

*The Blood  
Between Us*

*Daniel Devine*



# The Blood Between Us

Daniel Devine

© Copyright Daniel Devine 2015

This edition published and distributed exclusively on [www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)

This is an authorized free digital edition for registered members of obooko. Although you do not have to pay for this e-book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites nor offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author and obooko.

## Chapter 1

Helen shuddered as the white clad altar boys passed her carrying the holy cross. Their faces were lit by a pious passion but she found their soft, cherubic features revolting. Her father did not move, but she could feel the force of his attention shift upon her. She made a show of pulling tight the lace collar of her church gown.

“This old chapel is far too drafty in daylight,” she considered the flame of a guttering candle in a nearby wall sconce before raising her eyes above the stained glass images of saints, etched in vivid reds and whites, to regard the lofty ceiling. “I don’t know why we must make matters worse by always attending midnight mass.”

“Hush, child,” growled the duke. “Count it a blessing that you have walls and warmth on this winter’s night. A slight chill is not so much to endure.”

Helen reddened, feeling ashamed, but at least her father had been appeased by the opportunity to lecture and paid her no more mind; his gaze leaving her like a heavy shawl slipping off of her shoulders. In truth, the discomfort she felt at services had been growing stronger with each passing week. Initially, it had been quite mild but it had long since grown too strong for her to ignore or rationalize away. She feared she would not be able to endure attending mass much longer if her queasiness continued to intensify at this rate.

Her sister Ruth, seated beside her, knocked a knee against her own.

“Be thankful for this cold,” she whispered, giggling. “And the blessed cough and holy snot that it shall bring!”

Though she appreciated the sentiment, Helen scowled at the girl’s vulgar tone. Helen was only a few years Ruth’s senior, but her sister always struck her as severely lacking in maturity. When would the girl grow up? Even her body seemed oddly nymph-like; where Helen was tall and well-figured, her sister was small and bony despite being well past puberty. Sometimes, she thought they shared nothing beyond common parents.

Ruth’s whisper had not been quiet enough and the duke struck her sharply in the back of the head with a black-gloved hand. Their father had never been above beating his children in church if it was necessary to teach them discipline.

Helen’s sister surprised her again by smiling ruefully despite the blow. Typically, she would have whimpered and straightened into a cowed silence. Instead, the rebellious gleam in her eye made her look almost like some demented stranger. Helen wondered briefly if Ruth actually were the one actually suffering from a fever.

Helen followed through the motions of the mass like a sleepwalker, her mouth voicing prayers that touched neither her consciousness nor her soul. She marveled that she had once been a member of the devout. The memory of that younger self seemed almost alien to her now, but it had not been so long ago.

What would her mother think to see her now? It would crush her heart. But then, a stumbling horse had done a fine job of that years past, without a care for the duchess' piety or sense of propriety, so why should her dead feelings hold any more sway than Helen's living ones?

Behind the altar, the priest completed his lengthy homily about the importance of devotion to one's Lord. Since her recent loss of faith, Helen had begun to look at the preacher's messages in an entirely different light. For example, she had noticed that when the duke was in attendance, the readings tended to emphasize the importance of serving one's master and obeying without question, as opposed to the usual patter about the poor and the humble inheriting the earth.

Helen zoned out again, returning to her fugue state, until one line of prayer penetrated the haze of her thoughts.

"Et ne nos inducas in tentationem, sed libera nos a malo"

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, she thought, and knew at that moment that she was already lost. For she desired not to be led from temptation, but only to succumb to it completely once more.

She had embraced the Devil, and her soul would not be saved.

Helen felt herself flushing suddenly, the memory of another's warmth momentarily erasing the chill from the drafty chapel. Unconsciously, she rubbed her legs against each other and the feel of the smooth, cool silk over her skin reminded her of another night when clothes such as these had been slipped so slowly away.

She turned her head from the altar, some vestige of the good Catholic girl within her still ashamed of these thoughts, only to have Ruth catch her eye. The girl raised an eyebrow, almost lewdly, and Helen would have almost thought there was something knowing in that smirk.

She was left feeling embarrassed, as if Ruth had caught her in the act itself.

Finally, the mass was ended and the royal family afforded a chance to egress from their private section at the front of the chapel. Their father would be caught before he could reach his chambers. Given the duke's habitually odd hours, many a deal had been struck during meetings long after midnight following his preferred time of prayer.

Being young, and of the feminine persuasion besides, his daughters were under no such restraints. The duke's footmen would see them swiftly back to their beds.

"You'd best return to your rooms at once," said Ruth, the mocking in her tone of concern only audible to Helen due to their sibling's familiarity. "In your state, it seems you are quite in need of your bed!"

Helen flushed again, how much did her sister know? Were there things had she seen? Ruth had always been a vile little rodent, creeping around where she was not wanted!

Hopefully, Ruth thought she had caught Helen in some romance book tryst. The fact that she did not appear to have told anyone else was promising. Helen would have to arrange a

meeting where she could speak with her more openly and ensure that Ruth would keep matters secret. They were sisters, and if the situation required it, Ruth had her own skeletons that Helen could threaten to expose.

Regardless, her sister's taunting unnerved her. Was Helen's arousal so clear that everyone could see it? Looking around, no one else seemed to have taken Ruth's words at anything but face value. Indeed, her servants appeared quite sincerely concerned about hastening her out of the chill.

Helen thanked her sister for her concern, careful to show no emotion. Something about the girl was changing, and it bared investigating. A good long sisterly talk was definitely a necessity.

But as she mounted the stair leading to her quarters, her thoughts rushed toward what awaited her there, and any concerns about Ruth were quickly forgotten.

\* \* \*

Helen's chambers were atop the castle's southwest tower, but her family's hold was modest and the climb only enough to get her blood flowing. Though the cracked walls and chipped stone steps had absorbed the evening's cold, she felt stronger with each step away from the chapel, and the chill could no longer penetrate her.

The Engelmann's had ruled the lands surrounding this small keep for centuries, sometimes serving one greater lord and sometimes another, but the duchy's glory days were clearly in the past. As Helen ascended the tower's stairs, she saw flashes of the small, sleepy village huddled about the castle's walls, filled mainly with turnip farmers and goat herders. It bridged a slow-moving river that had once been of strategic importance, back when war was fought at the local level between rough bands of men fighting to be king of this hill or that.

In this new world, where wars were fought at a distance and the prize harvest of the country's youth sent off by ship to die alone on foreign shores, the duchy had little to offer in and of itself. The goods they could generate were plentiful and cheap, all over the country, and there was no great industry or culture for her people to look to with pride.

Helen had dreams of turning Engeltown into more than a one-horse town, but she was honest enough with herself to realize that these were likely pure fancy. Real change had to start at the bottom and work its way up, but even if she brought in the country's best teachers, what farmer would allow their children to lounge about in the classroom when he should be digging up the fields?

She turned the final curve of stair to her door and found it open. Her two handmaids, Sarah and Andrea, awaited her, blinking sleepily out of reddened eyes. She sent away the footmen and had her maids begin undressing her. The girls had stoked her hearth to a baking

heat to combat the weather, and sweat glistened on her naked skin as she had them change her into her sheer white satin nightclothes.

“How can you be sweating in this frigid weather?” demanded Andrea. The handmaiden was a foot taller than Helen and at least two feet broader at the shoulders. Her lineage had clearly done some mingling with the local peasant stock.

“Are you ill again?” asked Sarah, a pretty little dark-haired girl with swarthy skin and freckles. The ongoing changes in Helen’s health and behavior had not gone unnoticed, most of all by her ever-present friends and maids. “Should we call for the physician?”

Helen tied tight the scarlet sash on her robe and shooed them away.

“It is nothing but the exertion from mounting the stairs combined with the sudden heat of the fire,” she assured them. “Once I lie down in my cool bed I will be as right as rain.”

Sarah bowed meekly and drew back her covers.

“Are you certain, my lady?” asked Andrea.

Helen slid beneath her sheets and staged a mighty yawn.

“Yes! Now leave me be. Don’t think I don’t see your own bleary-eyed gazes. You both nodded off while you were awaiting me, didn’t you?”

They looked down guiltily.

“It is no matter,” she assured them. “Off to bed with you. I wish my privacy, I don’t want to hear you shifting about and disturbing me as you have of late!”

“Yes, my lady. Sleep well,” said Sarah softly, almost a whisper. She paused in the doorway as Andrea continued to eye the duke’s daughter skeptically. Helen sent them away more often than not these nights, and despite her excuses of irritability and insomnia, Andrea was not so dull as to be entirely devoid of suspicions. Fortunately, she was also not of a station to be able to act on them.

“Is there something more, Andrea?”

The handmaiden’s frown deepened the lines on her horse-like face.

“No, Helen,” she said sourly, pointedly refusing to use the proper title. “Enjoy your evening.”

Oh, I will, thought Helen; shivering with a sudden thrill. Andrea crossed the room to join Sarah at the room’s entrance. Both bowed again, and they pulled the broad wooden door shut with a thud.

Helen was on her feet at once, but was careful to scamper across the floor and put her ear to the door. It was several moments before she heard the footfalls of her friends begin to descend the tower. Once she felt certain they were out of earshot, she struggled to jostle the thick wooden bar into the brace on her door, ensuring that they would not return. It dropped into place with a boom that echoed throughout the room, and as always, she expected the noise would bring guards running; but after a few tense moments, it became clear that barring her door had not provoked any alarm.

Peter had assured her that such precautions were unnecessary, that no one would interrupt them when he did not will it. She was never sure when he was boasting, however, and saw no harm in being careful.

Her heart racing now, she nearly tripped over her own feet in her urgency as she practically sprinted across her chambers and unlatched the door to her balcony, pulling it ajar by only a few inches. Instantly, a gust of icy air swirled through the opening. She shivered with pleasure as it caressed her feverish skin through her clothes.

The wind grew stronger, her bedside candles guttering and nearly extinguishing before flickering back into life. The fire in the hearth seemed to pull back into itself for a moment before reasserting its strength with an audible snap.

The tingling on Helen's skin intensified as a gray mist began to blow in through the open portal, darkening and thickening as it slipped beneath her gown and slid along her skin to pool at her feet. She failed to contain a moan, blushing at more than her embarrassment.

The mist swirled smoothly down the front her body with tantalizing slowness, finally, regretfully releasing her to coalesce into the kneeling form of a dark-eyed young man whose oily black hair shimmered in the candlelight. He was shirtless, revealing a lean but well-muscled form; and though he wore dark green breeches, they too were revealing of his own arousal, which only renewed her own.

He pulled her sash free with one forceful tug, and suddenly the whole of her flesh was bit by the frosty air. He sprang forward, almost predatorily, to kiss her, and she wrapped her arms around him, crushing him hard against her. Her fever surged and the throbbing heat of his body only intensified the feeling. The wintry chill of the air was forgotten. She felt as if she might set the castle afire.

He lifted her from her feet, his lean arms raising her effortlessly from the floor as if she weighted nothing. He had a body like a dancer, slim and smooth with muscle, but was barely taller or larger than Helen herself; yet somehow his physical strength was immense.

His lips never left her, though they trailed from her lips to her neck, shoulders, and chest. Sometimes kissing, sometimes biting softly and unexpectedly, drawing wanton moans from her lips.

Despite his intense desire, he placed her gently upon her bed, almost as if afraid that she would break. You would think that he would know better by now, she thought with a bark of a laugh. As she struggled to unclasp his trousers, his hands drifted softly through her hair, down her breasts, and along her thighs; gently nudging them apart. He caressed her there and she went rigid, filled with yawning need. Graceless, she managed to work his pants down around his knees and free him.

It was some time before she was once more capable of thought.

She lay against him in her bed, one hand wrapped possessively about his waist, the other stroking at the already healing bites along her neck; this renewed symbol of his love that, despite her vulnerability, he fed but did not kill.

She lazily admired his sleeping form. Peter Nourlish and his family had come to her father's court a few years back, God knew what profit they thought would be found here. Helen had been defenseless against him—a handsome, aloof boy whose European upbringing made him seem older and exhilaratingly worldly. Her passion for him had followed the expected route, but he had possessed even darker secrets that she could ever have dreamed.

And to her detriment, she supposed, Helen had found herself more than willing to embrace them. She smiled and rubbed her naked form against his, the source of her Eternal Damnation, falling into a satisfied sleep.

## Chapter 2

Helen awoke to the sound of screaming.

Peter was gone and she was alone in her bed. Her fever had dissipated and she felt no more clear-headed. The fire had burned down during the night without her maids to watch over it and the warming sun had not yet risen, leaving her loathe to expose her bare skin to the world outside her comforter. A quick glance revealed that Peter had at least closed the balcony door behind him on the way out.

She wondered foggily what could be happening. Lately, nights with Peter always seemed to leave her disoriented. She raised a hand to her neck where the fresh bite throbbed faintly, but not unpleasantly. A vampire's bite was actually undetectable—like a mosquito's sting without the swelling, excepting those times when Peter had gotten a little over-amorous, not the clumsy bite of a vampire from stories meant to scare children.

The scream that had woken her had died off but it was immediately replaced by another which was quickly joined by a third. These were much lower in pitch. Men now, she realized groggily.

The howling intensified and finally the wordless terror in the cries cut through the gauze that appeared to be wrapped around her brain, allowing entry to fear and the clarity of thought that came with it.

Could the castle be under attack? An absurd thought. Who would want to invade the duchy? What was there to gain from it, more turnips?

But if there was no assault on the castle, then what could be the cause of this distress? The only thing that sprung to mind was a fire in the compound, and in that case she would do well to exit the tower.

Helen hesitated for a moment. She heard new voices added to the chorus as one man's was silenced, ominously. That these were cries of pain was unmistakable.

She sprang from her bed to the puddle of her nightclothes that still lay where they had fallen the prior evening. The bare stone was like an immense block of ice, and she hopped about awkwardly until she managed to don her slippers. This process took a few moments but the yelling coming from below only grew more chaotic. More women had begun screaming, though the deep male tones still dominated.

Helen hastily removed the bar from her door, jumping back as it nearly fell atop her foot. She grabbed a candle, barely a nub, from a table by the door before creeping out onto the stairwell.

At first she inched forward timidly, but it soon became clear that that the commotion was coming from a floor far below and that these stairs had been deserted. Indeed, as she descended she found the guard post at the entrance to the top floor abandoned.

Helen quickened her pace, suddenly wanting out of this dark, cramped stair.

She emerged onto a plush carpet stained with blood. The source of the gore was unclear, though that only served to make the sight more disturbing, as the rusty, congealing red ran as far as she could see in each direction—down the back hall, towards her sister's southeast tower, and forwards into the great hall.

There was so much. She squinted closely at the muck soiling the green carpeting, woven with the leaping fish sigil of her house. Could it really be blood?

The shouting intensified again, many men in unison, a wordless challenge. It was followed in short order by varied cries of agony. Helen wasn't certain, but she thought the two sets of voices were the same. The sounds were all coming from the great hall and, against all good sense, she headed slowly in that direction. Reaching the end of the passage, she gasped, unconsciously grasping at the tapestry hanging to her left for support as her legs, numb with shock, threatened to give way beneath her.

The great hall was a sea of death.

The floor was awash with blood, lakes of it pooling here and there about the flotsam of twisted bodies, rivers of it still surging from the wounded and recently dead, following the contours of the floor and forming puddles along the low spots in the foundation. Helen saw horror wherever she looked. Here was a butler who had slipped her extra cookies when she was a child, his right arm torn way and missing. There lay the head of one of the older kitchen maids, staring blankly back at Helen, as if baffled as to the whereabouts of its body.

Most of the corpses were men-at-arms, members of the duke's personal household guard; their swords had been broken like twigs and the shields and helms they wore had been

crumpled like paper. Despite the gruesome casualties, a number of her father's men were still standing, clustered about one of the tall windows that lined the hall. Those in the fore were grunting and swinging their weapons while those in their rear shouted encouragement or slumped to their knees grasping at wounds while shouting in pain and fear.

Her mind void of thought, Helen found herself tiptoeing closer to spy the cause of this destruction. She skidded on slick blood and had to throw her arms wide to maintain her balance. She dropped her candle, but the floor was so wet it merely fizzled out. Her right foot landed inches deep in warm liquid and she felt fluid seep inside her slipper up to her ankle.

There was an unearthly roar and a number of guardsmen went flying through the air to land just to Helen's right. She heard armor creak and bones shatter as they hit the solid stone floor, kicking up a spray of gore that reddened Helen's robe and clung, warm and stinking, to her hair.

As more brave men rushed to fill the gap left by fallen comrades, their assailant hopped nimbly onto the window ledge and into Helen's view. The figure's back was to her, its face obscured by the hood of its black cape, but she recognized Peter's form just the same.

She froze in shock as he squinted out the window, hissing against the first rays of morning light. He was attired differently than he had been when he met her that night, for those few short moments that they had remained dressed, and though it was splattered liberally with the blood of others, there was not a loose thread upon his cape despite the horde of men seeking him harm.

He turned then, his unseen eyes seeking not her but the hall's far corner, and something in his posture struck her as wrong. For a moment, she doubted it was truly Peter, but there was just too much familiar about his mannerisms. He turned away once more, the muscles of his thighs thickening as he crouched, then launched himself through the foot-thick glass of the window as if it was naught but a layer of treacherous ice.

Men leapt back from falling shards of glass as thick as Helen's arm, cheering when they saw the vampire disappear into a puff of smoke, no doubt mistaking his hatred of the sun for the success of their impotent attacks.

Helen was only peripherally aware of them, however. Instead, her eyes sought the target of his parting gaze and found her sister meeting her eyes from the far entrance to the great hall.

Ruth wore a long sleeping robe of mint green and, though she did not appear to be wounded, there were broad smears of blood across her chest and down her stomach, as if she had been rubbing herself repeatedly with her soiled hands. Indeed, as Helen stepped toward her, she was clutching one hand against a breast and running the other bloody palm up and down along her lips and cheek as if trying to paint herself with death. Noting Helen's approach, her eyes widened in surprise, then contracted in amusement.

Ruth squeezed her breast and shivered, offering her older sibling a slow, satiated smile—the glint in her eyes was ecstatic and defiant, but they rolled up into her head and the waif collapsed, bonelessly, another body amidst the chaos.

\*\*\*

“I heard the screaming,” Helen explained, trying to sound rational. “And I wanted to know what was happening.”

“And it never occurred to you that you were walking straight into danger?” thundered the duke, prompting a shushing from the physician at his side.

The three were alone in Ruth’s room, gazing at her unconscious form. Ruth had been bathed and changed and laid to bed, and had not stirred once since collapsing in the hall.

Helen found herself searching Ruth’s quarters for evidence that the girl might have recently had a visitor, but she could not be certain. The servants would have closed the windows before her arrival, given the weather and her sister’s weakened state, and if Ruth’s bed or dolls and decorations had been ruffled, they had since been straightened.

Helen had not wanted to let her sister out of her sight until she learned more about Ruth’s connection to Peter, but in the end had relented and taken the opportunity to clean herself and dress before joining the others here. The canary yellow gown that Sarah had tied her into seemed to clash both with Helen’s mood and the somber events of the morning.

“People were clearly in distress and none of the men whom should have been defending the stairs for my protection answered my call,” protested Helen. “If I was going to die, I decided that I would rather do so on my feet.”

Duke Engelmann was a tall man, and he had always seemed like a huge figure to his daughter, in both status and presence. Despite his size, in this morning’s light his features looked gaunt and pale and his hair thin. An old man who seemed to be drained of more vitality with each day that he outlived his late wife.

He ran a hand along his gray beard and began to reply, but was interrupted by the portly Dr. Jonas.

“There is nothing more I can prescribe for her, my duke,” he said with a sorrowful inclination of his head. “There is no mark upon her apart from some scratches on her neck and back and I think her malady is more of the mind than the body.”

Despite Jonas’ girth, his hands were slim-fingered and steady. He gestured one toward Ruth’s face, where she lie beatific in slumber.

“Such horrors are something that no one should be exposed to, least of all an innocent young lady like Ruth.”

Perhaps, not so innocent, Helen fumed internally but she held her tongue.

Her head was a whirlwind of questions. Was it honestly possible that Peter was being unfaithful to her, and with Ruth of all people? Even if that were true, and she certainly did not want to believe it, what could possibly have caused him to go on such a rampage? Had his true nature been discovered somehow? No one else seemed to have recognized the vampire for who he was, for Helen had not heard his name mentioned by her father or any of his officers.

Nothing that had happened made sense. Many of the dead she had seen were servants and women—apparently killed merely for sport, for they clearly would have posed no threat to Peter. He entered and exited the castle practically every night without being detected. No matter the situation, he should have been able to escape without bloodshed.

But if not Peter, who else would have been capable of slaying so many humans at their whim? She had overheard her father and his men talking, and they spoke only of one known attacker.

“What can I do?” asked the duke, his concern for his daughter clear in his tone.

“Bah! Nothing!” The physician waved away the question. “But nothing needs to be done. Calm yourself and go about your duties. As she sleeps, her mind will come to terms with what her eyes have seen. Like all of us, she will find a way to cope.”

Jonas began to collect his tools and vials and buckle them into his bag. The duke took a long look at his youngest child.

“There is much to tend to in the wake of this... event,” he said reluctantly. “If you think my presence would be of no further benefit...”

Helen saw her chance and seized it.

“Worry not, father, doctor, I will sit with my sister and watch over her and alert you if there is any cause for concern.”

The duke bent to hug her, one of the few times she could remember him embracing her with true warmth since her mother had passed.

“Thank you, child,” he released her, stroked her hair affectionately. “I will send your maids, and Ruth’s, I’m sure the girls will want to see her as well.”

Helen shrugged, looked from the duke to Jonas.

“I can’t put it easily into words,” she said slowly, eyes drifting down to the floor. “But it would mean something more to me if I could sit with her alone, sister to sister...” She allowed her voice to trail off then added.

“Besides, after the events of this morning, I believe that I too would benefit from some time in solitude to order my thoughts.”

“Of course, child, of course!” fumbled her father awkwardly, kissing first her and then Ruth upon the forehead. “Come doctor, let us go.”

He strode towards the door.

“I will check back in an hour,” said Jonas, following the duke out.

She watched them go then turned back to her sister. An hour was a long time. She looked at the bed's puffy pink pillows and thought how easy it would be to smother the scrawny little girl.

Helen managed to resist the urge, but it was a closer thing than it should have been.

Ruth still slumbered when the physician returned, in fact she had not even shifted in her sleep and her breathing was barely audible. Fortunately, Jonas did little more than check her vital signs, grunt, and announce that he would return after a slightly longer interval.

Since coming to her father's court half a dozen years ago, after the passing of good old Doctor Mandel, Jonas had treated all of her family's afflictions. Helen wondered how long it would be before he began to make the connection between Ruth's current symptoms and Helen's fainting spells and fevers which she had begun suffering since becoming Peter's lover. For now, it appeared that the morning's chaotic events had clouded the situation.

She soon grew tired of sitting and began to pace the room. She had just begun to consider rifling through drawers for evidence of Peter's infidelity when her sister's voice startled her, having not seen the girl wake.

"How did I get here?"

"You collapsed in the hall," explained Helen, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice as she added, "No doubt due to the sight of so much blood."

"No doubt," echoed Ruth sarcastically.

Helen spun to face her, placing hands upon her hips. Ruth sat up in bed, only her head and torso visible, her tiny legs and waist invisible beneath the overstuffed comforter.

How to play this? Was it possible that Helen had misread events? She didn't think it likely, remembering with revulsion the way that her sweet sister had appeared aroused amidst the sickening sight of so much suffering and blood.

And it had been Ruth he looked to before finally fleeing. Helen felt a burning flash of jealousy.

If they too were lovers, then the girl had to know what Peter was. Unless, he had used his powers over mind and perception to muddle her thoughts and confuse her.

Was there danger here in approaching this too directly? If Helen were to expose her lover's true nature, and Ruth was not fully aware, would it lead the child to confess to father? Helen did not doubt that would lead to Peter's death or the at least the persecution of he and his father and brothers.

"I cannot make sense of what happened this morning," Helen offered finally. "If it is not too traumatic, could you recount for me what you saw?"

Ruth gave a brittle laugh.

"Let us not be false with each other, kind sister. I think you know just what I saw. Are intimately aware, perhaps."

Anger flared in Helen and she took another step toward her sister's bed.

“In truth? Is this such a frequent occurrence?” she demanded. “Tell me, how often have the people of our duchy been slaughtered like hapless lambs?”

Ruth did not back down, staring back darkly. She shrugged with a maddening indifference.

“Is it more of a sin if they die en masse rather than quietly one at a time? I apologize, I had not realized your own hands were so clean.”

“How dare you!” screamed Helen. A small corner of her mind warned her that an argument would bring people running, especially given the current state of general alarm, but in her fury she could pay it no heed.

“No, how dare you!” retorted Ruth, bolting upright. Standing above her mattress she barely topped her taller sister, but the malice radiating from her features more than made up for her lack of stature. “The beautiful, smarter sister! How dare you attempt to deny me this as well! Why should you always have everything, and I only a pale echo of your happiness?”

Her angry outburst trailed off into a sob.

“Why can I never have what I desire?”

Helen paused, gaping. She had not known what to expect, but her sister’s wounded reaction had taken her completely by surprise.

Ruth shed a few more desperate tears then wiped a hand hard across her face and gathered herself with a moist sniffle.

“I did not want it to be like this, Hel. I thought you would be happy for me!”

Helen stood, shaking in a mixture of uncertainty and mute rage.

How did one begin to argue with such twisted logic? If Ruth persisted in seeing herself as the victim, even when seducing her own sister’s lover, even when faced with the terrible murders, nay massacre, of their lifelong servants and friends; how could Helen’s mere words possibly have the power to change her mind?

Unexpectedly, Ruth’s sobbing gave way to a sudden smile and, watching the swift shift in her storm of emotion, Helen began to have doubts about the girl’s stability. A wistful longing came into in her sister’s brown eyes and called to her seductively. Was it this vulnerability that had drawn Peter astray? Had it been he who was the aggressor? Helen’s stomach sickened and she willed herself to focus.

“Do you remember when we were children and one year for Christmas, mother gave us both the same doll?”

Helen nodded, she had a vague recollection. Mother had been infatuated with some foreign toy-maker who had come to court that year. All the women of the nobility had followed the beautiful young duchess’ lead, and the fad that year had been to buy gifts from the traveling merchant. That one Christmas had probably made the man’s fortune.

Their dolls had had intricately painted faces and real woven hair that could be styled and combed. Helen had loved hers for a year and then completely forgotten it, discarded it

unfaithfully like so many childhood toys of the moment. She had not thought of the doll in ages. She did recall that upon receiving it, she had played often side by side with Ruth, who had dragged her own dolly around with her for years later until it was beaten and tattered and finally stolen by a servant at her mother's orders and 'misplaced.'

"Can we not return to those joyful days?" asked Ruth with a melancholy yearning. "Let us regain what we had then—intimate sisters, sharing secrets and games that no one beyond ourselves could possibly understand."

"No!" roared Helen, this simple scream of denial trying to convey the haze of hurt, angry thoughts that buzzed in her brain. "This is not yours to share!"

"Oh, it is not?" challenged Ruth, her hand cupped her neck and she looked down at herself. When raised her eyes, she was sneering cruelly.

Helen took a deep breath, trying to steady herself, and her eyes fell upon a stuffed bear posed on a pillow above Ruth's head. It was possible, she supposed, that this was all somehow a symptom of her sister's deficit in maturity. Perhaps she really could see Peter as nothing more than a toy to be manipulated for their pleasure. If so, what would it matter who was playing with him, so long as they gave it back when it was not their turn? Having never had a lover, could the concept of love and possession of another be a foreign thing to her?

Such a dementia would explain her indifference to the morning's deaths. Old playthings had been broken yes, but it had all been part of the game with the one that was currently her favorite.

Helen refused to believe it. Her quiet, obedient sister could not have been harboring such a dark soul forever without any outward symptoms. Something had changed or was changing her.

Only one thing made sense, but it was a solution that she could not accept. Helen knew that she herself had, quite literally, forfeited her soul for Peter but the process had not warped her in this way.

Had it?

Of course not! She may be a biased judge of her own mental state, and certainly she could no longer claim either innocence or morality, but she had still found the events of this morning revolting and inhuman. While she could imagine her sibling as desperately lonely, easier to mold and manipulate, she had never sensed this kind of violence or bloodlust in Peter himself.

"What happened this morning was not right!" pleaded Helen.

Ruth closed her eyes and shuddered, but it was not in fear of the memory of the massacre.

"Oh, everything that happened this morning was very right!" she said throatily. There were sudden footsteps on the stairs.

"We finish this later!" whispered Helen harshly.

Doctor Jonas threw open the door. He held his black bag before him and his face was red and sweaty.

“I thought I heard raised voices!”

“Apologies, good doctor,” said Helen with false sweetness. “I was so overjoyed with the recovery of my beloved sister that I could not contain my emotion.”

Jonas looked at her and seemed to sense something of her insincerity. Perhaps he had had reports from the servants of arguing voices, for he tilted his balding head and frowned.

“And I myself awoke, crying out,” said Ruth, before matching Helen’s irony by adding. “Such terrible nightmares, thank goodness my sister was here to comfort me.”

“Of course, of course,” nodded the physician. Apparently, he found this lie more palatable. “I will mix you a mild soothing agent. It is healthiest that you stay awake but an elixir to calm your nerves is a good idea.”

He began to dig in his bag.

Helen curtsied.

“I shall leave you to focus on restoring my sister’s good health,” she told him. “I have other matters to which I should attend.”

“Of course, my lady,” replied Jonas, offhandedly. He was already shaking crystals from a small glass vial into a beaker and paying her little attention.

Ruth said nothing, though Helen felt her eyes follow her from the room.

### Chapter 3

Helen rarely met with Peter during the day.

It was not that he spent the daylight hours in some mouldy coffin hiding away from the sun. Intense sunlight weakened vampires significantly, but he had explained that it would take days for it to be fatal.

Indeed, they had met often during those afternoons years ago when he first courted her, though little since consummating their relationship. This was an intentional ruse on both of their parts. Publicly, he was a failed suitor, though someone she still regarded with affection. They hoped this would better disguise the existence of their ongoing tryst. It was annoying on occasion, but in truth, Helen did not mind. At times, she even found it exciting, this feeling of role-playing when encountering him at court. The ability to share secret smiles amidst the ignorance of their peers.

She had to send Sarah to him with three summons before she received a reply.

His own note was terse and hastily written, in stark contrast to his typical flowery words and carefully-penned hand.

‘It soothes my heart to hear you are well. I thought of you immediately when I heard of the disturbance at the castle. I have some duties to my family that I must attend to, but will try to call on you shortly. Yours, P.’

Helen read the note repeatedly, trying to pry out meaning from in between the words by mere force of will. Certainly, there was no loving flattery in the words, but that was merely in keeping with their mutual decision to mask their true emotions from anyone who might sneak a look at the missive. There was no guilt she could detect, no apology. Nothing in there spoke of a man caught out in the act of infidelity or homicide. But then, he hadn’t been caught had he? She had seen him make his escape, but in all of the chaos, it was unlikely he had caught a glimpse of her. Especially, given that he had been focused on her sister.

Could it all be some kind of tragic misunderstanding? One where Ruth had been involved, but Peter had had the bloodshed forced upon him? From what Helen had seen, and the words she had just exchanged with her sister, it was clear that Ruth also hungered after her lover. However, that did not have to mean that the feelings were necessarily returned. What if Ruth had confronted him about his relationship with Helen or with knowledge of his vampirism? Was it possible Peter might have had to slay the witnesses to protect Helen?

She shook her head, realizing this was just idle fancy. While she could just barely conceive of Peter killing someone if it was the only way to protect her, she couldn’t think of anything Ruth could have done that would have prompted it. They had been careful and Peter was smart enough to find ways to deny any claims that Ruth might make. For all she knew, Ruth might not be involved in the matter at all. Perhaps she had always had some type of twisted crush on Helen’s lover, and she had simply been aroused upon seeing him escape his attackers so deftly. Her words might be nothing but hot air meant to upset the sister who had what she wanted. But Helen’s gut told her that none of this was true, that these were just things that her heart wanted to believe. The most likely answer was that her beloved was a murderer, and her sister too held his affections.

Frustratingly, there was not even a veiled explanation of what might have driven him to such brutality in the letter. Perhaps naively, given the insecurity of the communiqué, she had expected some coded answer to the questions still swirling through her head. She could not connect the horrible visions still etched in memory with the gentle soul of her lover, whether or not he proved unfaithful. There was a dark, predatory part to him—to any vampire, by definition, but she had always felt that it was something he regretted. Something he managed and controlled.

For the first time, she began to fear for her own well being. She felt a sudden remorse for the way she had been looking down on her sister. What if Helen herself was no better? Nothing but another gullible girl, being used and manipulated.

There had been a few occasions when their lovemaking had almost been discovered during the early days of their affair, when they had been even more daring and hungry. She had seen Peter twist and distort the memory of others. What if the persona he presented to her was the lie? Was it possible that he was nothing more than a cunning hunter, a stalking tiger in the skin of a man, capable of all that she had seen and more?

She went as far as to pick up a pen with a shaking hand to cancel the appointment, but put it back down, realizing her foolishness. If this confrontation was going to happen, it had best happen now. It was not as if running or hiding would save her from Peter's anger for long, all of her guards had not prevented him from entering her room at his whim in the past.

It was still a few hours until the midday meal, and Helen's churning stomach was far from interested in being filled with food. She needed someone to talk to and did not relish the idea of trying to once more pry the truth from her younger sibling's clearly malfunctioning mind.

She glanced over at Andrea. The large girl sat knitting by the door, awaiting her lady's needs, but Helen could not imagine bouncing vague generalizations off of her and receiving anything like useful advice. She needed to talk to someone used to dealing with complex and difficult situations.

"Andrea, attend me."

The girl raised her broad face from her needle and thread.

"I wish to change into something more formal. I am going to pay a visit to my father."

\*\*\*

"I am indeed quite familiar with the duke's habits and preferred schedule, sir," explained Helen with cold patience. "You may recall that I am his eldest child. It will not have escaped your astute attention to the defense of my family that grave matters have transpired today. I require my father's council, and I will be speaking with him now!"

She strode forward as if she expected for all the world to be granted access to her father's quarters against his expressly stated wishes. As if she were allowed to override this order as a matter of course.

In honesty, she had never before disturbed her father during his daily rest. She feared to, as many an ambitious courtier had found to their misfortune that even mention of a potential interruption would put him into a dangerously black mood.

Since shortly after her mother's death, the duke had kept odd hours. He rose well before the dawn and stayed up long after midnight. His only rest came during a few hours at the middle of the day which he spent, almost without exception, sequestered away in his rooms and never interrupted. He claimed that sleep mostly eluded him and it was the only time of day that he could get any relief. Helen was concerned that he had not broken this ritual even for a day so

atypical as today. It seemed a sign of weakness, of a broken man; one not capable of stepping up when the situation required it.

Her attempted bluff would never have flown with Henrik, the duke's hoary old chamberlain, with his bald head and rotting teeth. However, Henrik was away on some duty which, Helen inferred from the uncomfortable answers she had received, likely involved the disposal of bodies.

Instead, left to protect the entry to duke's chambers were a quartet of guardsman. Numerically, this was an upgrade—no doubt added security to protect the duke in case this morning's assailant were to return with him as a target. Unfortunately, their captain was a young man named Mark Virl whose loyalty was unimpeachable, but whose head was nearly as thick as his sword arm. Even worse, Helen was quite sure that he fancied her.

She almost felt bad for the big brute as he flustered and stuttered in the face of her bluster.

"Fear not, I will be sure to inform him of the veracity with which you defended his privacy. No blame shall fall upon you." Helen curtsied, careful to present him with the most advantageous angle for viewing her bosom. "In fact, you may find yourself rewarded."

She took a step forward and one of the other men began to raise an arm to block her but Mark waved him away.

"The good lady seeks the duke's comfort after the disturbing events of this tragic day. What father would want her held at the door?"

The older man removed his arm with a silent nod. Helen felt she could read his thoughts clearly in his eyes. 'As you wish, but it's on your head not mine.'

Trying to mask her surprise at her victory, she continued towards the door. The guards did not move to assist her so she had to struggle to shove open the heavy portal. Upon entering his antechamber, she nearly tripped over the corner of a carpet, finding the room in near total darkness. Once she had pulled the door closed behind her, she found that all but one dying candle in the room's chandelier had been extinguished and all of the windows covered with black sheets.

She quietly pulled open the smaller door into his bedchamber, but the blackness behind it was even more complete. She paused in the threshold, should she knock? Was her father sleeping? Was he even present? She listened intently but heard not the faintest breath.

She waited a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, then trod softly into the room. After a few steps, something shifted the covers on the bed and a pale light shone from atop the mattress, causing her to blink.

The light was odd, clean white rather than orange, and it did not flicker like a candle or a lantern. After a moment its source shook free of the covers and she saw that the light illuminated, no originated, from the skin of a shapely woman. The woman crouched naked and heavy-breasted, atop her father, the white light making his old flesh look pale and oily.

Despite the strangeness of the situation, Helen's first thought was one of mortification. Had she interrupted her father with some floozy? Was this his midday ritual! She had always assumed him celibate following the passing of her mother.

Then the woman turned and Helen recoiled in shock. All of her body was the same shade of monotone, flawless white. Even her eyes were colorless orbs, devoid of both irises and pupils. As if she were a being of pure light.

It did not matter, Helen recognized her just the same. This woman was her mother, not her mother at the time of her death, but the fetching young duchess she had played with as a toddler.

"Mom?" she whispered, and somehow speaking broke the spell. The woman nodded towards her then disappeared in a flash like lightning. The room was plunged back into full darkness and Helen stood blinking in confusion for a time before stumbling forward and finding a striker to light a lamp at her father's bedside.

She was relieved to find him clothed from the waist down. It somehow made the unnatural act she had interrupted more acceptable. Of much more immediate concern was that her father lay completely still, and she could not hear him breathing.

She leaned closer, putting an ear to his chest, but he immediately jolted awake, banging her ear against his ribs and causing her to straighten with a grunt of pain. "Miriam?"

Her mother's name, of course.

"No, father. It is Helen, your daughter."

Her father wiped at his eyes and frowned severely.

"I know who you are girl!" he snapped. "What are you doing here? I left orders not to be disturbed! I'll have that goat-headed boy hung!"

"It is not his fault, father. I told him I had been unsettled by the morning's events and needed to speak to you. It put him in an impossible position. He would have been gravely insulting one family member no matter how he responded."

Her father growled, not agreeing but putting the matter aside.

"Err, how did you find me disposed?" he asked cautiously, looking amusingly like a boy with his hand caught in the cookie jar.

She found this a difficult question to answer. Should she go with the honest approach? She imagined herself quipping: 'In some sort of supernatural congress with the shade of your late wife, of course.'

What was wrong with her family anyway? Were they all obsessed with the affections of the undead?

At least this implied that the thing she had encountered was not some evil spirit, preying on her father's memories without his knowledge. She thought of Ruth and then of her own suddenly uncertain affair. Of course, that did not mean the spirit was not simply feeding on him with his knowledge.

Was this a sign that she should come clean about Peter? A man who slept each afternoon with a ghost might be more open than most to his daughter's courtship with a vampire. Still, she needed to be careful not to reveal too much. She could not find it in her to put her lover in danger until he had had an opportunity to give his side of the story, and given the deaths that morning, it was likely her father would act with brutal decisiveness if he were to learn Peter's true nature.

The duke seemed to take Helen's hesitation as a sign that he had been discovered.

"Helen, look. I know this will seem hard to understand..."

Despite her curiosity, she cut him off, cleaving to the matter at hand. She would stick to the discussion she had intended, she did not wish to stand Peter up for their arranged appointment. There were too many questions, and who knew how he would respond to being summoned and then spurned?

"Later, father. Right now I need some advice."

The duke sputtered and stopped. He was not a man who usually allowed himself to be interrupted. Clearly, he was relieved to drop the subject.

"What if you were..." she groped for an analogy that would be of use. "What if you were trying a case?"

"Very well," he said, scratching his head in groggy befuddlement. "I do that often enough."

"Yes, yes. And all of the evidence seemed to point to a certain party being guilty. But you knew the accused well, and you had always known him to be a good man, of the type who would not countenance the actions performed."

The duke sighed.

"What is this game?"

Helen did not answer but continued to regard him expectantly.

"Fine. I would tread lightly. I would seek more evidence; for my own experiences with the man should hold some weight, as I am a reasonable judge of character. However, I am not so arrogant as to believe I cannot be deceived, and more than once I have had to accept that I have had the wool pulled completely over my eyes."

It was Helen's turn to frown.

"What you dislike my answer?"

She attempted to smile, but there was no real feeling behind it.

"No, father. It is very sound advice. Indeed, it is in line with my own thinking on the subject. I guess I was hoping for some easier course."

"The easiest courses are rarely the best, daughter."

"I know, father. I will leave you to your rest now."

She raised a hand to extinguish the lamp, paused, and let it fall.

"I do have one more question, father."

“Yes?”

“What I... saw for a moment just before you awoke,” she said carefully. The duke swallowed audibly. “Could it do you any harm?”

Her father gave a laugh filled with false bravado.

“No, child,” he reached out to pat her head. “Think of it as if... as if I was having a dream. No real harm can come from a dream can it?”

A very good question.

She nodded and kissed him, then extinguished the lamp, thinking of Ruth’s dream of finding a way to play dolls again with her older, disinterested sister.

## Chapter 4

Helen scheduled her luncheon at the Summer Squash, a small boarding house and eatery on Engelton’s nearly deserted main street. With her father holding no events at the castle, the Squash held no tenants. Few people from the neighboring towns chose to visit the village if their business did not require it.

She had been prepared to rent the entire dining room for privacy if required but it was unnecessary. The locals, even the regular drunks, had far more important things to do at the moment, preparing their farms and flocks for the snows that would come soon. Tom Squall, the Squash’s proprietor, was a large, soft man with an open, friendly manner and a shock of straw colored hair. Melinda, his equally large, plump wife stood at his side behind the bar, dressed in a conservative wine-colored gown with her hair tightly bound. Both lit up and greeted her with obsequious bowing as soon as they recognized who had entered their establishment.

Helen, who at times received lesson’s in the duchy’s finances to prepare her for her potential future duties, recalled that the Squash would long since have gone bankrupt if not for grants from her father. These were made specifically so that he would not have to suffer the indignity of ruling a duchy so backwater it could not even offer a place for visitors to stay. She had no doubt that the two proprietors would ensure her privacy as she dined, the challenge would be controlling the rumors of her visit that would spread throughout the village the moment she left them behind.

After no small amount of deliberation, she had decided that meeting Peter outside of the castle was the wiser option. Here there were only two pairs of ears to eavesdrop and they had, quite frankly, a reputation for spinning a tale or two. In theory, the remote location put Helen in

more personal danger, but she was honest enough to realize that any sense of safety was likely a sham. If Peter was truly capable of the uncaring destruction she was attributing to him, then having additional guards about would not save her, it would only ensure that more people got killed.

And so, the Squash it was.

As a cover, she had arranged an impromptu shopping trip with Andrea and Sarah at the stalls of a few other merchants scratching out a living on Engelton's streets. There was little to be found in the stores that she needed, or to be honest, even wanted but young noblewomen were supposed to spend time frivolously shopping and impulsively buying things they had no need for; she doubted anyone would find the trip suspicious. That she had met with Peter would be noted, and might give hint at their affair, but she was hardly at a point where ensuring it continued seemed of any importance. Besides, his father kept offices and a warehouse nearby. Peter worked there most days when not on trips with his family, acquiring goods from afar. It was plausible that they were two friends simply catching up on one another's lives upon discovering that they would both be free in the same area at the same time.

As expected, she arrived before him, and instructed the Squalls to provide her and her maids with tea in the main room while ensuring they were not interrupted, even by the staff, unless they called for assistance. Another would be joining them, she informed them vaguely, and should be brought as soon as he arrived, otherwise they did not wish to mingle with any of the Squash's other patrons whom should be kept from the room.

The couple looked at each other, and she could see some impenetrable private conversation pass between their glances, but they complied immediately with smiling faces. Helen soon found herself at a small round table with a cup of slowly cooling tea before her, listening to Andrea and Sarah natter on about a young boy that had seen working for one of the clothiers. They knew she would be meeting with Peter, but knew nothing other than that she had wished to escape the castle for a time.

She supposed that the shop boy had been attractive enough, in an a strapping, freckly-faced, peasant sort of a way. Perhaps that was all that her maids could really aspire to, she mused, but Peter with his grace and wit put the boy to shame.

The sudden realization that Peter soon may no longer be hers caused Helen's very heart to wrench.

If Helen found it hard to focus on their words, she did not think she could be faulted. Her life and the one love she had ever known, if such things could be well separated, may be ending badly within the next few moments. She feared even weak tea would be far more than her churning stomach could handle.

Her eyes wandered desperately, searching for something that could distract her from her morose thoughts. The cut flowers on table were lively and fresh, she noted. Simple, country things, they were; baby's breath, daisies, and wildflowers. She breathed in their scent and took

some comfort, thinking they were the only sign of life she had encountered in some hours. In their own humble way, they offered her hope. She would have to remember to compliment the Squash's mistress on them before leaving.

She had arranged for Peter to arrive after them, but both Helen's tea and that in the barely touched pot had long since grown tepid when Mrs. Squall escorted him to the table, offered some further pleasantries, and made herself scarce.

Helen looked into the depths of his eyes and knew doubt. He appeared neither nervous nor worried about this hastily arranged appointment. Instead, his face lit up with excitement upon seeing her. Helen fought down a similar emotion, and reminded herself of the vampire's ability to deceive.

He nodded politely to each of her girls, then knelt and brushed her tingling hand with his lips. She had a sudden flash back to him kneeling beneath her in her chambers just before they fully gave into their passions. Could that memory really come from only last night?

She forced herself to concentrate.

His clothing was indicative of the success of the Nourlish's trading. He was dressed fairly simply, in dun colored pants with a ruffled shirt of a light sky blue secured beneath a vest of a darker brown, but the cut and make of his clothes were clearly quite fine. One look said they did not come from any tailor here in Engelton. A kerchief in exactly the same shade as his shirt sprouted from one pocket, a half-moon of golden watch-chain looped out from another, glittering in the light of a nearby lantern. He stood and Helen felt her handmaidens practically wilt besides her as he smiled.

"Peter, it feels like it has been such a long time," she said neutrally. "How good of you to come."

His brow furrowed, as if he had caught something in her attitude that surprised him but he did not press the issue. Instead, they spoke idly for a few moments about his duties assisting his father in importing and exporting goods from Engelton and a few of the Squash's young serving maids brought a fresh pot of tea and the boards of sliced, stewed meat, vegetables, and cheeses that they had been preparing. Helen made it quite clear that nothing else would be needed, and wide-eyed with fear of offending the duke's own daughter, they practically scurried from the room.

She indicated a far table which sat along the wall, near broad windows which offered a look out at the village's empty main street. Gray clouds had rolled in, making the gloomy afternoon seem even colder. The only sign of activity was a mangy orange hound chasing a bit of trash as it blew along the road.

"Andrea and Sarah, why don't you go and enjoy the view," she said pointedly. "I would like to speak Peter about some private matters."

Her friends complied without complaint, exchanging excited looks no doubt anticipating the fun of pressing her for details on what appeared to be this renewed turn in their courtship later on.

“What is it?” Peter leaned his head in closely from where he sat across the table and whispered quietly. She could detect nothing but concern for her well-being in his words. “I imagine this must be about the terrible events of the morning.”

“Terrible?” She echoed, sipping her fresh tea to give her a moment to think. A scowl momentarily clouded his charming face then revelation struck and he gave a forced laugh.

“Ah, of course, who could have managed such a thing but me? Is that what you’re implying?”

Helen only nodded, not telling him that she had seen him there. She would let him decide whether to offer truth or lies.

“Do you really think me a monster, you who knows me better than anyone?”

He seemed sincerely offended, and she found herself wanting to forgive him and put all of this behind them, but she refused to be swayed by mere sentiment.

“But you are a monster, aren’t you?” she could see that the words hurt him but could think of no other way to speak this truth. “You must kill to survive.”

Peter clenched a fist in rage, she rarely saw him angry like this, and for a moment she was frightened. With effort, he calmed himself and continued to implore her.

“So must all men!” he retorted, spearing a piece of nearby lamb with his fork. “But never like that! I admit what I am, I have admitted it to you from the start, but I only commit those sins that I must, and even then I take pains that the undeserving do not suffer.”

It was true, actually. He had made her aware of his true nature before taking her as a lover, offering her a chance to walk away. She had thought it very brave. They had spoken then, at the beginning, of what his affliction meant, of the things he need do to stay alive.

He seemed heartbroken by his fate, that he must harm others, and confided that he fed only when the hunger overcame him and that he chose only those known to be criminals or vile and cruel and never those living near the castle. He had seemed so earnest then, and Helen had seen him as something of a tragic hero, but now that she had reason to consider it more carefully, she wondered. She had heard rumors of mysterious deaths in the duchy’s prisons, but still, how many truly evil men were there in the land? And what would he turn to for his next meal once they were gone? It did not seem a sustainable plan.

Peter was staring at her with burning intensity. His entire body seemed on edge, as if at any moment he might either strike her or bolt.

“I wish to believe you and did not think it an act you could be party to,” she told him truthfully. He relaxed slightly but remained highly strung. “But as you said, you are the only

one in the duchy I know of who would be physically capable of such an act, so I must ask the question.”

She looked at him pleadingly.

“Even if it was you, I have faith in your heart! I just want to know why!”

He threw down his napkin, looked as if he intended to rise from his seat.

“I cannot believe you would doubt me in this! Perhaps, we are not as close as I had thought!”

Her maids glanced over, then quickly away. Helen placed a hand on his arm to still him.

“So, you deny all involvement? Indulge me, I wish to hear you say it.”

If he was going to lie, she would have the lie straight from his lips.

Peter sighed, pulling away from her and sitting back in his chair. Something in him seemed to deflate, and he was no longer angry, just sad.

“I swear to you! I had no knowledge this would happen! If I had any inkling of what would occur, I would have acted to stop it. You must believe me!”

Helen studied him closely. She noted he still hadn’t specifically stated he was innocent of the killings, only that he hadn’t been expecting or in favor of them. Until these recent events, she would have claimed to know his moods intimately. Right now, and she could not fathom why he would want to falsely project such an impression, something about him looked guilty. Again, she was tempted to tell him what she had seen, but continued to lay out rope with which he could hang himself.

“I do know you,” she said firmly. “And I do want to believe that you would have prevented this if you could have.”

She looked deeply into his eyes.

“So, what is it that you are not telling me?”

Peter looked away, fumbling at his food with his knife and his fork.

“It is... complicated,” he said finally.

“I cannot claim to be an expert,” she countered harshly. “But I suspect the origins of most mass murders tend to be.”

He winced, dropping the silverware, but continued to state down at his plate.

“Well?” she prompted.

He looked up, shrugged, and clasped his palms before him.

“What if I told you that the atrocities were the work of a... friend of mine.”

Helen’s tea cup clinked loudly down onto her saucer. A few drops sloshed out of the cup.

“I’d advise you to rethink your friendship with someone who you have proclaimed as utterly reprehensible in your own evaluation.”

“If only I had the option!” he muttered under his breath.

He sighed, throwing up his hands in exasperation.

“Fine, not a friend then, but someone I have obligations to which I cannot, for personal reasons, abandon.”

“Who is this person?” demanded Helen.

Peter cleared his throat nervously.

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you.”

“And you accuse me of mistrust?”

He placed a hand over hers. She shook it off and he frowned.

“I trust you completely. I know you, and I know how difficult this situation would be for you. Were I to tell you the name you would tell your father in an attempt to stop further deaths. You could not bare the fact that if you held your tongue, many more may die.”

‘But I saw you!’ she wanted to shout.

She watched him continue to fumble about with his meal awkwardly. He looked defensive, and to be honest, that didn’t make a lot of sense. If Peter were the villain, she was the one in danger. He had no reason to lie to her, he could just kill her and be done with it. If nothing else, it showed her feelings mattered to him, that he cared about her on some level.

That seemed incompatible with him dallying with Ruth behind her back. A strange thought occurred to her then, was it possible her sister was the catalyst here? Could she have blackmailed him perhaps, forced him to do the things he had done? But that had to be Helen’s heart overruling her head, what would he gain from protecting Ruth’s identity from her?

“Do I know this person?” she asked suddenly.

“You’ve been in the same room with them before,” he replied, talking around the question, not wanting to give anything away. “But I strongly doubt you realized who they truly were.”

That certainly fit the bill for Ruth, but could also be almost anyone she’d ever met in passing.

“You place me in a difficult position,” she said. She had to take another sip of tea to wet her throat before continuing. If anything would paint a target on her it would be these next words. “Without the culprit’s name, the only name I have to offer the duke if these terrors continue is your own.”

Peter did not seem angered by this veiled threat, he simply nodded in acknowledgement.

“I will deal with the matter myself. Nothing of this sort will ever happen again, I promise you that.”

He seemed so sincere, but Helen could not find it in her to entirely believe him. Nothing he had said had explained what she had observed firsthand. He still had neither explained his presence nor admitted it.

“Very well, your secrets remain safe if you have spoken true.”

She stood, already thinking of what she would need to do next.

“Wait, my love” he said, leaning in close to her to whisper urgently in her ear. His warm closeness, familiar scent, still made her heart race. “Reassure me that nothing has changed between us.”

She did not embrace him, though her arms desired to. Instead, she stepped away to pat him lightly on the shoulder.

“That remains to be seen.”

She turned away and summoned Andrea and Sarah and he could say nothing else of consequence. Her last memory as they left the dining room was one of Peter standing alone, still beautiful in his anger and frustration.

## Chapter 5

Andrea and Sarah chattered at her relentlessly on the ride back to the castle. Neither was so direct as to ask her what had been discussed during her meeting with Peter, of course, but their queries trod every circuitous route toward the topic that they could devise. Had she not thought Peter looked well? Why was it again that they had fallen out in the past? What were his current plans? Might they be meeting with him again soon?

Helen said little. Her last few interviews had brought her to one conclusion, she was done with talking. Each attempt to farm information from her loved ones had simply cultivated more questions and left her more angry and confused.

The girls took her silence stoically enough. Even ignorant of the whispered words between her and Peter, her ire and his discomfort cannot have been hard to observe. They knew he had displeased her, and perhaps it was more fun if they were left to invent their own reasons as to why.

Even before she and Peter had parted ways, Helen’s mind had already been racing ahead, trying to determine which thread to pull next to unravel this strange tangle of events. The duke’s advice still struck her as sound, seek the truth and follow her gut in its absence.

The truth was being obscured from her, of that there was no doubt. Her lover was not telling her everything he knew; whether to deceive her or to spare her the responsibility of how to act on such knowledge almost did not matter. He was in some way complicit. Her own eyes and his own words had told her as much. But her gut told her he did so regretfully, that there was something important she was missing, something that may cast him in a better light; and if her heart was a bit too eager to agree with this assessment, did that make it any less valid?

She would start her investigation tonight, and she resolved that it would continue every night until she was sure her duchy was safe. Even if Peter's likely lie that 'a friend' was responsible proved more than a cliché, and he really intended to sort this matter out personally, it brought her little comfort. If Peter was being honest, than what she thought she knew of his heart was true, and that Peter had little chance against the thing that had prowled the castle's halls mere hours ago.

Unfortunately, knowing what she needed to do was not nearly the same as knowing how to go about it with any chance of success. She spent the late hours of the afternoon pacing about her room in agitation, discarding this idea and that, having already sent her friends away so that she could think without their intrusive gossiping. Eventually, she decided that calling upon Doctor Jonas was a necessary first step. On any other night, she might have been able to simply sneak about halls and use her status to bluff her way by anyone who she was unfortunate enough to encounter. On any other night, the guard would not have been tripled. Of course, on any other night, she would have no cause to even be attempting such a thing; after all, her illicit lover was well capable of coming to her.

Jonas looked surprised to see her when he answered her knock on his door, but admitted her immediately. An open book had been overturned on his desk, atop a disorganized scattering of papers, in order to save its place. A smoking pipe sat beside it and the fragrant smell of the tobacco was pleasant in the confined quarters and made the threadbare room feel less chilly.

"I am sorry to disturb you at your leisure, doctor."

"Do not be silly," he huffed, taking her hand and inviting her to sit beside him on his tattered brown couch. "It is always a pleasure to be graced by your presence, my lady."

He looked her up and down critically.

"Though, I admit I had not thought to see you again so soon. Are you well?"

"The day has been stressful," she conceded. "But my recent fever seems to be receding. It is not mine own health which concerns me. I wished to hear how my sister was progressing."

Jonas crinkled up his nose.

"Have you not been to see her?"

"I am not a trained physician," she countered, though she kept her tone light. "And though she seemed to be recuperating quite well under your care, there is something in her manner of late that concerns me."

The doctor breathed on his glasses to wet them, rubbed them on his wine-stained shirt, and replaced them atop the bridge of his nose.

"Admitted, she seems a bit off," he said cautiously. "But she has been through quite a trauma for such a young girl. I think what she is experiencing is only to be expected."

"I care not whether it is expected, only if it is healthy."

Jonas nodded sagely.

"Our bodies and minds are resilient, she will find her own way to survive."

“And what steps are you taking to ease the poor girl’s recovery?”

“Look, I’ve already discussed all of this with your father...” He began to protest, but then he saw something in her eyes and relented. “As I said, I believe she will mend properly on her own. There is little to it. I have prescribed sleeping draughts in the evenings to help her avoid nightmares, and I will be counseling her personally to ensure that she develops no lasting maladies of the mind.”

Helen squeezed his hand briefly and smiled.

“Thank you, doctor. I never doubted your devotion or your methods, but I care very much for my sister and wanted to make sure I understood the situation.”

“Of course, my lady,” he mumbled. “A noble sentiment.”

She rose to leave, but turned back upon reaching the door, as if a thought had just occurred to her.

“If you would be so kind as to indulge me, I do have one word of advice, however.”

Jonas raised his bushy eyebrows inquisitively.

“Yes, my lady?”

“Do not simply prepare her the draught or attempt to administer it—she will simply order you away. No, instead I urge you to have one of the servants or her maids sneak it into her meal. I’m sure if you explain the importance of the situation to them they will understand.”

“Is such deception really necessary?” asked the doctor skeptically.

Helen smiled and shook her head ruefully, as if recalling some past trial that was amusing only in retrospect.

“No one knows a girl’s mind better than her sister, doctor. This is not a war you will win without subterfuge.”

“As you say, my lady, I thank you for your guidance.”

The physician gave a very faint bow. Apparently, he did not intend to argue. She could only hope that he intended to comply.

He shut the door and she hurried off down the hall, spying the hour on a grandfather clock as she passed.

Time was growing short.

\*\*\*

Helen’s ruse proved far easier to pull off than she had anticipated, worryingly so.

She dined alone with her family that night. A tense meal that, even given her father’s reserved manner since their mother’s passing, may have set a new high-water mark for awkward tension.

The duke was too embarrassed by having had his unnatural acts of congress discovered by his eldest daughter to brave much in the way of conversation. Ruth seemed more willing,

but Helen had no idea what rules prevailed over parlay with her glassy-eyed, visibly shaking sibling. She feared to say too much, lest Ruth ask a particularly uncomfortable question for their father and all the staff to hear.

“I heard you had a trip into town today,” her father said, after stirring his stew idly with his spoon for some time. “How did that go?”

“It was fine.”

“Really, what did you do?” inquired Ruth, brightly. Her high-pitched voice was bright; a young girl, curious and innocent but her dark eyes were heavily lidded with suspicion.

Helen shrugged.

“It was merely an attempt at diversion, a reminder of normal life. We did some shopping and had a quick lunch at the Squash. Nothing exceptional, I’m afraid.”

“Did you buy anything?”

Helen squinted at this girl, who apparently lusted after blood but still wanted to discuss her sister’s current taste in shoes. Was this an act she was putting on for father? Or were the morning’s murders really as trivial to her as Helen’s wardrobe?

“Nothing significant, I did pick up a warmer shawl and gifted Sarah with a new bracelet that I saw her gawking at.”

Her hope was that if she projected enough disinterest, the subject would drop. Unfortunately, her father decided to soldier on with his perceived duty to promote family conversation.

“I heard you met with a friend?” he asked idly.

Ah, wonderful. Just the topic she had hoped to discuss. It would have been foolish to assume her father did not have eyes watching her as she moved about the village, however. He could be remote, but he did care enough to make sure they didn’t get into trouble. Helen was never quite certain what he cared about more though—their future or simply their reflection upon his own honor.

“Yes, he was in the area.” She stated flatly.

“Oh, who was it?” It was interesting to note that the bubblier Ruth’s voice got, the more hateful the fire burned in her eyes.

Helen chewed her roll slowly, perhaps if she took too long to reply, her sister would decide she hadn’t heard the question and move on.

“It was that Nourlish boy wasn’t it?”

Helen nearly choked on her roll at this gentle prodding from her father. She took a sip of white wine to clear her breathing passages.

“Which one?” The mask slipped for a moment, and there was nothing but fury in Ruth’s voice. Realizing her error, she giggled weakly and put a smile back in place. “They are all so fair, our noble merchants, I envy your ability to snag their attentions.”

If her father noticed the tension, he did not comment on it. Instead he simply wagged a fork full of stewed meat at her.

“That Peter boy who had designs on you earlier, wasn’t it?”

“Father!” she gasped. If only he knew, she thought.

“He wouldn’t be a terrible match you know, the duchy certainly use the money. I hear the Nourlish do quite well in Europe.”

Helen blinked, unable to repress a laugh of dark humor. An interesting turn, nice of him to mention this now that their affair appeared to have unraveled.

“Oh, and what did the two of you discuss?” asked Ruth, jabbing violently at her beef with a knife.

“Private matters,” said Helen coolly, then after a moment’s consideration added, “We remain good friends, I simply wanted to catch up with him and see how he was doing.”

Best to keep Ruth guessing as to the status of things between them, she figured.

“Funny, I thought you had just seen him more recently,” retorted Ruth in a tone brimming with false innocence. Was it possible her sister had always been this sarcastic and she hadn’t paid her enough attention to notice? “I must have been mistaken.”

“I gather you were.”

Talk moved on to more idle matters for a time, and though she did not see who supplied Jonas’ elixir, it soon became clear to Helen that the drug was taking effect on Ruth who was becoming sluggish and having trouble following the conversation.

Seeing this, Helen excused herself first, saying she had eaten too much at luncheon and she rushed toward the southeast tower. Extra guards had been posted at each landing, but none saw fit to obstruct her when she explained her wish to sit through the night with her sister after the trauma the child had suffering upon last awakening. Once she had gained entry to Ruth’s chambers, there was not even a need to secret herself away. When Ruth’s maids arrived, along with a couple of usher’s supporting the catatonic duke’s daughter, Helen simply instructed that the girl be changed and laid in bed and then gave strict orders for everyone to depart.

Ruth’s maids knew that Helen had demanded to sit with her sister earlier during her recovery, so it did not seem out of character. If either of the young girls somehow knew enough to doubt Helen’s motives, they lacked the authority to override her commands.

In less than an hour, she was alone in the room with her sleeping sister. In her drugged sleep, the child looked cute and harmless. Helen felt a stab of jealousy. Why was Peter lying for her? Disgusted with both herself and everyone else, Helen shook herself and took a closer look about her sibling’s quarters.

The next step of the plan was to watch and wait. Admittedly, the how for this portion of the plan had been somewhat lacking. She felt rather silly, peering about behind curtains and wall hangings like a doomed child uncertain of where to hide before being sought. In the end,

Helen found herself where she had feared she would, inside a wardrobe peering between gowns in an attempt to see through the crack in the doors.

She would have no clear route of escape if she was discovered, but that seemed an acceptable sacrifice. She had no idea of where to run.

The next several hours were not enjoyable. Her back quickly cramped and she feared to shift her weight—her sister had become more restless in her sleep and she was uncertain if the doctor’s draught may be wearing off. The fabric of the hanging clothing itched where it touched Helen’s skin, and the musty odor of the wardrobe made her want to sneeze.

She did not think that she had dozed though the shadowy outline that appeared between her vantage point and the bedside candle did so as if out of nowhere. Of course, that need not indicate any failure in Helen’s vigil; she had made sure the windows to Ruth’s balcony were full open and she was well aware of Peter’s ability to arrive without detection when he so chose.

Her hiding spot did not afford her a clear view, but she could tell from the noises in the room that the new arrival must be trying to shake her sister awake. There was a bit of muttering, probably from both parties, but any words were too low for Helen to make out. The struggle culminated in a loud slap of skin against skin.

Ruth cried out but did not wake, and the shadow pounced upon her with vicious aggression. The girl gave a louder gasp of pain and Helen began to wonder if she would need to reveal herself to come to her sister’s defense, but the sound slowly transformed into a moan of ecstasy.

The vampire spat loudly on the floor.

“What, have you found a taste for drugs now, as well?”

Peter’s voice sounded strange, not merely because of the disgust that filled it. It sounded baser, deeper, as if his darker nature ruled him now.

There was a sharp movement and Ruth cried out again, this time solely in pain. A strange glow suffused the room, it outlined Ruth’s sleeping figure in a mouldy green;

Helen could even see her scrawny legs illuminated through fluffy comforter. The man leaning over her was still an image cast from shadow, though something familiar in his stance told Helen that it had to be her beloved Peter.

The light vanished, as quickly as it had come, returning the bedchamber to its more natural state of darkness. Helen’s eyes strained once more to adjust.

“Mmm, hello my love. How are you here already?” purred Ruth, sounding suddenly more coherent.

“Have you continued your exploration of new pleasures without me, my heart?” The amusement in Peter’s voice sounded false, a thin veneer over anger and jealousy. It seemed to promise that the wrong answer to his question might invite violence. The more Helen heard him speak, the more she wondered if this was not truly another man. “There was enough opium

in your system to keep you asleep for hours. Unfortunately, I have other intentions for you before then and prefer you in a more active state.”

He gave a crude, throaty laugh. It sounded nothing like Peter’s melodic one.

“I’m afraid only one of us enjoys fucking the dead!”

Did Ruth somehow bring out this more vulgar nature in him? Did she call to some part of him that Helen did not? Helen frowned, she couldn’t imagine what about the drab little girl he could find so exciting, what Helen wouldn’t have done for him.

“But I took nothing!” Ruth protested. There was a bit of a tremor to the child’s voice, as if she knew to be afraid of the repercussions if he did not believe her. Revelation struck, and she added accusingly, “It was that blubbery walrus of a doctor that my father employs! It had to be! He’s always trying to ‘calm my delicate nerves’ for some reason or another.”

Ruth growled in agitation.

“Delilah or Chastity must have slipped it to me. I swear, the two are little more than my father’s spies.”

Helen was surprised by the venom in Ruth’s voice but then, even with the little attention that she paid to her younger sister’s entourage, Helen had noticed that the two slightly older but far more mature handmaidens seemed to hold little true affection for their charge.

This answered seemed to appease Peter.

“Only say the word, and they will trouble you no more, my duchess.” It was all too clear what he was proposing. The Peter that Helen knew would never have spoken of murder so callously.

“They would only be replaced by some other hideous imbeciles,” bemoaned Ruth.

There was a meaty smack of flesh on flesh and Peter gasped in surprise. “I can think of better ways to spend out time together than complaining about the help, can’t you?”

Peter’s gave another deep, rough laugh.

“Just a moment, let me deal with the guards.”

His shadowy form stiffened for just a second, then launched itself onto the mattress with an ardor that shook the bed frame. She heard fabric tear followed by the moist sound of impassioned kissing.

For a moment, the entire room actually went red. Helen had always assumed that was only a figure of speech until now. Her blood felt as if it was on fire with rage. It was all that she could do to remain hidden. She stayed her hand by debating with herself which of them she would kill first, but all the while something cold gnawed at her stomach, asking why he had never wanted her like this.

Their lovemaking, if it could be called that for it seemed nothing like the way that she and Peter shared their bodies, sounded far from gentle. Peter actually berated the girl, insulting her figure and taunting her for her lust, while in the very act of taking his pleasure from her. Helen could practically feel the sting of each sharp slap as he struck her again and again, but

oddly Ruth did not seem to struggle, instead each of her screams dissolved into a deeper cry of pleasure, though at times she even seemed to retch as if he were chocking her.

After a few moments, Helen's rage had burned itself off, leaving behind a hollow emptiness. As she continued to listen to their exertions, she revoltingly began to find herself aroused at the sounds of their pleasure. She reminded herself who exactly was involved here—her own sister and a man who had promised to be true! But still, a part of her remained at least curious, wanting to sneak out for a better look at what exactly they were doing. Could Helen allow herself to be treated this way if it meant she could win Peter back? She was not so certain.

Finally, Peter seemed spent, for the chaotic creaking of the bed and striking of bodies off of the wooden frame slowed and then stopped with a great deal of grunting. Helen heard their bodies shift away from each other, hoped that all that was left now was to wait for the vampire to leave and her sister to fall asleep, so she could slink back to her own chambers, devastated, and begin to imagine how to live through another day knowing what she now knew.

Then she heard Ruth laugh and the sound of rumpled sheets being tossed to the floor.

“Don't think I'm done with you yet!”

Just when Helen had thought that her humiliation was complete, the entire process upon Ruth's mattress began to repeat itself with vigor. Helen could take it no more. She grabbed a nearby plush ball gown, began to wrap it about her head in an effort to blot out the sound of their infidelity. The hanging wire screeched softly against the wardrobe bar, as she jerked the gown closer another garment and its hanger clattered to the floor.

Both sounds were faint, neither should have been audible above the carnal cacophony of sounds coming from the mattress. Unfortunately, the monster upon the bed had senses that went far beyond the natural..

The banging of the bed frame ceased abruptly.

“Don't stop now!” she heard her sister plead.

But the vampire leapt away from the bed, straight towards Helen's hideaway.

“What is it? Have I disappointed you in some way?”

“Shut up, girl!” he growled, never turning his attention away from Helen's location.

Helen's first instinct was to scramble further back, putting as many clothes between them as possible, but she knew that was foolish. Better to freeze and make no further sound, not even a breath, than put any faith in such a false barrier.

The vampire bent to retrieve his long, black cloak from the floor, and tied it over his naked form casually. Helen saw a small slice of his face through the crack in the wardrobe and cursed herself for an idiot.

He gave a rough snort.

“Come out, little voyeur. I know you are in there. I can smell your blood.”

## Chapter 6

She had been both wrong and right. The voice that taunted her sounded so very much like Peter's, but it had not been his.

Helen revealed herself, clearly there was nothing to gain by delaying. She tried to project as much confidence as she could muster, mind grasping for a way to bluff her way out of this. Unfortunately, she found it impressively hard to project dignity when stepping out a wardrobe after eavesdropping on her sister's nighttime diversions, no matter what the extenuating circumstances.

She half-expected the vampire to strike her dead on the spot, but he contented himself with giving her as close an inspection as he was receiving himself.

She had met this brother before, but had still thought of him in her mind's eye as he had appeared a couple of years ago, before she and Peter had begun courting; an attractive schoolboy. She had not paid him much thought since, not seen how closely he had come to resemble his brother—a slightly shorter, broader version. They were not quite twins, but slight variations on a common theme, close enough to fool even a lover on a quick glance across a crowded room or by a bedside in the dark.

It was Ruth whose voice finally interrupted their silent stare.

"Helen, what are you doing in there? Naughty, naughty!"

Oddly, her sister did not sound particularly upset. Of course, it wasn't her temper that Helen was most concerned about.

Looking upon the vampire was very disconcerting, every feature so familiar, yet Helen could read nothing from an expression that felt vaguely off. It was as if a partygoer stood before her at a costume ball, donning a mask of her lover that was detailed but did not quite capture him truly.

"You are the one called Paris, are you not?" she said finally.

"I am, and you are my brother's chosen." This was a statement, not a question. "Have you come hoping to notch another Nourlish on your bedpost?"

Her leered crudely.

"I've heard many a good bar tale about men who bedded sisters." He thrust his chin towards Ruth who had by now arisen from her bed and come to stand beside him. She bled freely from a recent bite on her neck and fresh scratches between her breasts but paid them no mind. Helen too knew they would heal in moments leaving only the faintest of marks, real vampires would not go undetected for long if every bite they inflicted left telltale signs. They could choose when to make the wounds they dealt permanent.

Her sister's hastily donned clothing looked as if it had been raked by a tiger—a reminder to Helen that what she said here may have dire consequences.

Paris's bawdy manner revolted her, and she was at a loss for the safest way to respond. Disturbingly, it was Ruth who again spoke first. She had positioned herself in such a way that her face caught the candlelight, her deep brown irises seeming to shine in the otherwise dark room.

"Yes! Do join us, sister, that would be... exciting!"

This outburst caused even her lover to glance at her with mild surprise, though he didn't seem to disapprove of the suggestion.

"I'm flattered," Helen managed flatly, swallowing bile. "But I fear this is all a tremendously embarrassing misunderstanding."

"Oh, do tell," urged Paris. Something in his eyes seemed to harden.

Helen took a deep breath.

"It is clear now in retrospect that my reasoning was quite flawed, but I actually believed that you were my brother. That he and Ruth..."

Paris's slap rattled her teeth. She swallowed blood, hearing Ruth gasp.

"I know why you are here whore!" Paris howled, his lewd joviality gone, mood changing to dangerous rage as easily as a shift in the wind. "To learn my identity so that you can point me out to your father's men!"

"No, no, this is a mistake!" she managed to cough out. Ruth reached for him, gently repeating his name, but the vampire shoved her sister away so violently that she collided with a small table and fell into a heap.

Paris grabbed at Helen, and she felt nails like knives penetrate the tip of her shoulder, followed by a crushing pressure as he began to squeeze. She screamed, afraid for her life. He eyed her up and down hungrily and laughed.

"Maybe I will have you away way. You wouldn't usually be quite my taste, but the insult to my brother will make you far, far sweeter."

There was an animalistic roar from across the room, a vibration through the air like the passage of an archer's arrow. The hand was torn from her shoulder, taking a fair amount of flesh along with it. Helen was spun around, ramming into the still open door of the wardrobe and going down, her nose bloodied.

Scampering back to her feet, she found Peter wrestling with his smaller brother, trying to pin his wrists against the wall. Paris's arms flexed, thick with muscle, and Peter was shoved back. Ruth shrieked and began sprinting towards the pair. Helen grabbed her sister by the arm, intending to keep her from getting herself killed, and tugged her off of her feet. Red-painted nails scratched at Helen's already purpling cheek and they both fell down again.

"Let me go!" howled Ruth. The girl scratched and bit and kicked and fought dirty, but she hadn't learned that many new tricks, and Helen had been bossing her around since they were children. Helen received some shallow cuts and a shockingly painful kick to the shin, but managed to muscle her smaller sibling into the nearby wardrobe and hold the door shut.

Fortunately, a floral patterned chair within arm's reach proved to have rectangular legs just the proper width to jam through the holes in the door handles, effectively imprisoning Ruth within.

Helen's eyes once more sought the Nourlish brothers but found them a blur of dark hair and clothing, moving too fast for her mortal eye to follow. They climbed atop anything available for leverage—tables, chairs, and shelving; launching themselves off and fighting in the air like birds of prey. The two were so similar, and the bedchamber so dimly lit, that Helen was rarely certain which form was friend and which foe. Blood had blossomed from one or both of the combatants, and it dripped from the vaulting ceiling to into patches of thick carpeting. It was impossible to determine who had shed it, though the absolute brutality of blow and counterblow led Helen to believe there were significant contributions from each brother.

Helen's heart told her to help Peter, her animal brain said to flee. The latter impulse should have won out, for she realized that her lover's concern for her and the attention he paid to her presence was more likely to do him harm than good, but the two combatants were crashing back and forth across Ruth's quarters so erratically that she could not plot a safe path to the door. Instead she simply stood there, dumbly clutching at her throbbing shoulder.

Each collision the pair made with the walls and flooring caused a tremor like a small earthquake, creating sprays of dust and pulverized stone. Helen began to wonder if the tower itself might collapse before either of the Nourlish brothers.

Growing rapidly nearer came the unharmonious clanging of metal on stone. Soldiers burst through the door, weapons already drawn. They had been posted at the landing below, assigned to watch for danger and ensure that Ruth remained safe. Had the men been asleep? Apparently it took Armageddon to summon them, as the earlier fornication had barely been less raucous than the current warfare.

She could only imagine that Paris had been distracting them with some glamour, but that Peter's attack had disturbed his concentration.

The first man charged a few feet in the room, saw Helen, and pulled up short.

"My lady," he said, confused by her presence. She recognized the voice as Viri's.

Another dozen armed troops surged into the room behind him, having to stumble to a halt to avoid slamming into him. They looked around, noting the ill-used bed and broken furniture, but the vampires dug their claws into the very walls and hung from the arch of the ceiling, focused mainly on each other.

Mark opened his mouth to form a question, but it was never completed.

"No!" she heard Peter shout from above her.

The guardsmen looked up, brandishing their weapons, but death was already among them. Paris hit Viri like a blur. There was a crunch of metal and then there was nothing left of the boy except red pulp leaking from flattened armor.

Two more men were down before they even realized they were under attack. Paris's clawed hands slicing through swords and shields like naught more than tall grass.

“Protect the duke’s daughters!” shouted another man, trying to muster those around him into some type of order. Helen’s protectors responded bravely, but they would have been wiser to run. Paris batted away swords with inhuman strength, used one hand to crush a man’s skull inside his helm, tore open a throat with a simple flick of his wrist.

Stop! This murder is senseless!” cried Peter, lunging towards his brother, but Paris laughed and danced away, somehow always managing to keep a soldier’s body between himself and Peter. Helen’s lover was helpless, unwilling to harm the guards trying to protect her, and Paris killed them one at a time, tossing the corpses mockingly at Peter before seizing another soldier to use as a shield.

The younger vampire seemed invincible. His eyes never left Peter, but he blocked blows and nimbly dodged away from assaults he could not have seen coming from the troops surrounding him.

“Run you fools!” Helen shouted finally in frustration. “I command it!”

Most her father’s men ignored her, preferring to die fighting. A couple of the younger guards, saluted her and turned toward the door, but Paris hefted the older warrior he had just beheaded and hurled the corpse at them so hard that it smashed them against the wall. Helen heard bones snapping and both men screamed and passed out.

Peter pounced, finally having an open angle to attack, and tackled Paris to the floor. The two rolled about, knocking over a potted plant, and Paris somehow shook free and leapt aboard a nearby table. Peter pulled himself atop a bookcase of Ruth’s favorite fairy tales, and their aerial battle renewed, the brief interlude of brave men dying proving entirely pointless. Helen’s heart was sickened.

The two vampires came together, came apart with amazing speed. They must have made a dozen passes before one, appearing wounded, struggled to reorient himself after a collision and landed awkwardly on the floor. The other leapt impossibly high, alighting on the chamber’s primary chandelier, setting it swinging slowly like a pendulum.

The grounded figure pulled himself to his full height, and Helen grew certain it was Peter. Her suspicion was confirmed when Paris growled at him from above.

“This is over, Peter.” He sounded well assured of his victory.

“Hardly,” Paris braced himself to strike but Peter motioned with his left arm, making some gesture that she could not decipher in the dark. The dull flames of the chandelier’s candles leapt high, like a fire doused in wine, and Paris screamed and plummeted gracelessly to the floor.

Peter stepped over him, placing a heel on the back of his neck.

“Surrender, brother.”

Paris went limp beneath him. Behind Helen, Ruth had heard enough to be aware of a change in the tide of the conflict, and began screaming and hammering on her makeshift prison in earnest, nearly tipping it over atop Helen.

Helen herself crept closer, wary of Paris's compliance. Perhaps he had been wounded badly by Peter's trickery, but surrender would not have been in the nature of the beast that had massacred this castle's hall.

"You have squandered your second chance, Paris," Peter paused, panting heavily. "I do not have it in me to kill my own brother, but I have no qualms about exile. Never return to this duchy again!"

Paris laughed, a wet, pain-wracked sound.

Peter ground his heel.

"Kindly let me in on the joke, brother."

"But, you are the joke, Peter!"

Helen could not be quite sure what happened next, the movements were so fast.

Paris's arms raised above his back, father than human shoulder joints should have allowed, and grasped Peter by the knee. There was a sickening crunch, a swirl of motion, and both were on the floor but now Paris lay astride his brother, one hand clamping his throat to the floor, the other thrust deep inside his chest, as if seeking to literally tear out his heart.

"A word of advice, older brother. When your foe is down, kill him."

Peter shrieked as his brother's claws twisted inside of him. Helen grabbed the closest thing at hand, which turned out to be a medium-sized jewelry box, and charged forward. Lord knows what she would have done with it.

Fortunately, Peter was faster. He had no leverage to throw off his brother, nor to strike him with any real force, but a hand whipped into his vest pocket and back out. Paris cried out in surprise. The younger brother's body shone fiercely, encased within a bluish-white aura that spread quickly down through his skin, rendering him first incorporeal, then gone completely.

Helen reached her beloved, expecting to find a dagger, or perhaps a stake clutched in his hand. Instead she saw an odd assortment of glass and iron bits, which he quickly discarded as he desperately pressed the hand to the deep wound in his chest. A few of the bits caught the light of the now dimly burning chandelier above and she recognized the gears as the remnants of his pocket watch, as if all its gold had been sucked away.

"Peter!" she cried, and lay beside him, beginning to pull his head onto her lap. He cried out and stopped her.

"There isn't time! You need to listen!"

"But you have defeated him..."

Peter shook his head, coughing.

"No, that was only a spell I had placed on him earlier, assuming he would likely find a way to break out of the temporarily holding cell where I had placed him."

The hand not pressing against his wound grasped her wrist.

“It is fortunate I thought of it, but it will have little effect in the long-term. He will have been returned to the cell, but I had not realized his escape until I found him here. It must already lay open, my sentries incapacitated or dead.”

Peter’s breathing was so jagged and shallow, that she knew every breath must be costing him greatly.

“I came to the castle tonight not because I knew he had escaped, but because the way we parted today had left me unsettled. I needed to see you again. I found your room empty but immediately sensed my brother’s presence here.”

He cried out in sudden agony. Helen clutched him tightly.

“I will send word to my father, summon the doctor...”

“No!” the urgency of Peter’s objection surprised her. “Understand, Paris travels as I do. He will be return in mere minutes. And ask the guards littering this chamber how effective the duke’s army will be against him.”

“But then, what are we to do?”

Peter coughed again, writhing in pain.

“Not we but you, I fear. It falls to you now, I have failed you. I should have killed Paris when I ambushed him this afternoon upon learning of his killing spree at the castle. I was, as I remain, too proud to kill my own blood.”

“But I can’t possibly fight him!” panicked Helen.

“You have to, but it will not be a battle of brawn.”

“How then? I doubt you’re going to teach me magic in a few minutes!” she was shrieking, hysterical she knew, but didn’t seem able to stop.

“Go to the chapel, get the blessed chalice there. Pour in some wine, and mix it with a drop of his blood. The combination of holy and unholy will expose him finally to God’s judgment. He need not drink it, just be doused in it, and it should be enough.”

Helen looked at the stained carpets. There was plenty of blood here, but how to transport it, or even to be certain which stains were Paris’s? Peter seemed to read her thoughts, shook his head.

“The blood spilled here would not work, it must be fresh for the ritual to work.”

“Then how...”

“When we feed, we transfer something of ourselves to the victim. If the drop were to come from someone on whom he recently fed without killing,” he jerked his head towards the now toppled wardrobe, still emitting frustrated screams to the thumping of small fists against wood. “It should be enough.”

“Should be?” Helen was not comforted by his choice of words.

Peter smiled despite his pain.

“You must understand, this isn’t something I’ve done before myself,” he glanced something in her face, grew more serious. “But I trust the source implicitly, a number of spells I learned from the same tome have proven effective.”

He gasped and this time clutched both hands over his wound. His eyes unfocused for a second, and Helen feared he had gone catatonic, but they focused on her a bare breath later.

“Understand the risk I am taking by confiding in you and sharing this information,” he said. “The knowledge required for mortal man to kill my own kind.”

Helen nodded, realizing the faith he was placing in her, and suddenly she was crying and the tears would not stop.

“I know,” she bent and kissed his face, forehead. “I should never have doubted you. I am not worthy of you. But I will not fail you in this, I promise.”

“Good. Go now and stop him. Or his killing will not end in Engleton. I can no longer delude myself. He has too much of a taste for the killing. If Paris is not stopped now, he will eventually drown this continent in blood.”

Helen did not want to leave him, but he pushed her away with surprising force, used one hand to pull himself over to an end table and propped himself up into a sitting position. He tore off his vest and began to synch it around his mid-section; and though he screamed periodically as he did so, Helen though his face already seemed to have regained a bit of color by the end of the process.

“Move! I am not so easy to kill. Every wasted second is your enemy.”

“I love you,” sobbed Helen.

“Then do as I bid you,” he urged, pulling his bidding tighter.

Helen trod across the bloody carpet to the toppled wardrobe. It was lucky that Ruth was still trapped, for her tipping of the cabinet had broken the seat that Helen had used to jam it closed, but a chair leg had stayed stuck in place.

Helen wrenched it out with a violence she would have rather been inflicting upon another.

Ruth rolled out onto the floor, a hissing ball of snot and tears clad in torn clothes and unkempt hair, smelling of sex and defeat. She started to bolt before her second foot had even struck the floor, but Helen grabbed her by the scruff of the neck and dragged her across the blood slick carpeting. Fists and knees and feet battered Helen, but she barely seemed to feel them. She shook her sister like a storm driven sea.

“You are coming with me!” She shouted, her hysteria adding a level of desperation to her voice that she had never heard in it before. “Obey me or I will kill you! It’s a short walk to the chapel and I don’t think your blood will dry by then!”

Ruth stopped her struggling and just spit in Helen’s face, staring silent murder.

Helen gave one last look to her fallen love. He seemed no worse. Did his breathing, perhaps, sound a bit less labored?

“I know you can do this,” he told her. “But you must go now!”

“Live for me,” she told him.

“As always,” he replied.

And she left him there, dying and alone.

## Chapter 7

The men-at-arms Viril had led to their slaughter had left no one behind to garrison the stairs beneath Ruth’s chambers. This was, in retrospect, quite fortunate considering that Helen had no idea how she would have explained the current state of her and her captive.

The siblings had not yet descended two dozen steps when Ruth appeared to slip, bouncing down the hard stone steps like a rag doll. Helen attempted to haul her back upright using her firm grip on the girl’s upper arm, but despite Ruth’s negligible weight the stairs were too steep, and Helen overbalanced toppling into a head over heels descent. After her second full revolution in the air, Helen’s right elbow struck the jagged stone of the steps and all feeling in the arm was lost to a gut-wrenching stab of pain.

Below her, Ruth’s frail form landed lightly, if awkwardly, and she cackled; sprinting (with only a slight limp) off through the entry to the second floor, and away from the chapel.

Helen cursed and wondered if Peter might not be the only one with a family member needing to be put down. Her homicidal thoughts were interrupted by the shouts of men from the floor below her. She prayed they did not already herald Paris’s return.

Helen righted herself, amidst much bodily protest but thankful that nothing seemed severely broken, and then followed in her sister’s wake.

The corridors were eerily empty. Granted, it was well after the time that most people would be abed, and Helen had no concept of how long it had been since she snuck into her sister’s quarters, but where were all of the extra patrols that her father had ordered?

This was very bad. Ruth may be a runt, but she had always been fleet of foot than Helen. Worse, she didn’t even really need to escape, just keep away long enough for Paris to arrive and find them.

Where would she be headed? There wasn’t much on this floor except for their father’s private rooms and his public meeting chambers for business. Of course, if Ruth found anyone

and got the first word in, it might be enough. Once the duke's soldiers had a hold of his weeping, half-clothed, gore-splattered daughter they were unlikely to remand her into Helen's care no matter how she tried to convince them.

In fact, it was no doubt going to appear somewhat suspect when Helen arrived a few moments later, wild-eyed and equally disheveled, chasing after her sister. She ground her teeth, not seeing an option beyond continuing to plunge onward. If Helen slowed her pace now, she may lose all trace of her sister.

She turned a corner and caught just the faintest hint of motion, perhaps the sole of a foot, slipping through the archway into the master chamberlain's offices. She hesitated for a moment, wincing in anticipation, but no cry came from within. Following into the room a second later, she found that Henrik was once again absent from his desk, the large portal to the duke's antechambers just barely cracked beyond it—but wide enough for Ruth to have slipped through.

Where in damnation was everyone? Given recent events there should have been half of the duke's army posted here. She spared a glance at a clock along the wall. It was not as far past midnight as she had assumed, the duke must have scheduled another late night meeting elsewhere, but that did not explain the complete desertion of his chambers by his staff. There was more shouting and the sound of trampling feet came from far off down the hall.

At best dimly lit, even when the duke was present, her father's antechamber and rooms were now a complete and opaque black. Helen dove into the room, worried that Ruth might be concealed near the entrance plotting some sort of ambush. She crashed into an ornate half-pillar and some artistic knick-knack of her father's, no doubt priceless, shattered upon the floor.

So much for channeling the silent huntress, at least the piece had not landed upon her.

"Come now, sister, we haven't got all night!" She had lost the advantage of surprise, so Helen thought intimidation might be her best bet. She could see nothing in this dark room, but she had often been able to bully Ruth about as a child. Even if her sister refused to surrender, she might make the mistake of saying something that would give her position away.

Helen heard nothing, just the blood pumping in her own ears and a distant scream from the floors below. Her guts tightened. All evidence pointed to Paris's return, and she was fumbling their only chance to prepare.

Anxiously, she crawled toward her father's bedchambers. She had hoped her eyes would adjust to the low light, but the lack of illumination seemed absolute. She might be leaving Ruth at her back, having nothing to go other than the absence of a feeling that anyone was lurking nearby.

Helen touched another partially opened door and dragged herself forward into the main chamber, lying prone. Something large and porcelain-sounding exploded a couple of feet above her. A large chunk of debris landed on her back, but got stuck in the remnants of her clothing.

Helen charged forward, instinct telling her it was best to close the distance before her sister readied another projectile.

There was a feminine grunt from several feet to Helen's right. She pivoted, realizing her estimation of the missile's origins had been off. There were more grunts, deeper and more desperate, followed by the unmistakable crescendo of shattering glass. Moonlight entered the room, A cold wind howled past, sucking out the shred of a black sheet that had been obscuring the window. Ruth, stood to its right, chest heaving as she leaned against a fireplace poker that supported her like a walking staff. She placed a hand upon the window frame, mindless of the jagged teeth of glass still protruding, and stared defiantly back at Helen.

"You will not have me, sister! I will not be party to my beloved's destruction."

"He will kill everyone!" thundered Helen. "Father, Henrik, everyone you've ever known!"

"And what should I care?" Ruth shrieked above the thrum of the whipping wind. "Not a one of them has ever seen me! Not for whom I really am!"

Ruth's hand remained affixed to the window frame, blood now visibly pooling between her fingers, here and there overrunning them and dribbling down the light gray stone.

"All my life I've been the duke's other daughter! The one who's not pretty. The one who's not as talented. What have they to offer me but their pity and perhaps a political marriage to some second-born son five times my age?"

Ruth straightened, her rage strengthening her resolve. Helen could see her tensing for motion.

"Paris is the only one who ever saw me for what I was, a real person. What do even you know of me, truly?"

Helen could only hang her head guiltily. She opened her mouth, but her sister ranted on, her words caught up in their own momentum.

"Yes, you have known me longer than anyone. But none of you ever cared to ask my opinion or gave the slightest value to what I thought! Only Paris loved me for me! I will not have a hand in his death!"

Ruth tossed away the poker and pulled herself up onto the window ledge. Heather launched herself forward, but the distance was too great. She stumbled over the discarded prod and slid to the windows edge.

Ruth's doll-like form plummeted through the frigid night air, growing smaller still, the tatters of her nightclothes flapping as they splayed out behind her like streamers. There was a flash of lightning, and Helen was momentarily blinded.

The light dimmed but did not dissipate, resolving into the form of her mother. The sparkling apparition rose softly through the air, clutching Ruth to its bosom in a gentle embrace, its hands stroking idly through her hair. Helen stepped back as it slid gracefully through the window, came to a stop hovering just slightly above the floor.

“Mother, can it really be you?”

Wordlessly, the brilliant spectre passed Ruth into Helen’s arms. The small girl was subdued now, eyes open but breathing slow and even, as if in sleep.

“Mother...” Helen began, wanting to offer some explanation of what had brought them here in this state, but not able to perceive of a point at which to begin.

The ghost simply shook its head, and though its eyes were unreadable, opaque white, the familiarity of the gesture conveyed the same heart-breaking disapproval that it had when her mother had delivered it during some moral mending lesson.

Before Helen could speak again, the spirit was gone, the brilliant form boiling away like steam.

Helen took a second to robustly knot her sibling’s long hair about her wrist before carrying her towards the stairs.

The screams and shouts echoed from all directions now, invoking a dread sense of déjà vu.

\*\*\*

The sounds of men suffering seemed to rouse Ruth from her stupor.

She struggled from Helen’s grasp, then yelped as she was tugged along by the hair.

“No! I jumped! I was falling...” she stammered, shaking her head. “How?” “Your mother,” Helen informed her coldly. “The one soul who really loves you, no matter your many faults.”

Helen paused to give that emphasis.

“Even in death.”

“No!” Ruth howled, pulling back and trying to rip her hair free, but Helen had knotted it too thickly. “Some other bit of magic trickery that Peter has taught you!”

Ruth continued to struggle, but Helen wrapped another loop of hair around her arm and dug in. The younger girl was dragged along by the elder’s advantage in size and strength. When they reached the stairs, Helen kept both hands on her, ready now for her antics.

Ruth did not bite and kick as lustily as before, some of her certainty was gone now and it drained a little of the fight from her.

The passage to the chapel was empty, save for the dead; a collection of limbs, heads, and bits of armor Helen could not mentally reconstruct well enough to number the victims.

Seeing their goal gave Helen renewed strength and she quickened her pace. If she were to fail, at least let them say she had gotten this close. Suddenly, from somewhere behind them, Paris’s voice echoed tauntingly off of the walls.

“...A wolf in love with the sheep! I will kill each and every one...” but the words receded as he spoke, and were eventually blotted out by a new trio of screams.

Helen, who had turned in horror to look back over her shoulder, saw Ruth shiver and close her eyes, hugging herself tightly. Disgusted, Helen gave an overzealous yank on her sibling's ebony locks.

"Lord above! What is wrong with you, girl?"

Ruth laughed, was it Helen's imagination or was her face flushing slightly? "I'm sure you wouldn't understand," she said. "But to have a man so powerful, who can thrust his wishes upon others, who can dominate anything he lays his eyes upon..."

She shivered again, and Helen gave up on speaking with her. It was unlikely to achieve more than nausea.

They did not hear Paris again, but as they came abreast of the entrance to the chapel, pounding feet suddenly came sprinting toward them. Instinctively, Helen pressed her back against the wall, a pull of hair smashing Ruth against it beside her. But the feet belonged only to one of their father's guardsmen, running literally for his life, though likely in the wrong direction. His left ear and cheek were completely missing, torn from his face, and in his wide-eyed panic he did not even seem to take note of their presence before disappearing around the bend behind them.

Helen crossed the white marble threshold into the chapel and staggered. She felt as if the very air of the place pressed against her. The sight of the large gilded crucifix hanging above the altar made her head hurt.

This was another angle she had not considered. The holy chalice was meant to provide her salvation, but how would she even react to its touch?

Ruth did not seem similarly affected, and noting Helen's hesitation, tried to take advantage by striking at her with fury. Helen managed to turn so that the blows landed against her back and she retained a solid handful of hair.

Helen felt another jolt of unease when she crossed behind the altar, but it proved only momentary, and she continued on into the chapel's back room. She had half expected to find a priest or some pious, wounded soldier sheltering there, but it too was empty.

Helen glanced at the grand, gilded tabernacle with its dancing angels and wondered how Peter had intended she would pierce its locks. But then, searching across the room for something to use as a club or a crowbar, she was amazed to find a simple silver chalice on a short wash wooden table beside a small tub of water.

Perhaps the priest only locked away the grander chalice used for major rites? Or had the cup been placed here before cleaning following midnight mass and abandoned when it became clear the castle was once more under attack?

It was no matter, she was not about to argue with providence.

Helen grabbed the chalice, pausing only to slap a small stone from her sister's hand—Ruth had acquired it somewhere and begun trying to saw at her hair with its mostly blunt edge. To her relief, she felt no searing pain or other sign that she would be smitten from on high.

Helen felt a brief rush of triumph followed by paralyzing doubt. She had focused so much upon the first part of her goal, obtaining the chalice, that she had no idea how she was going to use it against Paris.

Well, first things first, she told herself determinedly. What had Peter said? To fill it with wine. She glanced around, found a convenient jug on a counter. She doubted the wine was blessed, given its dented pewter container, but he hadn't specified. She filled the chalice nearly to the brim.

Right, next add a drop of Ruth's blood. She smiled grimly. That was one instruction she was more than happy to follow.

She glanced around desperately once again, could find nothing with a cutting edge. A nearby alcove held a painting of Saint Stephen being stoned into martyrdom, lit by two tall candles in tubes of scarlet glass. Sighing, she put down the chalice, and smashed one of the candles on the floor. She bent to get her hands on a likely shard, and Ruth threw all of her weight in the opposite direction. Helen had been expecting the girl would try something, and she more or less kept her balance, the tips of her fingers just barely managing to snag a long sliver of glass.

Helen steadied herself, raising the scarlet point, and prepared to haul her sister forward head-first to make a cut. The question now would be what to do with Ruth once she'd taken her blood. Seeing the make-shift dagger in Helen's hand gave Ruth a final, desperate burst of strength, and she fought back, beginning to pull the larger girl off of her feet.

Helen set her legs and heaved, only suddenly, the counter-pressure that Ruth was exerting was gone. Helen fell backwards onto her rear, glass shards stabbing into her buttocks. Her only consolation was that she managed to swipe the chalice off of the alcove shelf as she fell, but most of the wine mushroomed out of it, splashing down around her and leaving her sputtering and squinting out of burning eyes.

A full foot of black hair remained tied to her wrist, but it ended in so smooth a cut her barber would have been jealous. Momentarily dazed, Helen raised her eyes to find Paris's laughing face looking down at her. She found it hard to comprehend his presence, she had not seen or heard him coming. One moment he had simply been there.

The vampire's lips and cheeks were smeared with blood and his black cape shed drops of brown offal and gore onto the chapel's blue tile. When he smiled, his teeth were red as well.

Helen was struck again by his resemblance to Peter, though her lover's smile would have never held such cruelty.

Paris had placed himself between Helen and Ruth, now sobbing and clutching at his leg. He cast an amused glance between them.

"I must say, I rather fancy you Engelmann girls. Your demon lovers leave you alone for a few seconds, and you're off doing sacrilegious things in churches. The two of you are insatiable!"

Ruth tugged at his cape.

“Your brother told her if he added my blood to that chalice, she could use it to defeat you. Ack!”

Ruth was flung flailing through the air, landing with a loud “Oof!” well out of Helen’s reach.

“Did he now?” Paris raised an eyebrow. Grabbing a nearby cask of holy water, he took a long swig, grimaced, and burped. “Seems unlikely but Peter always was the bookish sort, prone to spouting ridiculous-sounding bits of historical trivia.”

Helen still sat upon the glass-strewn tile. The half-full chalice rested in her lap, her right hand held a slick grip on her impromptu weapon. The shard had sliced her own palm when she fell, but she had been unwilling to relinquish her hold.

Fortunately, Ruth had either misunderstood those snippets of Peter’s instructions to Helen that she had overheard while imprisoned, or had simply not had enough time to fully explain before she had been battered aside. In theory, that gave Helen a chance, but sitting there looking up into Paris’s sadistic, predatory eyes she found herself paralyzed; unable to fathom what she should do next.

Paris kicked out and Helen’s head cracked against the tile floor. Irregularly shaped sparks of light flickered across her field of vision, and when they receded, she had trouble bringing the speckled stone of the ceiling into focus. The fragment of glass she had been holding, lubricated by her blood, slid several feet from her outstretched hand. She kept hold of the holy chalice, but it fell against her shoulder, dumping all but a spoonful of the remaining wine onto the floor.

“Still, best not to take chances,” Paris stepped forward. Helen was battered, concussed, and devoid of anything she could use as a weapon, but her base instinct told her that in order to survive she had to keep moving.

She rolled her prone form towards him, batting away his cloak with her stinging, sliced-open hand so that she could sink her teeth into his calf.

His skin tasted musky and foul.

Paris kicked out again. Helen was lifted into the air and smashed into the chapel wall halfway to the ceiling. By the time she had slid down it to the floor, landing in a numb tumble, Paris was already on top of her again.

“There is more fight in you than I expected,” sneered the vampire. “Perhaps I will have you before I kill you.”

In one careless swipe, he tore off the front of her gown, leaving four parallel tracks of blood across her breasts and stomach. She looked into his wild, manic eyes and had no doubt that he could just as easily tear out her heart if he so desired.

Helen raised a hand to the blood on her lips, Paris’s blood, and dipped her fingers into the chalice. There was barely enough wine to wash her fingers clean, but she felt it fizz as it

came into contact with the blood. Peter had told her one drop needed to be added to a full cup of wine, but the little smear of wine's reaction to the vampire's blood gave her hope that the spell might yet work its magic.

"Enough of this foolishness!" he tore the chalice from her hands, crushed it to a small silver ball with one fist, and tossed it in Ruth's direction.

Helen directed a firm slap at his face and Paris easily caught her wrist, but Helen's hands were still wet with wine.

She snapped down her fingers, wiping them along the back of his hand. She wished she had taken the time to ask Peter how the bloodied wine would work but she would simply have to be ready for anything.

Helen had hoped for shrieking, smoking skin, or perhaps Paris's instant disappearance into a puff of smoke. Instead, there was nothing. The vampire laughed.

"A word of warning; sometimes my brother's theories prove to be nothing more than whimsical failures."

But Helen was no longer paying him any attention. She had gone bone white with horror. Her face, screwed up in disgust, was fixated looking over Paris's shoulder. Her attention was riveted by the thing that had appeared behind him.

"What?" asked Paris, noting the change in her expression. Half-wary, half-concerned, he began to step back from her and turn, as if assuming some type of trick but considering Helen little enough of a threat to indulge his curiosity. His worried look intensified when he heard Ruth begin screaming in horror. Helen shrank back against the wall, legs shaking with terror.

The monster that had materialized behind him was taller than eight feet, with twisted horns that scraped the stone ceiling. Its arms and legs were as large as tree trunks, covered with writhing muscles of grotesque thickness. Indeed, its knobby red skin seemed to have more in common with wood than flesh.

Helen took one look and felt certain that she was regarding Satan himself.

"I can see your soul!" hissed the unearthly being with glee. Its voice was like the scratch of sandpaper, and when it spoke it revealed its curved, tusk-like teeth.

"No!" gasped Paris, looking afraid for the first time she could remember. In a blur, the vampire attempted to flee, but the devil proved even faster. It grasped him in an enormous fist, trapped him within crisscrossed black nails as long as Helen's forearms.

The creature squeezed, but its fingers slid, ghost-like through Paris's form. The vampire's body, for Helen saw that was all it was now, tumbled to the floor. It began to decay with astonishing speed, skin rotting off of bone.

Paris was screaming, the sound coming not from his rotting mouth but from the glimmer of dark soul still trapped between the monster's squeezing fingers.

Helen heard a thump from behind her, risked a sideways glance, and found that Ruth had fainted straight away.

She turned back, only to have the devil had thrust its enormous head towards her, she squealed and nearly fainted herself. The creature chuckled, a sound like stone cracking. Its breath felt like splash of boiling water across her skin.

It sniffed her with its gigantic nose.

“I smell the sin on you as well,” it cackled. “I will have you too, in your own time.”

It disappeared in mid-laugh, just as suddenly as it had come.

Exhausted and bruised, Helen collapsed onto the floor, conscious but no longer able to hold herself upright. Her father’s men found her there a short time later, shivering and bloody.

## Epilogue

“You expect me to do what?” asked Peter.

He and Helen lay in bed, still intertwined in the wake of their lovemaking.

She had not yet told him the words that the devil had said to her, what they implied about their ultimate fates. She had known, that in some sense, their love had likely cost her a chance at heaven, but she had not ever really dwelled on the alternative before now.

At first, she feared that the knowledge of their impending damnation would sour her love for him, but her heart had swollen to bursting when she learned that he still lived, and her feelings had not dampened since.

What use had she for heaven if entry would deny her all love on earth? She could not have faith in a God who would order the world in such a way. Either the Lord would see their love was true and forgive them, or she would be punished for it as He saw fit. She would not deny her heart.

Perhaps, at a later date, she would regret or repent. But now, wrapped in Peter’s arms, or earlier, alive beneath his hands; she was willing to accept that there would be an eventual, eternal price for today’s happiness.

It simply added an incentive to make it count.

She had found him, weak but very much alive, lying in almost the same spot in Ruth’s room as she had left him before going to confront his brother. Peter had been able to use his greater mastery of magic to disguise his location from Paris, so the other vampire had not been able to sense his whereabouts when he returned to the castle. Even if he had known that Peter still lay wounded in the tower, Paris had apparently decided to kill Peter last, so that his traitorous brother would suffer by watching the people he had chosen over his own blood die before Paris dealt him the final blow.

Even with that being the case, Peter’s wounds would have killed him if not for his supernatural fortitude. When Helen returned to him after vanquishing his brother, she found him looking stronger not weaker, as if Peter’s body was already sealing the horrific wound. His continued existence soon became a cause of great confusion to Doctor Jonas, who seemed to be

keen on publishing a study of the young man's amazing recovery. Instead of remaining bedridden as expected the Nourlish boy was already returning to light duties about his father's shops.

"Propose to me," repeated Helen. "After a full courtship, of course; my father believes you are an exceptional match."

The duke had survived Paris's attack unharmed, though deeply saddened by the further gutting of his guard. His men had moved him to a more secure location immediately upon becoming aware of the fighting between Peter and Paris in Ruth's chambers, and though he chafed at the careful handling, he had never been in danger when Paris returned.

Helen's father slowly grew to accept her assurances that the danger had passed, despite her refusal to explain her certainty. She had told those who found her in the chapel that the vampire had assaulted her and her sister there, but that they had been saved by an angel of God. People ignored her ravings, but they would have paid no more heed to the truth, which would have no doubt unsettled them greatly.

Helen suspected her mother's hand in convincing her father to return the castle back to a more normal status. He had initially been highly skeptical of their enemy's defeat, but came out of his next afternoon rest seeming far more confident in their safety. "Me? A match for a duke's daughter?" Peter asked, one-eye squinting in what she recognized as disbelief.

"Please," she shoved a palm against him lightly, not really wanting to push away from his warm flesh. "A duke of Engelton's daughter. You're hardly placing yourself in line to be the Holy Roman Emperor!"

"Don't make fun of me!" he protested, but his beautiful mouth was laughing. "I'm just saying that we Nourlishes are hardly old blood. The gentry still have prejudices about such things."

Helen's heart beat faster, for he was protesting the particulars, not the proposal itself.

"Don't be so naïve. It all comes down to money in the end!" she chastised him. "What kind of a merchant are you, if you don't even know that?"

He held up his long-fingered, talented hands defensively.

"Engelton is hardly an economic Mecca, if you've failed to notice," she continued. "We need the money. You just need to talk your father into offering a sizeable dowry. Your money may be new instead of old, but the duchy can spend it just the same. No one will see such a match as objectionable."

Peter traced the line of her cheek, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"Ask my father for a rather expensive bride for my birthday, eh?" he asked, then shook his head. "I'm afraid I have no idea how he will respond. Certainly, he always wanted to provide a legacy for the family, but a dukedom? That may be well beyond his ambition."

"Work on him. You can be quite... convincing, you know."

Peter's hand moved down from her chin, stroking lower and lower. Helen writhed.

“So I’ve often been told.”

“I’m not sure that’s entirely the best approach to take with your father.”

Peter laughed.

“I suppose not. But he’s hardly the one who I want something from right now.”

She had thought her evening’s desire exhausted, but found some remaining after all.

Afterwards, they lay quietly on their backs, her body nestled into the slot between his chest and encompassing arm. She did not want to broach the subject again, for fear that he would feel pressured. In truth, this night had gone far better than she could have imagined. She must have played the scenario over a thousand times in her head, and in few of them had she imagined him so open to the idea of marriage.

She was excited to tell Andrea and Sarah that they would soon renew their courtship. She wouldn’t be able to recount this conversation, of course, but the girls had been running a number of notes back and forth between Helen and Peter recently and knew they had been in discussing something urgent. She had confided in the pair that she had spoken with her father about whether the merchant’s son was a proper match and that the duke had agreed. She smiled, the girls would be overjoyed. Not only would they be happy for their friend, but they would own the best gossip in the castle by far.

Happily content, her thoughts of the future had begun to drift into the world of dream when Peter finally spoke again. She had thought him already asleep himself.

“What has become of your sister?” he asked, clearly somewhat uncomfortable with the topic. “There have been some rumors about town due to her absence.”

Helen pondered this, wondering what others might make of Ruth’s sudden disappearance from the public eye following that night’s events.

“What have you heard?” she asked him then, studying him closely. “What do you believe?”

She felt him shift his weight beside her.

“Well, the word put out from the castle is that the gentle-hearted duke’s daughter has been sent away on a sabbatical for her health after witnessing dire events involving an attempted assassination of the duke.”

Helen nodded. They had tried to disguise and downplay the number of deaths suffered over the last week, but Engelton was a small village and she had no doubt that people would talk. If her family was lucky, no one would ever discover the full tally of the dead, but those who did start to group some facts together would know it was high.

No convincing narrative had presented itself to explain Paris’s repeated assaults on the castle. It wasn’t like a wild lion would have wandered into the duchy’s main stronghold. Saying it was the result of revolutionaries or the criminal element might be plausible but it would only unsettle the public. Better, they decided, to blame the deaths on some elite killer tasked with killing the duke. Hopefully, the outcome of that rumor would be to rally the people around their

leader. Why the Turks would be wasting their gold on murdering the Duke of Engelton had been left for the public to debate.

That was mainly because no one on the inside of the cover-up could construct a convincing rationale.

“Good,” Peter would know the gossip he heard from the villagers had partly been authored by Helen herself. “What about the second part of my question?”

He hesitated, reluctant to answer.

“I find it suspicious that she has not been seen since the day that Paris... was defeated.” Despite his brother’s homicidal intent, Peter still seemed unwilling to speak about his death. She suspected that on some level, he held himself responsible for it, feeling he could have prevented it if he had handled the situation differently. Helen intended to continue to work to dissuade him of that notion. Paris had been evil and cruel, and his nature would have shown through eventually no matter how he had been treated.

Peter turned to her and smiled weakly.

“I would like to think that you did not really wring her neck as you had earlier threatened.”

Helen smiled back and did her best to look innocent.

“I don’t think your father would have allowed you to lock her in the dungeons,” continued Peter, studying her eyes closely for a reaction. “So, a sabbatical I think is the truth of it; though likely not one of her own choosing.”

He nodded, seeing some confirmation of his theory in her expression.

“Where has she been exiled?”

“Peter!” she protested, squeezing his arm. “Think me capable of some mercy! The time away really is for her own benefit! I think you would agree that some disturbing attributes of her character have recently come to light which could likely use some attention.”

He shrugged, his mood shifting from merry to morose.

“I hardly qualify to give advice on rehabilitation of one’s peers.” She frowned, and he seemed to make an effort to shake off his gloom. “Where have you sent her then?”

“To Trise. Father would only agree if she was close enough for him to visit and check on her progress quite regularly,” Helen admitted. It had been another argument she did not think she would have won against the duke himself. Her mother must have weighed in on the matter, she would have known well that something in Ruth was broken.

“Trise?” replied Peter. “But there’s nothing there but a...”

“Convent, yes.” She interrupted. “I believe it is Ruth’s spirit more than anything that needs mending. I will have to have faith in the good sisters to repair it.”

“A nunnery, really?” Peter shook his head ruefully, giving her naked form a long, pointed look. “You, my dear, are a terrible hypocrite.”

Despite her protests, they went on to prove him right once again.

If you enjoyed reading my book I would be delighted if you would leave feedback on my obooko.com [download page](#).

*Please note: This is an authorized free edition available exclusively from www.obooko.com. If you paid for this free e-book, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author.*



This is an authorized free edition from  
[www.obooko.com](http://www.obooko.com)

Although you do not have to pay for this e-book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright law. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only: it must not be redistributed commercially or offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand an immediate refund and report the transaction to the author and obooko.