



PENNY DREADFUL

WAIL OF AN EBBING TIDE

Xena Torres

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“Great seducer, corrupter, you came to me at my weakest, fed on my isolation and pain, my guilt, my grief, my desperation to find some solace, some peace in this life. You who helped cause my malady, you who made me sick and then offered a cure, a cure that was none at all.”

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BITCH
OF ROME
ENTERTAINMENT

WAIL OF AN EBBING TIDE

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Penny Dreadful is the copyright property of Showtime and Sky. It was created by John Logan and produced by Desert Wolf Productions and Neal Street Productions. This fan fiction story has been written for entertainment purposes only out of love for the show and out of respect to my fellow Dreadfuls.

*Dedicated to Eva Green
for the gift of Vanessa Ives
&
my fellow Dreadfuls*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story rewrites the ending of the final episode of *Penny Dreadful*, "The Blessed Dark," from the moment Ethan enters the white bricked room with Vanessa. It is then divided into six parts ("episodes") in which I attempt to conclude the series, wrapping up loose threads and plot points that I think most Dreadfuls would agree were left unresolved at the end of the series.

Please note that I am not someone who is against tragic endings, nor do I think endings have to be sunshine and rainbows, where none of the characters die and they all go off to live perfect lives. I do, however, think endings to series need to give viewers closure and have to bring the characters to a point where we can accept they will live on without us watching. For my ending, I followed the threads already presented on the show. I also used the books *Penny Dreadful* drew from, directly and indirectly, while other parts were completely my own.

Dr. Jekyll does not appear in this novel. While his story was disappointing, I felt it was as concluded as it could be without starting a new thread and this fan fiction is an attempt to conclude the show, not the first part of a virtual series.

I wrote this because, like many fans, I felt cheated at the end of the series and frustrated with all the threads left dangling. So much felt unresolved and, for a show I loved so dearly, I could not abide such an ending. We cannot know all the moving pieces behind the scenes that brought us to the ending we got, but let it not diminish our respect for everything else John Logan and the team behind *Penny Dreadful* gave us. I write this to put out an alternate ending for the fans who feel like me, not to curse the *Penny Dreadful* crew (no matter how angry those last ten minutes or so made me).

I have done my best to capture the subtle nature of *Penny Dreadful*, so you may find you will better grasp this story if you read it more than once, as the context of a moment is altered with information you are provided with later. The story contains numerous

nods and winks to some of the original novels (*Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *Carmilla*), other literary works, various mythologies, and what is *Penny Dreadful* if not laced with Romantic era poetry? You do not need to be familiar with any of the works to follow the story, but those of you that are should get some additional enjoyment, just as you did watching *Penny Dreadful*.

To my fellow Dreadfuls who felt the same as I did at the end of “The Blessed Dark”—hurt, angry, upset, unfulfilled—I hope reading this small work can give you the same sense of closure for this fantastic series that it gave me to write it. It was a joy to play with these characters and give them the ending I thought they deserved. I hope *Wail of an Ebbing Tide* allows you to say goodbye to this show you loved.

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PROLOGUE

THE BLESSED DARK

Etan opened the door and stepped into the white bricked room. He felt stifling heat from the hundreds of burning candles, smelling the hot wax as it dripped down to the floor. Seeing no familiars, he set his drawn gun back into the holster, but kept his tingling fingers close to the grips of his weapons, praying he would not need to draw them.

She stood at the end of the shallow hall in the middle of the small, circular room with her back to him. As he stepped closer, she slowly turned her body just enough for her eyes to make contact with his. Her skin was pale beyond life, except around her eyes where it was tinged red. Her irises held him. He had seen playfulness and delight in those eyes; strength, compassion, hardness, and even cruelty. The eyes were the same flesh, but they were not her eyes. They were dead. His chest painfully constricted as he realized his desperate desire to save her did not mean that he could.

"Miss Ives," he said softly as he entered the room, closing the distance between them.

She pivoted, gliding as if not touching the ground, and faced him. "After all this time and all we've shared, still so formal, Mr. Chandler?"

Her voice, but not her voice.

"Vanessa."

"Not quite."

"Amunet," he ventured.

She gave him a dangerous half smile. "Somewhat. If it suits you to so call me, I'll allow it. You humans do like to name a thing as though that gives you some power over it."

He took a few more steps, leaving an arm's length between them. Her black hair trailed over the long, white dress, which seemed so foreign to him on her body; she was a dark thing, now even more so: the Mother of Evil unleashing death upon the world, but unlike Vanessa, dressed in white.

She studied him with razor eyes, seemingly able to look right through him to his soul. He supposed she was doing just that. "Quite the adventure you had in America. You were nearly ready to join yourself to my other beloved, yet here you come to challenge me to this bloody dance once more. How hypocritical of you, *Lupus Dei*."

"I want to talk to Vanessa."

"She can hear you, our dear Miss Ives. She's here with me as I have always been here with her. This prudish era, her strong rebellious will; trapped within the faith of a repressive, false religion...I have not experienced a heart so close to my own in more years than you could imagine. I stirred in my cage and the scorpion stung her down to her soul, calling out to my beloveds. With her I have always felt so free. I have given her that same gift."

She began to circle him. Though nothing about her posture or her movements suggested an attack, Ethan tensed anyway. "You would claim to love her, but you are here to try to shackle her by shackling me. You've seen her true self, Ethan, you know her heart. Before you now we both stand. Even if you could restrain me, she will always be the scorpion."

"I don't want to restrain her."

"Good. Then leave this place, *Lupus Dei*, for she is free with me and my beloved."

"I don't want to restrain her, and I know her heart; this is not her. *You* are not her. I don't know if you're trying to lie to me or

yourself. Vanessa's heart is pure."

"Her love for broken things?" she questioned with a mocking tone.

"Yes."

"And what of her cruelty?"

"You are responsible for that."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

She smiled again, delighted by the game, a game only she knew the rules to and one Ethan had no clue how to win. "Well then, shall we have blood, Lupus Dei, or are you just another mindless animal? Not that it matters; you have failed either way."

"I don't understand."

"Ah, you didn't know you weren't the only one. Yes, the poor stupid animals, of which there are many, are to be my 'protectors,' keeping me away from my beloveds, but here I stand. At such time as I should join with one of my beloveds, Lupus Dei alone will rise, but it's not the throats of my beloveds that you seek." She stopped before him, her face inches from his, her eyes suddenly turning red as blood and filling him with a sense of terror. "It's *mine*." A hand shot out with inhuman speed, shoving him with such strength that Ethan was lifted off his feet and projected down the hall, hitting the metal door at the end with enough force to leave an impression in it. "You left, Lupus Dei," she taunted with a deadly purr as her face began to contort, "and I am far too strong for you now."

With a single leap, she was at his side. When she landed, Ethan looked up into a face more hideous and frightening than the slithering vampire creature he had seen that first night with Vanessa. Her mouth widened, holding rows of long fangs, and her face distorted into something that resembled a mixture of snake, bat, and insect. Her skin had become a dark shade of grey, causing her blood red eyes to stand out until they seemed to glow. There was no trace of the woman he loved there.

She reached down with one hand, lifted him up by the collar of his jacket, and slammed him, head first, into the metal door. The clang in Ethan's head was louder than the one that echoed through the space. He felt himself once more hurtling across the room, crashing into the bricks which exploded and fell around him. Somehow he was still conscious enough to hear her laugh; a deep, gleeful celebration of his suffering, a sound that seemed called from Hell. He could feel candles burning the hairs on his skin, and every part of his body was alive with pain. He found himself becoming aware of every smell, every sound, and vividly sensed every part of his body so clearly, his skin alive with enhanced sensation. He thought this must be the moment before death, soaking in every last detail of life before the end. He felt numerous forms all around him, heavily furred bodies, and his chest vibrated as they all growled lowly at once. They came closer with dripping teeth, ready to feed. He felt the bites, sensed them as if they were real, but at the same time, he could tell they caused no harm to his physical body; they bit through his flesh and into his soul. All their curses were now his alone to bear. His body responded, shuddering with agony, as he felt the familiar sensation of his body starting to rip and tear, but in a way unlike any of his prior experiences. It felt like forever, a pain everlasting, an unmatched physical anguish, but within seconds of hitting the wall, Ethan rose on large, clawed feet, his wolf-like eyes opening to see the Mother of Evil racing towards him.

Thought remained his, which he held onto only long enough to realize how different his appearance was. He was more wolf than man, far more than he had ever been. There was no moon, but here he was, more powerful than ever before. The instinct to survive, and an even stronger instinct for a throat—*her* throat—forced him into movement, driven by need. He let his human mind recede, and surrendered to the wolf.

They crashed together, claws and fangs tearing at flesh. Blood splashed over the white brick, covering the room in red gore that

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splattered and killed candles, driving them ever more into a darkness neither noticed. Each landed blow was enough to bring death, but neither fell, their wounds starting to heal even as they were made. They raged on through the heavy darkness, their eyes as comfortable there as in the light, each seeking to rip out the throat of the other, a wound even they could not heal from.

Never before had his wolf limbs known weakness, but as they traded constant blows, her meeting him tooth to claw, even his powerful arms were beginning to wane as the fight waged on. A flash of thought that he would die and fail as *Lupus Dei*, allowing the world to fall forever to death and darkness, suddenly renewed his strength and determination. Even this could not last as she seemed to be without limits. She enjoyed the sport of wearing him down so she would be able to relish the kill.

Ethan saw an opening. Teeth sank deep into tender flesh, blood bursting into his mouth as he consumed most of her neck. He could taste Dracula's foul bite and through his own he seized the tainted flesh, tearing it from her neck in a bloodied chunk. She cried out and collapsed to the floor, clutching the wound which would have instantly killed anyone else. It did not heal like the other injuries, and bled freely, even as the flesh worked to knit itself back together. Her face began to change back, revealing the woman under the blood, and her eyes were restored to those he recognized.

He stood over her, bloodied flesh in his mouth with the taste of Dracula on his tongue. She looked up at him as Vanessa. His chest heaved from the exertion and the *need*, rage embedded in his eyes. She said no words, holding her bleeding neck and every part of *Lupus Dei* tensed for the final strike, to fulfill the destiny of the Wolf of God, to deny evil its prize once more.

Ethan's love was stronger. Humanity returned to his eyes and they softened, looking into her face. He spit the chunk of flesh from his mouth, sending the bloodlust with it. Somehow, with no control he ever possessed before, he banished the wolf and fell to the floor,

exhausted and spent, next to Vanessa.

"Mr. Chandler," she greeted weakly in a voice that was at last her own. "Ethan."

He crawled through the carnage to her and lifted himself up to take her into his arms, her back against his chest. Her breathing sounded wet and wrong, and he clamped his own hand over hers and the gushing wound as panic rose in him. Tears began to move down his cheek. He pressed his face to her hair. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please don't go."

Her other hand reached up and softly touched the one he had wrapped around her waist. She leaned back into him and he felt her body begin to relax.

"No, Vanessa, you can't leave me. I told you before: you can never give up as long as I live."

"I'm with you, Ethan," she said strongly, tilting her head up to meet his eyes. "Welcome home."

He kissed her, each of them with the other's blood in their mouths, but through the copper flavour, he tasted strength and life. Somehow the wound was not fatal, and had brought Vanessa back to the foreground. Her skin was still deathly pale and her eyes red, still not human, but Vanessa sighed with content, her lips against his own. Resting his forehead on hers he asked, "Is it over?"

Her eyes opened and held his, anger building behind her gaze. "Not before I take back from Dracula what I gave him. In blood."

Sir Malcolm's vision grew darker as Dracula's fist tightened even further around his throat. He could barely hear anything over the pounding in his ears, but he felt Dracula's other hand once more knock one of his allies away. He knew they had no chance of defeating such a creature, but Sir Malcolm would fight on until either Vanessa was free, or he was dead. He had lost too much already. His family died in these monsters' quest for Vanessa, and he would

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not allow Mina or Gladys to have died for nothing.

Dracula pulled him close enough for Sir Malcolm to feel the vampire's breath. While Dracula made eye contact with him alone, he spoke to all the battered and bloody combatants, trying to rise to their feet for another attack, despite their mounting injuries. "For the sake of my beloved, this is your last chance to accept clemency. Leave this place."

Rage took over Sir Malcolm's features and he attempted to answer Dracula with a blow to the face, but the ageless vampire effortlessly caught his fist and hissed, "Very well," into Sir Malcolm's ear. His mouth began to open as the human canines stretched into wickedly long, sharp fangs.

"Stop!"

Even though he was about to black out from the lack of oxygen, felt his life dangling, Sir Malcolm smiled at the sound of Vanessa's voice. The fangs that had just touched his skin were quickly removed and he felt Dracula turn, the dragon dropping him to the floor. Kaetenay helped Sir Malcolm to his feet as he wheezed and coughed, trying to draw air back into his lungs, even as he searched the darkness for Vanessa. He found her on the broken balcony, Ethan at her side. Both of them were awash in blood, but she stood firmly, with strength radiating from her, causing Sir Malcolm to feel only relief.

Dracula looked frantically between Ethan and Vanessa. "This cannot be," he whispered, though it echoed in the vacant slaughterhouse, allowing them all to hear.

"Yet it is," Vanessa coolly replied.

Seeming to forget anyone else was in the room, Dracula moved closer to Vanessa, his face filling with pain. "You're mine."

"No longer."

"I freed you."

"Did you? Great seducer, corrupter, you came to me at my weakest, fed on my isolation and pain, my guilt, my grief, my des-

peration to find some solace, some peace in this life. You who helped cause my malady, you who made me sick and then offered a cure, a cure that was none at all. You sold me a love for the broken things, the night creatures, created but unloved by God.”

“That which we both are.”

“Look around you, Dragon. Do I look unloved? Do I look at peace? You said you wanted to love me for who I am, yet you corrupted me to bring out that which you most desire, causing me to merely deny a different part of my soul, but to deny my whole self still. These people—my friends, my family—they love me for *all* that I am.”

Glancing behind him, Sir Malcolm saw agreement in the eyes of those there with him. They were on their feet, ready to strike again, to help free Vanessa; not for the sake of the world, but for her, for their love of her. Sir Malcolm would go to the very gates of Hell to protect her. He would not fail again.

“I love you, Vanessa,” Dracula stammered, his face contorted with grief.

Vanessa held his gaze with cold eyes. “Do you? You and your brother claim to love me, but if you did, you would have let me go, let me be happy. Instead, for my entire life, you have tried to torture me into submission, to be as *you* desire. *That* is what you call love.”

Dracula opened his arms wide. “Kill me then. You said before it was the only mercy you would give me. Just as then, I accept that end if I cannot be with you.”

Vanessa tilted her head slightly to the side and smiled at him as though he were a child. “That trick shall not work twice.” Her face began to change, and Sir Malcolm was horrified by the result. It was nothing like how Mina had looked and was terrifying beyond the creature that had been with her. No one had much time to react, as Dracula began to change as well, his form making Vanessa’s seem tame.

Fog began to fill the room, making it hard to see Dracula’s true

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form, but some primal sense spread dread to his very bones as he saw fur, claw, wing, and fang. He had a sense of being stalked by the bat, the wolf, and the dragon all at once, and was frozen in place, trapped like a frightened deer. It was impossible to hold the true form of Dracula in his mind, just the sense of creatures, the sense of fear, the heavy mist feeding a prey's panic and desire to flee, while at the same time being rooted to the ground.

It was Dr. Seward's gun that rang out first, looking for a direct blow to the back of Dracula's head, but he was suddenly as thin as a crack in a doorway, only to return to his massive size as the shot missed him, all within a heartbeat. The others began to fire, as did Sir Malcolm, while Catriona and Kaetenay ran at Dracula with their daggers at the ready. Each bullet passed harmlessly through the fog as Dracula's form changed, shrinking and growing, faster than any human mind could follow, and he launched himself into the air on massive leather wings before Catriona or Kaetenay could reach him. Vanessa jumped off the balcony as Ethan brought up and fired both of his guns. Like all the other bullets, none touched Dracula, but Vanessa crashed into him, and they landed heavily on the floor, the concrete cracking under the force of Dracula's weight driving into it.

Sir Malcolm and the others were forced to hold their fire, not wanting to hit Vanessa, or each other, with their sight so diminished by the fog. Catriona, Kaetenay, and Sir Malcolm tried to use their blades, but the battle between Dracula and Vanessa moved at speeds no human could match, as though two gods were locked in battle. Blood shot out from the hidden mêlée, further drenching the slaughterhouse and the combatants, but neither Dracula nor Vanessa slowed or missed a step. It defied all comprehension, even as Sir Malcolm tried to understand what he was seeing, attempting to grasp how Vanessa was doing and how he could help, but they were all trapped beyond the battle and Vanessa was on her own.

A blast like he had seen the nightcomers use, but far more pow-

erful, radiated out from the fight, sending them flying into the walls. Dracula landed hard, briefly visible as the fog seemed to clear. Vanessa's claws ripped deep into his throat, causing him to roar in pain, but soon the battle was once more too quick to follow and cloaked in fog again.

Stumbling painfully to his feet, Sir Malcolm helped Victor up, but the young doctor fell back down, his eyes swimming from the blow he received to his head when he landed. Sir Malcolm saw Catriona limp over to Kaetenay, who wasn't moving. Dr. Seward was back on her feet, but she stood with a blank expression, seemingly unable to grasp what was happening. Ethan had fallen from the balcony, but he was getting to his feet and moving towards Sir Malcolm, who grabbed his shoulder when Ethan reached him. "There must be something we can do."

Ethan gave him a hard look and shook his head. "This is her fight."

"I won't lose her."

"Neither will I."

Being reduced to a spectator was not something Sir Malcolm was ready to accept. His hand tightened around the hilt of the sword he kept sheathed in his cane. Blood dripped to the ground, wrung from his gloves the harder he clutched the hilt. The battle stilled again for a moment, but this time Dracula had Vanessa pinned to the ground. Sir Malcolm didn't hesitate. He raced across the room, lifting his sword over his head, and speeding it straight through the center of Dracula's neck. This time the dragon didn't dodge the blow. Instead he made choking sounds and his clawed hands started to come to his throat, but Vanessa's were there first, striking with such force as to completely decapitate him, his head taking flight. When it landed, it was Dr. Sweet's, and the near naked body of the doctor fell on top of Vanessa, covering her in blood. The young woman's pale face instantly reverted to her own normal tone, all traces of bat, snake, and insect gone.

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Her head dropped back against the concrete, utterly spent. Sir Malcolm ripped Sweet's body off of her and tossed it aside, taking Vanessa's head into his lap. He saw so much blood on her that it was impossible to see her wounds through the gore, but she weakly held her hand to her throat. He tore some cloth off the clothes of a nearby corpse and pressed it to the injury. Vanessa lay there quietly, her eyes locked with his, smiling. He returned the smile and they said nothing. They didn't have to.

Coming to her senses, Dr. Seward helped Victor to his feet and led him to Vanessa's side. Both doctors noted Sir Malcolm was already putting pressure on the wound. Victor had Catriona cut him some strips of rags, which he used to secure the dressing Sir Malcolm was holding in place until they could transport Vanessa home and better treat the injury.

Vanessa stole a glance at Dr. Seward and softly whispered, "I got the sense that you never fully believed me, Doctor. I take it now that all doubt as to my sanity is gone?"

"I admit I still had some questions, though finding a dead-looking Renfield in my office, munching on frogs and blabbering about his master, was very helpful with the convincing. You shouldn't think, however, that the Father of Beasts excuses all your neuroses, Miss Ives."

Vanessa chuckled, then winced.

"You shouldn't speak or try to move," Victor admonished.

She didn't reply, just made eye contact with Sir Malcolm again, the two of them soothing each other's wounds from the events during their separation without needing to explain them. It still amazed him at times how deeply he cared for her considering he used to hate her with nearly the same passion. It really was the tiniest sliver between the two.

"Look," Catriona said, pointing at the sunlight the rest had failed to notice was hitting the floor from the holes in the roof. They all began to smile, realizing they had succeeded in reversing the apoca-

lypse. "So it's done then?" Catriona asked.

Despite the doctor's warnings, Vanessa frowned and replied, "This battle."

Though the straitjacket prevented him from using his hands, Renfield was not about to ignore the sweets sent by his master. He pressed his face tight against the walls, using his teeth and tongue to snatch the spiders from their webs. Each life he consumed was a gift as the flesh and blood of the life he took extended his own. Spiders were good because they possessed all the lives of the flies and bugs they had eaten, allowing him to claim them all as well when he took the spiders into himself. He longed for much larger things, such as the humans his master had given him, but he would not get those here. He could wait. His master would come.

He munched in contentment, savouring his latest gift, when he suddenly found himself on the floor. He did not know how he got there, but his face was wet with blood and his head shot through with pain. "What is wrong with my face?" he cried out. "Why does it hurt so terribly?"

Two orderlies stepped in the room, and one immediately ran back out, going to fetch a doctor. The second orderly moved to Renfield. "Why does my face hurt so?" Renfield asked. "What has become of me?"

The first orderly returned with a doctor, who leaned over the patient. "Doctor, I have had a dream. I am so weak. Please remove the strait-waistcoat; I cannot hurt you. I am awakening from a dream—no—a nightmare...these are my final words."

They lifted Renfield and put him on a bed, the doctor nodding to the orderlies to remove the straitjacket. His face was a mess of injuries, leading them to believe he had thrown himself into a wall. His skull was cracked and bone was sticking out of his face; he was no threat. He would die soon.

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"He got her through me. I told him such things, such things he then used against her. For a moment I fought him, I spoke of his plans, but now, I know, he is gone and she is free. I too am free, but I go with him not her, to some place beyond this one." His eyes grew wide and his body tensed. "God! God! God!"

As Renfield expelled the air from his lungs, his soul went with his last breath.

With Vanessa too tired and injured to walk back, Sir Malcolm paid to borrow a carriage, not wanting a driver to make note of all the bloodied passengers. He spent an exorbitant amount as it was just to have the man ignore Sir Malcolm's state. Dr. Seward was the least marked by the butchering, so Ethan helped her into the driver's seat while the rest climbed inside. Victor sat on Vanessa's right side, monitoring her most extreme wound, while Sir Malcolm was on her left. She rested against him, her eyes half closed. The wound was bad. She was once more fully human, but the injury had healed enough while she was in her godly form. She would live.

Ethan climbed in and sat between Catriona and Kaetenay, his gaze travelling between hard eyes on his Apache father and with concern on Vanessa. Catriona looked like she wanted to feel proud about their victory, but Vanessa's words had shaken her, unaware as she was of the larger battle the rest of them had long been fighting.

When they arrived at 8 Grandage Place, Ethan stepped out first and, despite all that had happened, he couldn't help but smile when he saw the man waiting there. "Mr. Lyle."

The Egyptianologist beamed when he saw who got out, though the blood and carnage quickly changed his expression. "Mr. Chandler," he greeted, "you've become very lax with your appearance since last we met." He could not help smiling again. "But that accent still undoes me."

Reaching back, Ethan took Vanessa's hand and helped her down, supporting most of her weight as she had very little strength left to hold herself up. Mr. Lyle's face filled with concern and he raced to her side to help. "My dear Miss Ives. I came as soon as I heard about the deadly fog in London. I feared terribly for your safety."

Vanessa gave him a loving look, but said nothing as they helped her into the house. She started to crumble as they got inside, but Ethan caught her and picked her up, carrying her over to the couch in the drawing room. Ethan had never seen her look so small and helpless; nothing ever made him feel so afraid. The others soon joined them, Victor now holding his medical bag. "Get water and rags. We have to clean away this blood. Dr. Seward, please assist me."

Concern made them all move quickly to their tasks, reunions to wait for a better time.

Introductions and quick greetings out of the way, Sir Malcolm, Ethan, Catriona, Mr. Lyle, and Kaetenay waited silently in the foyer while the doctors worked on Vanessa. They were extremely uncomfortable covered as they were with sticky and drying blood. Their own injuries became more vivid and harder to ignore now that the immediate life and death battle was over. Their concern over Vanessa banished all other priorities and kept them waiting.

Dr. Seward opened the doors and stepped out of the drawing room. She nodded to acknowledge Mr. Lyle and then said, "As suspected, the neck wound was the most serious injury." Ethan looked at the floor. "Thankfully, Dr. Frankenstein was able to stitch it up and none of the major arteries were nicked, which is one hell of a fucking miracle I may add."

"Can we see her?" asked Sir Malcolm.

"She's asked to see all of you, but the doctor wants us to keep it

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brief and allow her to rest. The rest of us have injuries that need to be tended to as well."

Vanessa was lying flat on the couch, her neck covered with heavy bandages, stained with a small patch of red, but her colour looked much better. With the blood and chunks of torn flesh removed from her body, and freshly dressed in one of her nightgowns, Vanessa looked nearer to herself. Victor was kneeling down near her head, keeping an eye on his watch as he took her pulse. Mr. Lyle took her other hand and gave Vanessa an affectionate smile. Sir Malcolm stood near her feet so he could observe her condition after the ordeal, and the rest gathered behind him. Ethan stood behind Vanessa's head, out of her sight, but close enough for her to feel his presence.

"The doctors have taken good care of me," she assured them in a small, but lighthearted voice. "I wanted to thank you all before being sent to my room." She smiled.

Sir Malcolm felt his heart lift at the small joke, happy her playfulness continued to show itself in the light of all that had happened and all she had been through. Remembering the wolf carcass hanging over Vanessa's bed he replied, "We'll have to find you another bed until I can have a new one delivered and your room cleaned."

Vanessa gave him a curious look, but he waved off his comment so she continued. "Each of you is dear to me. I cannot imagine losing any of you, but the dark forces are not done gathering around me and I fear for the lives of any who would stay."

"I will never lose another child," Sir Malcolm responded fiercely. "I'll not leave your side again."

"I shouldn't want to miss out on all the excitement," Mr. Lyle expressed as he patted her hand.

"I can't say I've had a lovely time, and I thought Dracula was the end of this," Catriona started, "but I feel bonded to you, Vanessa."

"And I you, Cat."

"That settles it for me. It would be helpful though to know what

these dark forces are.”

Dr. Seward met Vanessa’s eyes, silently committing herself as she answered the thanatologist’s question. “The devil.”

Catriona balked. “Fuck me.”

Ethan would have smiled, recalling his reaction to the same news, but he was too focused on his own thoughts and feelings.

“If it were but Lucifer alone.” Vanessa sighed, deeply distressed. Ethan came around the couch and stood where she could see him. They made eye contact and held it, each recalling what had happened in the bricked room, Vanessa feeling the pain of it throbbing through her neck. Even now, even in this, she would not betray his trust. She looked back at the others as he stared down at the floor, crossing his arms over his chest. “There is also the force inside me.”

Ethan didn’t want anyone to know what he had done, what he was, but he couldn’t risk Vanessa’s life. After what Amunet said and what he had felt—had wanted to do, had almost done—he knew he couldn’t continue to keep the others in the dark.

“There is also *Lupus Dei*,” he said, not looking up.

“The Wolf of God?” Mr. Lyle questioned in confusion. “He would seem to be the protector of Miss Ives. Do you mean he may be a threat to the rest of us?”

Ethan didn’t lift his eyes. “No, I do not.” He took a deep breath, then forced himself to meet their eyes. “I am a very real threat to Miss Ives.”

Everyone turned to look at Ethan, trying to absorb what he said.

Catriona sighed. “Could someone perhaps give me an abridged version of whatever I have gotten myself into?”

Dr. Seward turned to look at her. “My advice would be to get the hell out while you still can.”

PART I

BLOODY BUT UNBOWED

The sun beat brightly down on the city, the toxic mist having passed hours before. John Clare—the name he preferred to that he had been given before his rebirth, now known, but him no longer—cursed the sun. Gloomy London, trapped for days beneath the lethal cloud, did not even offer him the standard rain or fog that would better match the mood of his heart as he stood at his young son's grave. The small wooden cross was marked with only Jack's name and the dates that indicated his too short life. For a brief moment John had found the peace, happiness, and love long denied him since his birth in this monstrous form, but all was now lost. His wife, so happy to see him, but then marked beyond measure by grief, told him not to come home without their living son. She ignored all he told her of his life as this creature. The idea that living was anything but being dead, that any life was better than none, blinded her to the pain and suffering she demanded he place upon their son. He could not do such a thing to this boy he loved, so he took yet more pain upon himself.

Staring at the simple cross that marked the simple grave—sad though it seemed compared to fancier resting places around it—John could take solace in the fact that, unlike his never ending existence of suffering, Jack was free from all the pain of the world. He had a peace John himself would never know. The symbolism of the cross meant nothing to John, as hollow as the words that had been read from the Bible by the preacher over Jack's grave. Hands in the

pockets of his long coat, John stood before his son's grave and allowed more meaningful words to flow.

“Fear no more the lightning-flash,
Nor the all-dread thunder-stone;
Fear not slander, censure rash;
Thou hast finished joy and moan;
All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee, and come to dust.”

The sorrow and isolation, his last chance for happiness gone, John could not deny the tears that flowed, knowing he was now alone forever. His pain and grief blinded him for a time, as the night closed in around him. As he cried over his son's grave, staring at the pointless cross, he was reminded that there was one soul upon the Earth who accepted him, cared for him, loved him, and shown him only kindness since they first met. He might not know what would come next in his life, but for now he could find comfort and compassion from Vanessa Ives.

The fire burned strongly, warming the drawing room against the chill. The brandy was also helpful. Vanessa had been taken to one of the guest rooms to rest, and everyone's wounds were done being treated. They sat quietly, sipping their drinks, and watching the flame consume the wood in the fireplace. They kept their eyes off each other.

Kaetenay put his glass down on a side table and moved to stand by the fire, facing the room in order to look into their eyes. “My son has kept this part of himself hidden in shame. He did not reveal it for us to waste this knowledge and do nothing. If Miss Ives is important to you, if you want to save her, and this world, we must speak of the things others are too scared to even whisper about.”

“He's right,” Sir Malcolm agreed. “We have a war to fight on three fronts and we'll need to be willing to face them all, or we leave

our backs exposed and today's victory will be meaningless."

"Where should we start?" questioned Mr. Lyle.

Catriona finished the rest of her drink in a single gulp. "*Divide et impera*; divide and conquer. We cannot simply throw ourselves into a battle against the supernatural and hope it will all work out. We need to find out what we can about the forces involved, to weed through the tales and legends, pull the truth from the myth. The museum's library would be a good place for Mr. Lyle and I to start."

Kaetenay turned to Dr. Seward. "You told me about your way of drawing things from the mind. I have my own methods. Perhaps between us, we can extract truths from the force within Miss Ives."

"That would be extremely dangerous," Dr. Seward replied. Everyone looked at her. She met their gazes, offering nothing, but at last said, "I don't betray patient confidences, and in this case I'm not going to either." Victor started to interject, but Dr. Seward held up a hand. "Because the truth is, what I thought were symptoms of an illness—an elaborate system of external demons to battle in order to deal with trauma—were in fact *not* a series of grand delusions, but rather very real attacks on Miss Ives. There was a part of me that always believed her, that was drawn to her the moment we met, a part of me that desperately wanted to be in her life. That sense that I couldn't explain was frightening and fear left a foot in the door for doubt. The things she told me could not be believed; I could not completely surrender my grasp on reality as I knew it, no matter how convincing it was, not even when she reached into my mind and discovered my secrets. Yet these things that happened, those things she told me, those things we explored, have nothing to do with alienism. They were not part of the patient/doctor relationship I thought they were, and things that happened between us are things you need to know in order to protect Miss Ives. So know this: the last time I hypnotized Vanessa to access repressed memories, she went into a fugue state, basically a coma. She was trapped in her memory and I couldn't pull her out. There are frightening truths

buried in her, but in our attempt to reach them, we could kill her ourselves.”

“If we rely only on accounts where the truth might not be possible to uncover beneath the fiction, then Miss Ives, and the world, will be lost anyway,” Kaetenay challenged. “We cannot fool ourselves in thinking there is no risk in this. Miss Ives did not express her fear for our lives lightly; we may not all survive this war. Perhaps some of us need to reconsider our commitment.”

“Enough,” snapped Ethan, anger bringing him to his feet. He stalked across the room and stood before Kaetenay, confronting his surrogate father with the rage radiating from him. “Questioning you doesn’t mean anyone is backing out, old man. You don’t know Vanessa. Your method *would* be too dangerous. She’d be vulnerable to the demon.”

Sir Malcolm rose and put a hand on Kaetenay’s shoulder. “Mr. Chandler is right. While I know nothing about what Dr. Seward is referring to, I have seen Vanessa possessed by ghosts and demons through mystical forces, causing various degrees of harm to herself and others.”

“When she was under, I thought she was displaying evidence of being a multiple personality,” Dr. Seward continued. “That seed of doubt prevented me from understanding she was recounting a real experience because, even in her memory of the encounter, it took place within her mind. She was visited by Lucifer and Dracula in the past when she was battling an apparent possession that consumed months of her life. I could not pull her out of that place. She would not leave the memory, no matter how traumatizing, not even when I burned her with a cigarette, until she found the truth of what she went in there to learn.” Dr. Seward looked uncomfortable, then relented. “Miss Ives’ singular focus to track down Dracula and bring an end to her torment, led her to reject all my warnings. She has suffered a long time, with few chances to fight back. We should allow her to choose her own path.”

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"Miss Ives will not be up to any dangerous activity for awhile," Victor interjected, "and we are useless to her without food and rest. We should set up some sort of schedule to ensure someone is always here with her, both to monitor her condition and help keep her safe, while everyone else takes some time to eat and sleep."

"Miss Hartdegen and I shall be engaged for a rather extended period at the museum I should say," Mr. Lyle pointed out.

"Very well," acknowledged Sir Malcolm. "The rest of us can stay here and organize ourselves until your return."

Ethan looked at him. "Why don't you and the doctors stay with Miss Ives and get some rest first?" He glared at Kaetenay. "Since no one needs your mysticism right now, old man, you can come with me to get some supplies. I can't imagine Miss Ives kept enough on hand for a house full of people when she was here alone."

Kaetenay met Ethan's angry gaze with calm. "I would enjoy seeing the place you have come to call home." Ethan's cool stare somehow managed to become colder.

Slapping her knees, Catriona rose to her feet. "Sounds like a plan. Well, Mr. Lyle, shall we be on our way?"

Mr. Lyle glanced at Ethan. "I doubt Miss Hartdegen and I shall have as pleasant a time as our prior jaunt, but I shall strive for it to be as fruitful." Despite everything going on, Ethan couldn't help but return Mr. Lyle's smile. He had missed the small, eccentric Egyptianologist.

The four began to head for the door. Ethan would have been the first one out, but opened the door just as the man standing on the other side of it had been about to knock. Ethan studied the deeply scarred stranger, an immediate sense of distrust rushing through him, Vanessa's safety his only concern.

The man's eyes dropped down and he pulled the collar of his coat tight around his face. "Forgive me. I...I'm here to see Miss Ives."

"What business do you have with her?" Ethan challenged, trying

to keep the suspicion out of his voice, only slightly succeeding.

The man caught Ethan's tone, and seemed to become smaller and more submissive. "She is my friend."

Ethan's eyes narrowed. "How do you know Miss Ives?"

"We have been... confidants."

The others began to file into the foyer, wondering who was at the door. Dr. Seward stepped forward. "Mr. Hennessey?"

He moved his coat collar, attempting to further hide his face, avoiding eye contact. "Ma'am?"

Glancing back at her, Ethan asked, "You know this man?"

"If he's Patrick Hennessey, then yes. He used to be an orderly at the Bedlam; for a short time anyway. I had heard he was killed by a patient." She studied the man. "I can't be entirely sure though." She addressed him, "Are you Mr. Hennessey?"

"Forgive me, ma'am, but I go by John Clare now. Since the...incident."

"You're John Clare?"

Dr. Seward seemed even more accepting of him, hearing this, but Ethan was no better informed. He didn't really know Dr. Seward, so her ease did nothing to settle his concerns.

Sir Malcolm pushed his way through the crowd to stand in front of John. "It is we who must ask your forgiveness, Mr. Clare, but you have come at an inopportune time. I'm afraid Miss Ives is unable to receive visitors at the moment."

Victor stepped into the foyer and stopped, finding his heart in his throat, a sense of panic, terror, and anger washing over him in a confusing mix. He had dared to hope that after all this time he was free of his creature, his greatest failing. That he should return now after all that had just transpired with Lily, was a blow that nearly staggered Victor.

John looked up at Sir Malcolm's words, at last making eye contact, but he did not notice his creator. Concern filled his orange eyes. "Is she unwell?"

Self preservation and anger won out in Victor, and, standing taller, he spoke with authority. "Yes, and she shouldn't be exposed to any stressors during her convalescence. It would be best if you left now...Mr. Clare."

Cold eyes turned on Victor. His creature looked ready to push his way through the others in order to break his creator's neck. John had stalked Victor to this house before, but when he had come to see Miss Ives, John had not made the connection. As the home of his only friend, to John, this was a place of solace, a sanctuary where he would be welcomed as he was. This entire encounter, with so many looking at him with suspicion, and now facing his creator who seemed to have finally found voice to challenge him, made John want to flee, but his feet would not be moved.

Sir Malcolm glanced back at Victor with a glare, not caring for the tone or the orders the doctor was giving in his home. His look silenced Victor before returning his gaze to John. "The doctor is right. She is resting at present. Perhaps you could provide me with your information so she may call upon you later when she is feeling up to it."

John's face crumpled. "I...I am not staying anywhere at present." He could never have imagined such a scene as this. Besides his own need to see Vanessa, hearing she was unwell momentarily suppressed his grief and he did not want to leave without seeing his only friend in the world. "Would it be all right to wait for her?"

"As I said, this is not a good time," Sir Malcolm began.

"Vanessa will want to see him," interrupted Dr. Seward. She held his eyes with a finality that couldn't be challenged.

"Very well," said Sir Malcolm. "Some of us have matters to attend to and should be on their way. Mr. Clare, would you join me for a drink?"

He nodded, and Sir Malcolm stepped aside to let him in, then glanced at the parties who were leaving to encourage them to do so. Ethan cast an uneasy look at John's back, noting the venom mixed

with fear in Victor's eyes, but put his trust in Vanessa and followed Catriona and Mr. Lyle out the door, with Kaetenay following him.

Leading John into the drawing room with Dr. Seward trailing, Sir Malcolm glanced at Victor as he walked by him. "Why don't you check on Vanessa, Doctor?" Victor seized the opportunity and departed up the stairs.

Sir Malcolm pointed to the couch and John timidly sat as the explorer poured him a drink and freshened his own. A questioning look to Dr. Seward got a nod in reply so he freshened her drink as well, as she sat next to the nervous looking John. Sir Malcolm remained standing.

"I find it interesting, Mr. Clare, to hear Miss Ives holds you in such high regard when I have not heard her mention you."

"I left London for a time, and have only recently returned. Miss Ives helped me with my readjustment." An uneasy silence hung in the air. "Is Miss Ives in some sort of danger?"

"And what if I told you she was?"

John would not have thought Vanessa's reference to a shroud of pain, one she had wanted to protect him from, was something dangerous, but it certainly explained her melancholy and why he felt such kinship with her. At the same time he could not believe anyone would want to harm a woman as kind and giving as Vanessa. It made him at once angrier about the cruelty of the world and strengthened his bond to her. A deep sense of protectiveness filled him, knowing he could not allow any harm to befall such a good soul, his last remaining link to what it was to be human. His entire posture changed, channeling the anger into strength and confidence as he looked Sir Malcolm straight in the eye so there would be no doubt of his words. "I would do anything required to help her."

"You should know that the threats to Miss Ives are atypical."

"I am no stranger to the strange."

"Once you step into this world, Mr. Clare, it may be impossible for you to step out. It is not men that we face, but dark forces be-

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yond our world."

John didn't really know what to make of that, but his own existence challenged the normal view of the world. He stood, setting the drink on the mantel of the fireplace and held Sir Malcolm's gaze with all the fire inside him.

"To fear the foe, since fear oppresses strength,
Gives, in your weakness, strength unto your foe,
And so your follies fight against yourself.
Fear, and be slain—so worse can come to fight;
And fight and die is death destroying death,
Where fearing dying pays death servile breath."

Sir Malcolm set down his own drink. "And so our unmerry band grows larger."

Ethan didn't really know where he was heading. He knew what he was supposed to be picking up and where to get those things, but it wasn't foremost on his mind. As they headed down a fairly deserted alley, he suddenly spun on Kaetenay. "Can you give me one reason not to kill you for what you've done to me? Do you have *any* idea what happened in the slaughterhouse?"

"I felt the curse lifted from me," Kaetenay replied, waiting for Ethan to tell him more before he could formulate any other response.

"You and everyone else; everyone except me. I carry this alone now." Ethan stepped closer, his face nearly touching Kaetenay's. "You told me this gave me the power to save her, but that's not what happened."

"Is she not safe from the dragon?"

"That was *her* doing. You know what *I* did? I nearly tore her throat out, I was *supposed* to tear her throat out. *That's* the destiny of Lupus Dei. You turned me into God's backup plan, only that means I have to kill the woman I love in order to prevent an apocalypse."

"Would she want to be the cause of the end of days?" Ethan turned his back to Kaetenay and sighed in angry frustration at the stupidity of the question. "There are fates far worse than death, my son." He walked around Ethan in order to meet his eyes. "You're not tearing at her throat now and, since the moon could not have turned you before, that cannot be what stays your claw."

"Apparently I only kill her if that thing inside takes over and joins with one of the fallen brothers."

"So unless that time comes again, you instead have more power, more control over it, and can use it to help her. It sounds like what I said was true."

Ethan got in his face again. "Don't get smug with me."

Kaetenay still didn't flinch at his wrath; he was more than used to it and understood it well. "If you want to avoid the wolf killing Miss Ives, then perhaps we should focus our efforts on the battle at hand. If you still want to kill me when this is done, I'll not stop you."

Predator eyes scanned Kaetenay's as Ethan considered his words. Kaetenay could read the guilt and fear that lay under the anger, and the pain driving Ethan to the edge. All of these emotions could be useful, but only if Ethan could direct them at the true threat. "Feuding serves our enemies," Kaetenay said firmly.

"Then I guess we'll pick this up at a better time." Ethan stormed off. Kaetenay followed.

Stepping into one of the spare rooms that seemed far too Victorian for Vanessa considering the plain nature of her currently defiled room, Victor moved quietly to the bed where she was resting. He reached down and took her hand to check her pulse, but Vanessa startled at his touch, pulling her hand away. The jerking motion seemed to cause her pain as her hand went to her neck. A slight groan escaped her lips.

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"I'm sorry," stammered Victor. "I should have checked if you were awake first. I seem to be preoccupied." The word was laughingly inadequate.

"Still more used to your dead patients?" she teased. "It's quite all right, Doctor," she assured him, her voice still weak and hoarse, but sounding better.

Victor again took her hand and checked her pulse. His thoughts kept turning to the creature downstairs, wondering what was being said between him and Sir Malcolm. What would become of a conversation between the creature and Vanessa while he was unexpectedly under the same roof as his creator? Victor kept his losing his focus and he sighed as he started a fourth time to attempt to take Vanessa's pulse.

"You *are* distracted."

"It's been a long day."

"Don't I know it." She studied him. He could almost feel her clawing at the back of his brain. "There's something more. Tell me."

Victor swallowed and slowly lowered her hand. He sat on the bed, but did not meet her eyes. She waited in silence as he gathered the courage to speak. "You have always been kind to me, Miss Ives, though I am a wretched thing that does not deserve it." She squeezed his hand, but did not interrupt, seeming to sense how hard it was for him to say these words and that to stop him now might stop him forever. "All my life I have been driven to achieve some great enterprise. I pursued goals that would seem impossible to accomplish in order to be of use to my fellow man. I was devoted to my science, a lofty ambition I had since my youth, to bring that which I would imagine to fruition through the application of my rational mind. I saw no evils in my pursuits, but what I created, what I unleashed...the potential for the evil of my work should not have been lost on me. I have run from my responsibilities to that I created, and now I fear the secrets I have kept are about to be beyond my control as well."

The silence between them hung for a long time, Vanessa leaving the door open to him to say more, but Victor was horrified by the words that already left his mouth and dared not utter more. Vanessa carefully sat up and pulled him into an embrace. He reacted stiffly at first, but she continued to hold him until he finally began to relax and accept what she was offering, his hands even tentatively hugging her back. "You are not unloved," she spoke gently into his ear. "None of us are without sin. What matters is not only what we do, but how we attempt to atone for those mistakes. None can be forever innocent or unmarked. We are humans all. We can only demand better of ourselves, learning from what we have done and trying not to repeat those same mistakes. We are eternally works in progress."

Vanessa felt the tears that landed on her neck just below the bandage, and felt the slight tremor against her body as Victor silently wept. She did not let go, showing him her love, allowing him to vent the pain he'd been suffering in silence for so long. She stroked his hair as though he were a child, comforting him, letting him feel safe releasing his sorrow, as he'd had none to comfort him before now. She found herself wondering what became of his cousin, but perhaps he had not felt he could release his troubles to a woman he loved, while it was safe with she like a sister.

Slowly Victor gathered himself, his tears spent and his heart lighter, despite fear and the very real possibility he was about to lose it all. He met Vanessa's eyes and she smiled at him without judgment. Trying to collect himself, he again took her pulse, this time successfully, and listened to her heart, remembering to warm the stethoscope with his breath before setting it to her skin, causing her to smile again. Eventually he found his voice once more. "Well, Miss Ives, you seem to be on the mend. The others have been plotting in your absence and want to run something by you, but before that, you have a visitor waiting downstairs."

"Isn't everyone I know here already?" she jested.

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Victor took a breath. "Mr. Clare."

She seemed surprised, delighted, but also concerned. "How did he seem?"

"I could not say. I really did not have much of a chance to observe him. He's downstairs with Sir Malcolm and Dr. Seward."

"I would very much like to speak with my dear Mr. Clare. I think I should feel well enough to get myself downstairs. Would you mind waiting outside a moment for me, Doctor, in case I should be wrong and need a hand?"

"Of course, Miss Ives."

Standing at the door, staring at all the rows of books, Catriona turned to Mr. Lyle and asked, "So, any ideas on where exactly we should start?"

"Oh, by all means, Miss Hartdegen, ladies first."

She let out a breath. "I've never faced anything so daunting, and I say that after battling an army of Dracula's familiars, and the dragon himself, with the fate of the world on the line." She thought a moment. "Dracula's story could still be of use to us and may prove the easier of the four to find because of his numerous encounters with man, but I think we need to direct our focus away from the external threats and find what we can about the force within Miss Ives."

"Would not Miss Ives' internal search be better suited to that?"

"That's assuming she'll agree to it—"

"She will."

"—and that they will be successful. Miss Ives is the obvious linchpin in this entire affair, so she should be our focus, should she not? I would imagine the rest of the cast of characters would be better revealed to us if we know why they all want her specifically."

"We know she has been represented by the figure Amunet, but there's nothing in the story of Amunet and Amun-Ra about a broth-

er or a wolf. The Nordic Hella is said to join with Loki to destroy the world, and there is a hound and wolf figure: her guardian, Garmr, and Fenrir, who would lay waste to the world and eat the god Odin at Ragnarök. Lilith, the night monster. Echidna, the mother of monsters, with her love Typhon, the father of monsters. I could go on, but none of these tales provide all the elements of our little drama."

"Maybe the problem is our perspective. We're looking at myths and stories crafted by humans, but we're trying to understand a war among gods. We're like the three blind men trying to describe an elephant by only observing one little part with limited senses."

"We have more far more at stake in the game."

"Considerably." She stopped and looked at him. "What made you name those female figures?"

"They are all figures destined to bring about the end of the world through the power they hold over men."

"Mr. Lyle, not that tired old tale. I would think a man in your position would better understand the plight of women in the culture war. Women used to be worshipped for their ability to bear life, but somewhere along the way men seemed to think they have no power to keep it in their pants, thus women became seductive demons who will destroy the world. May I remind you that it was Dracula who was known as a seducer, and have not all the actions of him and Lucifer been a form of seduction against Miss Ives?"

Mr. Lyle raised an eyebrow. "Not an area I expected such command of from a thanatologist."

She crossed her arms. "It's an adjacent area of interest."

"Very adjacent." He smiled. "Society's changing view on women aside, the symbol of Amunet and Amun-Ra was tattooed on the flesh of one of Dracula's creatures, so we know that story must in some way factor into our tale. Humans have been conquering each other and blending cultures since our race began. Elements of the events may be seeded throughout the legends of many lands, altered to reflect changing views, none keeping the complete, true

narrative. Regardless of how the figures may be represented to reflect the culture the stories have sprung from, it's not a stretch to see the similarities between such figures. We may be able to pull the true threads of the narrative by comparing them to each other."

"Well, at least it's a place to start."

"Amunet it is then."

They headed to the Egyptian section and Mr. Lyle began to pull out several books after scanning the titles. He handed Catriona a stack and took the other for himself. They sat at one of the tables and started to flip through pages.

Without looking up from her work, Catriona unexpectedly noted, "You seem to be very close with our band of monster hunters, especially Miss Ives. Why is it you weren't here before?"

Mr. Lyle stopped and looked up. "Society moves in poor directions on many things, Miss Hartdegen." He sat in silence for awhile, thinking. "You know, looking back now, that day I referred Miss Ives to you, I think she had come to ask for my help, but when she saw how distraught I was by my own plight, she refrained from adding to my burden. Such is her nature. She really has such a tender heart. If she had confided in me that day, I would have stayed, the museum be damned. As it is, I suspect I shall find myself unemployed and shortly thereafter unmarried as well once they discover I refused to stay in the closet they prepared for me."

Catriona met his gaze. "It's ridiculous the things we choose to hate each other over." She said no more and returned to her book. Mr. Lyle did the same.

They paused in the foyer, Victor's hand still on Vanessa's elbow after having assisted her down the stairs. Vanessa's eyes closed as she took a moment, battling her nausea. She realized that she shouldn't have gotten out of bed yet, but knowing John was waiting, wanting to know what happened with his family, combined

with wanting to get him out as soon as possible so he would be safe, pressed her on.

"Are you sure you're ready?" Victor asked.

She plastered on a fake smile and answered in a playful tone, "Of course," trying to convince both him and herself that it was true. She touched his hand in gratitude, but also as a sign to let her go, then walked into the drawing room unassisted. Victor followed close behind in case he was needed.

Sir Malcolm and John were sitting in silence. "Mr. Clare," she greeted, letting them know she was there.

They both stood and Sir Malcolm smiled warmly, walking over to her and taking her by the arms. For a moment his world was complete, fear subsiding in seeing her again on her feet. Looking at each other, both were still comforted at being reunited. In a rare show of affection, especially in public, he leaned in and kissed her forehead. "I think I will retire before I am again prevented from doing so. I shall leave you to your company." He glanced back. "Mr. Clare, Doctor," bidding farewell before leaving.

Victor and his creation locked their eyes on each other during this exchange. Victor was surprised that, though the creature seemed to be projecting his usual anger, something about it seemed forced. Looking at Vanessa he said, "If you have no immediate need of me, Miss Ives, then I believe I will make a trip home and get some rest myself."

"Sleep well, Doctor." She touched his chest, smiled, and moved to join John. Victor watched a moment longer, then left, grateful to escape his creature's eyes.

Vanessa beamed at John. "It is so good to see you, Mr. Clare," she said as she held out her hands to take his, squeezing them affectionately when he took hers. "I've been wondering how your dance has fared."

His face collapsed and his breathing became rapid, fractured intakes of air, the sound of a dam about to break. Vanessa was horri-

fied by his clear pain and her face changed to one of worry and concern as she helped him sit down. He took a deep breath, attempting to still his grief so he could speak, but his voice came out broken. "My dear Miss Ives, I am undone."

She held one of his hands tightly between both of hers. "Mr. Clare...John...what has happened?"

He closed his eyes and shook his large head, desperately trying to control himself. He had come for comfort but only now realized he did not know what to say. He could not reveal what had happened without revealing the truth to her about himself. She was his last connection to the world and he knew he could not bear it if she turned her back, even if what they had was built on a lie. He took a deep breath and let it out with a loud sigh as he looked at the ceiling. "There is no way for me to recount what transpired while you remain in the dark, but if I should tell you, you may drive me from this home and I will be at an end."

She used a hand to turn his face to look into her eyes. "I have not been entirely honest with you either, Mr. Clare. I too have kept my secrets close, those that haunt me and keep me much apart from this world. Shall I alleviate your doubts by revealing my truths to you?"

"Sir Malcolm had already told me. He seemed determined to test my resolve to be at your side."

Frowning, Vanessa looked down at his hands. "I'll not have you involved in this, Mr. Clare."

"It is done."

She didn't say anything or look up for a moment, but then slowly met his eyes and studied his face. Her eyes subtly began to soften and a smile touched her lips, a mixture of joy, sadness, and pain. "Well...all you have learned has not driven you from my side, and though you may not remember our time at Banning, I do. You were all I had there. You took all the rage, and anger, and pain I unleashed on you, and you did not waver. You did all within your power, and more, to remind me I mattered, that I was loved." She

took his head in her hands. "There is not a thing in all the world or beyond that would see me less devoted to you than you have been to me." She brushed the tears from his cheeks with her thumbs and smiled sincerely at him, inviting him to tell her anything he wished. "No words you shall ever speak will see me show my back to you."

"I have dared so long to hope that I would find one who could pardon my outward form and would love all that I was beneath."

"You have found such a person."

"Miss Ives," he whispered, tears choking his words, "the man you knew, the one I have no memory of, is dead."

"It does not matter. You are just as beautiful a soul now as you were then, even if you cannot remember."

He took her hands, removing them from his face, but holding them tightly. "You think my words poetic, some metaphor for change, but these words I say are literal truth: that man is dead. Before you now is not a man, but a creature made of that man's dead flesh." She looked confused and there was a growing look of concern, but he continued. "I do not know how or when, but Patrick Hennessey, orderly, husband, father, passed from this world and accursed hands reanimated his corpse. This thing that holds your hand is a creation of man, of science gone astray, taking a man that was and leaving a monster in his stead."

She was silent for a long time, processing his words, but her hands remained in his. John did not wipe away his tears, too afraid to let her go. "What you tell me," she slowly began, "I must admit is beyond anything I could have fathomed, but my words are no less true, Mr. Clare; I am committed to you." He wept openly with relief, his chin falling to his chest, unable to meet her eyes as he reacted to her words. She forced his chin back up with her hand to look him firmly in the eye. "What I cannot abide, however, are words of slander that the man—because that is indeed what you are—before me is a beast merely for being."

"Perhaps I could see myself no other way before as, since my re-

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birth, all humankind has sinned against me, first rejected by my creator and then by all who saw me. I could count on but one hand those that accepted me as I am without some sinister motive, but from even that small number, only you remain. How I have longed and searched for love. I learned speech again through the poetry my creator left behind when he fled. Keats, Clare, Wordsworth, my love for their words, I see now, could only be a love from a heart that could know it, could be capable of empathy. Yet through my misery, through all that rejection, there was a violent change, such a torture you could not imagine. My hopes became a bitter and loathing despair. I cannot reconcile the catalogue of sins that transpired from that evil I became slave to, with the heart that fell for poetry, or the man before you now, the father bereft of son.

"It was you who gave the monster back his true heart, and you who so encouraged me to give that love to the family I had begun to remember. I do not regret my efforts, but I regret the truths I told my wife. She accepted me home, as did my son, but life is cruel and we seem born for only pain. My son has died." Vanessa's eyes filled with tears, but she said nothing, giving him comfort by being there with him.

"Were that the only pain I had to suffer, but Marjorie could not bear to face that loss. So blinded, she turned from her mind all that I told her about being as I am, and demanded I bring our son to my butcher of a creator and consign him to my fate. I could do no such thing. I am not welcome to return and once more I am cast out, my creator crueler than he could ever have imagined."

Vanessa hugged him. "We are kindred spirits, you and I. How often I have asked God how he could create me for a life of such pain. We both have dared to love, and both have been betrayed. Yet you must not think that life is completely devoid of joy or merit. The man I knew had no taste for poetry; the man before me now, his eyes fill with wonder and life when he recites the beauty given to him at his rebirth. We cannot give up. We must continue to dare to

try to find our happiness."

"There can be no more hope. Love has died."

She closed her eyes, her cheek resting on the top of his head. "You must not, Mr. Clare, give up the hope that we can have those desires.

"In crime and enmity they lie
Who sin and tell us love can die,
Who say to us in slander's breath
That love belongs to sin and death.
From heaven it came on angel's wing
To bloom on earth, eternal spring;
In falsehood's enmity they lie
Who sin and tell us love can die.'

"If you take on the poet's name, should you not heed his words?"

As she recited the poem, he had pulled back to look her in the eye.

"O, were I loved, as I desire to be!" he began.

Vanessa joined in.

"What is there in the great sphere of the earth,
Or range of evil between death and birth,
That I should fear, - if I were loved by thee!"

Vanessa smiled and held his face again. "You are."

He smiled back. "As are you."

The *memento mori* was not even remotely as impressive as the one that had burnt down, but this coven had not been gathering theirs together as long. Still, Evelyn Poole enjoyed being in this place, and approved of it despite its diminished stature. The leader of the coven, a woman older than she appeared, entered and dropped to one knee, her head bowed. "My lord."

The face that appeared as Poole twisted with an dark grin. He

should perhaps hate this form since he had not won his bride, but the truth was Poole had done all he asked and more. He had failed and lost his beloved, along with his chosen nightcomer. His favourite servant resided now with him in his domain and could no longer do his bidding on Earth. On this plane he took many forms, never his own, and for now this one suited him and gave him some delight.

"Show me your true face," he commanded.

Hair and clothes melted away, revealing the branded and scarred nightcomer. He ran his hand over the marks, licking the deep, fresh looking wounds over her bald head. He breathed in a sigh of contentment, savouring the taste of her pain that she felt the day he raked his claws over her body.

"I call you up, Lucy Westernra. You who were nearly claimed by my brother but now belong to me. I call you up to see if you are worthy to lead my nightcomers."

"What do you wish of me, my lord?"

"To bring the others. Gather my nightcomers here."

"My coven?"

"All of them. My brother has fallen and I have too long been denied my bride. I have been patient and subtle in my efforts, which has seen her slip from my fingers, or torn from my grasp since time began. I must possess her if I am to topple that bitch of a god that made me, and she and I will rule over the darkness that will consume Earth and Heaven. She must be mine. The war must end. I must have victory."

"And when my sisters have come, what would you have us do to bring about this end?"

"*Divide et impera*. We must destroy her allies, run her to the ground, leave her broken and bleeding, isolated from all who would come to her aid. When she is alone and destroyed, she will have no choice but to come to my side."

"And Lupus Dei?"

XENA TORRES

“He was given the chance to be my hammer, but rejected my hand. He must be destroyed with the others. At her side, he strengthens her against me. He cannot be allowed to live in some vain hope he will follow her to me. If she comes and he does not, he could kill her and I will once more be denied. He will unwittingly be my tool, and will be undone by his own hand. I have such a splendid card to play against the Wolf of God.”

PART II

OUT OF THE NIGHT

There was no safe place for him in the house, even the kitchen bringing up memories that were now stained with guilt. As Ethan methodically washed the dishes, his mind catapulted him to Sembene's final moments on Earth. Ethan actually felt the muzzle of the gun on his temple, that split second where he might have saved his friend, but the ex-slaver wouldn't allow it. The guilt had consumed him entirely, driven him from Vanessa's arms, and nearly over the edge, leaving both her and himself exposed.

"Why are you avoiding me, Ethan?"

His hand stopped, her voice freezing him like an animal attempting to avoid a predator's eyes. It had the opposite effect on her and he smelled her as she moved to his side, gazing up at him, attempting to have him meet her eyes. He could not.

"It's not safe," he whispered. "You yourself told me we are dangerous."

"What's not safe?" she challenged back. "What we are, or what we could be?" She put a hand on his arm. Her touch made him go still. "I'm not the same as I was when you left. If you step forward, I will not step back."

"Even if I'm coming for your throat?" He faced her then. "You already made this offer, but I had to leave. I couldn't live with what I was anymore. It took time to see how wrong that choice was, so I came back. Now I know I hadn't even scratched the surface of what I was capable of." A tear slid down his cheek as his eyes met hers. "I

can carry all these souls around my neck, but I could never carry yours."

She touched his face. "We won't let it happen. You've proven that already."

Ethan took the hand on his face in his own, but did so in order to slowly move her hand away. "I've been untrue."

"The past doesn't matter. Let us be here, now." Her eyes pleaded with his, and Ethan's heart could not deny hers, but the specter of his guilt and the force of his fear held him back. He couldn't hide from her though. She held his hand tightly while reaching her other hand around him to rest it on the back of his neck. Boring into him with her eyes, all he had kept from her was now hidden no longer. She pulled his head down towards her, touching her forehead to his and whispered, "I forgive you all of it."

He let the guilt go and kissed her deeply. She returned it with equal passion.

The rain had returned to London. Even with the end of the world prevented, the city could not escape its natural gloom. Victor watched the cabriolet leave before turning to face 8 Grandage Place. The rain was light, but Victor stood before the door long enough to get soaked through. He hadn't been called, but knew he was expected. Besides that, it was his duty to check up on Vanessa. Not knowing what awaited him inside, he could not seem to raise his hand to the door. It could be they were now aware of the true depths of his sins and wanted nothing to do with him.

He longed to inject morphine into his veins, but his home was devoid of the narcotic thanks to Lord Hyde. Victor also did not want to sink into that state again. His skin crawled and itched, and demons bit down on the back of brain, trying to lull him back, to surrender to the sweet release and be beyond this pain. Had not his addiction immobilized him, preventing him from bringing more

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harm? An intoxicated Dr. Frankenstein tried to kill Lily, but it was his sober self that tried to enslave her by destroying everything she was.

Remembering Lily and what he had almost done, he knocked on the door. It took courage and work to maintain one's humanity. If he was ever to atone for the monster he was, he had to stop running.

Sir Malcolm welcomed him in and directed him to the drawing room where most of their forces had gathered. They seemed deep in preparation, Ethan and Sir Malcolm clearing most of the furniture and other items from the room. Kaetenay was kneeling before a small table where he carefully set rocks and bones on a piece of snake skin. Dr. Seward sat in a chair before the fireplace, holding Sir Malcolm's cane. In front of her, Vanessa sat on the couch and the two of them were quietly speaking. Taking in the room, Victor spotted his creature in the corner to his right, his hands buried inside the pockets of his coat. The orange eyes hit Victor with intense hostility and his heart tripped in his chest as the demons bit again into his grey matter.

Victor had tried. Perhaps not enough, or maybe nothing he could ever do would matter, but the creature was what he was because Victor had created and abandoned him. Victor alone was responsible for him and he had neither healed the wounds, nor dispatched of him, and so their conflict had only grown. He had no idea what he could offer, but in these close quarters, if they were going to have to work together, he had to try.

As he stepped closer, his creature pulled in close and hissed in a low, threatening voice, "So long as Miss Ives is in danger, it is not the time for thee and me." A temporary truce seemed the best the creature was currently willing to offer. Victor was not about to press further, so he retreated, ignoring the urges that tore into him and looked to Ethan who was carrying a chair from the room.

The American stopped and noted Victor dripping water on the

floor. "Can I get you a towel, Doctor?"

"What?" Looking down at himself, Victor had actually been oblivious to how wet he was. "No. Thank you." Ethan took a step towards the door, but Victor interrupted, "Are we expecting trouble?"

Stopped again and glancing back at Vanessa, Ethan replied, "We're being cautious. You know as well as any of us how this could go. Just seems sensible to limit the possible projectiles."

Nodding, Victor moved to Vanessa as Ethan went back to work. Vanessa smiled at him, though it did not reach her eyes, apparently distracted by what was about to happen. She turned back to Dr. Seward.

"Last chance to back out," offered the alienist.

"I've never been one to run away," Vanessa firmly responded.

"Pardon me, Miss Ives," Victor said as he reached down to check the injury on her neck. Vanessa sat patiently while Victor did a quick examination, pleased to see she appeared stronger and the wound was healing well. "You've made good progress, but I should warn you that it goes against my medical judgment for you to push yourself like this so soon. In your weakened state, it could be fatal."

"We shouldn't assume the demon is waiting. We keep having to react, always caught off guard. If we can dictate the terms of this battle, we may be better poised to direct the end of the war to our favour."

The doctors shared a look, but said nothing. Much as they all disliked it, the war would continue whether they were ready or not.

Kaetenay looked up. "It is time."

Ethan and Sir Malcolm stood on either side of Dr. Seward; Victor and his creature stood behind Vanessa, though well parted from each other. Dr. Seward began to rhythmically knock the cane on the floor. "Listen to the sound of the cane. Focus on it until you hear nothing but it and my voice. Do not try to think of a specific time or place. Allow your subconscious to guide where and when you go.

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Sense Amunet inside you. Try to hear her voice and go to her."

The smell of tobacco filled the room as Kaetenay lit his pipe and blew smoke over the snake skin, beginning to reach out to the spirits. He spoke quietly in Apache, allowing himself to be touched by another world in order to find himself in the spiritual realm with Vanessa to help guide her journey.

Vanessa's eyelids began to drop and her head, growing heavy, fell back against the couch as she focused all her senses on the tapping cane even as the smell of tobacco reached her nostrils. Her breathing slowed and soon she seemed to be sleeping. Dr. Seward stopped the cane, handing it to Sir Malcolm, and leaned forward. "Can you hear me, Miss Ives?"

"Yes."

"Where are you?"

"I don't know."

"Can you tell me what you see?"

"Darkness." Her breathing became less relaxed.

Still chanting, Kaetenay blew more smoke, his eyes closed, but then he too became still and silent. Ethan glanced over at him and then Dr. Seward. She understood her cue. "Do you see anyone?"

"No." Fear was beginning to rise in Vanessa's voice, her breathing becoming faster. Sir Malcolm and Ethan glanced at each other, worried things were already going against their plan.

"Are you afraid, Miss Ives?" asked Dr. Seward.

"Yes," Vanessa replied.

"Of what?"

"I don't know."

"Are you alone?"

"No."

"Who do you see?"

"I don't see anyone, but something is here with me."

"Can you tell me what it is?"

"No."

Her eyes unexpectedly shot open and her breathing settled. She began to sit up, her movements not her own, but snake-like. A wisp of a hiss filled the room, seeming to come from her, but not from her mouth. Everyone tensed. One corner of her mouth twisted into a devilish smirk as she eyed the three before her with vacant orbs that did not reveal Vanessa there. "Ah my children, monsters you, my creatures all. What an unexpected delight. Such a gift you have brought me. It's been too long since I licked my beloved from within. How kind of you to reopen the door."

Ethan took two steps towards her. "Lupus Dei, how close you came to sitting by my side, my wolf to devour the world." Vanessa moaned and rolled her head. When she met his eyes again, hers had changed once more. "All I can smell is blood," she said in a small, terrified voice, that sounded too young for her. "The shooting has stopped, but they're coming in the church." Ethan's breathing intensified and he beheld Vanessa in terror. "Daddy and Paul are screaming at each other. Momma pulls me tight against her. Where are you? Where you are to protect me?"

"Paul has no bullets. He charges at the filthy red savages that have come into our home. My strong, brave bother." The spirit possessing Vanessa glared hard at Ethan. "Where are you?" Tears moved down Vanessa's face. "They're stabbing him! Over and over! Paul's blood is everywhere. I feel some hit my cheek. Get it off!" Vanessa wiped frantically at her face.

"Vanessa, listen to my voice," commanded Dr. Seward with complete authority. "Take control. This isn't you."

"Paul," Vanessa sobbed. "He's not even human. Momma tries to shield me from seeing him, but even when I can't see, it's there in my mind; that mangled pile of flesh and bones that was my brother. His blood has reached my shoes." Vanessa's voice had grown hushed and she spoke as though in shock.

"Daddy's struggling, but there's too many. I can hear him yelling. There's hands on me! Momma holds me tighter, but more

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hands grab me and tear me away." She was unable to speak, her eyes staring at a horror beyond words. Ethan bit the inside of his cheek as he grit his jaw, struggling to maintain his composure.

Sir Malcolm knew the pain facing Ethan now and wished there was something he could do, but they were both powerless. He was even more horrified to witness Vanessa in this state because, unlike before, she was now his world. Before he only cared about his own pain, his own needs, and found some measure of comfort in seeing her like this in times past, knowing the pain it caused her soul. Now he was sickened, not just because he loved her, but at the fact there was a time he had been so hard as to enjoy this suffering.

Vanessa fell forward, her hands washing over face. Tears caused her breathing to shudder. "She's screaming. Who could know how terrible a thing it really is until you see it? The top of her head...oh God...please help us. Momma's face is only blood. I can't see her beneath the red. The Indian tears her scalp away and she falls to the ground like something with no bones. She's not screaming anymore. She can't make much sound as she chokes on her own blood. She's not dead. She's not dead. Such pain in her eyes. No...no now they are empty. Momma?"

Vanessa rocked slowly and Sir Malcolm cut into the horrible monologue. "Bring her back," he whispered to Dr. Seward. Then again with more power. "Pull her out of this."

"Vanessa, you have to take control." Dr. Seward took the cane back from Sir Malcolm and once again started to tap it on the floor. "Block out the other sounds, all voices but mine."

Gasping, Vanessa's eyes looked up in abject terror as though some demonic presence stood over her. "They're going to kill me now. I know it. I'm scared. I'm so scared. Not to die, not anymore, it's all I want now, but I know they are going to make it hurt. Where are you? Please come save me."

"Come back, Vanessa."

Ethan couldn't stop the tears anymore and he crumpled to the

floor. He knew what was coming. When he heard the words before, his hatred for his father fortified him, and the darkness that Lupus Dei started to embrace felt nothing but cold as Jared Talbot recounted his family's end. Vanessa sounded nothing like his sister Mary, but the inflections were hers, the emotions were hers, and there was no shield against this now.

"They're forcing my mouth open," Vanessa continued, seemingly oblivious to the agony in the room. "The knife touches my tongue. I taste Momma's blood..."

"Focus on the sound of the cane, Vanessa. *Come back.*"

Vanessa's lips curled into a vicious sneer and she turned on Dr. Seward with intense rage. "Shut your mouth, you fucking cunt!" Dr. Seward dropped the cane, standing up, out of the chair, knocking it down as she stumbled backwards. Sir Malcolm held her by the shoulders so she did not fall over. "A woman as repulsive as you should have been on her knees," Vanessa laughed suggestively, her voice dropping, "with gratitude to any man willing to fuck her, let alone marry her." Vanessa rose, her posture hard and threatening. "You had the nerve to kill *me*, bitch? You deserved all I gave you, always flapping your damned gums at me." Hard, evil-looking eyes froze Dr. Seward and icy fingers danced across her scar. There was no mistaking those eyes.

Catching Victor out of the corner of her vision, Vanessa turned to face him. "My poor, sensitive boy." The voice was soft and sweet, but seemed tinged with danger. Victor's eyes at once began to water. "Yes, there he goes. So soft, so fragile. I ruined you, didn't I? I should have been harder on you, helped you get those hands dirty. Maybe they wouldn't be so stained now if I had. Maybe we should have told you I was ill. Oh my child, I am so sorry you found out like that. You never really got over it, did you? Not just your obsession with life and death, but how awkward you are around women." Her eyes narrowed. "I saw what you nearly did to that poor girl." Victor fled the room.

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Vanessa's head turned again, her voice lowering and sounding older. "And here's the brute that killed me. Tell me, monster, did you have any idea who I even was? Look at you here, standing with Miss Ives, but there are none on this Earth who know the vampire as I do. I could have prevented this, you know, but all that mattered to you was your rage and your pain. You think you alone have known suffering, that all the world should bow to your needs, everyone and everything else be damned? You distracted him, took his focus off Miss Ives too. You can't even imagine the horrors that grew out of what you made him do. That will come back too, creature."

John had tried to forget the old man he had murdered. There was justification behind the other things he had done, but not this. The man had merely been a thing at which he could direct his rage and to scare Victor to do as he promised, while also making him suffer. How could John ever have imagined the spider webs that connected that act to hurting his friend; a friend who was currently possessed by his sins.

Hands landed firmly on Vanessa's shoulders and she was shaken violently. "Enough, Vanessa. Take control," Sir Malcolm ordered.

"Back for more? I've missed you, child killer, wife killer, father killer. Shall we have another go?" Sir Malcolm backhanded Vanessa. She laughed. He hit her again. "No, Sir Malcolm, that won't save you this time. Is violence the only response you know?"

Dr. Seward laid a hand on Sir Malcolm, having recovered her wits by burying her feelings. "That's not going to help. She has to come out of this on her own."

"Why should I want to do that?" Vanessa asked. "How many personalities have I displayed this time, Doctor? What about one more? There's someone who wants to speak to you, Sir Malcolm," she gleefully taunted.

"Vanessa, you *must* take control," Dr. Seward said firmly.

"Do not worry about that which happens beyond this place," Kaetenay told Vanessa.

They appeared to be sitting at her table in the library, but their souls were far beyond the mortal plane. Vanessa's Tarot cards were fanned out between them. "What about the others?" she asked.

"We are here to find the truth inside you. Let the others distract the dark forces; our focus must be here."

"Where do we begin?"

He gestured to the table. She let the fingertips of her right hand hover slowly over the cards, waiting to see which one spoke to her. She did not rush this and time lost all meaning as Vanessa opened herself to hear the truth within her soul. Her fingers began to warm, as though being held over a flame, and she reached out and took the card, turning it over before her. A bull's skull looked out from behind a woman's bare legs. The High Priestess. Vanessa took a deep breath.

"What does this mean to you?" he asked.

"Unlimited potential. Balance. Duality. A guide to the inner voice."

Vanessa's eyes went crimson. "Yes, my child, I am here."

Eyes closed and Vanessa's hand dropped. She began to sink to her knees, but Sir Malcolm caught her. Ethan forced himself up and grabbed her at the same time. Carefully, they lowered her to the couch. John moved cautiously closer, his mouth agape. Ethan was still visibly shaken, and he kneeled next to Vanessa, his legs not able to support him. Dr. Seward righted her chair and sat, holding her face in her hand, her body shaking slightly. "Jesus," she whispered. She took a moment, then looked at Vanessa. "Is it over?"

Sir Malcolm grit his teeth. "I don't know."

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Vanessa's eyes fluttered open. "I was forced to leave my home. I was no longer a man. I was nothing." The voice was deep, even paced, and calm. Sir Malcolm and Ethan's heads lifted up, their eyes wide with recognition.

Ethan slowly stood as Sir Malcolm pulled back from Vanessa. She didn't make eye contact, as though telling a story to herself. "I had stopped being a man long ago, when I sold my people to the white man, but I did not know then that I was selling my soul as well. Once stopped and marked, I was like a ghost. I moved among people, but they did not see me. The marks made me invisible. Only the white man, who did not know what the marks meant would look at me. I was their slave before but did not know it. This time I knew."

The red eyes shifted back to Vanessa's blue-green ones. "What's happening?"

Red once more. "You came looking; you have found me. I couldn't deny you."

Blue-green. "I want to know what I am."

Red. "You are you, Vanessa. You always have been."

Kaetenay addressed the red eyed force. "We have come to understand. We seek answers to the darkness within her soul."

"There is no darkness within her soul. Everyone, including you, sweet Vanessa, looks through your soul to me. I am the darkness, the scorpion curled around your heart. But oh how you have fed me, embraced me. You were made for the light, but you've always coveted the dark."

The eyes changed. "If I am made for the light, explain the darkness, explain how I can covet what I was not to be."

A purr rose up as the eyes turned red. "Because I am here. There is none who could completely avoid my touch. When you stroked my scales, you sang to me and I came to you. You were so alone, so

beyond this tiny world that you could not help yourself. You kissed me deep to fill the void, and how passionately you kiss me still. You have as much fire as my beloveds and the world you were born to could never sate you; you had to burn."

"What choice did I have? I could not be invisible. I was less than a man to you, but I was not nothing. I took your money, I killed for you. If they would not see me, then they could not resist me. We killed so many. *I killed so many.*"

Africa, a place he loved like no other, was starting to grow dull and red in colour to Sir Malcolm. How had he so loved this place where he had been such a man? How could he have such love for this place when he had sacrificed everything to it on an altar of blood?

Vanessa was blind to his pain, just as she was to Ethan's, as he learned about his friend, this man he had never been allowed to truly know. The man he had killed; he could still taste his blood.

"You respected me for killing my own. At last I became again a man. What were these other lives to me? I killed them all for you."

Tapping a finger on the card, Kaetenay looked into the red eyes. "Duality. Miss Ives, but not Miss Ives."

"On the outside, yes. On the inside, Miss Ives and not Miss Ives."

Blue-green. "Stop speaking in riddles!"

"Two souls, Vanessa. One body. My soul is my own. Your soul is yours."

"Amunet?"

A shrug of the eyebrows. "In some sense, in others not. How often have you called my beloved by names you know, no matter how he has told you, you fashion him incorrectly? We are not for

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you to understand or know. The ant to the human, you are to us. Still, I cannot help but love you, poor broken thing."

Vanessa's eyes at last came to settle on Sir Malcolm's. "In some ways we became as brothers, but you never knew how deep our bond was. We waded through so much blood. You respected me because I protected you and your son, no matter the dark faces I had to take to save you. I was intoxicated by sight. I was less a man than before, but again I did not see.

"There was much beyond your knowledge of the world. You knew nothing of the shamans, the unique powers found in all the tribes. How could I not believe in everything when I saw all they could do? You never saw. I never let them touch you. Until the day I failed."

Vanessa took a deep breath. Tears had found their way down her cheek. It was too hard to grasp what she was being told. "You are not some power within myself as I and others have come to see it; you are a separate soul that resides in me."

A wicked smile as the eyes turned red. "In you now, as I have been in many others, as I will likely be in many more. So close, my dear, to the end of the game, but Lupus Dei came. What excitement this time thanks to our dear Mr. Chandler. A unique outcome. How interesting."

"Lupus Dei comes for you, not Miss Ives," Kaetenay observed.

She sighed. "Lupus Dei always comes. Such singular focus. Such cold, cold clay when he could be Fenrir and devour Odin."

Blue-green. "Odin? Why do you keep switching the narrative? Speak plainly if you wish to help me."

Red. "I care for you. I did not say I wanted to help you. We are at odds in our desires, Vanessa." A smile. "Though not always. You

must come to me and fulfill my wants. I will give you such peace and love then. Embrace the scorpion once more, let me sink into your skin and warm your heart."

"You said my soul is my own. I won't surrender it again."

The smile returned. "Silly child," she purred. "You think you know what you want. You dance away, you dance back. Such a merry game we've had, but you know as I know that the safety, the love, the acceptance you seek, you have only ever found with your head pressed to my chest, my arms embracing you." Her arms opened, inviting Vanessa into them. "It is not surrender, my child. It is accepting my benevolence."

They all leaned in, mesmerized by the narrative that fell so gently from Vanessa's lips.

"You took Peter into the tents, the tents you had filled with women. You had tried to make him before, but it was only now he did as you wanted, though he did not wish to. He wanted your acceptance so badly. I said nothing. I never did. Their fate was no different than those I sold.

"I stood outside the tent and heard all that went on there. I did what I always did for you; I kept out the men. Those that would not leave, who came for wives, daughters, sisters, I killed.

"I dragged away the body of such a man, as I had done many times before, but that man had given himself willingly. As I took him away, the shaman moved in. When I returned, I grabbed him and pulled him back, ready to kill him but he said, 'You are too late. It is done. Slaver, you are a part of this now and all our fates are yours to decide. If you kill me, he will die now, experiencing all the pain and suffering he has caused in one instant lived on him and he will be gone. Or you can spare my life, and spare his, and instead he will know only suffering until the day you are punished by God for both of your sins. Choose.'

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"I chose to spare him. Peter fell ill the next day."
The stone that was Sir Malcolm stumbled.

Vanessa leapt up from the table, as though she could physically outrun the soul that shared her body. "I've been in your embrace. I suffocated."

"You struggled. Stop struggling, Vanessa. Embrace me. Embrace yourself."

"Where is your heart? How can embracing you be an embracement of myself when you have no heart? All those people you killed!"

"You've killed, both using my power and by your own hand."

"That was different."

"Was it? Death is death, Vanessa, no matter how you try to justify it. Ethan tried to tell you this."

"Stop it!" Vanessa fell to her knees, her hands over her ears.

"I came with you to England. We were linked, Sir Malcolm, you and I. All that befell you was now at my hand. Your grief and pain, my responsibility. The curse took much from you, and it did not stop, would not stop, until God was ready to judge me."

Her eyes met Ethan's. "Wolf of God, I knew you were my judgment. Do not weep for me, do not feel guilt."

Turning to look at Ethan, Sir Malcolm was stunned. He had thought the witches killed Sembene. He realized almost immediately that Vanessa would have known and lied to him through admission, because she had known Ethan was safe. How could she if she had not seen him? These betrayals struck deeper because Sembene was already gone and his choice had been an impossible one. Sir Malcolm could not direct all the emotions he was having now on a dead man; his friend, his brother.

"Know, my friend," Sembene continued through Vanessa, "that on that day you did not kill me." She indicated Sir Malcolm. "You freed him." She met Sir Malcolm's eyes. "It was not soon enough to save your family, but maybe it will protect our lioness with the curse lifted." She panned her gaze once more to Ethan. "Has it not already protected your son?"

Kaetenay took Vanessa's shoulders. "Great Spirit, this child has asked to be released. Give her the freedom she longs for. Allow her peace."

The one behind the red eyes laughed. "Says he who cursed Mr. Chandler." Her face became hard. "I tire of you. Leave me with my child."

A shock wave hit the room, and everyone fell to the floor as Vanessa collapsed back onto the couch. Kaetenay coughed, waking back inside his body. The others groaned as they got to their feet and stood over Vanessa.

"Now is it over?" Dr. Seward asked.

Vanessa hugged herself and rocked back and forth, curled up tight.

Red eyes cooed at her. "I know this is all too much for you to understand."

"Please," Vanessa begged, "I just want peace."

The red eyes took on a look of pity, the sympathy real. "I know, child, but it is not for you to have. All of this is above you, your life beyond you and not really your own. It may have been better for you had Lupus Dei brought your end. There is no peace there for me, but there is for you. You could find it with me too, if you tried,

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but not if you can only see me through limited human eyes." She rose and picked up the High Priestess card. "The scorpion will always embrace you, darkling, if you allow it. If not, the duality must continue in conflict; there can be no balancing it within you."

Vanessa felt the other leave, her irises blue-green again and the card held in her trembling hand.

Opening her eyes, Vanessa groaned, feeling the bruises that had begun to blossom on her face from Sir Malcolm's blows. They were of little concern to her though as she sat up and leaned forward. Putting her head in her hands, she cried. Ethan held her against him as she sobbed silently. The others exchanged looks.

"Now it's over," Sir Malcolm said. "For now."

PART III

BLACK AS THE PIT

The house was empty, dull once more, but then the liveliness of the past had grown boring to him; if he was to be bored, he preferred to be alone with his portraits while he thought of new ways to experience life. Dorian Gray took in all the paintings around the room, slowly breathing in every fine detail. A memory haunted him of candlelight touching the oil, her elegant form walking the same path he now did. Any time his thoughts touched on her, he recalled the feelings she alone had shown him, she alone the only one who had wounded him. He took out the small photograph, and caressed it carefully with his finger. He had allowed himself distraction since her, and both had entertained him for a time, but neither truly compared to the mystery, the danger, the razor's edge that was Vanessa Ives.

Seated at one of the outside tables of the café, Lily stared down at the coffee she had not touched, oblivious to the warmth of the early morning sun that gently touched her cold, dead skin. She was haunted by Dorian's words, by the memory of Sarah, and by Justine's vacant eyes. The tragic ends of her children—one of flesh, one of ideals—gave power to Dorian's observations about the torments of the immortal to one who dared to feel. She could not imagine an eternal existence detached from everything, but then she could not hide from the immense pain she had suffered already in two short

lives. Her attempt to lash out at male oppression had ended in bitter betrayal, Dorian snapping the neck of her first follower while the rest had fled without a fight. There was no point in trying to rebuild what had so easily crumbled.

A shadow cast itself over the table, but she paid it no mind.

"Is that it then?"

That slight voice, that lovely note that had hidden such fierce desire, passion, and cruelty. It was not possible; she was dead.

"Was that all you were? A blazing fire that quickly fizzled out?"

Lily was afraid to look up, felt her heart would burst if she dared to believe it could be true, sure it was only a delusion caused by sitting at this table they once shared. Dorian's words echoed through her mind and the memory of dead eyes struck her very soul. She must have gone mad to hear her voice again, attacking Lily for her failure to deliver on what was promised, her guilt punishing her as she had intended. "It cannot be," she whispered.

The woman sat across from her, placing an arm on the table, and leaned forward. "You more than anyone should know death doesn't have the permanence we think it does."

Lily looked up to meet Justine's fiery, rage-filled eyes, no longer cold and lifeless as they had been when her body lay on Dorian's floor where Lily had left her. "Victor?"

"I am not a product of your creator, but as his creations have haunted him, so now do I haunt you. I became what you made me. I could not go on as I had been before and so I surrendered to my end. Men claimed my life before you and a man claimed it after you, and here you sit, your promises empty. What a fool I apparently was to believe you."

"I was deluded to think I could somehow wipe my own soul clean," Lily softly said. "By saving you, by empowering you to rise up, I thought that might somehow give Brona peace. It was selfish, it was foolish, and I damned us both."

Justine leaned in close to Lily's face, close enough for the undead

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woman to feel Justine's breath on her skin. "Undamn me. Set me free and so also free Brona. You have deserted us both by letting your fire burn out. Relight it. Set the world ablaze and make men suffer as we have suffered. To do otherwise is to betray me, and yourself, worse than any man has done." Leaning closer still, Justine was nearly touching Lily's lips. "Your fault was in your trust of men, even as you told us to rally against them. Dorian lives. Victor lives." Justine searched Lily's eyes, then kissed her mentor. Lily felt a painful spark cut through her, igniting her soul. "Rise up like a phoenix and burn."

The smoke shook as Vanessa held the cannabis cigarette in her trembling hand. Her haunted, wet eyes stared blankly at the fire-place. Taking the cannabis from her hand, Ethan took a long drag on it himself, blowing out the smoke which then circled around his head. He didn't feel much better than she looked. She had not uttered a word since coming out of the trance, did not acknowledge her surroundings, apparently lost within her own thoughts and fears. She had sat in complete silence as Kaetenay had shared what they learned. The others briefly recounted what happened with the possessing spirits, none of them wanting to relive the horrors longer than they had to. Ethan had gotten one of Vanessa's cigarettes and put it in her hand, but she did not react to it, or anything beyond her, since her crying had stopped. Her chest expanded with every deep, rapid breath and her eyes barely blinked. None of them were even sure she was hearing their words.

Sir Malcolm was also unusually silent, sitting alone in a chair, resting his face on a fist, his eyes brooding. Victor had returned, but sat apart and offered little words, embarrassed by his departure. None in the room were settled, all of them rattled to their cores by personal demons. Kaetenay alone was steady, familiar as he was with spirits and having been spared the attack by personal demons,

though, having experienced the force within Vanessa, he was not entirely unaffected.

"So basically we've learned nothing and the devil got a free pass to infiltrate us," growled Ethan. He took another drag on the cannabis.

"It was not nothing, but it was not enough," replied Kaetenay. "We must try again."

"Are you out of your mind?" Dr. Seward asked. "Explain to me how it's worth the risk. You weren't here, and I'm told that this encounter was nothing compared to others." She paused ever so briefly to steady herself. "Besides us and what we went through—something I'd rather not experience again—we've exposed Miss Ives to enough trauma."

"I cannot recommend another attempt," Victor agreed. Nothing he or Dr. Seward attempted resulted in any response from Vanessa.

"The spirit in her will not fully reveal herself to us, but through Miss Ives we have access to its power and through that, other spirits may provide us with answers," pushed Kaetenay.

"What good does that do us if we're dead or the devil takes her?" Ethan challenged.

Vanessa's breathing began to become deliberate and settled. Her eyes began to slowly focus.

"So we deny our only chance to learn? To gain knowledge that could help us save her?" Kaetenay pointed at Vanessa. "What is in her is beyond whatever you can dream."

"All the more reason we shouldn't piss it off."

"Enough." Her voice was so quiet, they nearly didn't hear her, but concerned as they were, they froze when they were at last given a sign she had rejoined them. She met their eyes one by one, all of them at rapt attention. "The decision is mine and I choose to press on. If you do not, I bid you goodbye with no ill will, though the demon may not allow your departure. I have been told there will be no peace for me in this life, so what harm is there to continue? Do

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not ask me to sit here and continue to be powerless, to live forever violated with no end in sight. If I should die, then it is done." She took the cannabis from Ethan and drew it into her lungs, steadying her hand. "It must end. I no longer care how."

"I am with you, Miss Ives," John said quietly from his corner, "to whatever end." The rest made eye contact with her, letting her know they felt the same.

"I must rest," was her only reply and she got up awkwardly. Ethan stood to help her, as unsteady as she was on her feet, but she shrugged off his hand and left under her own power.

Three women were waiting in the *memento mori* as Lucy entered. She had carefully crafted her coven of four, allowing them to invoke the four corners. Lucy had never been able to abide the restrictions placed upon women; her father arranged her marriage when she was still a child, and Lucy decided then that she would not be sold like livestock to aid her father's ambition for power and instead decided to seek her own. Her dearest and oldest friend, Mircalla Karnstein, became equally devoted to Lucy's desires and together they sought their freedom. Lucy's discovery of the fallen brothers had been a horrifying accident. Dracula found her, and sought to claim her as one of his own creatures. At the time Lucy had only known she was dying from an unknown loss of blood, sleepwalking in the night, and suffering from strange visions and dreams. Mircalla came to Lucy's home, staying in her bed in order to monitor her sleepwalking, and had seen Dracula hovering over her one night. When they at last understood what was happening, and both desired to give themselves to him, Lucy's betrothed by then had brought in several specialists, one who was eventually able to "free" Lucy from Dracula's grasp.

Looking back on this, Lucy was glad she had not been claimed by the Father of Beasts; she would have had power, but also been a

slave to him. Lucifer was her lord, but did not command every moment of her life, and his power, his reach, extended far beyond that of his brother. Though Lucy and Mircalla joined his legions together over a hundred years ago, it had taken them nearly sixty years to find the other two nightcomers who fit into Lucy's plans for her coven. Through that careful process, they had achieved much.

Strolling into the room, the other three bowed their heads. "Our time has come, sisters," Lucy greeted them. "Our lord has seen our power and our success and has granted us the highest honour."

None needed to ask what that meant; in the battle for Heaven, there could only be success for Lucifer if he first reclaimed his beloved.

"What does our lord require of us?" questioned Mircalla.

"We are to summon our sister covens and have them converge here. He will need us to observe his beloved's allies, to find weaknesses he may exploit. His work has already begun, striking them with memories and faces long lost to them." Lucy looked at her other two sisters. "You two, begin the summoning."

They left to fulfill her order as Mircalla came closer. Lucy stroked her friend's cheek, a soft smile spreading on her lips. "Soon we shall have all we desire. Imagine the power he will bestow upon us if we achieve what even Poole could not."

Mircalla returned the smile as she took Lucy's hand and kissed it. "I have never once doubted you." They stood silent for a time, comfortable holding each other's eyes. "What mission do you require of me?" Mircalla asked. "Shall I watch over her?"

"No, that will be my duty. She doesn't have full control of the host's body, but, even so, Miss Ives has been able to reach astonishingly deep into the well of her power. If not for our lord's hand on her from within, I doubt even I could remain hidden from her. As it is, it will take all my abilities to observe her without her knowledge. For you, my sister, there are others to watch, who he has not yet plans for. They may prove no help to Miss Ives or threat to him, but

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you will watch them to be sure. Assume nothing and report everything to me. If they need to be dealt with, they will be."

Dorian walked down the hidden hallway, moving towards the secret room that hid the only thing that could forever hold his attention; the reflection of all that he was, all the ugly parts that would never appear on his features, vividly represented by the oil painting. His body was a lie, the perfection of a painting captured in his living form, while the lifeless painting was the self reflection he was no longer able to grasp. It was always there, always changing, always a wonder to behold when whatever new thing he discovered eventually disappointed him.

When his thoughts had turned to Vanessa, Dorian decided he needed to pursue her again. Her prior rejection, he knew, was not a lack of interest on her part, and that sense of fear she had made him think she may have something new to offer him. As one who surrendered to every impulse, he desperately wanted to know what made her so afraid that she resisted her desires. She was not an immortal; she was something...else. She was unique and exotic, maybe even more so than him, with an immense power to her, coupled with an intense will. She was vulnerable at the same time, wounded and deeply scarred. He had been well distracted of late, but even when he had been diverted with Angelique, he sought out Vanessa, refusing to allow her to reject his invitation to the ball, needling at her weak point—her compassion for others—to get her to come. He'd been distracted again by the lively appearance of Brona Croft, now calling herself Lily Frankenstein, seemingly cured of her consumption. Engaging distractions, but his thoughts always returned to Vanessa.

Dorian was the only one who possessed an image of Vanessa, the tiny piece of her soul. There were no paintings and no other photos besides the one he held. He treasured it above all his other

portraits save one, and he wondered how his self reflection changed after his decision to re-engage Miss Ives. After all, had it not lost a tiny fraction of its ghoulish appearance when she had rejected him? What a thing it would be, what an amazing possibility for a new experience and sensations, if Vanessa Ives could pull his morality from the painting and replace it in his heart.

As he drew closer to the painting, he sensed a presence in the room. There was a slight tinge of anxiety, a rare feeling for Dorian, so he delighted in it. Only two people had ever seen the manifestation of all that he was, but both were dead, killed by his own hand. Basil Hallward, the painter, had been horrified, but his Angelique had proclaimed to accept the monster she saw depicted by the painting. He had known though that she had no idea what she was looking at when she made the claim, and in this one thing, he would not risk. The sensation of her discovery had been a wonderful cap to the overall diversion she'd been, but he did not welcome it entirely now. Immortal though he was, he approached with caution.

He was not surprised to find Lily standing in front of the painting; there really was no one else it could have been. "I knew you'd be back," he greeted with his standard lopsided grin. She said nothing as he joined her before the canvas. He accepted the silence, more curious to see the change in the painting than interact with her anyway. It was subtle, but Dorian could always detect even the slightest alteration. The same grin he had just worn was reflected on the painting, though it would have been impossible for anyone else to see it among the deformities. In the eyes he saw a sense of amusement, his own image mocking him over his thoughts about Vanessa. As he stared, the painting made the slightest shift, becoming more deformed. Though he was sure she had not, he wondered if Lily had seen it, then realized his disinterest in her compared to the painting was what had corrupted it further.

"I wish I could love," he declared suddenly. "Truthfully, I'm not

sure I was ever really capable of it." Lily subtly turned her head and studied him as though he were some insignificant creature before a god. Again, the slight tingle of a sensation he had not encountered in some time moved through him. He wondered if she had some new plan that might produce a unique experience. He'd been so disappointed when the last so quickly bored him. The violence held some small delight for him at first, but bloody mayhem was nothing he was unfamiliar with.

She turned away from him, and he pivoted to allow his eyes to follow her as she walked towards the wall. He stood with his back to the painting as first her eyes, then head, then body turned back to look at him. "Dorian," she spoke dangerously, at last speaking to him, "what was it you expected from us?"

"I didn't know what to expect," he admitted. "I never before had a woman bite off my ear." His voice had his typical playful tone, treating every encounter as a game. "Nor had I ever met another immortal. I thought you might be different, but you are the same as all the rest. Only one I've met has ever truly been unique, but then you are young yet; you may prove a better diversion after you've live a few hundred years and know what I know."

"Always after that new sensation, that new experience, that's all you have to feed you. You have tried to suck the life out of existence, but instead the life has been drained out of you. Tell me this, Dorian, have you ever tried, for all your vice and sin, to atone for what you have done?"

"I'm afraid I am quite beyond penance. That requires a sense of guilt I do not possess."

"You never understood what I was trying to do, did you? I can't say I fully knew myself before Victor tried to take my past away, before you took Justine. She reminded me so much of me. I thought I could redeem her life, give her back all that had been taken. Not to erase her scars, but to help her move past them. She would have become as I created, a child I gave birth to through spirit instead of

flesh. She took to it all so quickly, as children do. I didn't entirely know it then, but I wasn't really trying to start a revolution, Dorian; I was trying to atone for Brona's sins. Instead, I allowed another man to take me down and lost another child because of it. In the end, you were right; I accomplished nothing. Unlike you, however, I haven't decided that it means I should stop trying. I still need to atone." She narrowed her eyes at him. "So do you."

Raising a questioning eyebrow, smug grin still in place, Dorian asked, "And what sin is it I should atone for?"

"We've thought of three."

Dorian's head whipped around to face the new voice, one he never should have heard again, but to his left she stood anyway. He should have been scared, but he felt only delight at such a unique experience.

"Well Dorian," Angelique began, "do you know what you bought this time?"

"He can't even begin to guess." Turning his head to the right, to another impossible voice, he saw Justine.

"I'm sure we barely count for all the murders and attempted murders, Dorian," Lily said coolly, "but we three certainly agree that you owe us dearly."

He set his hand gently on her closed door, almost able to sense her inside. He wanted to check in, see that she was all right, but Ethan was also uneasy at the idea, still unsettled by the presence of his little sister who had possessed Vanessa. What other ghosts might she manifest to torment him? It was not an experience he wanted to relive, both for his sake and Vanessa's. He rested his forehead against the door, willing some of his strength into her, letting her sense his love and knowing she would feel him there.

There was no more to be done now. He turned and headed down the hall to the room he had occupied what seemed like life-

times ago. He could smell her there, as she had stayed earlier, before they had removed the bloody wolf carcass. Moving to the bed, he pressed his face into the pillow and breathed her in. He closed his eyes, exhausted by recent events marked with too little sleep, and the constant worry he not only would fail to save Vanessa, but would end up being the cause of her death.

A sudden sense of a presence in the room made him bolt to his feet. His body answered the threat with an extension of fang and enhancement of eye before he even realized it. He held the rest of the change in check, but was ready to release it if needed. On his feet he found himself face to face with Hecate.

He said nothing, just stared at her in surprise. Of all the things he may have expected, this was the farthest from his mind. Slowly, cautiously, he reached out a hand and touched her face as solidly as when she had been alive.

She seemed amused by his confusion and lack of belief. "Did you expect a nightcomer to succumb to death so easily?"

The fangs relaxed and vanished. "Why are you here?" he inquired.

"I swore myself to you, Lupus Dei. We were on a path, thee and me."

"Not anymore."

"Back with Miss Ives, I see."

Ethan stepped closer, standing over her, the threat real. "I told you not to speak her name."

"If you truly care for her, maybe you should hear what I have to say. You want her to be safe and free of torment; it's within you to grant her these things."

He eyed her with disbelief, but could not mask the desperate sense of hope that she might be speaking the truth. She slithered in closer to him, a hand reaching up to his face. He seized it in a painful grip. "Don't," he warned, low and threatening. She kept still, neither advancing nor retreating.

"As I said, we were on a path. Whose wolf you are will determine her fate." She dared to lean in closer, her lips a breath away from his. "Come to Lucifer and you will serve her forever."

Ethan grabbed her violently by the shoulders, but as he did, the door to his room opened and his hands were suddenly empty; Kaetenay stood in the doorway and before Ethan was only air. Ethan attempted to process Hecate's sudden absence from his grasp, then quickly directed his confusion as anger towards the Apache. "Don't you knock, old man?"

Kaetenay moved cautiously into the room sensing what was no longer there, before his eyes slowly studied Ethan's face, holding his gaze for a long time. Ethan glared back at him, revealing nothing. "What came to you, my son?" Kaetenay finally asked.

Leaning in, Ethan replied, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Whatever your issues with me, Ethan, I am here to help you protect Miss Ives and prevent the end of days; neither of these missions are aided by your constant confrontation. I know you are hurting, but you do not have the luxury of succumbing to your pain if you wish to avoid that you most fear."

"Or you could have just killed me when I asked you to." Ethan stormed passed him towards the door.

"You can't keep running from what you are." Ethan didn't stop and Kaetenay didn't follow. Instead he slowly circled the room. An adder's head, larger than his own appeared in the air and struck his face, launching him backwards. He crashed on the floor, stunned by the vision. He sat up and opened his eyes, but didn't move for a long time.

Gazing over the three women, who began to circle the room around him, Dorian's grin did not waver. "I've never gone mad. This may prove interesting."

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Lily shook her head. "I assure you, this is all quite real."

"I must admit, I have long forgotten how it feels to lose one you care about, but don't you think this a bit eccentric? I would, however, be interested to know how you accomplished it."

"Why should this surprise you?" Justine asked. "You never bothered to think much about how this painting became exactly what you asked it to be. You were a rather pathetic sight that day with the theatrics, weren't you? You offered your soul if only this portrait would carry all the burdens of life for you. Your prayer was heard...and answered." Her eyes briefly flashed black.

Dorian didn't spare a glance to Justine, his eyes rooted on Lily. "You're upset now, darling, but you'll come to understand with enough time. Who was the girl compared to us?"

"Are not the fleeting things even more special because they are fleeting?" Lily challenged. "The beautiful orchid that blooms for an instant and is gone seems more magical than the unchanging, forever mountains."

"So you've come for my blood, have you? Alecto, Megaera, and Tisiphone unleashed from Erebus to see retribution done?"

"No, Dorian," Lily cooed, "we've come to offer the gift of new sensation and experience."

"You said you were beyond penance because you're beyond guilt," Angelique continued, "and yet just moments ago you were imagining what it would be like to have a conscience again, to be able to see morality without having to look to the painting."

Justine smiled. "It's easier than you can imagine, having that back, and with it so many new sensations."

They stopped circling and Lily moved to him, placing her hand on his chest. "Atone by offering up yourself."

Dorian raised an eyebrow. "You would have me take my own life?"

Angelique draped herself over one of his arms. "Death is the ultimate experience, Dorian, and is the only thing that gives life any

meaning at all."

Justine laced an arm through his free one. "We should know after all."

"Your life for your deeds, Mr. Gray," Lily said. "Cleanse your soul and undergo that moment that makes all experiences matter. Without it, life grows dull and hollow."

"Like your eyes when you killed us," Angelique pointed out.

Tracing a finger over his jacket, Lily said, "As you are, you're really nothing but a dreadful cliché for one who thinks himself so unique."

Justine pulled a knife from her dress, the same she used to stab him before. She held the blade to his throat. "The painting holds all that you are, Dorian."

Angelique leaned closer. "Take your morality back from it. Atone, give up your sins, and experience as you could never imagine."

Taking Justine's knife, Lily drew it down Dorian's front, then placed it in his hand, wrapping his fingers around it. "You've made it clear you tire of this immortal life; all the passion is gone. How can you seek pleasure without passion, Dorian? Why do you think you've been so bored? There is no life without risk. You trapped yourself in an empty room when you were seeking to escape such a box. Free yourself." She guided him with her hand, turning him to see the ghoul in the painting, which looked directly at him, boring into him with a sense of hopefulness in the eyes. Dorian had never seen such a thing reflected there before. "You know deep down how much you want this," she whispered huskily into his ear. "See it there, reflected in your own eyes."

His heart raced, the blood thumping in his ears. Lily was right; the painting seemed to be screaming at him to do it. Her hand lifted his up, guiding the blade towards the canvas.

"I could do it for you," she offered, "but that would deny you the pleasure of the full experience."

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An evil look came over Justine's face. "I'd be more than happy to do it for him."

"Your life is at an end either way, Dorian," Angelique quietly confirmed in his ear so only he could hear. "The agreement was over between us the moment your thoughts returned to Miss Ives."

Dorian looked nervously at Angelique whose eyes were now pure black. Understanding that he wasn't being given a choice and that the painting could remove his immortality, as it had given it, Dorian found he suddenly did want some form of atonement before the end. He began to surrender to Lily's guidance as the knife hovered over the heart of the hunched up figure. The creature had tears in its eyes now and a pleading look. Dorian himself could not actually feel it, but he sensed it to be true as he stared at the trapped and hideous thing he had become; hidden from all the world and himself, but no less his soul. Dorian suddenly couldn't stand to look at it anymore and he slammed the blade through the canvas. Immediately he screamed, an unholy sound that seemed to echo through all of London. The painting frantically twisted and altered, the figure's chains snapping as it rose to its feet in an lavish room, standing with poise and grace, the contrapposto elegant like a Classical era Greek statue of pure bronze perfection, the pinnacle of artistic rendering. Where once a horrifying image was, the most stunning portrait in oil now remained, an image of Dorian Gray looking godlike and supernatural beyond anything he had looked in life.

The three women moved closer, but their eyes were not on the heavenly painting. Instead they looked at the wrinkled, dried out husk of a corpse on the floor, impossible to recognize, the knife sticking out of its heart. Angelique and Justine smiled, as though a mirror image, but Lily's expression was one of shock and horror. As they watched, the body of Dorian Gray turned to dust.

* * *

Catriona closed her book in frustration. "How on Earth are we supposed to pull any of this together if they aren't just multiple figures across mythologies, but are multiple figures *within* mythologies?"

"Ancient cultures had a pantheon of gods and it was common for some to fall to the wayside and be replaced with others that fulfilled the same purpose," Mr. Lyle explained. "Amun-Ra was by no means a stable figure of worship. The gods change, the story alters, but we know there was not a plethora of gods running around, interacting with man, just stories that changed and adapted. How else can you explain the demon's mark on Dracula's creature, or him being tossed from Heaven if he and Lucifer were not at some point allies? Dracula later decides to no longer serve, and like Set, grew jealous of the preference given to Osiris, and went to war with his brother."

"And like many ancient cultures, there was a singular underworld ruled by a singular god of the dead rather than the Christian ideas of Heaven and Hell ruled by different beings. Hades was feared because of a fear of death—"

"—but the Egyptians embraced the afterlife completely, so Osiris became a supreme being in their culture. He became a figure that is glorified, so his enemies are defeated; Set never bested Osiris, but he *was* destined to defeat the chaos serpent, Apep, who would seem to be another of Lucifer's names."

Catriona massaged her temple. "I never imagined looking for Dracula beyond the myths most directly connected to him through similar figures or accounts."

"Even so, Miss Ives was able to use your research to find him."

She gave Mr. Lyle a sideways glance. "That didn't exactly work out to anyone's benefit but his."

Mr. Lyle waved a dismissive hand. "What's gone is done." He paused and thought. "At one time the two brothers were allies. If we look to the Biblical war in Heaven, Lucifer battled God's forces,

but not God directly."

"Right, he fought the archangel Michael."

"Like a general leading the king's army. Perhaps Dracula served a similar function. After they were cast out, he came to resent his brother for his bride. When the brothers parted, Dracula's army served him alone and the two brothers competed for the force within Miss Ives, the challenge that much harder as they were in direct conflict with each other. Now, with Dracula gone, there's only one potential force to keep Miss Ives from the devil's hands."

"Lupus Dei."

"Yes, some sort of guardian that becomes a failsafe, perhaps protecting her in the only way it can once she's been corrupted." Mr. Lyle frowned, a sad look filling his face, recalling how he had found Vanessa not so long ago, broken and nearly destroyed by the fight. "It's not possible for a person to combat such forces forever. Her only reprieve before was the conflict between the brothers, but if we can't find a way to stop the demon, despite her powerful and willful nature, I fear Miss Ives will be lost to us one way or another."

They shared a worried look. They fiercely desired to prevent such an end, but they also knew there was not much they could do against such a formidable and singularly driven force. Even then they were unable to sense the eyes of Mircalla observing them, listening to every word.

Mr. Lyle and Catriona were not the only ones being watched by Lucifer's minions. Three stalked after Ethan as he walked through London's streets, while another tailed Lily. In Grandage Place, one studied John in the basement, another watched Kaetenay in the library. They were in Sir Malcolm's bedchamber, watching him sit alone in his fury, with Victor as he slept in Sembene's old room, and Dr. Seward as she walked the halls.

Lucy herself stood hidden against the wall in Vanessa's room,

monitoring her restless slumber. The nightcomer studied each tick of Vanessa's fingers, each change in her breathing pattern, as Vanessa's power reached out beyond herself, seeking answers. Lucy smiled as she watched how the constant, unconscious effort put more strain on Vanessa, who had already been driven to exhaustion and seclusion after being touched again by Lucifer. Lupus Dei had driven out the demon some time ago, requiring Lucifer to directly assault his bride through his nightcomers, but the Apache had carried Vanessa into the spirit world and opened the door to him once more. He did not assault her now, himself stretched thin, planting his seeds, but his nightcomers never let any of Vanessa's allies out of their sight. They gathered in large numbers outside and moved secretly through London, doing their master's bidding.

For now they could leave Vanessa's power to tax her human body and weaken the human soul, making Lucifer's task easier when he was ready to strike.

His senses tingled and he stopped. Ethan scanned the streets and the rooftops, knowing he smelled a nightcomer. They would be disguised as humans during the day, but his eyes slowly panned the streets with his heightened senses. He spotted her hair just as she disappeared around a corner. He gave chase, trying to keep close to her heels, but she moved as no human could, apparently unseen and untouched by the crowds. Ethan jolted people and even shoved them out of his way trying not to lose her, a momentary glance of her hair all he ever really saw.

Emerging onto one of the major busy streets, Ethan stopped and scanned for Hecate, but an instant later she fell from his thoughts when he caught a glimpse that stopped his heart. He shook his head, telling himself it was stress and a lack of sleep, coupled with a fleeting look that made him see what he knew was impossible. His brain had imposed a face he knew on a person who could not be as

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she appeared. Even so, he found himself moving towards her, following her through the crowd, attempting to see her face again.

She stopped in front of a flower girl, reaching out and tenderly touching the young woman's chin. The flower girl smiled as she looked up at the person touching her. He saw a few coins being pressed into the younger woman's hands, as the other took a single flower and smelled it before placing it on her dress. She turned then and Ethan was confronted with an inconceivable reality because it was the face he had taken it to be. He stood there, shocked to his core, drinking in the sight of her, when her eyes just as suddenly fell on him as the crowd parted around Ethan as he stood there, like a pillar in the middle of the street. She too came to a stop and locked her eyes on his.

Again Ethan's feet moved on their own, and he walked carefully towards her, afraid she would disappear, but she waited for him, looking both happy and extremely sad. A foot away he stopped and held out a hand to touch her, but paused, as though touching her would break the spell. "Brona?"

She smiled at him, though her eyes filled with tears. Then they were each other's arms, clutching each other in a tight embrace. Everything outside of them fell away and for a moment they held onto the joy and kindness that had eluded them all their lives except for their brief and special time together. The time had been a balm upon their souls and touched their lives with a happiness they had never before known.

Pulling away from her, but holding her by the shoulders so he could get a good look at her without letting go, Ethan studied her face, seeing no trace of her consumption. "I thought you were dead," he choked, barely able to get the words out. "I saw you dead. How...?"

Her features contorted in deep emotional pain, tears moving down her cheeks, completely unable to find her voice as she stared into the face of the only man who had treated her with kindness; the

only man who had ever loved her unconditionally; a man she never thought she would see again. How could she possibly explain to him what had happened, what she was? Her insides twisted at the idea of having to tell him what she'd done, how far she'd fallen. In truth, neither of them had ever shared their lives with each other, letting their pasts and all they were fall away when they were together. They had shared their souls, which was the magic behind what they had been. His eyes studied hers, so happy, but begging to know where she had been and how this was possible.

"Brona did die," Lily finally managed to stumble out, but it did nothing to alleviate the confusion and hurt in Ethan's eyes, even though both were overshadowed by his joy. She reached out and touched his face, seeing a flash of Dorian's as he rapidly aged, hearing his scream, but she forced herself to look at Ethan, to soak up the comfort he brought her, however undeserved. "Ethan, I wish I could, but it would be entirely impossible to explain this to you."

He took her hands in his. "Then don't." His smile deepened. "How doesn't really matter."

Her chin quivered more, fighting the tears that fell anyway, remembering all the perfect moments she had spent with him. "I had no idea you were still in London," she finally offered, not knowing what else to say. His face faltered slightly then, a sense of apology on his features. She understood. "I hope she makes you happy."

"I haven't really given her a chance, but I know in my heart what we could be." He looked down at their hands.

"You deserve to be happy, Ethan. Love her; let her love you and be happy. Nothing could give me more joy."

He met her gaze, the smile back through the tears in his eyes. "And you?"

She paused; there were no words really. "I had my happiness with you," she finally said. Before he could say something, she pressed on. "It's been so good to see you, Ethan, more than you could know, but I must go." She tried to leave, but he held her

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hands. Lily met his eyes. "Your love will always be dear to me. I will forever treasure our time together, but I cannot do this. Please. It hurts."

He dropped her hands, unable to be the cause behind any of her pain. "8 Grandage Place," he whispered. "I'm there when you're ready."

Stepping closer, she leaned in and kissed him tenderly goodbye on the lips, then disappeared into the London crowd.

Sir Malcolm sat at the desk in his room, looking at nothing. He felt a sense of anger that he could not fully explain or direct, leaving him feeling impotent. He had experienced something like this when Peter had spoken to him through Vanessa, but at the time it had been so easy to hate her and use his anger in his search for Mina. Ethan and Vanessa were his family, but Sembene had been too. Now, knowing the truth of what took his children from him, what destroyed his family, and how Sembene had truly died, he was left to simmer in his rage, without an outlet.

He ignored the knock on his door, not wanting to be disturbed, especially not by Vanessa or Ethan, one of whom he was sure was on the other side of the door. He didn't react outwardly to the second knock, but it further fueled his anger. When the door opened without invitation, he rose in a fury and turned to face who could only be his surrogate daughter.

It wasn't Vanessa.

Dr. Seward folded her hands before her and met his fiery gaze with one of pure, cool steel, an unmoving, unflinching rock which broke the wave of his anger harmlessly around her, unimpressed by his wrath. "Well, go ahead," she invited. "Yell, shout, stalk around like an animal, throw things; show me just how angry you are. Get it all out, because locking yourself up in here and stewing about it is no use to anyone, least of all yourself."

Sir Malcolm tried to restrain his rage, biting it back as he spoke. "I appreciate all you have done for Miss Ives, Doctor, but you have no business barging into my chambers—"

"I would have barged in on you elsewhere, but you've been up here for hours and it's time you got over yourself."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You think yourself unique? Your case is as plain and common as they come, so typical of your class and your gender. Pushed to succeed, you're a man who's never happy with anything he has or anything he's done. You've spent your life always running towards the next thing, never allowing yourself to be still and happy in all you already have. You push everything and everyone aside in these pursuits, which is why you were never home with your family, why you were never there for your children, and why you were disloyal to your wife. You pushed your son to be like you, like your father did to you, but Peter was better able to give himself to others, so he never lived up to what you wanted him to be. He was the sort of man you couldn't understand, which made you push all the harder until it killed him. You completely ignored your daughter, but not her friend's mother, causing disorder and chaos in Miss Ives' life. This in turn resulted in her poor judgment that led to her wounding her best and only friend in the world.

"You of course seized on the opportunity to ignore all your own mistakes and choices and redirected your guilt outwardly through hatred towards Miss Ives, blaming her for all your failures with your family. You decided her action could be used to explain away your poor relationship with your daughter, and all that you felt was wrong with your son. So you reveled in her pain, cutting all ties with her and her family trying to bury your guilt with her.

"When Mina was taken, Miss Ives again became your scapegoat, the reason for all that was happening to your estranged daughter. At the same time you needed Miss Ives to save your child, and in needing her, you were vulnerable to your own guilt once more, see-

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ing through Miss Ives all you hated about yourself. It didn't help that you must forever wonder if she's your actual flesh and blood. That made you hate her all the more, trying to deny another weakness and failing."

Sir Malcolm stepped forward to stop Dr. Seward, but she ignored him, continuing for his sake and Vanessa's. "You couldn't rely on her, live with her, look at the young woman who you watched grow up with the children you knew were yours, day in and day out, and continue to pour your guilt on her through your hatred. Eventually you had to give it up and see the truth: she was the only child you had left, your last chance to have a family. You couldn't allow yourself to be a failure, so you took it. That required you to devote yourself to her completely. It then became impossible not to see that she was never really responsible for anything, especially as you learned about how she was targeted by dark forces and how they have corrupted her all her life. All that external anger you put on her to free you of your own guilt came crashing back on you. You've attempted to alleviate it through charitable acts, but mostly you've devoted yourself to Miss Ives to make up for how you wronged her. Of course, you've told her none of this. Now here you are, brooding alone, trying to convince yourself you're angry with Miss Ives, or Mr. Chandler, or both of them, for the death of your friend. How many times must you repeat this cycle of hating others to avoid your own sense of guilt before you learn to face up to your own shortcomings?"

Her gaze continued to hold his, unflinching, letting the words sink you. "You can either allow yourself to move beyond all this—and help the people you love, and who love you—or you can wallow in your guilt and anger, be completely useless to yourself and everyone else, and quite possibly hand Lucifer victory." She tilted her head. "What do you choose?"

Sir Malcolm didn't know what to say. He stood staring at her, all the anger drained from him and his mind a blank. This stranger had

managed to perfectly read his entire life, telling him things he had never been willing to look at. Hearing her words, he could not deny that she was right and in that moment, Sir Malcolm let it go.

Dr. Seward saw the change in his eyes and posture. "Good choice." She didn't actually smile, but Sir Malcolm sensed it in her eyes, so he smiled back slightly.

Then the house seemed to shake with an angry shout as the heavy front door slammed shut. "*FRANKENSTEIN!!*" Sir Malcolm and Dr. Seward eyed each other a moment and then ran out of the room, driven by the sound of rage that issued from Ethan's mouth.

"Where the hell are you, Victor!?" Ethan bellowed into the house. The others began to file into the foyer from all over, but taking one look at him, they did not dare get too close. Kaetenay stood in the drawing room doorway; Frankenstein's creation lurked in the dark of the hall leading towards the kitchen; Sir Malcolm descended the stairs with Dr. Seward to the landing, looking down on Ethan from the higher position.

Victor peered out from behind the railing at the top of the other side of the stairs. When he saw the barely restrained fury in Ethan's face, he slowly, cautiously, began to move down the stairs towards Sir Malcolm. Victor made brief eye contact as he passed, then continued down towards Ethan. As he descended, Vanessa appeared at the top of the stairs behind Dr. Seward's shoulder, staying back, even more withdrawn from them than Mr. Clare.

As Victor reached Ethan, standing timidly before him, the American suddenly punched him with enough force to send the doctor falling back into the stairs, landing painfully. Sir Malcolm immediately rushed down and put himself between the two, as Kaetenay ran over from the drawing room and attempted to restrain Ethan, who shrugged him off. Dr. Seward knelt down to help Victor up. Vanessa and John showed no reaction and did not move from the

shadows.

"What the *fuck* did you do?" Ethan asked, his voice lower, in a manner that was more terrifying than his yelling.

Victor touched his bleeding lip and winced. "Perhaps you would be willing to give some context to your question?"

Ethan's eyes seemed animalistic, a blood rage swirling dangerously in them. "Miss Croft," he spat. Victor paled. "You told me she was dead, told me you'd take care of her body. Explain to me then how I ran into her today."

Victor began to stammer, finally getting out, "You didn't."

Ethan took a threatening step forward, one of his guns suddenly in his hand and pointed at Victor's head. "You better tell me the truth, or God help you, I will kill you where you stand."

Sir Malcolm put up a staying hand. "Ethan," he began.

"Stay out of this." His eyes did not waver from Victor's. He cocked the hammer.

Victor's eyes frantically searched the faces around him for help, but they did not understand what was going on, only that no one would possibly be able to stop Ethan from carrying out his threat. "I didn't lie to you; Miss Croft did die." Ethan's eyes grew harder, letting Victor know there would be no more warnings. The doctor's words began to spill out, his hand up in a gesture for Ethan to allow him to finish. "The woman you loved, as you knew her, died. There was no way anyone could have saved her from the consumption." He gaze flitted around before coming back to Ethan's. "It was act of desperation in order to save lives, including most of yours," he noted, looking around at the people in the foyer.

At this, John stepped out of the shadows, anger marking his features as well. "You would seek to lay your sins at my feet, Creator?" Perplexed expressions met John's question.

"You were the one who killed Professor Van Helsing, who threatened to kill everyone living in this house if I didn't do what you demanded of me."

Kaetenay moved to position himself between creator and creation as John came closer, while Sir Malcolm continued to hold the space between Victor and Ethan. "I asked you to commit no unwilling sin, or have your forgotten my brother so quickly?"

Dr. Seward turned her eyes to Vanessa, who continued to watch from her place of seclusion, away from the rest of them.

"Someone fucking explain to me what happened to Brona," Ethan ordered, the confusion of John's words adding to his anger.

John turned to Ethan. "This demon you trusted has been creating monsters. Thinking himself a god, he sought to erase death from life through the reanimation of corpses."

"That's insane."

"Yet here I stand. I was his first creation. I killed the brother he made after me, hoping to spare him the life of misery and isolation I was born into. I admit to you, Mr. Chandler, that I demanded of my creator to make for me a companion, a creature like me so I would not have to go through this existence forced on me alone. To do this, he had to bring life to the lifeless once more."

"He didn't give me a choice!" Victor shouted.

"No one can better tell you," John directed to Ethan, "that the one you knew is gone. I recently attempted to return to the family of this body, but it could not last. Your love does not live. I came to see I was wrong to require Frankenstein to make for me a bride, both for trying to control her will, and because I made him impose upon her a life I would wish on no other."

All looked at Victor, words failing them. "You all judge me a monster, but I was trying to bring about an end to death," Victor desperately pleaded. "I was trying to remove the suffering it causes. I wanted to end the pain of having to say goodbye to those you loved. There's not a person here who can say they've been untouched by that agony."

"My mother died when I was young, and I did not, could not, understand why that had to be so, why the body had to fail. I have

proved that it does not, that flesh can be reanimated and life can continue. With Lily I was even able to limit the memory loss of my prior attempts. She eventually regained all memories of her prior life, but she could no longer be Miss Croft; Miss Croft was dead. She became a new woman twice over: the one she was at her rebirth, the woman you met Miss Ives," he said to looking up at Vanessa, "and the woman she later became.

"I did not pick her to hurt you, Mr. Chandler; I was trying to spare lives, and I took the opportunity that was presented to me. If I hadn't, this creature may well have killed Miss Ives, or Sir Malcolm, or you."

The room fell silent, nervous glances passing from one person to the next. Ethan reset the hammer and holstered his gun, pushing his way through the crowd at the bottom of the stairs. He stopped a moment to look at Vanessa, who did not meet his eyes, then retreated to the spare room. They all watched him, and when they looked back to Victor, Frankenstein was gone.

PART IV

MIDNIGHT WITH NO PAIN

Standing at her open window, Vanessa stared out into the night. Her arms were wrapped tightly around herself, as though she could keep her splintering spirit together if she held on tight enough. She squeezed her eyes shut, tears threatening, when the door to her room opened. Vanessa knew this confrontation was coming, but she was not ready to face the horrors mounting outside. "My world has become unending madness. I fear I am at the end of my endurance," she confessed.

Dr. Seward came closer, but gave Vanessa a wide berth, very carefully treading into her seclusion. She needed to help Vanessa pull herself out, but the wrong action now could push the tortured woman beyond her breaking point. "Locking yourself away in here won't make anything go away, Vanessa. I know you know that."

"I needed a moment's *peace*! Just a moment." Vanessa kept her back to Dr. Seward and struggled to contain her misery. She took a deep breath, trying to prevent herself from becoming completely overwrought, worried she was dangling over the abyss of insanity. A cold breeze brushed her face and Vanessa looked to the bright moon, using it as a focus point, trying to calm herself. "She told me there will be no peace for me," Vanessa said, her voice cracking.

Wrapping her arms tighter around herself and closing her eyes, she whispered, "Is no man immune to the desire to control and sub-

jugate? I knew he had a secret, but I never imagined." Vanessa pressed the heel of a hand against her forehead. "He was happy, so in love, and I saw only what was presented to me, too wrapped up in my pain to see then what I can see with perfect clarity now. It was so coached, so forced. He controlled her speech, her actions, trying to make her *proper*," Vanessa spit the word out like it was bile. "He had me assist him in making Miss Croft into the woman he desired. I had no idea."

Edging carefully closer, her voice soft, Dr. Seward replied, "You feel betrayed."

Vanessa closed her eyes in deep anguish as her mind shot back through time to the horrors of the white room, the memories so recently made fresh in her mind. She turned, the anger asserting itself through her pain. "Shouldn't I? My dear Mr. Clare was my shield, my only lifeline to maintaining my sanity in that place as they tried to torture me into submission, to behave as they demanded. That man clearly did die, because the man he was would never have attempted to create a woman to serve his ends. Or have I been wrong? Did I see only what I wanted to see in that terrible place?"

"Actions have a cause, Vanessa. They do not occur outside our experiences. To accept what people have done, to move on from it, we have to seek to understand that cause."

Vanessa turned away again. "I do not desire to know."

"Anger can make good armour for a time, but it won't protect you from your pain forever, and it certainly won't protect you from the demon. You need to face what you're feeling. Let me help you."

Looking out the window, Vanessa's emotions detached from her thoughts, her body suddenly feeling hollow. "I cannot." Her face was blank. She couldn't help but think that it might do the world well to burn, and that the demon they faced was a more accepting force than all of mankind.

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Mircalla kneeled before Lucy, her head bowed. "I do wish you would stop doing that," Lucy said with exasperation. "You are like an extension of myself, not my servant."

"It makes me happy to show my love and devotion, sister."

Lucy chuckled softly and shook her head, one corner of her mouth lifting in a smile. "As you desire." She dropped into a large, padded chair, stretching her legs out in front of her. "What do you have to report?"

"They have been able to discern a surprising amount considering what they seek does not exist. They will never find anything that will help them as mortals, but I fear they may make enough connections that she may remember herself."

The news hardened Lucy immediately, her laidback, confidence disappearing. "That could destroy all our lord's work, and force him to start from the beginning yet again. That cannot happen when he is this close."

Mircalla stood. "We have been subtle, casting stones among them so they will fight among themselves, but it is time for more direct action."

"That is not our call to make, sister." Lucy grew quiet. "Lucifer moves through their ranks. Dorian Grey has been removed, and our lord may soon possess more of their souls. His power is vast, but while he may be in many places at once, he cannot be everywhere. Take some of the others with you and watch them carefully. Report on the hour. If the situations requires, we will do whatever is necessary to ensure our lord's victory."

Outside the gate to Grandage Place, Lily kept herself hidden. She had not expected to find herself here. Her last encounter with Ethan shattered what frail sense of self she had left, yet she now searched the windows for a glimpse of him.

"There's nothing for you here."

Lily glanced over her shoulder at Justine, but didn't turn to face her. "You tell me nothing I don't already know, child. It is but a tattered dream."

"You walked away before. Can you not understand me needing to be sure of your resolve?"

"After everything, I would be a fool not to reconsider every thought before action."

"How could any action be more clear?" Lily did turn this time, hearing Dorian's voice. He stood, leaning against the archway. "I did not have much cause to interact with the man, but his misery was plain. Between his sins and his pathetic nature, death should be a deserved and welcomed end."

Lily stepped closer to him. "Happy are you, Dorian?"

"Quite. Living for the sake of not dying had gotten tedious."

"You brought about Dorian's end for lesser sins than Frankenstein's," Justine chided. Dorian raised an eyebrow in agreement. "Dorian may have taken my life, but Frankenstein took yours twice over, and tried a third and fourth. Even if he does let you go, what about the next woman he does this to?"

"I sincerely believe Victor has lost his taste for this science," Lily replied.

"You can't be sure," Justine said, closing in on her.

Dorian invaded Lily's space as well. "Punish or spare him; either way, as with me, death will bring a happy end." His eyes filled black.

Hunched over their books, Mr. Lyle and Catriona were oblivious to the gathering storm. Chameleon forms snaked along the wall, the library filling with nightcomers.

"Mr. Lyle." The colour drained from his face at the sound of Poole's voice. She stood perfectly poised across the room, her voice carrying though she spoke low and deliberate. "You sided with

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Miss Ives against me. That account has come due."

The nightcomers began to show themselves, seeming to bleed from the walls. Catriona was already on her feet, but as the room began to fill, she drew one of her daggers and took a defensive stance.

"You'll serve as a message to Miss Ives," Poole hissed, her eyes becoming black.

As the nightcomers raced in, Catriona tossed one of her guns at Mr. Lyle as she leapt on top of the table, which she did only long enough to launch herself into the air, pulling her second dagger. Racing to the floor, her blades struck across two throats. The bodies of the nightcomers crashed to either side of her as she landed in a crouch on the floor, the bloody blades dripping, her arms raised up and behind her. A fraction of a second later she was back on her feet, dodging the nightcomers' blows, arms whistling through the air as they missed her by an instant, instead feeling her blades slicing across them.

The room filled quickly with shrieks and blood as Catriona raced around at an alarming speed. The roar of the gun added to the chaos. Mr. Lyle's first bullet hit a nightcomer in the arm, but the second shot went wide. He dared not aim into the thick of them where Catriona battled, his marksmanship poor, running the risk of hitting the thanatologist who continued to cut through the witches.

She had more skill than they did in hand to hand combat, but they had the numbers and the speed. In an instant the battle turned. One laid hands on her arm, using it to toss her, viciously slamming Catriona into a bookcase with enough force to knock her through it, crashing into the next case behind it. The shattering wood pierced Catriona's skin and at last her blood spilled on the floor. Mr. Lyle began to rapidly fire into the nightcomers as they went after the thanatologist's flying form. As he fired, only one of the few hits he landed dropped a witch, and then the barrel clicked, no further rounds to spend.

Another gun rang out as Catriona fired into the nightcomers herself while she struggled painfully to her feet. Three nightcomers closed in on Mr. Lyle, and one shoved him, launching him backwards. He crashed down into a table, the wind knocked from his lungs. Closing his eyes, he waited for the end. He was confused when he felt the warm splash of blood on his face, but felt no injury and wondered if pain was somehow avoided during death's blow. He opened his eyes to see Catriona standing over him, firing her gun at the witches. When her gun too was expended, she returned to her blades and close quarter combat. Mr. Lyle groaned and got to his feet as he recovered his breath. He grabbed a leg from the shattered table and aided Catriona as best he could, bludgeoning any witch that got within reach. Again he felt himself struck by a powerful blow that hurled him away from his companion.

Catriona's arms were captured and the daggers torn from her grasp. Lucy grabbed her by the throat, lifting her off her feet. Catriona choked and clawed desperately at Lucy's powerful, unyielding hand, but the nightcomer smiled in victory, the thanatologist at her mercy. Lucy raised the woman's own blade to her face, threateningly, holding it to Catriona's eye as the human struggled to break free. The nightcomer smiled, debating where to strike. Catriona's face was already marked by dozens of bleeding injuries, but Lucy delighted in opening another on her cheek that cut down to the bone. Catriona barely registered the pain as she was beginning to black out from the lack of air. The blade lowered and sank deep into Catriona's side, releasing a spray of vibrant red when Lucy violently yanked it out.

Poole stood over Mr. Lyle while Mircalla lifted him into a kneeling position before her, holding his arms behind his back. Leaning in, Poole's lips were close to his ear. "Do tell Miss Ives I'm coming." Her hand flew across his neck and he felt a sharp sting, followed by the flow of blood. Mircalla released him, letting him collapse to the ground. He reached for his throat and grabbed at the wound.

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Studying Catriona's blue face, Lucy jabbed the blade deep into her two more times before dropping the woman to the floor. Facing the remaining nightcomers, with a quick head gesture Lucy indicated the bodies of their sisters. The witches collected their dead and wounded and began to depart into the night. Lucy faced her master with smug satisfaction. Poole slowly licked the blood from her ring, her black eyes dancing with delight. They followed the others, leaving the bleeding humans on the floor.

When he felt her presence, he didn't turn; he'd been expecting her to show up. "Get out," he warned, his voice low and deadly. The room was dark and Ethan sat in a chair that faced away from the door, his hands curled tightly around the arms of it. He was sick of all of them. Sitting alone, he was trying to numb his feelings so he could collect his thoughts after what had just happened.

"Say what you will about me, Ethan, but you must admit, I was loyal. I fought by your side, saved your life, and was willing to die for you. Can you say the same for any here?" Hecate asked.

"Yes," he replied without hesitation.

Hecate began to move closer, circling into his sightline. "Really? You came back here because you considered these people family, but what have they given you? From the moment you arrived you have encountered nothing but betrayal. Kaetenay made you a beast, Victor stole your love and transformed her into a monster, and Miss Ives?" Hecate crouched before him, staring into his eyes. "She gave herself to Dracula."

Leaning forward into her face, Ethan's look was hard. "Not before I gave myself to you."

"Don't pretend it didn't mean anything to you," she said with a smile. "You touched that dark part of yourself and willingly embraced your real power. You were so close to being beyond the guilt and the conflict, but you denied yourself in the end, and treachery

has been your only reward. At Lucifer's side you will be worshipped and obeyed without question."

Reaching out, he grabbed her face with one large hand and pressed tightly. "I told you to get out. That's the last time I'll say it."

She didn't struggle and made no move to leave. "Unleash that rage and hatred at a target more deserving. He told you he would take care of laying her to rest. Instead he stole her body and trapped her soul in a living corpse, so he could spare himself by presenting her as a gift to an undead monster. He treated her worse than a whore; he treated her like an object. This man you have considered a friend, a brother, all this time knowing your love was alive, with her memory, and he did not utter a word. He did not think of you or your pain, nor of hers." Ethan rose from the chair, walking away. She followed, pressing him. "It didn't end there. He fashioned her into a plaything, into a woman he desired, and attempted to claim her for himself. He tried to mold her to fulfill his *every* desire. All you had with her, all you suffered, meant nothing to him."

Ethan lifted his gun belt from off the chair and met her gaze, his eyes determined. He walked out.

Sitting once more in the dark gloom of the bricked basement, John was numb. Confused at his rebirth, horrified by his appearance, and rejected by all, he had seen himself as a monster, and in doing so gave himself the freedom to be one. He had violently slain his brother, Proteus, claiming it was for his own good, but John had not asked Proteus how he felt about his new life. The truth was, he had murdered his brother because their creator accepted him. In the same way, Victor's feelings for Lily had furthered John's rage towards his creator. Why was he the exception? It wasn't so hard to understand when he thought about the encounter from Victor's view instead of his own, that terrifying moment when Victor had succeeded to bring the dead to life; a screaming, bloody, seemingly

inhuman thing. John tried to claim superiority over his creator, but killing Proteus to spare him was a lie because John forced Victor to subject another to the same undead fate.

John gave no thought to the woman Lily had been before, failing to see her as her own person. He created lies, attempting to make her into the woman he wanted, the companion he felt owed, thus becoming no better than the man he forced to create her. Before them she had a life, and seeing the pain on Ethan's face made that all the more real. These were the actions of a monster, as was the murder of Van Helsing because of his own inability to connect to a human woman. He could no longer excuse his sins by casting them at Victor's feet; they were his alone. He could almost feel the presence of Lily, Proteus, and Van Helsing gathered around him, placing the burden of his sins firmly on his shoulders, sins that had echoed beyond the commitment of the act and led to him harming his only salvation in the world, even if indirectly.

He looked up when he saw the pair of feet come into his view. He had not heard her arrive. Vanessa stood before him, the expression on her face unclear and impossible to read. He'd been down here for hours, thinking over all he had done, unable to even consider what Vanessa was thinking. He looked down again, incapable of meeting her eyes. "Evil became my good," he whispered. "I surrendered my nature to that I had willingly chosen, completing my demonical design."

"There are sins," she began, "that can never be forgiven." He looked up, fear written on his face. "How could I have known what sort of monster you truly are? You attempted to enslave a woman, force her to be something she was not for your own selfish ends. At the Banning Clinic, you told me to be myself, but then you became this creature and defiled the memory of the man you used to be. Not because of what you are, but because of what you did."

John had no defence to present to Vanessa, tears filling his eyes. He thought he should be angry at her for proving her words and

loyalty false, but he knew that the fault was his own, her reaction a just one to his sins. Even if he didn't fully understand the past relationship they had shared, he seemed to have defiled it to its very core.

"You dare come here wearing my face, attributing words to my mouth that I would never have cause to speak?"

He looked up, perplexed not only by her words, but by how her voice seemed to be coming from beyond her. He was only confused further when his eyes were greeted by two Vanessas. The one before him turned to face the other.

"Not content to wear my face in wood, now you wear it in flesh and accost those dear to me with your lies?" the new addition sneered.

"I am the Father of Lies," the one before him replied, her eyes going black.

"And what lie could be greater than one masked in truth?"

The imposter shrugged her shoulders with a smile, seeming to accept the criticism as a compliment. "They sting all the more."

The real Vanessa came closer, her posture angry and threatening. "Leave this place, demon. Leave me and those I love and let us be done with all of this. I have slain the dragon; do not think you will stand where he has fallen."

"Defeating one of flesh is no grand feat, beloved. To defeat one of spirit is another matter entirely. All our battles before now, you think they guarantee you a victorious end? Each time you surrendered more to more to me and you don't even know it."

Vanessa's eyes hardened. "I will not live my life forever tormented by you."

The smile on the imposter's face broadened. "No. You won't."

Lips curling back, Vanessa's tone changed, animalistic and guttural as she began to unleash the *Verbis Diablo* on Lucifer. He replied in kind and the air around them started to shake. John was frozen in his chair, unable to move, some invisible, powerful pres-

ence locking him in place. Their words meant nothing to him, but grew more intense, causing the imposter to falter; even so, she smiled. John blinked and there was silence, a single Vanessa left standing before him. She swayed on her feet, a hand to her forehead. She tried to stabilize herself, but her legs gave out. John found himself able to move and went to her side. Her eyes were closed and she took a deep breath, seemingly trying to regain her composure and strength. She clutched at his arm when he touched her carefully to offer his support. Holding onto him, she still continued to slightly sway. John was deeply concerned, but didn't want to leave her to get assistance, so he stayed by her side. She looked like she might be sick, the swaying increasing, but she took another deep breath and slowly began to regain some strength. Carefully, she opened wet eyes and they met his.

"My dear Mr. Clare," she began, "now you may see why I did not wish this shroud to engulf you as well." She reached out and set a slightly trembling hand against his cheek. "There has been much truth in this house of late. It would seem to show that those brutalized with pain and loss can only respond in kind. I choose not to believe that. I lost myself for a time, but no longer. The past is gone, beyond us in a place no mortal may tread to see deeds undone. We can look into the past to help guide our actions in the present, but we mustn't live there, where no action now can have meaning."

He held her eyes.

"Unfathomable Sea! whose waves are years,
Ocean of Time, whose waters of deep woe
Are brackish with the salt of human tears!"

Vanessa smiled. "Shall we let the waves rest?" They continued to hold each other's gaze for a moment, reaffirming themselves with each other, both more than ready to move forward. "Were but peace in our immediate future, Mr. Clare, but we must alert the others," she said, rising to her feet with his help. She touched his face again, then started up the stairs. He followed close behind, in case she

stumbled. She did not.

Tiny, invisible teeth gnawed savagely at his brain, frenzied by the needle in his hand. Victor held it before his eyes, fingers around it, ready to turn it to his arm and feed his veins. His red rimmed eyes were blurred and his hand quivered as he took shaking breaths, staring at what was both his salvation and his curse. It had the power to make it all stop, take all the pain away, still his mind so he could rest. It would also solve nothing. A temporary reprieve, a high always harder to produce, and a deep sense of failure and shame that would make it that much harder to resist, the risk of sinking into a narcotic dream for life, always dancing at the edge of possibility. It would take away all his burdens, then bring them back with twice the force that only greater doses could grant a future respite. Even to deny it, it was his world until death, a torment that would see no end, except through the temporary surrender that would doom him all the more.

Victor allowed his shaky hand to weaken and, as the needle began to fall, he closed his eyes, his arm and head dropping. He could surrender, but he deserved no freedom, no matter how slight, from his sins. How grand he thought his goals, but even if he could find a way now to defend his ideals, he was trapped by the reality of his actions. He looked around his lab, his chamber of horrors, an eternal hell both for him and those that it spit forth. He had failed his creations in all things, failed as a doctor to do no harm, failed in all he desired. He not only failed to end suffering, he had been its carrier, spreading his own grief and loss in his attempt to smother it.

His bottom lip quivered and he took in a trembling breath, suddenly feeling an intensity as hot as fire burn through him. Rising to his feet, he strode with purpose to a copper pipe leaning against the wall. One hand wrapped around it, then the other grabbed hold, picking it up, and raising it above his head. Withheld inside all his

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life, Victor's fury exploded from him, body and soul, bringing the pipe down on one of the electrical boards. Sparks and broken bits flew with each hit he landed, mixing with his yells and his swings. The room erupted in destruction and chaos. He moved around the lab, nowhere safe from the swing of the pipe, shattering glass, destroying electrical boards, ripping out cables, smashing books from the shelves. He raged with a lifetime of pain, anger, fear, and loss that never had an outlet beyond his work and his drugs, both themselves creating only more anguish he had to bottle inside him.

Not before his limbs were no longer able to lift the pipe did Victor crumple to the floor, awash in silent tears, as live wires continued to spark around him. On his knees, he bent over, arms flat to the ground with his forehead on the floor as he wept, a broken man desperate to atone, but unable to do so.

"Hello Victor."

With heaving chest, and still on his knees, he raised his head up just enough to see the voice's owner. Standing like an avenging Erinyes over him, backlit by bursts of sparks, was Lily, her eyes cold and merciless.

Vanessa stood before the fireplace, John at her side. Dr. Seward sat on the couch with Sir Malcolm beside her. "What's this about?" he asked.

"We thought we could choose the time and place of this battle, but we have already been engaged; the demon moves among us. He has never before directed himself personally against any but me, always appearing in the guise of one I trust, but now he moves against those that matter most to me," she told them.

"To what end?"

"He is seeking to break our unity, to leave us divided and remove my defences. A moment ago he appeared to Mr. Clare, with my face, but I do not think it was his first action against us. The tim-

ing of the conflict between Mr. Chandler and Dr. Frankenstein seems an unlikely coincidence in light of this.”

Kaetenay entered the room. “I was unable to find Ethan.”

“Well *that* can’t be good,” Dr. Seward replied.

With determination, Ethan moved through the streets, his destination his singular desire. His right hand clutched the grip of the gun, and he felt a growl low in his throat. He had to fight to contain the wolf, which pushed against the man, natural animal instincts hungry to take over. The wolf wanted blood, wanted to kill, and Ethan had no desire to stop it.

Lily stood over Victor and scanned the destroyed lab. “I suppose you think this gesture means something.”

“It means I am done.”

She slowly paced in front of him, enjoying their reversed positions, him prostrated on the floor before her. “I’d like to believe you, Victor, to think that at last you’ve given up your aspiration of omnipotence, the execution of the creation of man, and seen that your hopes are as nothing. You may be able to create the body, but God failed to create his ideal man, how arrogant to think you could do better. Perhaps you have finally accepted the lives you have created and shall let them be.” She stopped before him and lowered herself down in a crouch, closer to him, but still superior in height, holding all the power in their encounter. “But then you never did let me go, did you? You would have killed me, in fact, for loving another, for not being what you tried to make me into, but your bullet could not harm me. I was not helpless Brona anymore, unable to fight against your murderous hand. You came again, stalking me outside my new home, but I let you leave. You didn’t cease. Again you came, but I was surrounded by allies, and once more I let you go. Then the

very one who encouraged me to spare you betrayed me, and once more you tried to rob me of my life through the theft of all that makes me, me.

"I lost someone very dear to me in trusting men, in giving chances when I should have acted." He said nothing, defenceless against her words, all of them true. Their eyes were locked on each other, him still shaking from the exertion of the lab's destruction and from the agony of his guilt. She fed off every tremble, relishing the power she held over him. "Dorian is dead," she told him. She leaned in closer. "Now I've come to deal with you."

Victor's eyes betrayed a tinge of mirth as he shook his head with a small smile. "You think you are the first of my creations to threaten me with death? Your threat is just as hollow. You may think I fear death because of my efforts to eradicate it, but I have never feared my own. It's such irony, but there is nothing I could want more.

"I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain."

He laughed at her. "My eternal suffering in life will at last draw to a close with the ending of it." He rose on his knees and spread out his hands. "So do it then. Have your vengeance on my thrice-accursed hands."

Lily got back to her feet, looking down on him. He continued to hold her eyes. "I sought to destroy you," he agreed, "for no reason other than your refusal to be as I desired, for refusing to be mine, for following your own heart. Would that I could be a better man, but there is no atonement for my sins, even were I immortal with an eternity to try. So end it, Lily. Take my life, take vengeance for your sake and that of your brothers. Maybe you will grant me, as your creator, this one small mercy and finish it."

Leaning in again, she kissed him softly on the forehead. Victor closed his eyes and savoured this final touch. "Know, for all I have done," his whispered, his eyes still closed, "I am sorry. In my death, let all I have wronged be at last free."

He sensed Lily move behind him, and accepted his fate. In that moment the door was kicked open and Ethan burst in. A flash of light, an explosive sound, and Dr. Victor Frankenstein, the man who erased the line that divided life and death, slumped to the floor, his life at an end.

PART V

COME TO DUST

Hands tightening around the grip of the gun on his right hip, Ethan walked up the stairs towards Victor's apartment, anger driving his every step. He found the door to the apartment open, but no one was inside. The disappointment should have increased his anger, but instead Ethan found it waning with the lack of a target, his human mind beginning to settle the wolf's blood lust. He heard a voice, which he didn't focus on at first, assuming it a common thing in the cheap apartment building, but slowly he became aware that the voice was Victor's.

"You think you are the first of my creations to threaten me with death?"

Ethan began to search the room, trying to find the source, eventually stumbling on the hidden door. It was locked. Ethan threw his weight into it, testing its strength.

"In my death, let all I have wronged be at last free."

The lights dimmed and Ethan heard an explosive sound just as he again hurled his shoulder at the door, this time it giving way under him. He burst into the room just as the sparks began to lessen and Victor fell to the ground. The cable he had been holding gave off a final spark, then died, casting the room in deep shadow. Ethan vaulted down the stairs and ran to Victor's side, regret at once filling his heart. The smell of burnt flesh met him first and Ethan knew even before he saw Victor's now glassy eyes that the young doctor was dead. Dropping to his knees beside the body, Ethan tried to

collect his thoughts and feelings, looking into Victor's face for a long time before he reached out and forced the eyes closed. His hand held there a moment, then trailed down and rested on Victor's shoulder, Ethan vividly realizing that this was not what he had wanted, that it healed nothing at all.

"Did anyone see him leave?" Sir Malcolm asked. They all shook their heads.

"We have to find him," said Vanessa, already moving towards the door, but Sir Malcolm put a hand on her shoulder, stopping her.

"You're safer here. We will find Mr. Chandler and Dr. Frankenstein," he promised as he indicated Kaetenay with his eyes. "We'll get Mr. Lyle and Miss Hartdegen and bring them back here as well."

Vanessa met his gaze with fierce eyes. "I'm going with you."

"Vanessa—"

"This is *my* fight. I'll not lose anyone else. I can't carry any more souls on my conscience. He wants me; let him come."

The front door burst open, surprising everyone as it should have been locked. John and Dr. Seward closed in around Vanessa as Sir Malcolm and Kaetenay moved forward to meet the threat. Mr. Lyle stumbled in, supporting an unsteady Catriona. Kaetenay and Sir Malcolm acted quickly to aid them over to the couch. Their clothes were drenched in blood. Everyone moved into action, putting pressure on the wounds.

Waving off the concern, Mr. Lyle pointed at Catriona. "My injury is minor and no longer even bleeding. I fear Miss Hartdegen is another matter."

"Of all the times for Dr. Frankenstein to be away," muttered Sir Malcolm as he pressed a bandage to Mr. Lyle's throat anyway.

Vanessa said nothing in reply to the comment, sure this was exactly what had been intended, as she and Dr. Seward lifted

Catriona's shirt to reveal three deep, bleeding wounds in her side. Victorian modesty took a backseat to life and death, Kaetenay moving in to help.

"We were attacked by witches," Mr. Lyle informed them, and again Vanessa said nothing; she was not surprised by his words, but was deeply concerned. "Considering the difficulty we would have in explaining our battle with the supernatural, I thought it better to avoid unwanted questions, so we came directly here." Mr. Lyle met Vanessa with haunted eyes. "Mrs. Poole was there." Sir Malcolm stiffened.

"That's not possible," Vanessa replied.

"No matter how you may feel about it, my dear, I saw her with my own eyes and I quite remember every terrifying aspect of her."

"Nightcomers may be powerful, but their mortal bodies can be killed like any other. I saw her die. Had not Mr. Chandler nearly decapitated her, the rapid aging would have finished her nearly as quickly. No, what you saw was another wearing her face."

"The demon?" Vanessa didn't need to reply or even nod; Mr. Lyle already knew. "How nice to know I've come up in the world."

"Why did he let them live?" asked Kaetenay. "These wounds were not meant to kill."

"They're still damned unpleasant," Catriona grumbled weakly through shivering lips, her body in shock.

Vanessa stood and looked at the blood on her hands. "Because he wants me broken. Killing you would be too easy; so much better for you to abandon me to him. Not that he would spare your lives if you left."

"Well he'll have to try much harder than this. I could never abandon a lady." Catriona winked at Vanessa, which soothed some of the worry and guilt she was feeling over their injuries. She smiled back weakly.

The sound of the door opening once more caused those on their feet to take protective positions around Vanessa and the wounded.

Ethan stepped into the room, his hollow eyes not seeing the blood before him. His sad and remorseful orbs met Vanessa's.

"What has happened?" she asked.

Ethan couldn't answer, but his wet eyes told them all that they would soon experience the grief displayed so clearly on his face.

Tilting her head slightly, Vanessa treasured the warm sun on her face. While pounding rain would have matched their grief, the bright light instead offered tribute to Victor's life, rather than expressing sorrow at his death. It also afforded them protection from the nightcomers, giving them this slight reprieve in which to say goodbye. They had arranged no service, and none of them spoke as they stood around the freshly dug earth that held Dr. Frankenstein in its embrace. His death marked with finality the fact that none of them had truly known the man. The truths so recently revealed, coupled with his tragic end, made everything too much to comprehend. John was the only one not among them, but the rest came to mark the loss of one of their own, regardless of all that had recently transpired.

Vanessa broke the silence, quietly whispering,

"Yet I know, where'er I go,

That there hath pass'd away a glory from the earth."

As the others began to move away, Dr. Seward stayed at Vanessa's side. Sir Malcolm looked back when they did not follow and with a look, Dr. Seward told him to allow Vanessa the space. He granted it, but stopped nearby until she was ready to leave, unwilling to risk her safety. Distracted as he was, Ethan noticed this happening and waited silently with him, keeping his protective eyes on Vanessa. Dr. Seward stood with Vanessa, offering herself if she was needed, but otherwise leaving the younger woman to her thoughts, allowing her to process.

"I wish I could just let him take me," Vanessa said eventually,

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"and let this have an end, but that would only bring more suffering. So fight on I must. The world will live, but those around me are doomed. To know me is to suffer, release found only in death. Would that it were possible for all of you to leave, and by my isolation set you free, but the demon will grant you no respite. You said I felt unworthy of affection, but the truth is my affection is a curse. I have been selfish. I should walk alone."

"None of us are just about to let you do that. We'd suffer too much in losing you," replied Dr. Seward.

Vanessa said nothing for a long time, deep in thought as her eyes seemed to turn inward rather than taking in the headstone. "Perhaps we are all cursed, none of us really free, pawns in some cosmic game beyond our understanding. I wonder, Doctor, have you felt as strangely drawn to me as I have to you?"

"Yes," admitted Dr. Seward. She looked over at the waiting group. "I think the others would say the same. Whether it was completely our choice to be here or was all predetermined, I do not think any would feel their lives lessened by knowing you."

"Yet they are lessened," Vanessa replied, looking at the tombstone once more.

"Everyone must die, Vanessa, and in some cases, they may be happier for it, but what defines us is how we lived."

Staring hard at Victor's grave, Vanessa quietly said, "I have considered such an action many times. There would be peace for me there, the struggle at last at an end."

"Would that be true to who you are?"

"No," she admitted.

Dr. Seward stepped in front of Vanessa and put her hand over the younger woman's heart. Vanessa froze, daring the words she knew must follow, that would keep her fighting, keep her fire, keep her dedicated to life and finding the peace she longed for among the living. Dr. Seward held Vanessa's eyes with her own, the heat from her hand seeming to pierce all the way to Vanessa's heart. "Be true,"

she whispered.

Vanessa's eyes closed, a tear moving down her cheek as she dropped her head to Dr. Seward's shoulder with an expression of relief.

Entering the library, Vanessa's eyes fell on the neatly stacked Tarot cards. She set the fingers of her right hand lightly on the back of the top card. Tentatively, she sat down at the round table, letting her hand begin to glide, fanning out the cards across the surface of the wood. Her hand slowly began to trace backwards, allowing the cards to work on her until she knew to stop and pulled a single card out. She turned it over to see the clawed hand, curled to look like a star, peering back at her. The Star card reaffirmed the echo of Joan Clayton that came from Dr. Seward: all was not lost, no matter how dark and empty her heart felt.

Ethan came in and sat across from her without a word, folding his hands before him on the table. It took him a long time to meet her eyes. She waited in patient silence. "I went there to kill him," he confessed.

Vanessa turned the card back over. "You had murder in your heart, but you wouldn't have gone through with it."

"No?"

"No," she replied with finality as she again met his eyes. She hoped the faith she had in him would lead Ethan to have it in himself.

One of her hands reached out and took his. He drew strength from the touch. "I don't know how to move on from this." Her eyes glanced down at the table; his followed. He only hesitated a moment, but then held her eyes as one of his hands moved along the fanned cards. He took his time, holding her eyes as though her power would flow through them into his, and to his hand. When he turned over the card with a lizard crawling up the woman's bare

legs, he met her eyes again. The Temperance card held no meaning to him. Vanessa sighed and held both his hands in hers. Ethan waited, not sure he wanted to know.

"Death has brought with it a cleansing," she told him. "Your views have shattered. What remains will grow stronger; what is destroyed you must sweep away and begin to build anew." They sat quietly, hands and eyes locked, grieving, but also helping each other to come to terms and start to heal. When Sir Malcolm entered, they remained intent on each other.

"Mr. Chandler, there is a woman to see you," Sir Malcolm informed him.

In the foyer, Lily stood. Vanessa squeezed Ethan's hand, smiled in silent greeting to Lily, then headed up the stairs to give them their privacy. Ethan watched her go for a moment, before giving his full attention to Lily. For awhile neither of them spoke, content to be with each other but also unsure what to say. "I'm glad you came," Ethan said, breaking the ice.

"I wasn't sure that I would."

He gestured to the drawing room with an open hand, following her in, the two sitting on the couch.

"I really don't know what to say to you," Lily started.

"I know," he offered. Ethan met her eyes so it was clear to her what it was he knew, trying to exorcise the biggest demon from the room. She nodded and looked down at her hands, accepting the gesture, but left all the more silent by it, having no place to start. "How much do you remember about us?" he asked.

She smiled, genuinely. "All of it. No matter what life I may live, I could never forget. Our moments will always be a blessed light of happiness, and for that reason I could not come to you, not as I now was." She let him hold her cold hands. He didn't comment and she relished his warm touch. "At first I remembered nothing, then I re-

membered too much; a lifetime of brutality I had tried to deaden myself to, made all the darker compared to that brief existence in the light. I allowed myself to be consumed by the darkness, thinking that could somehow make things right. I wanted the world to bleed for all I had suffered."

A single tear slid down her cheek. "My anger, my need for vengeance, destroyed another completely and then took her life. If that were not enough, it took from her, her very soul. All her anguish alone did not destroy her; it was my hand that guided her so far from any hope of finding peace in this life or any other. I thought I had to avenge all her pain with blood, and her murder with yet more." She met his eyes, her look firm. "Nothing comes from vengeance. No amount of suffering afflicted can begin to ease your own." Her eyes glazed, seeing something from the past that haunted her now and would haunt her always. "That moment you think will make all the pain stop, which you fooled yourself into thinking worked before, it is a hollow scream that makes you all you hate. I thought I would continue to seek my vengeance, but that avenue turned with him to dust. There was no relief to be found, only more pain.

"I told her no. I tried to express my love, but her eyes went black and she left me again. I weep, but this scar I will cherish above all others, for it was earned in healing, in love, in choosing to not taint myself further, to not surrender to the monster; to hear his words and try to be human. His life is his and mine is mine. So I am here." She wiped away the tears with one hand. "I don't know what comes next, but I wanted to start with you."

Ethan had some difficulty following her words as the people she mentioned remained unidentified, but he didn't press. She did not require him to follow the details of what happened; she needed him to understand how she felt. "Nothing you have done could begin to compare to the blood I've spilled, the lives I've ruined," confessed Ethan. "With you, I was happy despite my life. A blessed

light of happiness." He smiled, captured by how true her words were for him too.

"Considering how it ended, do you regret it?"

"Not one moment. Despite the pain, I'd do it all over. I was happy with you. I found peace with you."

Lily turned her head back towards the foyer. "She has a very kind spirit." Ethan looked in the same direction after Vanessa. Touching his cheek, Lily turned his head to meet his eyes. "Honour what we had. Try to be happy."

Dusk began to settle, though John had been standing at his creator's grave long before the onset of twilight. He heard the footsteps of her approach and though it did not seem possible for her to know he was gone, John knew before she reached him who it was. Lily stood silently at his side, the two children at their father's grave.

"And now it is ended," he said. "There is my last victim. Dear Creator, what good does it do now to ask thee to pardon me? I devoted myself to his suffering, irretrievably destroyed him, and drove him to his very end. He who created me suffered not in the creation of the deed, and for all the suffering I visited upon him, he still knew not ten-thousandth the portion of anguish that was mine; yet here I pity him. Only now do I look beyond that which I was, what I suffered, and see thee as generous and devoted to the ending of the mortal plight, of cursed death. Death can only alleviate the suffering of one, but at the cost of all others. There can be no happy end in its seeking, nor in the thirst for vengeance." He stepped forward, closer to the headstone. "Thy deed is done and I have no chance to unmake it.

"I had never once before thought outside my own selfish ends. I brought to life only pain and expected kindness in return. I tormented our creator, demanding he provide for my happiness. His abandonment of me, I repaid in suffering onto him, so here we

stand in misery and death. There can be no happiness when you seed only hate.

"The only true kindness I have known in my rebirth was that I did not ask for, or seek, or demand. I gave in turn because it did my heart well to do it; giving for the sake of giving and not with the expectation of return, this is life." Lily stepped beside him again and studied his face. He touched the headstone. "Here is my last victim."

Kneeling down at Victor's grave, Lily touched the freshly turned dirt. "Our poor, lonely creator. How you longed to remove death from life, yet you were terrified to let life live; such a tragic contradiction. Be now at peace, Frankenstein. Be now at rest." She rose to her feet and faced John. "And what of our unhappy pair?"

He smiled with a slight laugh. "I am not unhappy. I express my sorrow over our creator, but I have a home and a purpose. It was not what I once sought, but that has made it all the sweeter. Tragedy does not erase happiness unless we allow it. Mourn, but do not forget to cherish what good was had. Do not live trapped in the pain that has passed; we can put good in the present, and plant such seeds for the future."

"I am without a place to start," she admitted.

"If you wish, I can offer."

The smell of tobacco settled over the room. "I will only travel with you this time to help you find a guide. Once you have found this spirit, I will help the others distract the demon here," Kaetenay told Vanessa.

Catriona shifted and sat up more in her seat, ignoring the pain in her side. "Wait. Forgive my ignorance, but what demon?"

"Do you have your guns?" Ethan asked.

"Of course."

"They won't do you any good."

"Oh, well, that's comforting."

Mr. Lyle set a hand on her shoulder. "Miss Ives' unique nature makes her...susceptible to inhabitation. I've only seen such a thing befall her once and I'm told it was a rather tame display."

Vanessa met Catriona's eyes. "It may be best for those of you recovering to leave. I'd ask the others to go, but Dr. Seward and Kaetenay may need to be protected from me."

"Maybe it will just be more cranky spirits messing with us," Dr. Seward interjected. "Much as I disliked the experience, hopefully it goes that route."

"I doubt we'll be so fortunate," Sir Malcolm grumbled.

"Probably not," she agreed.

Mr. Lyle and Catriona looked at each other. Catriona answered for them both. "Regardless of how it turns out, we said we were with you. We'll stay."

Vanessa gave them a half smile. Her eyes settled on Ethan, who placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. For a few moments everything else faded away while they silently fortified each other. It passed within a few seconds, but was an eternity between them. Vanessa returned her attention to Kaetenay and Dr. Seward. "I'm ready."

Kaetenay blew smoke over his bits and bones and started to speak quietly in Apache, beginning his journey to the spirits. When he fell still and silent, Dr. Seward began to tap Sir Malcolm's cane against the floor, as Vanessa allowed her body to relax, focusing all her energy on the sound. The tapping continued and slowly Vanessa's eyes closed, her head falling back. Her body lost all tension and she had the odd sensation that she was lying in bed. Wondering if something had gone wrong, as she was no longer able to hear Dr. Seward or the cane, she opened her eyes.

It took her a moment to recognize her old room in her parents' house. She was indeed lying in a bed—hers—but she found herself unable to move. She sensed rather than saw a presence at the foot of

her bed. It was black and pacing. Vanessa had the feeling it may be some sort of large cat, but then suddenly it was a woman. When Vanessa blinked, the figure was beside her and she could see the face.

Mina began to crawl onto the bed next to her and Vanessa felt both drawn and repulsed by her at the same time. Vanessa's childhood friend met her eyes. "I don't know which of us should be more afraid," Vanessa whispered.

The fair haired woman laid her head on Vanessa's chest and Vanessa felt both at peace and afraid. She then felt a stinging pain just below her throat, like two needles pressing into her. She had felt such a sting before though much stronger. Mina sat up, her fangs red with blood.

"I saw your face in a dream," Mina said, but the voice changed as she spoke into another Vanessa knew well. Mina's face seemed shrouded in fog. As it cleared, Vanessa found herself looking into Joan Clayton's yellow eyes. "It has haunted me ever since," the Cut-Wife finished.

They were now in the old cabin in the moors, Vanessa sitting above Joan who was propped up in bed. Vanessa felt her neck, but there was no blood or trace of a wound. "Are you to be my guide, then?"

"I knew you would come to me, that I would be called on to help fight against the forces that sought you. I was the only daywalker left to teach you.

"When I saw you in the dream, the essence of what you were, I sensed I would meet you at the end of my days, that I would only be able to start you on the path to finding your power; you needed more protection than that. I would not live as long as was needed without serving the demon, so I sent a part of myself into my line, a part that would be able to be with you on your journey when I was gone from this world."

"I knew she was more than just your blood." Vanessa's eyes met

Joan's. "Do you know how dear you are to me? I was seldom happier in all my days than when I was with you."

"Listen, my little scorpion, for time even here is short. You were not the first girl to come to my home, but you were the first who could not cross the barrier that stayed. I had begun to hope you would not come to me, but I sensed your power and it was far too great to be any other. When you pulled The Devil from the Tarot, I knew who you were and that my end would soon come."

"Why didn't you tell me any of this before?"

"You think you are the first, girl? She has lived in countless bodies across all time. They do not always find her, they do not always draw her out when they do; telling you may have woken her more than she already was. I should have done more to make you understand not to use the *Verbis Diablo*. You were not truly cursed until you pulled that book to avenge me. I failed to see just how determined and stubborn you were, and believe me, you were obviously both of these things. It was that heart of yours that did you in, my little scorpion; you loved, and love will have its sacrifices."

"But what does all this mean? What is this thing inside me?"

"That I do not know; no one does. She has had a thousand names and countless stories, but not one paints her true face. Mortals are not meant to understand gods, but know this, girl: neither of you must be doomed; it is not foretold. This is your body and none of them, not even her, can take it unless you give it. Your soul is yours and you must hold onto it with all you have, or you could be lost forever. Both of you.

"Your heart has at times left you vulnerable, but if you are true to it, Vanessa, true to yourself, you may yet find the peace you seek."

Dropping her head to Joan's chest, Vanessa closed her eyes and savoured the reunion, even if it was noncorporeal. It felt real, and Vanessa took a deep breath, content and at peace, regardless of all that was happening in her life. It crept up on her slowly, a sense of

pain throughout her body that began to rise in intensity. She sensed wetness on her arms and face, becoming aware it was blood that was flowing from open wounds. She felt hands on her, and bandages were pressed to her injuries, causing a stinging pain that made her hiss. Her body was alive with bruises that seemed to pierce down to her bones.

Opening her eyes, she was on the couch with Ethan and Sir Malcolm restraining her. "Mr. Chandler..." she began weakly. His eyes were filled with love and concern. He gently touched her chin as he searched her eyes, checking to see she was okay and not mentally crippled like last time. Vanessa looked back with intense determination, unwilling to be broken. Despite his worry over her physical injuries, Ethan smiled at her strength and resolve.

Catriona's face appeared above her, upside down as she came into view from behind Vanessa's head. "That certainly *was* intense." Feeling as she did, Vanessa didn't doubt it.

"Did you learn anything useful?" asked Sir Malcolm.

Before she could reply, Dr. Seward was there. "She needs to rest, and I need a drink. Mr. Chandler, get her upstairs to a real bed so she can collect her bearings and have a little time to recover." She poured herself a shot, finished it in one gulp, and then poured another. No one else moved. She glared at them. "I'm sorry, did I give the impression that was a suggestion?"

Vanessa felt herself being carefully lifted as Ethan took her in his arms. She rested her head against his chest, comforted by the sound of his beating heart. Her eyes began to close and she surrendered to her exhaustion, letting the restful darkness have her.

Her friend's head in her lap, Lucy stroked her fingers through Mircalla's hair. Content, Lucy closed her eyes, enjoying the quiet moment with her. "Lupus Dei's loyalty is not unexpected, but it amazes me how committed the humans have been," Mircalla said,

expressing Lucy's thoughts.

"They seem fearless in the face of death," Lucy responded. "The threat of oblivion was clearly not the tactic to use to drive them away from Miss Ives."

"The seeds of discourse did not have the desired outcome either."

"Their devotion would appear absolute."

Fire exploded from the hearth, reaching out towards them. They were engulfed by the flames, feeling the intense heat, but neither they nor the room were scorched. The fire receded slightly, curling around the figure that now stood before them, the flames licking her feet without burning her. Evelyn Poole stood before them, and as Lucy studied her, she realized it was not her master in Poole's guise, but the nightcomer herself. "You bring orders from our lord?" Lucy asked as she and Mircalla stood.

"You see what our lord has already seen; the time for shallow cuts has ended. A few allies have been removed, but every last defence must be stripped away."

"We are no match for Lupus Dei," stated Mircalla.

Poole smiled. "Not alone you're not." The flames burned higher and other women began to appear in the fire. "Gather your nightcomers, Lucy Westernra." Lucy signalled Mircalla with a wave of her hand and her sister left to carry out the order.

Hecate appeared next to her mother. "Our lord did a good job wearing your face," Poole observed, holding Hecate's chin and studying her features.

"Not as well as I," Hecate replied with bravo. "None have ever come as close to turning Lupus Dei." Her eyes narrowed. "I want another shot at him."

"You may seek the wolf. I seek the lamb." Poole looked over Lucy, who could sense Poole's power reaching out to test her own. "You'll do."

Stiff and sore, but having recovered most of her strength, Vanessa sat with the others in the drawing room. Her cuts and scratches had been mostly superficial, but she still ached all over and exhaustion threatened her. She inhaled the cannabis, letting it help settle her, though she limited her intake to keep her head clear.

They were all gathered, including John who had returned from Victor's grave, along with Lily, the newest addition to the group. Everyone watched Mr. Lyle, who was seated near Catriona, prepared to share what they had discovered. "It's important to note," he began, "that we have no complete narrative and much of this is speculation."

"Well researched and carefully deducted speculation," added Catriona.

"I would expect no less from either of you," Vanessa reassured her.

"I will explain this in Biblical terms only because it is the version you are likely most familiar with, but the reality is, best as we can tell, all our myths appear to be a mangled, corrupted version of the same story. Time, culture, conquest have altered the story within religions and across them."

"Much more than the scattered tales of Dracula where we could deduce it was the same figure, he too has had many names and appears across cultures in many forms: Set, Typhon, Nidhogg..."

"You're saying every religious story is just some variation of the same tale," Ethan clarified.

"Precisely, Mr. Chandler." Mr. Lyle continued, "They appear different because they changed over time for many reasons, mostly political, but these stories about gods say more about the societies that spawned them than they do of the supernatural beings that inspired them."

"We know there was a war in Heaven, and Lucifer and Dracula

were cast out, one to Earth to feed on the flesh and one to Hell to feed on souls. We take this part from the narrative Lucifer himself provided. The Biblical tale presents a war between the forces of Lucifer and the forces of God, led by the archangel Michael. We believe Dracula to be the general of Lucifer's army in the same capacity. It is not clear why God did not merely smite his foes when he himself had created them, but after the war he divided them when he cast them out in order to reduce the threat. Dracula and Lucifer continued to be allies for a time, but Dracula began to covet what Lucifer had."

"The force in me," Vanessa declared.

"In essence, yes, though it does not appear Lucifer possessed her either. She is an enigma, blended with so many figures and versions that she's impossible to comprehend. She seems to be represented as the wife of one or both of the brothers, but at the same time they seek to possess and corrupt her."

"You have called me a reincarnation of Amunet, but we know now that there are two souls within me: mine and hers. Joan Clayton told me I am not the first. The force seems to be the one who is reincarnated, placed within a new human host when the prior one dies."

"That makes a sort of sense," Catriona thought aloud. "During the war, she may have sided with Lucifer. It seems she was also cast down and, like the brothers who had to be separated from each other, she had to be separated from them, considering how she seems to be key to them being successful."

"She walks both the Earth and the spiritual plane, not fully in either of their worlds," Vanessa concluded. "They peruse her across these lifetimes in an attempt to possess her, but they've never fully succeeded. Even if they find her, even if she gives in—"

"—Lupus Dei kills the human host," Ethan softly finished.

"Yes," agreed Mr. Lyle. "God seems unwilling, or perhaps is unable, to destroy the brothers. It would also appear he is trying to

protect the force within Miss Ives in some way. Lupus Dei destroys the host, not the force. She merely moves on to a new body and the cycle starts again."

"That doesn't mean she's being protected. For whatever reason we can't understand, God seems unable to destroy any of them. This would all appear to be crafted to prevent them from realigning and taking Heaven," countered Vanessa.

Mr. Lyle crossed his legs. "As I said, this is speculation, but the force told Mr. Chandler that the wolves were her protectors, that only Lupus Dei kills the host. In addition, she is not reincarnated within her own unique body, but shares a mortal's body with a mortal's soul."

"That may just be how God is best able to hide her from them."

"It may be," Catriona agreed, "but it seems to us a deliberate act done with a purpose beyond self preservation. This figure is represented as a destructive force, and yet she seems to be the one who has been corrupted by the brothers, not the other way around. If that's the case, perhaps God is attempting to reverse her corruption through this direct melding with humans."

"I'm a poor host for that."

"Miss Ives," Mr. Lyle warmly began, "you have a shaded view of yourself through all you have suffered, but I would wager everyone in this room is gathered here around you because we see what you do not. We love you, each in our own way and we pledge to raise the veil of sorrow from your head, not first to prevent the end of days but because of your true hearted kindness that we hold so dear."

Vanessa looked around the room with watery eyes, settling on each of them in turn. They met her gaze, agreeing silently with Mr. Lyle and letting her know it through the love that they reflected back to her. Even Lily, who Vanessa hardly knew, nodded in agreement. Vanessa had felt so alone and isolated all her life that the love she finally saw and felt, that had been there all along, near-

ly choked her with overwhelming gratitude.

Mr. Lyle smiled at her and continued. "So the two brothers circle around her, trying to corrupt her to their purpose in an attempt to reclaim Heaven. God is perhaps trying to remove her corruption, perhaps not, but he cannot allow the brothers to be successful, so he sends a guardian who is also a safeguard." He looked at Ethan. "This too is a force that finds its way into a mortal body and moves on when the deed is done, waiting until needed again.

"Lupus Dei takes many forms and guises in myth, and he is represented as a protector or a power that can devour the gods. It would appear he too is susceptible to corruption. He is a servant of God, but could be turned to serve Lucifer and this other force instead. If this occurs, he may be able to destroy God himself. If he remains loyal to his creator, however, then his purpose is to keep the force within Miss Ives from their hands. As this knight of God, well as we can figure, we believe him to be God's general, the archangel Michael, the Dracula to God's Lucifer." Ethan raised his eyebrows, looking surprised and skeptical.

"Consider how you told me you were able to drive the demon from Miss Ives last year, when all else had failed, even the priest. You had no inclination to attempt to exorcise the demon before that moment when you were about to kill her. Miss Ives was possessed, but the force within her was not, so as a wolf, not yet fully Lupus Dei, you were still her protector, infused with powers from God and determined to save her."

"Per our starting disclaimer," Catriona added, "we cannot be sure any of this is true, but all the pieces do seem to fit."

Vanessa stood, suddenly feeling the need to pace as she sucked on the cannabis cigarette, less concerned about keeping a level head and more interested in settling her inner turmoil. "Even if all you say is true, how can we use any of this information? What good does it do us?"

"Absolutely none."

XENA TORRES

They were all on their feet in an instant and facing the voice that had suddenly appeared among them. Victor stood with his hands behind his back. He raised his eyes to reveal the pools of black, as an army of nightcomers began to melt from the walls.

PART VI

HORROR OF THE SHADE

Never had Vanessa sensed such power. The nightcomers seemed to almost be vibrating with it, their bodies swirling into blurs at times as though two were occupying the same space, the other seen only in glances. These were not merely nightcomers; they seemed saturated with power, the likes of which Vanessa had never heard of or encountered. It wasn't the witches that held her attention, however. Her heart burned in anger at seeing the demon wearing Victor's face, so clearly letting her know he had a hand in the doctor's death. It was a mocking of her love for Victor, who had in ways reminded her so much of Peter, filling a long standing void that was left at the young Murray's passing. That space would hollow once more, but currently it was filled to the brim with pain, an excruciating agony that demanded satisfaction at this insult to it. Lucifer smiled with Victor's face, seeing the torment in her eyes, the snake in him hissing a greeting to the scorpion that rattled in her chest, awaking hungry in response to Vanessa's anger.

Ethan and Sir Malcolm immediately moved to put themselves between her and Lucifer, Ethan gently pushing her back behind him. Dr. Seward was at her shoulder and the others moved towards the threat. Vanessa pushed back against Ethan's hand, stepping forward, though she welcomed him close at her side, even as she sensed his growing apprehension. "Why come as though for war?"

she asked Lucifer, approaching him. "You cannot take me by force; you don't have that power. I may be a blade of grass, but I am one you cannot reap. Our souls cannot be rendered unless I allow it. These others have no part in this; the battle is between us."

He gave her a look of pity. "The outcome of this is already determined. It does not matter how I enforce it."

"I've defeated you before."

"You may send me away a hundred times, but when you speak my tongue, beloved, you grow closer to me. Eventually your words will be only a sweet serenade to me, never able to drive me away again. The outcome is inevitable. As to your allies, if they have not the sense to flee, then they must die." He took a step closer and everyone tensed. "I would be willing, just this once, to allow them to live...if you come to me now, beloved."

A deep growl rose up from Ethan's throat, his teeth beginning to grow, his eyes changing, while he once more pulled Vanessa behind him. "That's not going to happen," he told Lucifer. "We will stand between her and surrender, between her and death. We're not going to let you take her."

Lucifer tilted his head, Victor's eyes looking at him, unimpressed. "Lupus Dei, you are nothing to me, nor are any of these others. I offered a final chance. It is now rescinded."

The nightcomers exploded forward and were immediately answered with gun blasts from Sir Malcolm, Dr. Seward, and Mr. Lyle. Ethan roared and before a nightcomer could cross the room, he had taken his monstrous wolf form and ripped open the neck of the first nightcomer to reach him. Vanessa's allies attempted circle protectively around her, but an invisible blast filled the room and scattered them away, all except Dr. Seward and Ethan, who were apparently beyond the nightcomer magic.

Ethan threw one nightcomer through a wall, then charged forward, driving the oncoming horde into the foyer, giving him more room to move. Catriona followed through the hole the nightcomer's

body made, and the two of them moved with unmatched grace as claw and blade sprayed blood along the floor and walls.

Sir Malcolm shot his way back to Vanessa's side, he and Dr. Seward dispatching the nightcomers that moved towards them, but they didn't seem interested in Vanessa at all, their attacks focused instead on her allies. Kaetenay moved to help Mr. Lyle, covering the shorter man as the Egyptianologist reloaded his firearm, Kaetenay's blade slick with blood. Lily also used her blade with precision, as she and John used their superhuman strength to manhandle the nightcomers.

Lucifer smiled with Victor's lips, confident in the outcome of the battle, beyond ready to take the war to the gates of Heaven.

Catriona moved down the narrow hallway, forcing the witches to come at her in smaller numbers, using the bottleneck to empty her firearms into their ranks. Pulling her blades, she vaulted over the railing to take the stairway landing, giving herself more room to move as her knives danced over nightcomer flesh. She found herself disoriented, feeling like she was facing foes she had already felled, the faces seeming to repeat. Catriona tried to rationalize the sensation, contributing it to their unique look that gave them a uniform appearance, but she could not understand why she did not have the same sensation during her last battle with Lucifer's minions.

Fighting backwards up the stairs, she once more restricted their ability to assault her in large numbers and was able to reload one of her guns. She fired point blank into a nightcomer's head just as the witch reached her, and Catriona watched the body tumble down the stairs. Even as she slit the throat of another witch, the thanatologist caught the tumbling form crashing to the ground out of the corner of her eye. Catriona watched as another woman's face rose from the witch's. There was a flash of demonic fangs, and then the face sunk back into the nightcomer. The bullet was forced from the witch's

skull, and the skin reformed, closing the wound. The nightcomer got back to her feet.

"We are completely buggered," Catriona cursed under her breath as she fired another round into the witch's forehead.

Pulling the fight into the kitchen, Lily and Kaetenay ripped knives from the walls and hurled them at their foes. John plowed into a group of nightcomers rushing forward. He was bleeding freely, but his immortal body was unhindered by injury. He grabbed a witch by the head, and snapped her neck with a fierce and powerful jerk. Mr. Lyle, protected by John's undead body, fired into the onslaught. Lily likewise took the brunt of the nightcomers' blows, shielding Kaetenay.

Lily had no idea what they could possibly achieve against an army from Hell, especially one that did not die, but she was committed to the fight and would not cease so long as there were enemies to fight and her body was able. Though she and John were covered in their own blood, they had saved Kaetenay and Mr. Lyle from deaths beyond count. Lily could not recall a time in either of her lives where she had felt so alive. She was beyond the pain of her own life, focused instead on protecting the lives of others, creating purpose to her existence. Despite the stakes of the battle, and the impossible odds, Lily felt a sense of peace.

Kaetenay grabbed her shoulder. "We must fight our way to the ballroom. My son needs me."

Another blast crashed into her body, but Dr. Seward was still unfazed by the nightcomers' magic. She fired back with her last round, quickly reloading the gun before the nightcomer could rise again. Vanessa pulled the doctor behind her, staying the hands of the attacking nightcomers who would not risk injuring their lord's

prize. Chanting the *Verbis Diablo*, Vanessa drove the nightcomers back. They scurried away to assault the others, giving the two women a moment to breathe.

"Why aren't I affected by their magic?" Dr. Seward wondered aloud.

"Joan Clayton," answered Vanessa. "You're not entirely immune though, Doctor. Her magic is a part of you and affords you some protection, but there are witches with far more power than her own. Don't get overconfident."

"I don't know how I'm supposed to accept this."

"Does it really seem so impossible in light of all that is happening around you in this very moment?"

"You have a point." Dr. Seward fired several rounds from her gun before reloading it again. "This can't go on forever."

"No. It cannot."

The battle had raged throughout the house. Not one was unscathed, but to stop was to die, leaving Vanessa to the mercy of Lucifer. They fought through injuries that would have felled any other, defending and propping each other up. The downstairs battle had put large holes in the walls, the fighting in the foyer streaming in and out of the drawing and ball rooms.

The nightcomers piled on Ethan, though none had the power to slay him, any more than he could them. A burning hatred of each other drove both sides into the pointless battle, though Ethan's actions helped keep the nightcomers focused on him, reducing the numbers the others faced. Even so, the humans were growing exhausted and would not be able to go on much longer.

Taking to the air with a powerful leap, Ethan crashed into one nightcomer and then another, plowing them through a wall into the dust covered ballroom. He quickly turned to head back out, but found a single nightcomer standing calmly before him. Ethan

paused, his senses confused by what he smelled, as it was not what he saw.

"Hello again, Mr. Chandler," Hecate said through Mircalla.

"Get away from my son," Kaetenay ordered from behind her.

She turned to face him, amused by his audacity as he held up his dagger. "Have you not noticed your weapons have no effect? There's nothing any of you can do to stop us."

"I will not let you put your claws in him again, witch." One hand shot out and while he was too far away to touch her, she recoiled as though struck, Hecate was suddenly standing separately from Mircalla. Kaetenay seemed to race towards the spirit without moving and they both fell upon the sand with the hot sun beating down on them, somehow transported to the American desert. "If you want to fight as a spirit," he said, "then you are vulnerable to one like me."

"You can't hold me here."

"My spirit can."

Hecate smirked at him. "You'd die."

"I am already dead. I happily give my life to keep my son free of your corruption, to allow him the chance to be the man he has always wanted, but others would not let him be."

She charged at him. He did not flinch and when she jumped, she passed right through him. "We are both already in this place forever. The battle is done."

In the ballroom, Ethan saw Hecate for a moment before she was gone, while Kaetenay fell lifeless to the floor. Ethan's claws destroyed Mircalla, who, no longer possessed by Hecate's demonic spirit, was now vulnerable to him. He stood over Kaetenay only long enough to register he was dead, before Ethan threw himself back into the raging battle, having no time to process or mourn.

Sir Malcolm was again separated from Vanessa by the nightcom-

er horde. He ignored his injuries, a desperate sensation of panic threatening him at the idea of Vanessa's death, and he knew he could not allow it. His sword unsheathed as his gun ran out of bullets, his ammo now spent, and he struggled against the fatigue that tried to slow his movements, banishing it as he fought without ceasing.

He missed a witch as she lunged at him, allowing her to pass through his defences. Her hand seized his throat and, lifting him off the ground with no effort at all, she slammed him against the wall. The nightcomer smiled at him and Sir Malcolm saw another face in hers as though two inhabited her skin. He sensed the other even before she spoke. "How delightful to see you again, Malcolm," Poole's voice teased from Lucy's lips.

Sir Malcolm responded to her taunt by managing to pierce her through the chest. She was unfazed. She looked down at his sword. "I no longer have a heart for you to wound." Taking the sword from his hand, she pulled it out of herself before dropping it to the floor. Poole drew Sir Malcolm's face in close to hers. "That offer I made? You may disregard it."

She gasped in pain and released him. He wasted no time grabbing his sword and stabbing her through the heart again, sensing the rules had changed when he saw Vanessa as the nightcomer stumbled. His surrogate daughter's eyes were burning and intense, and she held her hand in the air where she had touched Poole's back. Poole and Lucy cried out together and did not rise.

"The lamb has killed the lion," Sir Malcolm spit at her.

Looking at Vanessa, he grabbed her by the arm, pulling her close as he stabbed a nightcomer behind her. "Are you all right?" he asked, noting the trail of blood coming from her nose.

She touched her nostril. Her breathing seemed strange, but a sense of wonder and amazement filled her eyes. Her head turned, her body following, and she began to walk towards the foyer, sensing his dark presence, oblivious to the war waging around her. She

stood before the staircase, looking up at Lucifer on the landing. He still wore Victor's face, a smile on his lips, his hands behind his back. They locked eyes on each other, time slowing around them. Vanessa felt an ungodly pain rip through her and blood began to flow from her eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. She gasped in agony, blood erupting from her mouth as she slowly sank to her knees. She did not remove her gaze from his, did not lose her singular focus on him, sensing everything, all the world around her, even as her blood-filled eyes held him alone. She was everywhere and nowhere. Deep within the core of herself, the force housed within was awakening, building strength, like a sun that was quickly expanding, burning to get out. The scorpion's tail lifted, poised to strike.

Blood flowed, the mortal body taxed beyond its limit by the force of the power within, the force itself the only thing holding her together even as her blood vessels exploded and crimson trails moved down her face and body.

Then stillness. Perfect clarity.

Lucifer was suddenly standing above her, taking in the room, which had in an instant become devoid of nightcomers, the entire house at once still. He turned to her, but she wasn't at his feet. The others stumbled into the foyer, collapsing with the immediate threat gone, knowing they would not be able to get back up to fight again. If it was not over, they would be. But there was no horde, and Lucifer did not seem the least bit bothered or concerned by their presence. "This isn't possible," he growled.

Vanessa appeared as from nowhere, standing above him, five stairs up. The blood was gone and she seemed to have suffered no ill effects. She was calm and confident with not a trace of fear. "They are all gone," she told him. "I am the end; I have unmade them."

He calmed, smiling. "They don't matter. Welcome, beloved, once more to the night."

She ever so slightly tilted her head, amused by how he misread the situation. "The night, yes. The dark, yes. Evil, no. I lost sight of

that, but I know again what I truly am." She spread open her arms and his face fell. "For what is life without death, light without dark? What is created must have an end. What is a perfect moment that lasts an eternity? It loses all meaning."

Stepping down, she stood before him, shorter in stance, but all the power clearly hers. Lucifer trembled as she came to him and then he dropped to his knees. "Why did God cast you from Heaven?" she asked him. "Should he not have destroyed you utterly, you his corrupted creation? Why allow you to continuously challenge him, to corrupt so many others?" She leaned over, placing her face close to his. "He didn't have a choice; he had no power to unmake you. That power...is mine."

As she rose back up, Lucifer stammered, "I brought you freedom. You came to me because you were tired of being cold clay and wanted to burn with passion. Embrace me again, let us burn the heavens and rule supreme. It was I who embraced you for what you were, I who valued all that you are. You were not free until you were with me."

"You corrupted what I was. No longer."

The Victor illusion began to scream, a horrific sound like none ever before heard on Earth, Heaven, or Hell. The foyer filled with a blinding white light, and then he was gone, the scream echoing off the walls.

Vanessa buckled, her face once more awash with blood. Ethan reached her first, picking her up and holding her in his arms as he kneeled beside her. "This body..." Vanessa started weakly, coughing blood before she continued, "cannot contain all my power." She focused her bloody eyes on his. "I release her to you and you to her." She touched his face. "I unmake you, Lupus Dei. Go home."

Ethan become human once more and he sensed the force of Lupus Dei leave him, his burden at last released. The force within Vanessa smiled, looking up at something none of them could see. Happiness flooded her being as she looked upon him for the first

time after so many millennia. "Brother. I too am coming home." Her eyes closed, and Vanessa went still in Ethan's arms.

Silence hugged 8 Grandage Place, despite the battle damage and the carnage of blood that had mangled most of the house. Gentle sunlight filtered softly into the room, touching Dr. Seward's closed eyes, trying to tease her from slumber. Her mind began to wake, but she had no interest in opening her eyes, still beyond exhausted even with the much needed rest. She managed to come out of the battle the least scathed. Even so, sleeping in the chair had not helped to sooth her various aches from the fight, and she stirred in her seat, stretching her limbs, and thinking it may be worth opening her eyes to have a cigarette. Settling on this, she succumbed to the sunlight that pried at her eyes and opened them as she yawned.

It was only then that she realized she was being watched, and her heart skipped a beat. She nervously turned her head, feeling a sense of apprehension, but when she met Vanessa's dazzling blue-green irises, Dr. Seward's face beamed, thrilled to at last see her young friend awake. Quickly rising, she got Vanessa a glass of water and sat near her head on the mattress. "Here," she quietly said as she helped Vanessa up enough to drink.

"Thank you," Vanessa replied, her voice hoarse and weak. She was deeply pale, having lost a great deal of blood, but had no actual signs of injury. Vanessa let her head fall back onto the pillow, even this slight effort too much for her.

"How do you feel?"

"Tired," she answered, her eyes closed once more. Slowly, she smiled. "But free."

"The others will be glad to know you're awake."

Her eyes opened again. "How long have I been sleeping?"

"About four days."

"Is there more water?"

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Dr. Seward poured her another glass and helped her rise to drink it. "I've come to realize," the doctor began, "that we have a bit of a dilemma upon us, Miss Ives."

"Oh? How so?"

"I tried to make it very clear to you that I am your doctor, not your friend, and with all you've now been through, you'll be needing my services more than ever."

Vanessa detected her tone—which she knew few others would have been able to—and matched her mirth. "Quite right," she replied with a stern expression.

"On the other hand, I have part of your friend's soul within me, or something preposterous like that, making it rather impossible for us not to feel a sense of kinship between us."

"That is a dilemma."

"As such, I'm afraid I will no longer be able to continue as your doctor. You'll no longer be able to book appointments with me during business hours, nor will I be able to accept payments from you. We shall only be able to meet outside my practice when I am done work for the day, since I do need to make a living." She paused. "I will probably be more inclined to serve brandy when we meet."

Vanessa smiled broadly and took her hand. "And shall I still address you as Doctor?" she teased.

"I suppose you will have to call me Florence. God, I hate that name."

Chuckling softly, Vanessa closed her eyes, but kept Dr. Seward's hand in hers, happy to be connected to her friend, both of them, as a sense of peace at last settled over her.

The cellar was one of the few rooms that had escaped damage. Ethan stood with dry eyes before Kaetenay's lifeless body which was lying upon the table. He had been down to see him a few times, but felt nothing when he did. There was no anger or pain, emotions

he knew well, nor was there happiness or a sense of relief, something he had long thought he would feel at the man's death. Ethan was completely devoid of feeling when he came down here.

Footsteps echoed on the stairs and Sir Malcolm came to stand beside him. "Will you take him home?" he asked.

"No," Ethan replied.

"I know you have had your difficulties with him, Ethan. With as checkered a past as you had with each other it would be impossible not to. But may I remind you of the time you told me how blind I was being about Vanessa?"

"That's not why." Ethan faced him. "He is my family, Kaetenay of the Hills; he belongs with me, and my home is here. This is where he should be put to rest. Next to my brother."

Sir Malcolm's eyes softened in understanding. "In my experience, it's never been easy letting go of hate, until I'd done it and saw how easy it actually was."

"It's also a vital step you have to take in order to be able to start to forgive yourself. I don't know about you, but I'm tired of paying for my sins. I think it's time I lived."

The slightest hint of Sir Malcolm's lips lifted as he lowered his head and his eyes. Ethan's words rang true, though Sir Malcolm never dreamed that he could do such a thing and thus had never tried. In some ways, he'd thought Vanessa's desires naïve, much as he wished she'd find what she sought. He'd never looked himself, but Ethan understood sin in a way few others could. Maybe it wasn't impossible.

Sir Malcolm set a hand on Ethan's shoulder. "He was a good man."

"In his way."

They stood together in silent vigil.

Blood was splattered around the room. The table that normally

held her Tarot was overturned and the purple cards lay scattered about the floor. Vanessa set the table upright and began to reassemble the deck. She did not fan them out when she was done, instead merely cutting the deck and flipping the first card. It was the back of a nude woman with thin, dead-like hands reaching out to her from both sides. In the bottom corners was the head of a bull and the head of a roaring lion. Vanessa smiled at The World card, which confirmed what she already knew: this journey was at last over and a new one was beginning. As her hand left the card, she sensed her connection to the spiritual realm stretch out and then shatter, disconnecting her from the cards. She didn't mind. Vanessa was more than happy to trade her sight beyond the world for her freedom and her peace. Vanessa set the cards into a small, wooden box and closed the lid, thinking they might find a fitting new home with Dr. Seward. Her eyes looked up to the heavens and she softly whispered,

“Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.”

“Miss Ives?” Smiling at John's voice, she turned and hugged him. “It's good to see you up, Miss Ives.”

“I couldn't take another moment in that bed, though I do believe Sir Malcolm is cross with me.” He didn't meet her eyes and her smile slowly diminished as she studied his face. “You're leaving.”

“Yes.”

“May I ask why?”

He gently took her hands in his and at last met her eyes, his sparkling, and a smile on his face. “My dear, dear, Miss Ives, it is because of you. You have awakened the soul I did not think this reanimated flesh possessed. I have lived so long in darkness, surrendered myself to that place through my own actions, but you have been the star that lit the way from the shadows and have given

me hope that I can be more than I was. Yet now I must find my own path, light my own way, and to do that I must leave your side for awhile.

"Know I shall carry you in my heart wherever I go. You must never fail to call upon me should you be in need; I will cross the Earth to stand by you."

Vanessa's eyes had grown wet, a combination of joy and sorrow. "You must promise you will write."

"Lily and I both."

"You go together?"

"We feel we have the same journey to take to find our own way back to being human. Our hearts are here with you and Mr. Chandler, but this we must do. We go away from you now, but you are both with us in spirit."

She hugged him again, tightly this time, not able to let him go. "I wish you would stay, but I understand." At last she pulled back and they looked at each other in uncomfortable silence.

He smiled awkwardly, with his unique laugh, the quick expel of air with the barest chuckle. "I always made an awkward bow." She smiled back at him through her tears. "Cherish your happiness, Miss Ives. It is long deserved." He held her eyes, then said,

"It came with the threat of a waning moon
And the wail of an ebbing tide,
But many a woman has lived for less,
And many a man has died;
For life upon life took hold and passed,
Strong in a fate set free,
Out of the deep into the dark
On for the years to be.

Between the gloom of a waning moon
And the song of an ebbing tide,
Chance upon chance of love and death

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Took wing for the world so wide.
O, leaf out of leaf is the way of the land,
Wave out of wave of the sea
And who shall reckon what lives may live
In the life that we bade to be?"

Vanessa held his face and kissed his cheek. "I shall have to recite poetry more often, Mr. Clare; it will hold you in my heart."

Knocking on the door as he entered Catriona's hospital room, Mr. Lyle set the bouquet of flowers on the table by her beside as he sat down next to her. The injuries she had incurred in the first attack, and her devotion to protecting the others during the final one, had led to various wounds suffered by Catriona that required her to be taken to the hospital. She was receiving top care courtesy of Vanessa and Sir Malcolm.

"I'm not much for flowers," she said to Mr. Lyle, "but I should be thankful for the thought."

"Yes, well, the hospital wasn't about to allow me to bring you a bouquet of new knives, Miss Hartdegen."

"It would have been extremely thoughtful and practical if they had," she replied with a smile.

"I shall endeavour to make it so at a future encounter."

"How's Miss Ives?"

"She's awake and on her feet again, against better judgment." Catriona visibly relaxed and sighed in relief. "The museum has contacted me, very cross that I returned from my trip without informing anyone," he continued

"Not about the library?"

"Thankfully, we seem to have escaped detection. They don't know who they should be yelling at. They would appear to have enough on their plates trying to explain to Scotland Yard why there is a room full of blood, but no bodies or missing persons connected

to the museum, so they don't seem to be looking too hard."

"Well, it's nice to finally have a little luck pass our way. I'll take it, however small. So you're off to Egypt?"

"I promised my expertise as long as they fully understood it would be a very short trip. Miss Ives has promised me a dance when I get back, and I am far too ecstatic about it to be gone long. I also expressed my deep concern over recent events in London and that my lack of ability in such matters would make it most problematic for me to go without a proper escort. I was hoping we'd set out when you were on your feet."

"You know, I have never actually been to Egypt, which really is rather shameful for a thanatologist."

"I quite agree."

"Well, provided you can assure me it shall not involve mummies or supernatural battles, as I have had quite enough of that for the time being, I'd be delighted to join you on such an adventure. I assume your wife has no issues with the matter?" She winked.

"I shouldn't care what that drunkard thinks. We've divorced. Sir Malcolm let the museum know that he desired to be a patron of my research. All demands were then mine to make."

Catriona nodded her head once, proud of him. "You have yourself a partner, Mr. Lyle."

She set the white lilies on Victor's grave, as John walked up behind her. "Did you express my regrets to Ethan?" Lily asked.

"He was disappointed, but understood. Miss Ives was the same."

"We'll be back."

"Someday."

She stood, but kept her eyes on the grave. "Do you really believe we will find something beyond our hate? We have both given ourselves to it since our rebirth, have for so long searched to demonize

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others in order to have a place to direct our pain. In trying to make monsters of others, we made monsters of ourselves."

"I believe we can do better. I believe we can endure the hardships and not cease our caring. Neither of us was as completely lost as we thought; the love and empathy were always there. We shall seek to nurture those instead, and embrace what happiness we find, however fleeting, and be thankful for it."

"What, after all, would life be without passion?"

"A living death. Thee and me have been dead long enough, sister, so let us live."

It had taken over a month of great work and expense to restore 8 Grandage Place to what it was before, but at last their house was a home again; they had even replaced the giant metal front door with a beautiful wood paneled one instead. The drawing room curtains were open wide, allowing the sunlight that burst through London's clouds to warm the room, cutting equally through the pain, sadness, fear, guilt, and anger that had long gripped those inside.

Standing in the once dust covered ballroom, which had been restored like the rest of the house, Sir Malcolm frowned. "I don't know. This room has collected nothing but dust for years. Perhaps it would be better suited to something else."

"You just spent a small fortune restoring it," Ethan said, pointing out the ridiculousness of his thought.

"With the three of us living here, wouldn't it make more sense to turn this room into something useful? I always felt that library was far too small."

Vanessa stepped between them, wrapping her arms around Sir Malcolm's waist in a side hug. "The room can easily be made useful again." She looked up at him. "We should have a ball." Her eyes darted towards Ethan, giving him a look of displeasure over having woken up in bed alone. He bowed his head in apology, a slight

blush in his cheeks. "Mr. Chandler will make an exceptional escort now that he knows how to dance, and he owes me after having turned down my last invitation."

Ethan smiled at her with a sense of playfulness. "One smile and I say yes." Vanessa released Sir Malcolm and stood before her fiancé, putting her arms around him, looking up into his eyes. She smiled broadly at his reference to their first meeting. They held each other's eyes, both content and at peace. She lifted her face up to kiss him, long and deep, her passion intending to encourage him to head back upstairs with her. He didn't miss her cue.

Sir Malcolm continued to frown, ignoring them. "I can't even remember the last time I hosted a ball. Do you really want to try this after everything that's happened? We may be daring fate."

Vanessa and Ethan continued to hold their gaze, happy in each other's arms. Vanessa's smile widened. "Let us dare."

