brewing behind his eyes warns me not to argue with him.

He slides in behind me and holds me against his body.

"I'm sorry, Carmina. I couldn't help today." He whispers in my hair.

"I would have been sorrier if you did." I reply sincerely, and rest my head against his chest while the rain sings a lullaby.

More to Come

We wake up with Momma knocking on the cottage door. Slowly, I feel my body protest against the movement. I have slept in Liam's arms on the bay-seat, but the previous day's run that is kicking my muscles.

"It's open, Momma." I call, not having enough strength to get up and open the door myself. Liam is chuckling at me and I elbow him, which sets off the painful kicks again.

Momma smiles at me, walking to the kitchen with a breakfast basket. She speaks to me from there as if it is the most natural thing in the world.

"Oh, it looks so nice with the re-vamp." I hear her open the fridge door and sigh. "Your fridge is empty. No wonder John is moody."

"Momma, you didn't come to lecture me about my fridge. And John knows where the hall is!"

"No, I have not." My mother emerges with a tray packed with food and two cups, sitting herself down on the floor by the fireplace. She waves us closer.

"Come on, breakfast doesn't wait on you."

I groan as I move and even Momma lets out a breathy laugh. My mother takes a bite of the toast, her eyes on Liam while she's chewing. I hate it when they do that. I know she's talking to him and he won't answer unless he has to.

"Use your words, Momma," I chastise her and she smirks at me.

"Your Uncle is missing." She speaks.

I feel my body tense, I feel the nausea return. "When...?"

"He went to town yesterday morning, early – before you arrived there. He's not been back. The Ancients are all searching for him."

"Do you think he knows?" I ask.

"Truth be told, my dear heart, we don't know. Though searching his room, there is no indication that he wasn't coming back. Nothing was taken, and Esmeriska would know."

"Do you think...?"

"I'm not thinking anything right now, Carmina. I came to bring you breakfast and tell you myself. Also, it's your birthday in a week. Spring day is upon us. Lilly, Jarrod and J.J. will be joining us."

I narrow my eyes at my mother. It is clear there is something else she's not telling me.

"And?"

"And with what your Uncle has done, he is no longer the leader of the Earth Valley clan. That will be Lilly and Jarrod's job."

I gawk at my mother, who leans over and closes my mouth.

“Now eat. Or I’ll feed you like I used to... you know I can.”

I blush furiously. Liam cocks his head to the side and my mother’s eyes sparkle.

“When she was little...” She tells Liam

“Momma! No!”

Momma ignores me and continues telling the story.

“She would get into a strop about the food. It was around the time when I had to disguise natural food with liver. So, whenever she refused to eat, I would—” Momma leans, wriggling her index finger at me. I scoot away from her, ache or no ache “—works every time. Eat.” Momma points with that same finger at the plate in front of me.

Worried that she may break out a demonstration, I grab a piece of cheese and stick it in my mouth.

Liam is falling over with enjoyment and I swear the foundation is shaking.

“Really, Momma!”

“Really, my darling child. If I didn’t embarrass you at least once in your lifetime in front of your guy, I’m not doing my job right.” She winks at the man shaking on the floor.

After breakfast, I have another long, relaxing bath. I mull over what Momma told us. I feel numb about the previous day’s events and will deal with the backlash of that if and when it happens. I am excited to know that Lilly and Jarrod will be back, and we get to meet little J.J. I think John will be happy too. I know he’s missed Jarrod a lot.

Liam is sitting back in the window watching the rainfall and I join him. Smiling, he wraps his arms around me.

“Can’t believe it is over a year ago, I was sat in that tree over there,” he points, “Watching you from a distance...”

I turn to him in surprise. “That’s why I never heard you! I didn’t think to look **up!**”

“Yip.”

“You watched me?”

“Every night. And um, one more confession, but you’re not allowed to get angry at me... promise?”

“I can’t promise that.”

“Then I can’t tell you.” He says and holds me closer.

“Liam! Ok, ok, I promise.”

“I used Jarrod’s soap to mask my scent so that I can watch over you while you sleep, here in the cottage.” He sounds guilty at the memory.

“You what?!” I turn around to see if he’s joking but it is clear he’s not.

“I missed you so much, Carmina, and when you slept... As horrible as your dreams were, I could share in them. Be close to you. Like I did the first month after we met.”

“Momma sort of told me about that. She said you slept at the window for a month!”

“I did. You didn’t remember me and I couldn’t forget you.”

“Liam... I’m so sorry, it must have been so hard for you.”

He kisses my cheek, breathing in gently. “I was close to you, which was all that mattered.”

I turn all the way around, sitting on my knees; I hug Liam hard against me.

“Hmmm,” he murmurs against my neck. “Steady on now...” I don’t let him go, and I share with him every grain of emotion that fills me in that very moment. I feel terrible for causing him so much pain and hurt, and yet – I feel proud and loved and wanted by a man who could literally pick and choose.

“Liam, I’m so sorry. I forget sometimes how hard it is for you to be with me. I take it for granted. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t do that, my Rockflower. Don’t apologize. Just don’t leave me again.”

I make a promise to Liam that I intend to keep, no matter what.

“I promise...”

The kiss that follows is filled with tender passion, sweet promises and gentle caution.

We spend the rest of the day lounging and reading. For a short while, I convince myself the monstrous world I live in does not exist and in this cottage is my fairytale. I am no longer the ugly duckling. I am loved by a man who is perfect in every way and to call him a prince would be an insult; he is so much more!

Liam smiles perceptively at the thought and brushes a stray hair from my face, holding my head against his shoulder.

Things to Be

Tomorrow is spring day, my birthday. I am cautiously optimistic. Jarrod, Lilly and J.J. will arrive just before lunch tomorrow and, if I was unsure about John’s excitement, it becomes obvious when he pokes his head through the kitchen door.

“Morning, John.”

“Hey, Vixen. Listen, I um, did something for the baby... you mind having a look?”

Clutching my cup of tea, I motion John out of the door. He strolls with his arm around my waist towards Lilly and Jarrod’s home. John opens the door and the first thing I notice is the smell of paint.

“You’re going to have to open up John, the smell is... strong.”

“Yeah, I think I grew so used to it...”

When John opens the door to the baby room, I come close to dropping my cup. The little boys’ room is transformed into a pirate toy store. There is every imaginable gift. The walls are painted in a Pirate cabin style with wooden slates, a pirate bed and a big pirate treasure trunk piled with more toys. The shelves are like a pirate bookshelf with heavy wood and books from top to bottom, draped with rope netting.

“I ... didn’t know what to get, so um... I got everything.” John shuffles sheepishly next to me.

“John! This is incredible! A bit much... but, my goodness, it is wonderful!”

“Well, he is going to grow, isn’t he?” John defends his actions.

“And then he’s going to want more stuff – but if he has everything... then well... um. I just couldn’t choose.”

I laugh at the unusual awkwardness. I’ve never seen him like this before. He is nervously excited and genuinely worried that the baby, a few months old, won’t like it.

“John... what a generous gift. I am sure J.J. will love it... All the more if the two J’s he’s named after share in this with him.”

John’s face lights up and he grins. “I am hoping so! I didn’t ask Jarrod and Lilly but...”

“I can hear Lilly’s squeal already. She is going to hug you silly!” I laugh.

I take John’s hand and drag him out of the room.

“It is perfect.” I whisper to him.

“Yeah, I also stocked their fridge and...well, come, there’s more...”

When John drags me to the living room, it is filled with the most beautiful flowers. Lilly’s favorites – baby’s breath and pink carnations – are arranged all over the place and a wood carving with the Moretti emblem is on the face of a low coffee table. The room is re-painted in warm colors and the furniture replaced with sturdy, heavy, cleanable material. The lights in the ceiling look like tea-candles and highlight each vase with flowers. It is truly a fairytale room.

“Raina helped with this.” He confesses, still worried. “She says it is spring after all.”

“Oh, now I’m sure you are going to need earplugs! John, this is amazing!”

“I missed them, Carmina, so much...” His face is solemn and serious, moving me to hug him to me.

“I know, you big lump. They are here tomorrow... This is beautiful!”

“There’s one more thing...”

When John opens the back garden, it has been transformed to a family outdoor dining area with an adjacent play area.

“They can watch him, or them, play... Children need outside too.” He says with conviction. I tilt my head to John and smile.

“They do.”

“Do you think they will stay here or at your Uncle’s old home?”

“If I know Lilly and Jarrod, they’ll stay here. But they have responsibilities, who knows how Lilly will organize herself around it.”

With that, we go back to my cottage, John looking marginally relieved about my reaction.

“John... we love you so much. J.J. is going to love you so much. Raina already thinks you’re a god... Thank you, mutt, for everything you do for us.”

John abruptly bundles me into his arms and whispers, “Thank you Vixen, you don’t know how much that means to me.”

“I think I do...” I let him know and hug him hard.

John lets me go as quickly as he gathered me to him and mutters: “You need to get out of your PJs, woman; I can’t believe how high the sun is and you’re not even dressed properly! What would the neighbors say?”

“Why you little—”

But John is already setting off in the opposite direction. As I approach the cottage, I see Liam returning from his run and skip along.

The rest of the day passes lazily and peaceful. Momma won’t hear of me helping with the preparations for tomorrow. “Who’s heard of working on your own birthday celebration? Go read

something.”

When the sun is almost setting, I hear Raina’s fast little steps approach. Like John, she’s taken to using the kitchen door and, also like John, the fridge is scarcely passed by. I stand inside, waiting for her.

“Hey Raina,” I greet when she looks through the door.

“OH! Hi Carmina!” She answers too quickly. I narrow my eyes.

“Come to find my fridge? You’d swear Momma is not feeding her clan!”

Raina blushes and sits down at the table. “No, I came to see you. Well, I was hoping to sneak past you - you’re good!”

I lift an eyebrow and take a plate with snack food out. I’m hungry again anyway, so it won’t go to waste. Putting the plate in front of Raina, she grabs my hand and instructs me: “Open your hand, and close your eyes.”

I do as I’m told but peek through one eye.

“No! No cheating, Carmina! Uncle **Liam!**” she calls for re-enforcement. I smile at the way she’s calling Liam and John ‘Uncle’, like she’s claimed them and, despite their protests, she’s not letting go.

“Raina! Good to see you.”

“Yeah, hi. Cover her eyes, she’s a cheater,” Raina commands the Ancient; the same Ancient she was petrified off not so long ago. Liam obliges proudly before I can protest.

“Glad to be of service, little lady.”

I feel the happiness swirling around the room between the two with me and it makes me proud. Fast and light, eight items are placed on my palm.

“There. Now she can look. Thank you Uncle. This Vixen is a handful!” She mimics John and I hear Liam chuckling.

When I open my eyes, I stare at my hand; eight perfectly shaped crystal teardrops, each one with an initial in silver floating inside. R, J, L, M, J and J.J. Another has a copper R, different from the others and one L in gold.

“Everyone who would love to catch your tears so they don’t have to spill - family! I made you this to remind you we love you and we feel with you. See... Look.”

Raina’s eager hands turn them around one by one as she tell me who the teardrop belongs to.

“There is one for me - for Raina, one for Uncle John, and one for Momma Margarith, one for Lilly, one for Jarrod, one for baby J.J. and one for Roland’s spirit – and Uncle Liam’s in gold because he catches your special tears.” She explains excitedly.

Liam winks at Raina, pulling my hand closer to look at the charms. I am still stunned. When Liam moves my hand, the light catches the items in my palm, tossing sparkling beams against the walls in the kitchen.

“Now, isn’t that coincidental?” He grins. “I have a charm bracelet here in my pocket that would fit those perfectly!”

I cannot speak at all. Liam’s hand hardly moves and the charms are added to the bracelet and clasped around my wrist.

“It ... is just...” I can’t speak and try hard not to cry.

“Happy birthday for tomorrow – and really, Carmina. You’re getting old.” Raina says. Grabbing a hand full of snack food - “For Uncle John,” - she darts out the door. Liam bursts out laughing.

“Do you like it?”

“I love it so much! I’m a big cry-baby, aint I?”

“No - according to Raina, you’re just old! Why would she say such a thing?!”

“Oh... the Romany reckons if you’re past your teens, you’re on the shelf. Marriage is more difficult and children are just about out of the question too. She’s not adapted that view yet...” I blush.

“Hmmm, so... you’re getting old, huh?” This amuses Liam and I punch him in the shoulder, achieving nothing but a mild ache in my hand.

“Thank you Liam... for this,” I hold my arm up and let the shiny teardrops dangle.

“Thank you for being a cry-baby, my Rockflower... your tears is what keeps us immortals... human.”

I have nothing more to say so I lift my mouth to Liam’s for a kiss, to which he happily obliges.

When I wake up, Liam springs out of bed like a broken coil-spring.

“Stay,” he chirps at me and I stretch lazily. I hear him in the kitchen and shake my head. Liam gets back to me with a tray, upon which is a flower and breakfast. There is a card in his hand and he looks nervous when he hands it over.

When I open the card, it reads: “Will you be my valentine?”

Confused, I look at Liam.

“With everything going on, we’ve missed it twice already. I’ve not forgotten. I think your birthday and Valentine’s Day can be one day – that way we will always have time to celebrate it.” He produces another gift from under the bed.

“Liam! This is so unfair! I... I have nothing to give you for our Valentine’s.”

Liam grins impishly and rubs over his hair. “You do, you just don’t know it yet.” He motions to the box. “Open it. I love seeing your face when you see things for the first time.”

I place the food next to me, drinking the juice first to empty the glass. I have learned early in my life that if it can spill, I’ll wear it sooner than not.

When I open the box and lift the soft tissue paper away, I am instantly possessed by Lilly. The dress I lift from the box is sensational; soft light silks in beautiful green layered up in a ballerina style. Built into the dress is a blood red corset with embroidered green leaves and vines, added to it one small broach-like yellow and gold sunflower.

“Liam! This... is too much!”

“I have missed many years... indulge me, my Rockflower... just for today?” When Liam turns on the charm and makes those sweet, sensual tones flow through his voice, there is just no way for me to resist.

“Just... for today.” I agree.

“Good.” His mood turns all ‘normal’ gain.

“Your shoes.” He hands me another box and inside is the daintiest pair of ballerina shoes.

“Oh, Liam!”

“I heard a stray thought about an ugly duckling once. Your fairy godmother stepped in and helped

me pick that. You can thank my mother later.” Liam grins triumphantly.

“My turn.” He leaves fast.

I barely manage to contain my excitement. Spring is in the air. Love and blossoms and beauty and family and ... I firmly put the horrors out of my head and choose to enjoy the day. When Liam returns, I have to contain myself. Liam’s green shirt matches the color of my dress and the sleeves on his pants are rolled up to his calves. On the pocket of his shirt is matching sunflower embroidery. The string-collared shirt fits him perfectly, accentuating his shoulders, chest and arms. I swallow hard and let the butterflies loose in my belly, while my heart beats a tribal dance through my chest. I feel like a princess and the gods sent their handpicked prince, just for me. And he is absolutely... Liam’s fingers snap in front of my face and he is super pleased with the results. He holds his arm out to me and we walk together to the breakfast hall.

“Oh,” I whisper to him, “Yes. I will be your valentine.”

“HmMMM, one down, one to go.” He muses and a secretive light flickers through his eyes.

When we get to the courtyard, I stop to take it all in. Momma has outdone herself. There are flowers everywhere. The stalls are made up of old medieval style kiosks with drapes of soft silken materials. The food smells are drifting up all around and in the center of it all, a small podium is made up with white satin and red roses. The ground is covered in stepping-stones making pathways all around. In the trees are lanterns, already lit, with small, shiny lights netted over each tree, covering them. I have **no** idea how she did that! It is beautiful!

Raina runs up to me with Momma shortly behind her, arm in arm with Lady E.

“You two look like the fairy king and queen!” Raina shouts and I blush.

Liam clears his throat. “Then let the King bestow a wish upon his favorite elf. What will you wish for?”

Raina claps excitedly and, suddenly, she grabs Liam’s hand, pulling him down and whispers in his ear. The look on Liam’s face was a mixture of serious frowning and amused anticipation. He nods a few times and then stands up, pulling his shirt straight.

“Well, I think your wish is my command little lady.” He clears his throat and calls out over the courtyard in a loud, thundering roll.

“Hear Ye! Hear YE! Come one, come all! Bring your children, bring your family!” Liam looks down at Raina who nods in approval and waves her hand for him to get on with it. He clears his throat again, having attracted all the attention in the courtyard.

“Raina, the...Fairy King’s favorite elf, hereby requests official acceptance into the Fire Valley clan... If you agree to this wish, say AYE!”

I watch astonished as Momma puts her hand in front of her mouth and Lady E leans into my mother’s shoulder. Didn’t see this coming by a mile but what a great thing!

As one, the courtyard all shouts “AYE!” and John rushes to pick Raina up onto his shoulder.

“Then, by the power invested in me, I beseech the Mother Queen!” Liam turns to Momma who’s crying with joy.

“Of course! Of course, Raina, of course!”

When John puts Raina down, she runs to Momma and buries her head in her dress. “I have a home. Nobody can send me away again. I have a home!”

Momma was hoping to extend the official adoption to Raina earlier. She did not want to force Raina into a decision and decided to wait a while longer. It is now apparent that Raina is done waiting. She has chosen her family out of love, not desperation. Her fears are soothed with the knowledge she has a home.

“Let no person even try!” John shouts, brandishing a stick as if it were a sword.

“The young Elf Raina will have a knight... and uh, wolf! To protect her and her home.”

The cheers and celebrations about this wonderful turn of the morning flair up again and are accompanied by the music for the day.

I whisper to Liam: “You are amazing, my King.”

“I’m working up to astonishing.” Liam teases, taking my hand, walking with me through the food stalls.

The day progress as expected: lots of food, lots of games and running around; lots of laughter and jostling between the wolf families. When the household car pulls up, everyone lines up at the gate to welcome Jarrod, Lilly and little J.J. home. It does not take long for John and Jarrod to form their double trouble duo.

“Duuude!” and “ouch! Sorry, Mom!” John gets a slap from his mother before he could continue.

“You got fat!”

“I’ll show you fat, puppy!” And off they go.

Lilly looks like a natural momma, cheeks flushed and happy as she introduces their baby to the clan.

“And this is your Aunty Carmina!” She says. I put my finger out to the chubby cheeked boy who promptly grabs it and start chewing.

“He knows where the snacks are already!” John teases as I withdraw a spittle-wet finger from J.J.

Lady E doesn’t wait for an invitation; she simply takes the baby from Lilly. The two older women wave us away like we’re intruding and sidle off to the big old evergreen tree. Momma has already set up a small playpen and sleeping area for the baby. I think that child is going to be the most spoiled vampire half-breed on this planet. Raina attaches herself to J.J. and the bond was almost instant. J.J.’s eyes follows her everywhere and, from time to time, you can hear him scream with laughter at Raina. Like Lilly, she’s a natural with the kids.

I walk Lilly to their home, while Jarrod, John and Liam follow, enthralled in some bizarre game of “look at my muscles”, behind us. I stand back, not wanting to cover my ears openly when Lilly walks inside. Her squeal was as I predicted. She flies out the door minutes later and tackles John into a typical Lilly hug-jump-up-and-down motion. John grins proudly and Jarrod pretends to growl.

“Back less than an hour and you excite my wife? What have you done?”

John stands like a stone pillar while Lilly grabs Jarrod's hand dragging him inside. I hear the roar from inside: "YARRR MATEYS, WENCH BRING ME A DRINK!"

Lilly's retort slays me: "Not until you scrub the deck you sea-dog, what do you think this is, a two-bit parlor?"

I whisper to John, "I think you got it right!"

John waits humbly outside, shuffling again until Lilly and Jarrod both emerge from the house.

"John, what a splendid thing to come home to! Thank you!" Jarrod grabs the Ancient into a bear hug.

"It was nothing; Raina helped."

Liam takes my hand and steals me away, leaving the three to enjoy their reunion.

When night falls over the courtyard, the effect is spectacular. The family all gathers around and share stories, food and general merriment. Liam has vanished and I assume he is off with Jarrod and John chasing someone or something. When the silence falls instantly over the clan, I turn to look behind me.

John, Jarrod and Liam are all standing on the podium in black tuxes. Lilly, Momma and Lady E stand up and join them. The silence in the enclosure is sweetly interrupted by the soft music which ends when Liam steps up and holds his hand out to me – I swallow a million times, trying to figure out why my mouth is so damn dry.

He takes my hand in his, looking over his shoulder and then speaks clearly: "Today, you agreed to be my valentine. I have one more request."

Liam sinks to one knee, turning my palm up and kissing across my pulse, like he's done a hundred times before.

"Liam..." I start but he rolls his eyes up to me and the look on his face near stops my heart.

"You promised me you wouldn't ever leave me again." The music starts up and I recognize the song, *A Thousand Years* by Christina Perri. The small group behind Liam recites the words and I feel the tears streaming down my face. Liam drops his forehead into my palm while the words paint my soul every color but blue.

Heart beats fast

Colors and promises

How to be brave?

How can I love when I'm afraid to fall?

But watching you stand alone,

All of my doubt suddenly goes away somehow.

One step closer

I have died every day waiting for you

Darling, don't be afraid I have loved you

For a thousand years

I'll love you for a thousand more

Time stands still

Beauty in all she is

I will be brave

I will not let anything take away

What's standing in front of me

Every breath

Every hour has come to this

One step closer

I have died every day waiting for you

Darling, don't be afraid I have loved you

For a thousand years

I'll love you for a thousand more

And all along I believed I would find you

Time has brought your heart to me

I have loved you for a thousand years

I'll love you for a thousand more

One step closer

One step closer

I have died every day waiting for you

Darling don't be afraid I have loved you

For a thousand years

I'll love you for a thousand more

And all along I believed I would find you

Time has brought your heart to me

I have loved you for a thousand years

I'll love you for a thousand more

I'll love you for a thousand more

When the song fades, and the silence falls again, Liam lifts his face to mine.

“Carmina Rose, Rockflower, Vixen, Huntress, Redheaded Volcano Goddess... I have waited so long... please, will you marry me and make good on your promise to never leave me again?”

I look over Liam’s head to the group behind him. When I compose myself, I look down to him.

Sinking to my knees I whisper to him, “I’m dangerous for you.”

He smiles and nods. “And I’m dangerous for you.”

I close my eyes.

“Right now. We get married right now, Liam.”

I hear Momma and Lady E both say: “Told you.”

“Then right now it is, my Rockflower.” Liam stands up and Uncle Will steps forward. I didn’t even see him before.

“Then let’s get this done... before she changes her mind.” He says with a big grin.

Everything happens fast after that; I am moving as if in a daze. Lilly grabs me off to the side to “fix the mess you made of your face.”

Lady E and Momma whirl around me to attach “the rest of your dress” to the corset part and I am transformed into a bride within minutes. They all knew! It dawns on me. They all ... I’m such a dummy!

Liam looks at Carmina standing with him, in front of his father. He cannot believe that everything went smoothly. He’s been on eggshells most of the day, and worried that Carmina may pick up on his nerves. Thankfully, everyone helped with keeping her distracted and busy, yet relaxed. When he hears her telling him that she won’t wait, he couldn’t have been more relieved. His mother and Margarith told him that she would do this. Carmina is not one for waiting, Margarith said, never has been.

Liam looks at the girl that captured his imagination and love from the very first moment he smelled her scent. He closes his eyes and recalls the first memory: the redhead sitting in the glade, looking annoyed at him because he blocked her view. How little did he know back then?

Today, he is marrying this woman, this being who has literally turned the entire species of immortals upside down and inside out. This girl who is nothing more than human and yet, everything about her challenges that perception.

Liam asks his Father to waive the traditional vows and not tempt fate by asking about objections to their unions. He is not so much worried about the fact that someone may object, though he is worried about the determined look on Carmina’s face that tells him she will not tolerate interference. Will decides to let the lot of the traditional ceremony go up on the air. He simply takes their hands in his and set the example of leading through his heart.

“I want you both to declare your love, openly and with witnesses, to one another.”

Carmina clears her throat eager and ready for this event. With a beaming smile she declares, “I hate you.”

Liam’s mouth twitches in one corner, and without hesitation he replies: “More today than yesterday, less than tomorrow. I also love you.”

Carmina responds fast and definitively, “More today than yesterday, less than tomorrow.”

Will raises both eyebrows at the pair in front of him and shrugs. These two have broken every conventional rule and law thus far, why not this one too?

“Will the witnesses accept these vows?”

John and Lilly were the first to throw their voices behind the couple with a “dang right!” and “without question.”

The rest of the company echoes their agreements in a similar fashion, some of them not answering, looking confused by the recited vows.

“Then, my Son, allow the Moretti House to welcome the new daughter into our home.”

Will turns to his wife, who brings John with her. Taking hands, they let out a howl in unison. The sound travels to the moon and back and embeds itself firmly in the memory of every person attending. When the echo dies away, Will steps away for Margarith. Margarith smiles bright.

“Then, my Daughter, all the Nightshade clan wish to welcome the new son into our home.”

Margarith ties her hair back and the clan women follow suit; the men spread their palms up.

Margarith moves to extend a palm towards Liam, and one towards her heart, the clan mimic the exact motion and as one, one word chases after the faded howled echo. “Family.”

Proudly, Liam looks at Carmina. He feels honored to be part of her clan, and exceptionally proud of introducing Carmina into the Moretti Ancients’ House.

“Witnessed and Welcomed. You may kiss.”

Liam hears Carmina’s heartbeat; he feels the heat lifting into her cheeks. Pulling her into him, he kisses her keenly, tenderly.

I feel the cold of Liam’s lips on mine. I also feel every pair of eyes on us. The thunderous cheers and roaring congratulations lift me into the clouds and beyond, but not without the usual red heat spreading over my face. The volcano rumbles at the exact moment his lips meet mine. The tremors that roll over the ground serve to spur the clan into further shouts and applause. Liam’s words burn into my heart like a personal signature: “Thank you, I am complete now.”

“And I belong,” I answer.

A tambourine sound flairs up and Raina beats the sound to a song. The clan claps along and the Rocky Road To Dublin is paved with beautiful memories. John hooks his arm into mine.

“She did that on her own. The friend-family will always be with us, living on in Raina,” John says proudly.

He then dashes off to hoist the tambourine-playing girl onto his shoulders again while dancing through the family.

Lilly slides up next to me, whispering: “Now would be the time to ask if you have any questions about... honeymoon things.”

She pokes my side and I feel my face catching fire all over again.

“Lilly!” I hiss at her, which draws a questioning look from Liam.

Lilly opens her mouth to speak to Liam and I elbow her with a warning look.

“Girl talk.” She ends up saying.

I am surprised to see Joseph and Maria join us, and the Vulture House shows up one by one.

“Carmina! Liam! Congratulations! We approve! What a great addition to the Ancient Houses...

Margarith, my dear! You are a blossoming flower yourself. Thank you for this gift!” Joseph’s charms gain hit points with Momma.

“Monkey’s Uncle.” Fayola repeats her doubt of my humanness but adds an old Jamaican blessing,

“Congratulations to both houses. Getting married is nothing; it is assuming the responsibility of marriage that counts the most.”

We spend the rest of the evening dancing and celebrating. Our clan has not been in such good spirits in a very long time. In one day we’ve had two new Elders returning with their baby, an adoption and a wedding – My valentine-birthday-wedding is the best gift I have never dreamt of. It dawns on me that as of right now... *I* am a Moretti!

Honeymoon

When the time comes to say goodnight, Liam takes my hand and leads me away from the cottage.

“Alone time. Close your eyes; don’t cheat, or I’ll have to go fetch Raina.”

He picks me up and I shove my face into his shoulder. Liam moves so smoothly, I have to peek to see if we’re going anywhere. He stops immediately and glares.

“Now, Mrs. Moretti, don’t make me tell you twice.”

I push my face firmly into his chest again, feeling the excitement blazing at the way he called me *Mrs. Moretti*.

Why am I this nervous? Oh yes, I’m human. And a virgin. And married to a vampire wolf-man... Right.

Even with my face tucked away against the cold of Liam’s body, I can smell mildew, forest and sulfur in the air. My senses are overloaded and my curiosity threatens to get the better of me.

“*Are we there yet?*” I ask the wordless question.

“*Almost...*” Liam answers. I sense him folding his body over and then the smells turn sandy and dusty. The sulfur is still evident but less so. The air feels damp yet it is warm. Liam puts me down and the slow dripping sound echoes like a soft rumor around us.

“Open.”

When I open my eyes, they take a while to adjust. When they do, I am struck in wonder. There is a beautiful natural window opening up onto the valley far below. I can see the lights of the courtyard twinkling like stars miles away. Inside, the floor is covered in soft, reddish sand. In the middle of the room we’re standing in is a natural warm spring sending up wisps of steam, condensation above dripping back down into the pool. The furniture arranged around it is carved in natural woods, some of which is still growing! The ceiling is re-constructed with deep, red hardwood beams with support

creating pillars all around. Carved in each pillar: the Moretti Emblem and an added feature of my face with flowing long hair! Two big tree-stumps create the foundation for an immense hammock towards the far back of the space. Into the black rock wall is a woodstove with a counter extended on both sides; on one side, a massive amethyst rock; on the other, a natural clear crystal. The crystals are lights, casting a soft purple shade and a brighter light over the entire area.

A small bookshelf with pictures... Pictures hand drawn of me sitting in the bay window!

“Liam! This is... extraordinary!”

“I... made this retreat after I burnt down the old one. It ... is for us, to be alone. I chose the side of the Volcano because someone once thought that Chantico sleeps in here...”

“Liam...” My trembling lips are a dead giveaway of my emotional response. Liam strokes his thumb over my cheek.

“Well. I know you like you privacy, so... I created a changing room.” Liam moves towards a panel in the wall. The small leather loop serves as a handle and when he pulls at it, it reveals a divider. The screen is blank white allowing the slightest of light through.

“I asked Lilly to pack your overnight bag... I have no idea what she’s put in there. There is a small bathroom to the back with a shower, mirror and basin.”

“Th-thank you,” I stammer like a teenager, slipping in behind the screen. Looking through the bag, there is nothing that breeds confidence in me. Lilly’s has put in exactly one full change of clothing for tomorrow, my toothbrush, a towel, brush and full make-up kit. What the hell, Lilly? I hear the water ripple and close my eyes. I can do this. I can do this. I... oh gods, I don’t think I can do this!

Liam feels the conflict rushing though Carmina’s tie with him. He closes his eyes and clenches his fists nervously, waiting for her in the pool. If he had a beating heart, it would be thundering along like hers. He knows she would hear it and there would be no question that he is as excited and nervous as his new bride. Perhaps it would have helped her, the same way hearing her heartbeat racing is helping him.

Carmina strips down and tries to tame her hair again. She knows the effort is futile but it helps with her nervous energy. With the towel clutched in front of her she steps out from behind the screen. Seeing Liam in the water sends her heart off on a marathon drumbeating again. His body is perfectly still for a while, his muscles tense. His pale skin looks like liquid rock; smooth, beautiful.

Liam turns rapidly, his eyes darker than usual, his mouth in a straight line. He holds his hand to me and I am drawn to him like a moth to a flame. The water is warm against my skin, the coolness of

his a welcome contrast.

“Carmina Moretti,” His low voice hardly disturbs the room. Liam tenderly brings me closer to him, his arms folding around me like a protective pen. I lift my face to him, my arm snaking up, putting my palm against his cheek. My eyes plead with him to accept me. Dipping his head, Liam’s lips find mine and, without another word passing between us, our bodies move in unison to an Ancient, internal musical beat. I feel the fever in me growing and there is no denying that Liam is dealing with his own ice storm, too.

Like a ballet dancer, Liam lifts me to just above his head, keeping my body against his. Slowly, patiently, he slides me down resting his head against my chest; the beat increases and the drums roll through my veins. The strength in his movement, the control and the utmost tenderness cascades through me in waves. Gracefully, he lifts my leg to place it around his hip, and the other follow. I lean back into the water, spread my arms and feel myself floating.

When Carmina leans back, Liam almost hears the control being snatched away from him. Her red hair floating around her small face, her beautiful body stretched out, makes her look every part the goddess he considers her to be. There was no denying the animal rising through every part of his body. He groans softly, insistent. His hands caresses over her sides, implanting the sensation of her heated skin forever on his fingerprints.

I hear the passionate groan from Liam and his hands moving so lovingly over my skin sends an internal shiver running through my heart. Lifting myself upright, my lips find his chest, his neck and then his mouth. Liam is holding my hips perfectly still against him, his kiss burns into my lips and I feel myself sinking deeper into the folds of his spell. Gradually, he lowers me further against him until I feel us connect and unite as man and wife. My head spins with a mixture of dulled pain and heightened pleasure. I whimper against his lips and Liam stops for long enough to look into my eyes. The sparks in his dark golden eyes sends me into a mild euphoric trance while he hugs me firmer against him, sealing the bond between us completely.

The faint smell of blood drifts up to us both and ignites the fire and ice helix to its fullest potential. When I open my eyes, it is as if the world has taken on a new dimension. I know this is not natural but it feels right. There is a flutter in my heart, like it has stopped and started, skipping a beat or two in the process. I can see every molecule drifting between us and, inhaling Liam’s scent, I watch the vapors of his being rush towards me. I put my hand against his chest, and feel it move past his cold skin, past his still heart and straight onto the warm, beating heart of the animal he brings with him. I wait for the wolf to respond and when he does, I welcome him.

Liam feels himself getting lost. He opens his eyes and the look on Carmina's face strips away any defense he may have had. Her heart is a thundering invite and the touch against his chest reaches inside him. The heat pulsing from her palm reflects the beat of the rising beast he conceals within. The gentle thump in her neck is a sweet torture. Liam has given up the fight to regain control and gives in to the beauty of their bond, the fragrance of Carmina's blood drifting and nuzzling against him. The man and beast unite in perfect balance. Liam pulls Carmina's head back as slow as his eagerness will allow. He leans into the soft skin triangle by her collarbone. She lifts to welcome him.

I feel the soft kiss above my collarbone. His mouth and nose trace up to just below my ear. Liam's teeth sink into my neck and I feel the thirst through our joint consciousness. I taste, as he does, the sweetness of my own blood. I hear my heart responding, protesting against the new pain coursing through my bloodstream. For the first time since I've heard the word, I truly and extensively understand what it is to be soul-bonded to Liam. When he lifts his head, the wolf is sneering a bloody snarl at me before his mouth closes over mine again, claiming his mate.

Liam feels the energy of Carmina's blood flush through his system. His thirst is quenched rapidly by her smooth, silky life essence and yet... He finds it hard to break away from her. Carmina's heart is the solitary protestor against his chest. Liam experiences Carmina returning his kiss with a brutal conviction and the memory of Sullen's words crash down around them both in shards of passion, carnal instincts and the sizzling steam - when fire meet ice.

"The circle will complete when you spill blood to love"

I don't know how we arrived at the hammock, or when, or what time it is or how long we've been here. I wake up feeling the beautiful memory of the night before blissfully playing through my mind. Liam is holding me tight and I wonder if he thinks I will fall.

"No, I'm afraid of you hating me today."

"Why would I hate you Liam?"

"I don't know. You scare me with your intensity and I can't hold onto any control around you anymore Carmina. Never again... Gods!"

I struggle against his hold and manage to reach close to his face.

"Liam..."

“Hmmm,”

“I want more.” I tell him.

Liam’s den shakes in a rolling thunder before his lips find mine, all caution and fear falling into an abyss we don’t care to find.

* * *

It was another day before we agreed to go home lest a search party is sent after us. Liam’s eyes follow me through the shower, and into the fresh outfit. I should thank Lilly for her perfect intuition, yet again.

“My wife...” Liam tests the words as if tasting a very hot potato.

I giggle happily and wrinkle my nose at him. “My husband.”

“Rockflower?” Liam’s voice suddenly changes from the dreamy undertones to confusion. I stare as he crashes next to me. Liam takes my face between his fingers and gingerly turns it from side to side.

“Carmina... there’s no bruises or... anything!”

“Not funny Liam, you didn’t really...” The seriousness in his eyes stops me.

“I lost it, several times.” Liam close his eyes and look uncomfortable admitting his indulgence to me. I twist my neck from side to side, feeling partially stiff. I never once thought that he had actually –

“Are you sure?” I ask, knowing the answer when the memory and all it entail barge into my mind. I shrug. “As I recall, Mr. Moretti, I thoroughly encouraged you.”

The tension from Liam’s face makes place for a boyish smile.

“You did. I was worried, Carmina. I don’t recall being very gentle with you.”

“Liam, I don’t recall asking you to be either.” I move towards the overnight bag and take out my hunting blade.

“What are you—” Liam starts but I lift an eyebrow and cut into my palm.

“Damn it, Carmina!”

I hold my hand out to him. Liam moves towards me with a sensual, low growl. His big hand clasps around my wrist and, looking into my eyes, Liam kisses the cut, sucking at the crimson droplets.

“Liam... if you don’t stop, so help me – we’ll stay here another day.”

Liam licks casually over the cut and reluctantly lets my hand go. His eyes still burning into mine.

“I love seeing you lose the iron grip you wield,” I whisper stepping closer. I feel the creature stirring in my bones.

“Not-this-time.” Liam speaks through his teeth. I give him a teasing look and pout. Inspecting my hand, the burning sensation has subsided and the wound is closing already.

“Hmmm. Is this what Sullen meant?” I ask.

“I don’t know, my Rockflower. And right now, if we don’t start walking, I don’t think I’ll care for a while to come yet.”

Half way home, I simply couldn't stand being so close to Liam without being touched and practically throw myself at him like a hussy. He catches me expertly and tumbles us both onto the ground in a feverish embrace.

"Let's go back." I coax.

"No, you need proper food, you're very pale." Liam pushes himself up and takes my hand, pulling me to my feet as well. The next moment, I hear the birds lift up in fright at the boisterous laugh bursting from him.

"Oh if you – you're hair's a mess," he gasps.

I grab at the semi-forest that is now tangled and clinging in my hair. I try using my fingers as a brush but it serves to agitate the twigs and grass into wrapping itself further into the unruly red mess.

"Help me, you brute!" I scowl at Liam.

There is no help for the mess and we both give up in fits of giggles. Liam takes my hand to show me.

"It's healed. It is slower than us... but you heal fast Carmina..."

"Maybe that is the last of the gifts bestowed upon me by your immortal gods?" I tease, not exactly in the mood to figure this out now. Nor am I exactly in the mood to face our families, either.

"Or maybe Raina is right, you're a myth." Liam teases along. Like a pair of teenage sweethearts, we take the longest way home at the slowest pace we can muster, still reaching the courtyard just in time for breakfast.

Entering the courtyard, the Moretti family is present, as expected. Jarrod and Lilly are the first to sound the alarm.

"Oh, it's about time! We were going to send care packages by pigeon soon!" Jarrod shouts at us and Lilly's squeak is remarkably well reserved.

I see the reason for that when my eyes land on the sleeping baby in his cart close by. Momma gives me a quick once over and I know she's checking to make sure I'm not hurt.

I stop, confused, noticing that my place is not set as usual. I stare at my Mother. She points to a seat on the other side of the table.

"You're married now, my dear-heart..."

I feel awkward. I don't think I like this very much at all. Liam touches my arm and pulls the chair out for me, a proud smile playing on his lips.

"We can take turns." He kisses my hand before he takes his seat next to me.

"Welcome to the dark side, Vixen..." John starts.

"They have milk and cookies!" Jarrod ends.

Lady E narrows her eyes doing the same as Mother, looking me over. Self-conscious, I put my hand to my neck, wondering if a bruise did show up after all.

Liam pulls a cheeky grin at his mother.

"She's fine Mother...s," He says, looking between the two women.

"Of course she is, but she is very pale." Lilly chirps.

"I – we've not eaten much." The memories make me shuffle in the chair; I focus on the food in

front of me.

“Liam seems fed.” Uncle Will adds dryly and my eyes stretch wide while everyone else seem to enjoy the comment. Liam puts his hand over mine, leaning in to give me a kiss on the cheek. The rest of breakfast was full of hidden connotations and, at times, direct questioning. Trust Raina to bring up the brambles in my hair, under great support of just about everyone.

New Elders

Summer rain is pouring down. Life around the Volcano has returned to a margin of normality. Liam has become a lot more protective over me and substantially more possessive. It is not like there is any kind of threat towards me at the moment. Sometimes I question whether it is his love for me or if he has genuinely developed an addiction. Not that I mind either way, I get to be close to him, and I like being close to him. I find myself sulking like a child when he stays away too long on hunts or business with the Ancient Houses.

Lilly and Jarrod are staying in their home on Momma’s estate, but that does not mean Lilly is being idle either. She has instructed my Uncle’s home to be leveled to the ground. In doing so, his belongings have been packaged and stored, of course. We found a letter that was addressed to Momma, which we felt appropriate to give to her. Momma has not read it as there has been no news of her brother and, until there is confirmation of one kind or another, she can’t.

Lilly has also instructed the tunnel between the estates blown up. With there being no need for borders anymore, Lilly is building a private school for the clan families, right between she and Momma’s estate, where the caves used to be. She has also fashioned a search party led by Jarrod to find any other hidden caverns on the estate. Lilly is not having any of this cloak and dagger stuff. Where the caverns were, she starts plantations.

She is also building a dinner hall and re-allocating the massive piece of land Uncle Darius kept to himself. Family needs room, and the little apartments nearly break her heart. Uncle Darius was rather selfish in his ways while his clan lived packed together like sardines.

Liam and I agree to join Jarrod, John and Lilly for breakfast every morning, setting the example of meal times. While Lilly will not insist on it, she has spoken to the families individually, inviting them to join us for meals. Jarrod is reaching out to the clan, hoping to encourage them into joining hunts, and helping one another with the food supplies. These families don’t hunt themselves and have always relied on processed foods and produce being delivered to them. Lilly makes it clear that she has no problem with their choice of living, but she also points out the benefits of being a close knit community and working together.

With the school, there are new jobs available and with the dinner hall, isolation is less of a problem. Working with the other Elders, Jarrod and Lilly are both eager to initiate projects involving the whole of the Earth Clan. Under the advice of Uncle Will and Lady E, Lilly is getting to know the

clan's folk individually and it is emerging that there are highly skilled craftsmen and women longing for an outlet. Jarrod suggests a furniture and interior decorating company. This brings forth a lot of support and sits well with shopaholic Lilly.

Arriving at the Earth Clan breakfast hall, Liam and I are soaking wet. Liam leans into me, stroking over my cheek, he mutters softly:

“Rain is a ...good smell on you.”

There was no time to reply but the smile is firmly stuck on my face. Jarrod and Lilly are sitting in the big hall with baby J.J. in a family atmosphere. Lilly is looking sad as, yet again, the hall is empty.

John arrives right behind us and lets out a yowl.

“Geesh, Vixen! You reek.”

I blush and Jarrod is roaring with laughter. “She does smell unusually human today! Unlike you, puppy boy!”

I glower at my brother pick up baby J.J., who happily grabs my finger and sucks on it making tiny njom-njom sounds to the amusement of the small gathering.

I trade with the boy; my finger back for a piece of toast, bouncing him on my leg. J.J. looks like a cherub with puffy cheeks and dark eyes. I muse about a bow and arrow, re-naming him to cupid. As much as I am not truly maternal, this little man surely grabs at my heartstrings.

“Motherhood becomes you Mina,” Lilly's pitch is sensitively high and J.J. covers his ears.

“I think he disagrees,” I say dryly. Liam stands with his hand on my lower back.

Leaning over to baby J.J., he points a finger at him, “No eating my wife, young man,” to which J.J. claps and gurgles.

“Yeah buddy, that's **his** job!” John interjects.

While we enjoy a casual breakfast, I notice an attractive lady and her two children walking hesitantly towards the dining hall. The rain is coming down hard and they look soaked already. I hand J.J. back to his mother and point the family out to Liam.

Liam whistles hard to get John's attention, and the two of them sprint off with me right behind.

The Lady looks like a deer caught in the headlights when we reach her, and I explain quickly,

“We'll just help you inside - let the brutes take the kids inside for you, you can run with me.”

“Thank you.”

“Keep up Lady!” I call over my shoulder and the murmuring laughter chases after me. The Earth Clan has not been encouraged to use their skills, including that of their natural nature. I could feel and hear her enjoyment at the invite and then I see the streak glitch past me.

When we get inside, Lilly is already drying off the children, settling them at the table.

“Good morning, Santine!” Lilly calls out and I sense the surprise reflected on the woman's face. I smile, proud of my little sister. She's always been good with people's names.

“Morning Elder Li—”

“Oh, wash. Lilly will do. Come on.”

Santine is shy, and only nibbles while the kids lay in happily. I hear Raina approach too and

couldn't help but laugh at John's greeting.

"Hey gipsy brat! Coming for the second breakfast too?" John calls out to her.

"If Lilly doesn't mind. Momma Margarith said it's alright to come visit."

"Is it always like this?" Santine asks me in a whisper.

"Yeah, pretty much." I answer, conspiratorially.

"And you don't mind being with ... us?"

"I'm married to that big one over there." I point to Liam, "If I had a problem, it's too late now, isn't it?"

Santine giggle-snorts which brings the attention back to her. She puts her hand over her mouth and apologizes.

"Don't be silly." Lilly puts her at ease. "We're family."

"Yeah, sometimes we even get serious." Raina comments and I pull a surprised face at her cheekiness. She has most definitely been around John and Jarrod a lot!

Santine relaxes enough to open up to Lilly. She was a teacher and, since hearing about the school, she's been excited. She explains that the clan is skeptical of the changes because they are afraid of the Ancients. Jackie made their lives miserable while she was on the grounds and treated them like personal slaves. Santine also explains that her husband died recently because he stood up to the Elder and, indirectly, to the Gello'Des. Uncle Darius had an agreement with them, no doubt initiated by Jackie. When Santine mentions the details of the agreement, the three men in our company go deathly silent.

John walks up to the woman and puts his arm around her shoulders.

"We're sorry about this. It is not how things are done... Jackie is... alive because she was shown mercy. To witness your loss, Santine, would you mind sharing the details of your memory?"

Santine nods, tears rolling down her face. "I am so glad someone is listening. I've been so alone."

I look at Lilly, who's sitting quiet and pale with baby J.J in her arms. Jarrod sits next to his wife, angry. Liam has no expression at all, and that is the most menacing sign of his rage.

The Memory.

Lying on the table is a letter of announcement with the official House emblem. It reads:

"Without further questioning, one child in each house with more than one, will be taken and trained to join the Gello'Des.

I am issuing this decree in lieu of a building war and effort to protect our Valley.

The child will be returned to the family when they have served their duty or become too old to pass as Gello'Des.

Any family whom opposes this decision will be seen as a traitor to the Valley clans.

You will be cut off from any rations, supplies and funding.

Yours Sincerely,

Darius Moretti.

Elder.”

A young man is standing in front of the Elder’s door with the letter clutched in his hands. He is angry and afraid; his wife is standing behind him, eyes red from crying. The young man is protesting against the Elder’s actions, begging and pleading to let him take the place of his child.

The Elder orders the young man away and Jackie takes him. A short time later, his body is returned to the wife. He has a hole in his chest like Roland’s; she is instructed to burn his body in front of the children.

The event was witnessed and Santine was assured of her safety for as long as Jarrod and Lilly are at the helm of this estate. Lilly asks her to come visit after breakfast to work together on a plan to help the families who may need it. I smile at my sister, realizing that today she’s singlehandedly won over a clan member, making a loyal friend and right hand for life.

Uncle Darius fled the scene before the plan could be implemented and, thankfully, no children were lost. This does not excuse him though, and the Ancient Houses elevate their search for he and Jackie. There is a war brewing, but I suspect it is not the one those two were hoping for.

I spend the day with Lilly and Santine while the men are all outside helping where and how they can with the builds. The rain is not making it easy but thankfully, when you have two wolf-Ancients and an angry hunter on hand, the rain does not influence certain things. Raina stays behind to play baby-sitter to J.J. and there are happy gurgles and chuckles coming from the pirate fort-room. When things go quiet, Lilly checks and finds Raina curled protectively around J.J for a nap.

“That girl is a natural,” Lilly muses and I laugh.

“Lilly, everyone is a natural to you if they are nice to children.”

When lunchtime comes around, there are three more families in the hall. Lilly looks proud and happy. They are not very talkative but Santine puts them at ease quick enough with the help of John and Liam. When Santine tells them I’m married to Liam, there was a general feeling of “Oh dear” and “No way”.

By dinnertime, a few more families join. Lilly is in her element and cannot thank Santine enough for her help and input. Santine, on the other hand, is just ever so happy to feel like there’s a purpose for her again.

Liam and I walk home with Raina after dinner and inform Momma of the events. Momma already knows because Lady E is sitting at her table, fists clenching in front of her. Uncle Will is nowhere to be seen, but I gather it is because the Rulers are meeting again. I also report to Momma about Lilly’s progress and my mother turns into a peacock.

Lady E lifts her chin like a regal queen, “Had no doubt the girl could do it. She learned from the

best.”

Liam and I say our goodnights before retreating to the cottage. I have a nervous dread in the pit of my stomach. Things went well today for Lilly and I know the Earth Valley clan has taken a turn in a better direction. The new information, however, is eating into my mood like an overfed maggot.

While I’m in the bath, Liam sits on the side, one finger stroking against my arm.

“Liam, do you want children?”

“Do I want to plan for a child? No. Do I want one if it comes along? Absolutely.”

“So... you won’t mind not having a child?”

“No, I am selfish Carmina. I love children, but... Yeah, I’m selfish.”

“Good. Because I was thinking, I don’t want children. I won’t live as long as you do, and—”

Liam puts his finger to my mouth and smiles. “Carmina... don’t speak of you leaving me. I don’t want to hear it. As for children - I don’t plan on having any, but if you happen to be with child, I’d be overjoyed.”

“Ok. But you know it is a reality. I ... won’t live as long, Liam.”

Liam yanks me out of the tub and holds me to him, water splashing everywhere.

“Carmina. Don’t torture me like this. I do not wish to think about it.”

“You can change that.” I tell him.

“Carmina—”

“No. Liam, tell me why not?”

“Because, Carmina, I am not even sure I can.”

I frown at him. “Wha—?”

“To change someone, Carmina, I need to administer my brand of poison into your bloodstream. I don’t think I can. I told you I’m selfish. How hard is that to understand?”

“So, you would keep me human because you want my blood?” I hear the disbelief in my own ears.

“That’s not what I meant, but that too. Yes. I can kill you if your body rejects the poison. I will lose you by **my** doing. You have an illness in your blood, I cannot be sure you will change. I can only be sure I can kill you. And *that*, my Rockflower would not do me well. I would rather have a few more years with you than kill you today. Do you *get* it?”

I hug him back, soaking up the intensity of his words.

“I do.”

Accident

Time is passing peacefully, except for the sporadic news we receive by way of reports from outside covens and clans. There seems to be an uprising against the Gello’Des, but it is confusing. The rumors about the traitor in the Valley are increasing and Dimitri warns about the possibility of a full-scale assault on the Valley.

Momma is visiting with him and I am starting to think that Lilly’s initial speculation about them being a pair is truer than I had guessed.

Sitting in the bay window, I look up at the clear sky. It is a beautiful day and I love the pink dabs

the sun leaves behind as it sets. A piercing scream rips me from my reverie. It came from the courtyard. I look at Liam who is frozen solid in place.

A panicked connection comes from Lady E.

“Lady E...”

*“Carmina! Bring Liam, come to the courtyard, and **please** get Liam!”*

I feel the terror and anguish flow from her and look at Liam. He is not moving. I walk over to him.

“Liam... **LIAM!**” I shout but he seems to be in a trance. I hold my breath, feeling my heart speed up, threatening to explode. I refuse to breathe, vividly pushing the nightmares I know into Liam’s mind. He grabs my shoulders, and only then do I ease up on the horrible images and memory.

“Your mother needs us...”

I feel absolute dread, anger and something else unidentifiable pulsing from Liam’s energy. I have no time; I still feel Lady E’s mood and Uncle Will join.

“Please, hurry before it is too late!” I hear her crying.

When I see Liam move, I don’t wait any longer and rush ahead to the courtyard. I dread what I will find there but know that I have to be there. I get there before him and find the family in complete disarray. My eyes search for Jarrod and Lilly but don’t find them nearby. Liam is right next to me, trying to turn me away.

“Carmina—”

I hit his arm away from me and feel the bones in my fingers crack.

“What is going on?”

When I break through the group, I smell blood. Strange smelling blood; I recognize the smell from memory and the image of Roland flashes into my head. I feel sick but the stubbornness in me refuses to turn away or give into the feeling. When I see John, I hear the scream burn from my throat, cramming into my ears.

I rush to John’s side and look him over. My hands search his body for other damage but the gaping wound in his chest draws my attention back. I feel my head swimming and the new dimension experience returns. Every molecule is vibrating into my view. I see the poison as if bubbles boiling through John’s chest. I see the metal arrowhead and freeze. That is what delivered the poison!

I look up and see Roland strolling towards me, a cocky look on his face, crouching next to me.

“Hello, devil’s advocate,” He greets, the same way as when he died.

“Roland?”

“Yeah, I made a bet with the devil and he lost. John needs your help.” He waves his hand loosely over John.

I stare into the wound.

“Roland, I don’t know what to do!” I tell him honestly.

“It’s in your blood. It’s in *YOUR* blood Carmina.” Roland gets up, shoves his hands in his pockets and strolls off.

“Don’t make me lose this bet, I’ll see you around – I promised, didn’t I?” He laughs and vanishes as fast as he came.

Liam is at my shoulder and frowning down on me. I am shaking like a leaf and I have no idea what's just happened. Roland came to – Too farfetched. I need to get a grip.

“Carmina-?”

I reach for my hunting blade on the side of my boot.

“Change, all of you. CHANGE!” I scream the command at them. It certainly wasn't a request. Liam still wants to argue but I push him away hard. Three static crackles, three wolves.

“Hold him still. Please.”

The wolves lay over John's body, effectively pinning him down. I push my fingers into the cavity and feel around finding the arrowhead. Scooping out as much of the blood as I can, I then use the blade to cut the arrowhead away from the flesh and bone. John is roaring under me and the convulsion of his body is making the efforts difficult.

“John... *Don't fight me on this.*” I speak soothingly to him, letting the calm I feel run in streams through his mind.

The process is slow but at long last I can lift the whole device, with chunks of tissue still clinging to it, away from John.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I hear Roland telling me again it is in my blood. I look down on John's chest, the runny crimson seem to slow down as soon as the device is removed. But it does not stop.

The clan knows by now to stay away from the blood and the circle is wide around me. I tie my hair back, and look around the courtyard. My eyes turn towards the volcano and I prey to the sleeping goddess for guidance. I wipe the blade with my shirt, then re-do the same over my hair. I have no time to disinfect this blade and I have to use it. There's no time.

“*Rockflower? No, Carmina no! What are you doing?!*”

“*It's in my blood, and my blood is in my body Liam.*” I stare blankly ahead of me, taking a few deep breaths.

“*Mina?*” Uncle Will questions.

“*If you can't control yourself, you have to go!*”

I grit my teeth and slice my arm across the pulse. I hear Liam's howl, followed by his father's and mother's. My clan doesn't move; they are all standing in silence. I watch the blood flow freely for a while and then stop. I didn't cut deep enough! Damn it! I slice the other wrist too and force through the pain to cut deeper. The blood flows generously and I hold my bleeding wrist over the cavity in John's chest.

“Please... let this be what you meant, Roland.”

The new dimension sets in again, and I see the ruby-red of my own blood seeping in among the darker shade of John's. I use my free hand, spreading and dabbing it at the tips of the broken bones.

“Please... Ambrogio? Chantico... Roland... anyone... now is a good time to help me!” I whisper, seeing my breath leaving my mouth as I speak. The bubbling stops inside the cavity and the bright

plasma is spreading like a harsh fire. For a moment, I think that it looks so beautiful, like a flower growing and waiting to bloom. I see the glimmer of the gipsy brat, **my** gipsy brat and smile up at him. I didn't lose him his bet.

Liam sees the smile set on Carmina's face, like she's in a trance. He smells her blood and it is taking all his effort not to tear her apart. He feels John's body relaxing under them.

"Mother?" He questions.

Instantly, Lady E replies: "He's healing."

Liam looks back to Carmina and is careful not to startle her. He drives into her conscious space and, upon seeing the world through Carmina's eyes, the big wolf closes his. He remembers this view, he remembers her touch; how she reached past the cold and invited the heat. She saved him from himself, and now she saved his brother from a permanent death. The Moretti Ancient house is indebted.

I sit back, feeling the energy draining from me, watching the view fading away. My mouth is dry. "Um... I'm thirsty." I declare and feel myself dragged off by the nauseating fog. I crawl away to throw up. I roll over onto my back, trying hard to catch my breath when someone holds water to my mouth. It feels like slime when it touches my lips and I spit it out, pushing the helping hand away.

I don't hear John anymore. Oh gods, did I kill him? I'm so sorry! I have no idea what I just did but my arm is aching, my hand is aching from hitting Liam and I think I stopped the bleeding but I may have waited too long. I pass out and tumble straight into a nightmare, for the first time in forever.

**** The dreams are nightmares are dreams and nightmares****

The land is changing. The ground is covered with blood.

Everyone is dead. Everyone is dying. I did this.

The arrowheads are spread about the ground like booby-traps.

I don't have enough blood to help them all. There is mud pouring from my veins.

Jackie is standing with Liam, snarling at me. Protecting HIM from ME.

"You did this. You. You did this."

"No! I love them. No! I'm sorry!"

Carmina! No, come back to me my love, please. PLEASE Rockflower... you made me promise!

Liam shakes Carmina, trying to wake her up from the dream. Eventually she opens her eyes but there is hardly any recognition in the dull far off gaze. There is a screech above, getting closer. The Bearded Vulture practically lands right on top of Carmina.

Fayola rushes into the links: “*They’re coming for Carmina.*”

Battle

I hear the voices in my head. They are like ghosts. I remember I used to have other voices in my head, but they are gone now. Why can’t I move? What is that sound? *Why* can’t I move?!

“*How far?*”

“*They’re **right** here!*” Fayola lifts off and joins the circling Vultures above.

There was no time to move Carmina. There was no time to move John. Liam hears the approaching gusts of air. There are no footfalls. They’re fast. It takes a while for him to realize that the movement is coming from two directions towards the courtyard. Birds fly up in squawking terror. Carmina is not responding, her body is motionless, her eyes dull. Frustration and fear chokes in Liam’s chest. The Ancients draws a protective circle around Carmina. The Lynxes arrive minutes ahead of the mob. There is no doubt they’re worried, as they circle around Carmina, nudging her with their big paws and heads.

First through the gate is Darius – a few paces ahead of the Gello’Des. They look like children going on a school tour. Their movements are silent, other than the hissing and childish laughter or rebukes. They’re an unruly mob, even for their years in age. There is no real organization among them. Each one has a small device, silver in color, attached to their palms. On closer inspection, the shape of a loaded palm size crossbow is pertinent. They are armed!

“*Carmina! Please my Rockflower... please snap out of it...*”

There is no reply. Carmina is not moving. Her eyes are cloudy, void of color or emotion. Her heartbeat is steady, rhythmic like beating a stable war-drum. Her breathing is low, deep, balanced. Her pale skin and ruby hair are highlighted by the brilliance of the full moon rising. The picture is a desolate portrait.

From Carmina’s Cottage, the other mob arrives at the courtyard: tall dark figures with pale white eyes, their formation militant, their movements in unison. Jackie Azzara leads them, in her original form. The pale faces are focused on the spec of brilliant red surrounded by discolored, dry blood seeped into the ground. The haunting silence from their corner is disturbed by the air whirling up

around their feet, dust and stones clattering out of their way.

The Gello'Des stop just inside the courtyard gate. The Originals stop just short of the courtyard clearing. Jackie and Darius move to be meters away from the strange scene in front of the main house. They wear matching outfits of crimson and purple. They stop two arm's lengths apart from one another, but at least a car's length from the Ancients in their animal shapes.

The Vulture screeches are circling closer. The air is stagnant, but for the beating of the wings from time to time. A swoop down to the group, low flying dive and back up, re-enforcing the Ancient Houses in a display of support and readiness.

Quietly, from the direction of the Earth Valley clans, Margarith Nightshade appears, with Dimitri Thana, Vadim, Alina and Darya. They move to stand in front of the motionless Carmina too, cautious not to drudge through the blackening pools where John was lying moments ago.

Lilly, Jarrod, Joshlyn and Edward arrive in a motion blur, silently taking up their place towards the back. From all directions, there are volunteer clan members arriving, silently. It is as if the world is holding its breath, waiting to exhale. Nervous tension flickers in all the eyes, watching the traitorous pair approaching.

"*Vixen... wake up!*" John tries again. The link between the Houses is quiet from Carmina's side. There are no dissenting emotions to find. Her usual bright energy is as dull and passionless as her body and face. The big red and black wolf, with the pair of silver and wild black Ancients, forms a triangle. John manages to shift and, laboring with stiffness and pain, he places himself in a protective stance over Carmina. His front legs are a strong, determined fort.

Margarith walks directly towards the pair, stopping them from furthering their approach, placing herself between them and the family flock gathered behind her.

"Margarith, my sister!" Darius steps towards to kiss her cheek. She stands still, not moving or returning his greeting.

Darius continues, "I brought you news." His look is manic, power drunk and bloodthirsty. Jackie lets out a sarcastic laugh and throws the Gipsy's book at Margarith. "News, of course. I bet you knew about it too!" Jackie shouts, allowing her voice to travel towards the dark pool of fighting originals.

The book lands on the ground but the Elder Margarith does not move or flinch. Her eyes are sharp, focused on Darius and Jackie; her demeanor, calm and controlled.

Lilly rushes forward when she recognizes the leather binding – Jarrod and Dimitri almost simultaneously backing her up.

"How fitting. The new Elder exposing the traitor." Darius' laugh is gruff and taunting.

“It is Carmina’s book!”

“Yes, your precious Carmina.” Jackie snarls, her human shape looking bigger than usual. “Be a dear Lilly,” she giggles and pretentiously put her hand to her mouth “Oops! I mean Elder Lilly. Read the last page – for everyone to hear, will you?”

Jarrood takes the book from his wife’s shaking hands and opens it. Reading the very last page, written in Sullen’s distinctive hand. Jarrood is visibly shaken by what he silently reads. He turns to look at the gathered group behind him and shakes his head.

“Read it!” Jackie insists and Jarrood clears his throat. His voice is passionate, filled with pride and loyalty.

“The Human Warrior is born.

There is a story that need be told.

The caravan has travelled far and wide.

We learned of a love between an immortal and a human girl.

They were smitten, and she wanted to join him.

But neither knew she was with child.

It was impossible, the declaration stated.

When he tried to change her soul, the baby absorbed the poison.

Over and Over until the mother had no memory of the boy she loved.

His own killed him. He was not their brother anymore.

We brought the girl to London, we orchestrated an encounter.

She was taken care of but only until they caught up with her.

The baby must die. It was the professed way.

Mother protect the child, her death was not in vain.

A girl was born. Red hair like flames waiting to be ignited.

She is human.

She will be gifted, armed.

To end the wars of wars.

She is the human warrior, the savior of an immortal race.

There is no other like her, there won’t be again.

A mortal immortal.

Her fate is in her own hands.

*Her name is Carmina, she is a human, yet... she is **Gello’Des.**”*

“Oh gods! Carmina! You have to wake up, bella!” Joseph nudges the statue-like figure, pawing at her hands and legs. Still, she does not respond to anyone. John’s body tenses at the words being read. The clan doesn’t budge, though their eyes falls on the woman in the middle of their formation. Margarith does not move, or twitch. She does not even blink at the news. Her emotions a perfect mask on the surface, but the Houses can feel the shock charging and breaking in short bursts through Margarith’s heartbeat.

“Being Gello’Des is not a crime. What they do is criminal.”

Dimitri speaks from behind Margarith. The sound of his words carries far beyond the boundaries of the courtyard, yet...he’s hardly raised it.

“What you did is.” He motions to Darius.

“What she did is.” His face turns to Jackie.

“She is a traitor to the clans. She’s a traitor in the Ancient’s house!” A voice rings back clear, the sounds behind the words are an assault.

“Anyone who stands against the Ancients are standing *with* the creature children! You are originals! How can you side with those who diminish your food supply? With those who poison you in your sleep?”

Dimitri’s clear and precise words fly around the courtyard like shielded daggers, challenging the black mass. “Would you want to fight on the wrong side of this war?! Would you incur the wrath of those who can take away what they gave you?”

“Dimitri Thana, you are talking in the wind!” Jackie hisses. “She’s Gello’Des! That thing should die!”

Margarith Nightshade turns towards the battle-ready originals.

“I recognize you, Alexis, your name was on a buyers list. You tasted the blood of Dimitri’s treasured possession. I see you Carina; your report stated that her blood was vitalizing. Human blood. If she were Gello’Des, would you live to tell the tale? How many more of you in that fighting pile has *paid* to drink from this girl? To taste her scent in the back of your throats? Can you witness her being anything but human? Can you stand there and say what you tasted was Gello’Des? You would have been choking, dying or crazed... are your minds drifting? Will you stand *WITH* the Gello’Des against us? Will you support a banished Ancient who tried to sever a soul-bond?”

Margarith speaks and there is no accusation in her words; no pleading, no anger.

There was a cry inside the black mass. “No, I cannot!” and another, and another, like a ripple towards the main house while the attention turns towards the Gello’Des.

“She was protected by the blood servants,” Dimitri makes his final stance. “What blood servant, even forced, would protect a Gello’Des?”

The decision is confirmed when the cries and threatening crouches focus their hunt against the child-like monsters.

Jackie screams at them in anger, her wild eyes and cat like movements ever-changing. When she realizes that she has lost her army, she turns on the one person blamed in her psychotic mind: Darius.

Pouncing like the Lynx she carries inside, she pushes him to the ground and a small, clicking sound explodes in Darius’ stomach. The bones of his spine shatter and he is paralyzed. Slowly, his blood turns darker, poisonous red and seeps into the ground below him.

Darius fixes his eyes on Margarith, who wisely retreats along with Dimitri, Jarrod and Lilly.

“Help me! She can help me like she helped the dog! I’m family!”

Jackie’s act spurs the Gello’Des into action. The group of child warriors let loose a series of arrows into the darkest of the bodies first. They are uncoordinated and random, leaving their victims enough time and space to escape the majority of the flying poison. The moon lights the way for the originals to lead their own assault. Calculated, precise, dividing into two parts: some defending the charging assaults towards Carmina, others leading a charge of their own.

I hear voices so far away. I used to hear voices before. These ones are very random. Why are they shouting so loud? The moon is full; bad things happen when the moon is full. Every fairytale tells you so. My life is not a nightmare anymore, but it is not a fairytale. Oh! The red blood seeping into the ground is so pretty. It is not my blood. I gave my blood to John. The light is casting shadows. Why am I being restrained? Did I kill John? John has my blood. Am I dreaming? Is this a nightmare and I am watching from the side? The ground is wet, it is hard to see the rain soaked mud from the blood soaked mud. Fresh rains fell early today; I do like the rain. It was beautiful when it cleared. The sky was painted in colors of pinks and purple, an artist’s work in progress just before the sunset.

I see the trees reaching for the sky, pulling down the moonlight. Futile. The shadows are darker and deeper, faster, sharper. Shadows are fighting. Not with light. They’re just... fighting. Without the light, there will not be shadows. The smell in the air is strange, so many strange smells. The children all look so beautiful, how can they not be loved? Dolls are what they are. Living dolls. They suffer life. Perhaps, perhaps, it is time to let them die. I hear a cry; I know the voice. Poor Uncle Darius. Will he die? Is he dead? These damn bonds are keeping me here. I wish they would let me go.

Body and Soul

Liam, in due course, hears Carmina’s random thoughts as they dart from moment to moment and back. There is no coherence in the manner of her sentences and Liam fears the worst. Has his beautiful wife finally pushed herself too far? He passes the thoughts to the others, whom narrow the gap between them the girl currently caught in stasis. Something is wrong with Carmina and there is nothing anyone can do for her.

Jackie, who is careful not to touch any of the seeping blood, is dragging off Darius’ body. She draws a line between the Gello’Des and the Originals by dragging the twitching, agonizing body over the ground. Standing with a foot on each side of the bloody line, she waits. Her arms folds over

her chest, taking delight in the carnage that is happening around her. She was created for this, she tells herself. The Valley will belong to her. Liam will belong to her. Stupid, puppy boy Liam. He will beg to have her by his side, and she will enjoy telling him to ask her again... and again. Her manic laughter is lost in the screams.

The fight becomes carnal: animal against old, child against original. There is hardly any distinction anymore, with body parts strewn. The ground is faintly disturbed, feet hardly touching it. Some of the Gello'Des break off and charge the Ancients and the Valley Clan, trying to get to Carmina. The Vultures call before diving into the Gello'Des mob, ripping off whatever their massive claws can reach. John stands over Carmina, his chest still healing but not gaping anymore. Carmina's blood is running through his wolf and the healing is happening faster than ever. His one track thought is to keep this redhead alive for as long as it takes. She saved his life.

Lilly and Jarrod fight back to back with Alina and Darya, not letting anyone pass them towards the house. The clan members protect the Elders tooth and nail while some are starting to set fire to the poisoned bodies. The smell disturbs the air.

Static is starting to form, small crackling causing hairs to stand on end.

The barking, hissing and snarling becomes desperate. Dimitri joins the originals in their fight against the Gello'Des. The originals viciously bite, ripping chunks of flesh from the children-creatures, who, in turn, fire shot after shot of arrows blindly. The courtyard turns into a bloody pool.

Liam is working around the outside of the protective circle, helping the clan members, moving the poisoned bodies away as he defends the fire-bearers. Will and Esmeriska pair off, using their claws to rip into the bodies of the child mob, pulling apart their limbs. More and more of them arrive, relentlessly charging, shooting, poisoning, assaulting! There are dead bodies strewn, body parts littering the space.

John is pushed off balance when one of the Gello'Des hits him in the chest. He takes the offender with him but this leaves Carmina exposed - something Jackie has been waiting for all this time. She sinks into a crouch, watching the struggle between the brown wolf and the dark haired teenager. She circles and sways, waiting for the perfect opportunity to get to the girl, who's not moved in all this time. Liam looks up to see Jackie readying for a charge. He tries to move towards Carmina but is hit in the chest by an arrowhead. The burst rips into his body, setting his veins on fire. He calls out through the link to the family, who are all fighting their own battles, all trying to close the protective defenses around their favorite human. Liam's eyes focus on Carmina, his beautiful wife.

There is a spark, like a firefly shook in a bottle. The crackling sound changes and the courtyard

becomes hot and humid. The air has changed and a fog is smoothly rising to hover just above the ground.

Did that cat just hit my husband?!

My bonds melt away into the ground, and I watch them spreading over the courtyard. I rub my wrists and shake my ankles. Look at this mess. Who is going to clean this up? There is so much blood; the smell fills the air and rises up, along with the trees, reaching for the full moon. It is beautiful how nature is always trying to embrace. Oh look, the moon is full. I have always known bad things happen on full moons.

Liam watches as Carmina's body splits in two. He thinks it is her soul he is watching, rubbing her wrists and shaking out her ankles as it stands up. The pale, motionless body is left behind. Carmina's hair is a fiery light display. The moon is stroking through the wild red tresses, setting it on fire, while crackles of static spread the heat and flames in every direction. Liam is convinced he is dreaming, blaming the poison seeping through his body, but the random gasps as the change becomes vividly noticed tells him his eyes are not betraying him.

Liam's body is on fire. Carmina's soul-body turns to her husband and strolls over casually with a breathtaking, playful smile. Silently, she kneels next to him, strokes his cheek and kisses his head. Liam feels her heat overpowering even that of the poison. She looks into his eyes, reaching past his body and takes hold of the arrowhead, crushing it in her palm until the last evidence of its existence is the small trickle of sand flowing between her fingers. Liam's eyes dart back to Jackie who's trimming around to Carmina's quiet body. When he looks back at his wife's soul-body, he feel the coolness return into his veins. Looking down on his chest, the wound is closing already. Liam is convinced that he's hallucinating or maybe dead. He tries to share the view with the rest of the Houses, but there is a block he can't get past.

Where Carmina's soul body walks, the air lifts and heats up, swirling around and settling back. Every person she passes feels intense heat against their skin, like the sun's concentrated rays. Her movement is fluid lava, running slowly. It moves towards Jackie. Liam calls out, but she does not even look at him.

A high-pitched electric sound rises up into the air from Carmina's still body. The battle is as good as over now as the Gello'Des is trying to escape the ominous, invisible fire passing by them. They are chased down by the originals, who are faster, better coordinated and less concerned about the elemental discharges.

As the soul body passes her protectors, they thought they could see a neon red flash of hair moving

past them...

“Jackie.” Carmina whispers. “Now, you’ve gone too far.”

Carmina’s soul-body reaches towards the charging woman. Liam is still trying to break through the link, to show the others shouting at him, asking what is going on.

Silence, like the static from an old radio, covers the misted courtyard. Smells of burning flesh, blood and poison mix with the heat that crashes like waves all around. Everyone hears *Carmina’s* voice, they hear her words, but the confusion befalls them when they see her body motionless.

“What is this?” Jackie stammers, feeling her skin burning at the throat. “How-?”

Liam looks between the soul-body and the human body on the ground. He leans over to touch Carmina’s face, calling out to her again. The soul-body looks over her shoulder at her husband and a crooked smile at his tenderness distracts her for a second, but only for a second.

“Maybe I’m just a myth.” Carmina says, reaching into Jackie’s chest with her free hand. She reaches past the quiet vampire heart and onto the beating Lynx heart.

“Maybe I’m just angry.” She squeezes the heart hard, digging her ethereal fingers into the soft tissue – a tortured scream from Jackie.

“Or maybe, Jackie, you have *gone. Too. Far.*”

Jackie’s eyes roll back in her head. Her tongue swells and protrudes from her mouth. Whatever fighting, snarling, and screaming... whatever sounds not absorbed by either Carmina’s voice or the charged atmosphere, stop. Liam watches his wife in admiration and awe.

“I still believe in *Light*. I still believe in *love*, family and *honor* and *loyalty*. I don’t believe you deserve your birthright. I am sorry Jackie Azzara, of the Lynx House. *I am truly sorry.*”

Carmina’s soul-body jerks hard, and Jackie lands on her knees, tilting forward, clutching at her chest. Carmina is holding the animal heart in both her hands. She turns her back on the lynx girl whose body is slumping on the ground. Carmina walks towards the Ancients, of which Liam is the only witness.

Standing in front of the Lynx animals of Joseph and Maria, she says sweetly, clearly and sincerely: “You deserve a worthy House member.”

As Carmina walks, a fire goes up behind her, trailing her path across the courtyard floor. The precious Lynx heart is beating in her palms, steadily. The soul-body walks towards Raina, who’s hurt beyond recognition and covered in blood. Raina opens her mouth when she feels the heat, and Carmina strokes against her hair. The blonde turns to a snowy white.

“She will be the gypsy Ancient. It is her time.” Carmina painlessly lowers the Lynx heart over the blond girl’s sporadically beating heart, stroking it into place and shaping it until they match perfectly.

Liquid fire, cold as ice, darts across the ground, clearing the mist and with it, taking the blood and the broken bodies with it.

Liam's eyes do not leave the entity moving towards her own body but not before she kisses his cheek. "I hate you, Wolf boy. I am done here."

A dark shape of a kiss welts bright red, then pitch black against Liam's cheek for all to see, and vanishes out of existence.

The courtyard is covered in sand. The gentle rain starts falling, washing away the last evidence that there was any form of confrontation.

Liam closes his eyes, sharing the memory by way of gathering witness with those that link with him.

Carmina Moretti is not 'just' human.

A short distance off, Margarith Nightshade is moving from one clan member to another, instructing them on the next course of action. Those who are injured and in need of medical attention are escorted to get themselves seen to. Those who are able to assist do so and the rest are to go home and check on their children. Thankfully, in the short battle with the Gello'Des coven, the Fire Clan has come up virtually unscathed. The originals, the dark warriors, are seeking out the shadows, waiting and guarding the courtyard battlefield, listening for any sign, any indication of renewed attacks or escapees.

The Ancients have shifted back to their human shapes, visiting with each family of the clan to share a view of the final moments of the battle. They leave Liam with his wife in the courtyard.

"Carmina..." Liam's voice is soft but urgent. When her eyes focus on him without recognition, fear chokes a new color into his otherwise golden brown eyes.

"My Rockflower?" He tries again but the hazel-sparked orbs are now looking through him as if he does not exist. Carmina's head tilts to the side, void of any thoughts – at least none that he can read.

There was no warning. There was no reason to consider a threat. In the distance, the moon catches on a silver palm sized crossbow. The moon-glinted warning came too late. Carmina's body topples over onto her husband.

The dark warrior shadow retreats and one lone call to Liam Moretti: "She was Gello'Des."

Liam's world comes to a standstill. He sees the silver arrowhead protruding from Carmina's chest. It did not explode, but...he hears her heart slow with every beat and he screams for help.

By the time anyone could reach him, there was no denying it...

Carmina Moretti's heart had stopped. Her links to the houses had been severed. This time, there was no arguing the fact that she is no longer with them.

The fiber of her tie to them fades – leaving a hollow empty thread through the three Ancient Houses where once there was a vibrant human link.

---- End ---

Thank you for reading Book one in the Second Breath Chronicles: "Hidden Carmina."

If you enjoyed the book, consider purchasing the second in the Series: "Carmina Revealed." & "Releasing Carmina"

Adri

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