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Becoming A Monster

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GAME FACTORY

A Novel for VAMPIRE: The Masquerade™

BECOMING A MONSTER

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VÄSTGÖTAGATAN 5
SE-118 27 STOCKHOLM
SWEDEN

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Chapter 1

Rats Spilling Secrets

French Quarter, New Orleans

May 24th, 2015

Marie D'Richet was furious. She was insulted beyond measure. David Kane, curse his name, was a pest without equal! That presumptuous, confident, dastardly, old prick! How dare he, HOW DARE HE!?

Marie was silent for almost a full minute to contemplate her answer.

"I should just have been open about it. I shouldn't have flaunted my position the way I did, or tried to command you by using Marcel's position. I was going about earning your respect the wrong way. So I ask you to give me another chance by wiping the slate clean. And then we'll see how it goes from there."

David sat in silence for almost a minute as well.

"Alright. Clean slate."

Neither of them smiled, but Marie felt relieved.

"Now you just owe me another boon."

Marie's stolen blood ran ice-cold. She turned to face David, who

was still looking at the city, but his face held a small, wicked smirk.

"Another?" She barely managed to form the word.

He turned to look at her, and there was a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

"Those Setites put a spell on you to keep you in torpor until the turn of the twenty-second century."

Marie's eyes widened.

"Then how am I awake?"

"Well," his smirk widened, "someone broke the spell."

His smirk was now a full-blown smile, but it was completely wicked in nature. He stood up, patted her on the shoulder, and said: "Good evening, Seneschal."

He had the NERVE to blackmail the seneschal like that!? He should be hunted like a mutt, but he was Marcel's prized scourge. He had somehow even managed to quieten the werewolves Marcel had been struggling to keep peace with! Marie, despite scouring Marcel's network of spies and reaching out to other cities where David might have stayed, remained unable to find out anything about him!

It was like he hadn't existed until the early 1900's, when he had come to New Orleans for the first time to settle down. Before that, she couldn't find anything about him. Either he was a fluke, or he had some very powerful allies.

Marie looked out over Jackson Square. She had requested to meet David to settle this once and for all. She looked at her watch. He was almost a half hour late. She started tapping her feet, but had to keep from jumping when she heard that annoying off-British accent.

“It is so awful when the other party is late, isn’t it?”

David sat down on the bench in the opposite end with a reluctant expression.

“Yes, it is,” Marie replied. “So why would you be late?”

“Because you always are.”

Marie flinched, but let it go.

“I have thought about our last conversation,” she began, “and I do not appreciate the way you behaved. I demand an apology.”

David smirked humorlessly.

“This isn’t kindergarten, Marie. You’re but a mere neonate, and I am by far your elder. Do not get presumptuous with me.”

“I dema—“

“I swear to God, Marie, if you do not stop being such a fool and taking that tone with me, you won’t last the next decade. Just stay away from me, and let Marcel talk to me instead. I am tired of dealing with you and your childish behaviour.”

His bored and irritated statement stunned Marie into silence. This citizen was threatening **her**? The **seneschal** of New Orleans!?

“I am the seneschal, Kane, and I demand your respect!” she all but shouted, making a few of the surrounding people turn and stare at them in confusion for a few seconds, before shrugging and continuing on their way, likely thinking it a lover’s spat.

Marie looked David in the eye, and put on her most aggressive visage. David's smirk fell, and his face remained stoic as ever.

"Marcel will hear about your behaviour, Marie, as will the his council. I will personally demand your resignation as seneschal."

A rock fell a thousand feet and hit the bottom of Marie's gut, making her panic.

"And I will make sure that you will never hold any status in the Camarilla ever again."

Marie would have broken out into cold sweat if her body was still able. But a little memory sparked what little hope she had left of taking control of the situation.

"I know about your precious little human, Emma."

Marie felt victory when she saw David's eyes widen slightly. But that feeling was quickly squashed when he moved himself closer to her and leant in so only she could see his face and hear his voice.

"If you go anywhere near her, Marie, I will stop heeding Marcel's wishes."

"W-what w-wi-ishes?" Marie could barely stammer, much to her extreme dismay. It was as if David had suddenly become thirty times more terrifying in an instant.

"That I would not give you a grisly, brutal and agonizing end."

Marie was rooted in place, unable to form coherent thoughts.

"You owe me your life, Marie, and I have every legal right

to end it however I see fit. Not even Marcel can stop me, in accordance with the Traditions.”

Then he got up and strode away. Marie made a very human sign of anxiety when she released a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding. She looked to a lone man, covered head-to-toe. Biker pants, leather jacket, combat boots and a hood, his face covered by a balaclava. She nodded once, and he did the same. Then he got up and followed David away, disappearing somewhere in the incredibly small crowd. Marie couldn’t stop the small smile that made its way onto her face.

If I can’t make you respect me, I will make you fear me.



Roger, a successful Nosferatu private investigator, was carefully following the scourge, David Kane. Marie D’Richet had been willing to pay a hefty sum for details on his routines, where he went, who he saw and where he made his haven. Thus far, he’d only observed him training a neonate caitiff who was most likely abandoned by his sire, and training a young woman, Emma, who was most likely his ghoul. From what Roger had gathered, he taught the caitiff, “Johnny”, the basics about vampires, and would eventually set him free to do as he pleased. But Emma, he taught basic espionage techniques. Taught her how to eavesdrop, how to pick pockets, and how to smooth-talk her way around people.

Right now, though, Kane was just walking through the French Quarter, clearly not aware he was being followed. Which was odd to Roger, considering the techniques he had taught the woman. Some of them were actually quite

advanced, but the woman was a prodigy. She picked them up flawlessly. Despite himself, Roger couldn't help but feel jealous, even if only a little.

Roger followed the vampire from a distance, and made sure his supernatural concealment was in perfect place. Roger was almost a master at the art of obfuscation, there was no way the scourge would notice him.

Kane, however, stopped in the middle of the street, a few people looking somewhat weirdly at him as he did so. Then, he turned his head ever so slowly, and glanced ever so directly at Roger. With a small grin, and a man passing in front of Rogers view of him, he disappeared without a trace.

The spy was shocked.

He saw me! How!?

He looked around the street, but his mark was gone. He leant against the building to his left and palmed his face whilst slowly shaking his head.

"Looking for me?" came a dark and smooth voice from behind him.

The Nosferatu jumped and turned around. Before he could do anything, Kane grabbed him by the collar and dragged him into the alley behind them, his strength much greater than Roger's preternaturally enhanced might. He threw the ancilla against a wall, which broke a good amount of the bricks and sent a great degree of pain through Roger's back and head. Before he could scream in pain, a hand covered his mouth, and Kane forced Roger against the brick wall, holding him upright in a grip so strong, he might as well have been interred in concrete.

“Why have you been tailing me for the past two months, rat?”

The scourge’s eyes were light blue and cold as ice, his face so stoic, it might as well have been carved in granite. He pulled the Nosferatu’s balaclava down and kept his hand close to the mouth, so as to swiftly cover it, should Roger scream for help.

“I was hired,” he quickly said. “I don’t care about you, I was just paid to look into you, I swear.”

“By who?”

Roger considered not telling, but the grip on his face tightened, and might have crushed his jaw if he didn’t.

“The seneschal, Marie D’Richet!” he said, fearing for his life. Something about the scourge of New Orleans frightened him, and it wasn’t only his monstrous strength.

“I see.”

Kane dropped Roger and stepped away from him.

“Tell the seneschal that I make my haven in Algiers. In return for sparing your life, and not coming after you to silence you for good, I expect you to report back to me everything she asks of you,” Kane said coldly.

Roger started nodding quickly.

“And besides, I know where you live, Roger,” he said, much to Roger’s shock. “The French Quarter is my domain. Be grateful I have not evicted you. When you know more, come to the warehouse district. I will find you there. And if you try to skip town or tell Marie of this, I will hunt you down, and you will die a horrifically final death.”

With that, David turned around and left the Nosferatu to sit down and begin healing the broken back and cracked skull, wincing in pain.



Emma was sitting in John's office, listening to another lecture. This time, they started tackling the Camarilla's history. It's laws, customs and structure had been interesting, but now she wanted to know it's history better. All the vampires in NightBlade had had a hand in teaching her something.

Aiden had taken her out to the bayou, where he taught her survival techniques and how to tame and treat animals. Granted, she was really bad at it, but still.

Daisy had taught her drawing, painting, sculpting and playing the piano. She had taken extra care in teaching Emma how to dance, and had made sure the young human would never lack clothes.

John had been ever so eager to start teaching someone else, having been on the receiving end for centuries. He taught her history, astrology, theoretical magical practices, and different languages often used in old grimoires and occult texts.

Both Catherine and William had been less than eager to teach her anything, but they relented out of respect for David. William had been by far the most tolerable. He had taught her how Kindred did political battle, how they stabbed each other in the back and undermined each other's efforts. He'd also begun teaching her how to handle money, and David had provided her with a million dollars she could use to start investing under William's guidance.

Emma was still uncertain as to exactly how he had that kind of money.

Catherine had by far been the sourest about the arrangement. She was teaching Emma how to fight, and that didn't always end well, with Emma emerging with bruises and cuts. She taught her how to shoot and use a knife and a stake, but Emma was far better at the theoretical stuff. The strength David's blood had granted her as a ghoul had, sure enough, waned after about a month.

Over the past almost four months, Emma had progressed nicely. David called her a prodigy, and she couldn't help but smile brightly at that. Some nights, she, David, Daisy and Aiden just stayed in all night, watching films and TV-shows. It had been Emma's idea. Whenever the Alastors had been out on assignments, they would come home irritated, and it wasn't until a few weeks ago that David had explained why.

"Why's everyone so... on edge?" Emma asked David as they sat in her bed, watching a rather interesting series about a man who wanted to become president of America, and used very Kindred methods of achieving that. David found it highly entertaining.

"The Anathema are beginning to learn Alastor routines, as far as I can tell. They are becoming harder and harder to find, and I've heard rumors that one Anathema has managed to subvert the Mark of the Trophy," he explained, his hand gently caressing her head.

"What does that mean?" she inquired, and leant further into him, never taking her eyes off the TV screen.

"It means that someone might have made a spell that allows him to detect Alastors who wear the mark all Alastors are given when

they kill an Anathema,” he said, and showed her the crescent-moon tattoo on his right palm. “We used to have safety in obscurity, but now, it would seem, we don’t even have that anymore.”

“Then how about that Lasombra?” she asked further.

“Not a trace of him. I went back to examine the ritual site, but there’s not a single hint as to where he might have gone. No component to try and compel his behaviour or control his thoughts. I have a theory, though it’s really shaky.”

Emma returned her focus to the lesson, reminding herself of the importance of what she was listening to. If she were to have any hope of becoming a witch, she would have to study hard and pay attention. She found the stuff to become easier and easier to memorize, and David had even given her a book, saying if she put her effort into decoding and understanding it, she could keep it for herself.

I think he has a wicked sense of humor. One that doesn’t involve directly harassing someone.

It was written in at least seven languages, from what she had decoded so far, and the dialects were mostly from somewhere between the fifth century AD and the second millennium BC. She had made out Greek, Latin and French so far, but the Greek was, to her limited knowledge, Koine, which wasn’t exactly common these days. She had asked John about some of the other languages, but despite all his knowledge and research, he could only make out some hieroglyphics and cuneiform. He couldn’t specify a dynasty for the Egyptian, and he couldn’t tell her whether the cuneiform was Assyrian, Sumerian or ancient Persian.

Fucking. Great.

At least David and John had both given her a veritable library to aid in her endeavor to decode the book, but she was only gradually learning what to look for, and where to look for it.

“That’s it for tonight, I think,” she heard John state. “I can’t really focus on it anymore tonight. I need a drink,” he muttered quietly as a side note.

“I really appreciate what you’re doing for me, John,” Emma thanked him with a gratuitous smile.

“Don’t worry about it, *passerotta*,” he replied with a warm smile. “It brings me joy to teach you. Besides, I have ever only been on the receiving end of lectures. It is delightful to teach someone else!”

Emma couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped her lips. And then a few questions struck her.

“Hey, is ‘John Miller’ your real name?”

“Ah, no it is not. It’s Johann Müller.”

“But, you sound Italian,” she reasoned, “not German.”

John still smiled, but now it seemed more nostalgic.

“My mother was a Dutch seamstress, err— tailor. And my father was a German merchant. They met in Venezia, and married. I was born there in...” he paused a little, his facial expression revealing his trouble remembering the year of his birth. “Summer, I believe. In the year 1350, give or take a decade or two.”

Emma nodded thoughtfully. Then she smiled and left his office, grabbing her notes in the process. All in all, her life had actually turned for the better since her grandmother’s

death, if she were honest with herself. University life had been boring and tedious, but not a night with these people went by without excitement or comfort. With the exception of William and Catherine, she had started seeing the vampires as her extended family, almost.

David was both a father and a mentor at the same time. John was the teaching uncle, Daisy was the...eccentric older sister, Aiden the older brother who'd been in the army and Symond was, well – Symond.

She didn't really know how to think of him. He rarely left his office, which also made her wonder how he fed. But on the occasions he did, or she went in there, he was nothing but a joy to be around, despite his less than appealing looks. But that was part of who he was; he'd started sneaking up on her and frightening her by just appearing in front of her, which had made her heart skip more than a few beats, but it just added to his unique charm as a kind of joker.

Catherine and William had been less than welcoming to her, but they were civil... *enough*. Catherine kept berating her when she made wrong moves in hand-to-hand training, but never offered to tell her what the correct move would have been. Emma had a strong suspicion Catherine **really** didn't like her, but she couldn't tell why that was so.

Emma made her way to her room and threw her things on the desk. She then dumped herself on the bed, just as her stomach growled.

"Great," she muttered to herself. "Should probably get something to eat."

Being the only person who needed food and water was challenging, considering that the vampires never seemed to

remember that fact. Emma had even made a game out of seeing which of them would notice it the quickest. It was usually David, but then again, he was the one who spent the most personal time with her.

A knock on her door made her look up as David peeked his head inside. *Speaking of the devil...*

“Want to go out?” he asked her with a small smirk.

“You heard?” she asked, astonished.

“Of course I did,” he laughed. “I have the strongest hearing in the entire building. I can hear your heartbeat from my office.”

Emma raised her brows in surprise.

“You’re the only one here with a beating heart,” he elaborated with a smile. “It stands out like a nightclub in a ghost town.”

Emma couldn’t deny the logic in that, and got up. She then followed David out of the building.



David was quietly smoking as Emma was slowly eating her Chinese take-out. They were sitting on a bench in Jackson Square, just enjoying the sights and sounds of the world around them.

“It’s amazing that none of them know about vampires,” Emma quietly commented between mouthfuls.

“Many of them do,” David explained with a small smirk. “They just don’t care.”

Emma almost choked on her food.

“The fuck!?”

David chuckled at the sight.

“Yeah, it’s true,” he elaborated. “Many native New Orleanians are brought up with stories about voodoo, werewolves and vampires. Some brush it off as superstition, but a lot of them personally knows a witch or two, and they can confirm it.”

“How?”

“Let’s just say that relations between sorcerers and Kindred in New Orleans have never been even remotely what you could call ‘civil’, by any stretch of the imagination. Giving us a bad reputation, though, would only incite conflict, and none of us really want that. So we just stick to our own communities, and avoid each other as much as possible.”

Emma nodded, swallowing the information alongside a mouthful of noodles.

“Why’d you decide to stay here?” she inquired.

David shrugged.

“Don’t know, really. I came here in 1907, just traveling. I was never content to settle anywhere for the hundred years or so after Katherine died, but here...I just stopped. Maybe the atmosphere, the— ambience, if you will. I actually don’t know,” he said, seemingly surprised himself. “It just felt like ‘home’.”

Emma nodded solemnly. She went back to eating, but realized she’d emptied the carton box. She threw it in the trash can beside the bench and leant back. David offered her a cigarette, which she graciously took. She lit it with the

lighter David held out for her, and started puffing away. They sat comfortably like that for what seemed like hours.

He's really nice to spend time with, Emma thought to herself.

She then scooted close and leant into him. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and laid his cheek on the top of her head. It had become a reflex by now. Some people walking by looked at them with warm expressions, and Emma could have sworn she heard someone say 'what a cute couple'.

If only they knew.

"If only, indeed," David said out of nowhere.

"Let me guess, 'where do you think Daisy learned that trick'?"

"Something like that."

She could almost hear the smirk in his voice. And then she realized something.

"Wait, your accent isn't really British, is it?"

David outright laughed.

"Well, that took you a while!"

Emma slapped his stomach, the only place reachable from her current position.

"So, what's your first language?"

David's arm around her shoulders seemed to tense up for just a split second.

"I don't have one," he said casually.

"Come on, you have to have a first language," Emma lightly

teased.

"I can't remember it. A lot about my early nights is hazy. I can't even remember my sons' faces."

Emma almost bit her tongue at that comment.

"**Sons!?**" she almost shouted, but remembered where they were. "You have **sons!?**"

"Had," David corrected her, still casual. "They died ages ago."

"And that doesn't make you sad!?"

"It hurt worse when one of them asked me to let them kill me."

Emma felt her eyes water up as her heartrate quickened.

"They **what!?**"

David was silent for almost a minute.

"Remember when I told you that my father was a werewolf?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, so were they. Apparently, the wolf skipped a generation. Anyway, to werewolves, vampires are parasites. Demonic minions of a primordial force of chaos and destruction they call 'the Wyrn'. When I went back to my tribe after dying and rising, they tried to kill me."

Emma clenched her hand, gripping David's shirt tightly. Tears almost ran from her eyes. Almost.

"I killed them all. Every single one of them. Except for my wife and my twin sons. I couldn't bring myself to do that. Even when they tried to kill me. So I ran," David finished his tale.

“That’s just—” Emma began, but she couldn’t find the words.

“Terrible, I know,” David said, but even as he told her this tale, he showed no signs of remorse, of sadness. Like he’d accepted it, maybe even understood it.

“And you’re fine with that!?”

“They were following their instincts, Emma. Just as a Cainite hunting for a human, every bit of their souls was telling them to destroy me, to fulfill their goddess’ decree. At least they had the decency of letting me surrender.”

Emma felt her face growing hot and wet, the tears finally rolling and the anger building.

“But you’re a good man, their father! Didn’t that count for anything!?”

“Correction; *was* a good man. And no. It didn’t. And no matter how much good I do, nothing can ever wash away my sins. I doubt even God, if he really looked for every little good deed I ever did, could find enough to make up even a thousandth of the bad things I’ve ever done.”

David never missed a beat, never revealed a shred of remorse, or regret, or sadness. Nothing but acceptance. Emma couldn’t believe it. His story was the most tragic she’d ever heard, and according to John, she might be missing up to three thousand years of it.

“You learn to deal with it in time,” David commented, most likely having sensed her inner tumult. “The only alternative is suicide.”

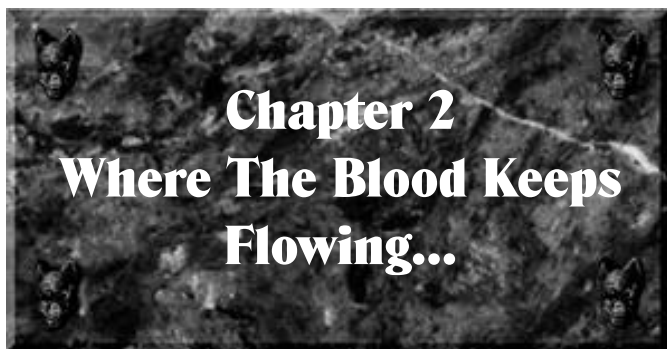
Emma nodded slowly, taking his meager words of wisdom

to heart.

“Do you ever regret becoming a vampire?” she asked. She was hesitant, asking such a personal question of a being older than herself by centuries, likely millennia.

“No,” came the reply without her hesitation. “My sire is the greatest man I know. He loved me as a friend, even when I was a mortal surrounded by werewolves. And I love him just as much, for saving my life, and for taking me with him when my own family rejected me.”

Emma couldn't help but admire David. Even after all he went through, he could love and laugh like a human. Like a man who lived the dream. Who ran through life, enjoyed it to the fullest, and didn't look back. A spot of light in a *world of darkness*, as he liked to put it.



Rubis d'le Nuit, a few miles west of New Orleans

May 26th, 2015

Marcel was having a terrible evening. First, Marie had been complaining about David for months. Second, she was convinced he was hiding something from them. Third, Marie had been pestering him about David's behaviour, and fourth, Marie this, Marie that...It was getting tiring. He had come to love Marie, no question about that, but when it came to David...the metaphorical headaches he could be spared if they got along.

Marcel sat quietly in a large, antique leather chair, staring into the fireplace. It was a trick David had taught him.

"Accustom your Beast to the presence of fire, and it will eventually stop making you flee from it. Of course, it will probably take centuries, and you may never completely get rid of the Red Fear, but it definitely makes some things easier."

Marcel considered David the closest thing to a friend he could, but Marie's comment about him threatening her life was a step too far. And Marcel wasn't stupid. There was no doubt in his mind that David could easily kill Marie, and

that he could probably invade Marcel's plantation and kill every single ghoul and guard singlehandedly, without effort. After all, he was a Red Alastor.

Despite David's claims that the job was practically glorified pencil-pushing, Marcel knew from contacts in different Camarilla positions that becoming a Red Alastor meant being the elite of the elite of the Alastors. You needed a reputation fearsome enough that just your existence meant you could be considered for the Red List. And a Kindred **that** powerful, in Marcel's mind, could probably take a Sabbat-controlled city on their own, given enough resources and time.

Marcel needed a way to make sure David didn't find an excuse to carry out his threat. He couldn't directly insult David, that could be certain death. No, he had to find a diplomatic solution. Marcel had never considered appointing a seneschal, but he wanted to afford Marie the easiest transition into a position where she wouldn't be in constant danger. And he also needed to question David about what happened to the lupines in the bayou. He hadn't heard anything from them in months.

Sometimes, being prince isn't as glorious as it seems.



Roger was nervous, but it didn't show. The Nosferatu was sitting on a bench in Jackson Square, waiting for the seneschal of the city to meet him. He soon caught sight of her as she came walking around the Cabildo, headed straight towards him. Roger wasn't an idiot, he knew that D'Richet was bubbling with vengeful excitement, even if her face was completely neutral. She came over and sat

beside him.

“What did you find out?” she asked, never looking directly at him.

“He probably makes his haven somewhere in Algiers. I lost him right past the bridge when a crowd of drunk juicebags came crashing out of a pub and knocked me over.”

Roger could practically feel the rage flaring up in the woman, and he didn’t have some of the higher senses other Kindred boasted to have.

“That’s it!?” she practically spat with seething fury.

“That’s it, but if you want me to continue, I need to know details, pronto.”

And the youngster prince-in-training fucking bought it.

“He’s not just the scourge of New Orleans. He’s an **Alastor**.”

Roger would have choked if his body had still been human. Now, it seemed, he was doubly fucked.

“An Alastor?”

“Yeah,” she said vehemently. “And he’s an elder as well. And I really don’t want him in the city for much longer.”

Roger nodded vaguely, now scared shitless over this new information. Kane had been strong, really strong, but an elder!? Roger didn’t know if serving the dude or running for the hills would be the wisest course of action.

Just my shitty, rotten, fucking luck! Dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit, dammit! Fuck!

“Keep tailing him. I want to know his every move, every

place he visits and anyone he speaks to. And for God's sake, find his damned haven!"

"Yes, ma'am," Roger quietly muttered when D'Richet upped and left.

Fffuuuuuuuuuuuuck!

Roger stood up and made his way towards the warehouse district, as Kane had ordered him to.

I've gotta be fucking suicidal.



David was sitting on the roof of a warehouse opposite his own. He had smelt the Nosferatu investigator a block away, and had decided to wait for him. Eventually, the covered Cainite did appear. Without so much as a sound, David jumped down the side of the building, hopping back and forth between the two warehouses standing a measly ten feet apart so as to slow and quieten his descent. Once down, he crept to the end of the small alley, hiding himself from the Nosferatu.

Roger merely walked on, slowly and looking around for the elder vampire. David expertly crept up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. Roger jumped and turned, frightened beyond measure.

"SHIT!" he shouted, and took a few steps back.

"Sorry about that. I had to make sure you were alone first," David said, but he didn't look sorry in the slightest. "What did she tell you?"

"To keep tailing you. Find your haven, things like that."

But David could tell that Marie had said something more.

“Is that all?” he inquired, and his tone and face didn’t leave ‘no’ as an option.

“She told me you were an Alastor, and an elder,” Roger said cautiously. “S’it true?”

David smirked humorlessly.

“It is.”

Roger took another step back.

“Relax,” David offered. “If I wanted you dead, you wouldn’t have seen it coming.”

“Relaxing,” Roger countered morbidly. “So, what now?”

“Now, you’re on my side, and you’ll tell Marie what I want you to tell her.”

Roger took a further step back.

“Nah, I ain’t your bitch, just cause you caught me.”

“I could kill you, if you prefer?” David smiled menacingly, as his left hand’s fingernails slowly extended and turned to claws.

Roger stared at the grisly means of Kindred destruction intensely for a few moments.

“So how do I reach out to you?”

“That’s what I thought.”

David then turned and walked towards the warehouse he owned. Roger followed closely behind him. Without warning, David grabbed Roger’s arm and dragged him towards the entrance. Roger was about to shout ‘what the hell!’ when he felt a warmth rush over him.

“Wards to make sure uninvited guests can’t enter,” David said without looking at the Nosferatu. “If I hadn’t grabbed you, you’d have been a pile of ash.”

“How comforting,” Roger muttered to himself.

“Isn’t it?” David responded without humor.

They entered, and Roger took in the building. It looked nice. Well, except for all the dust. There were several doors in the small entryway, probably leading to offices, if he had to guess. At the end of it, the large warehouse really came into focus with an entire gun-range, a martial arts section with mats and dummies, and cases likely containing weapons and ammunition. There was a couch and some small tables with chairs accompanying them. On the martial arts mat, a female Kindred was training the ghoul Roger had seen David teach espionage. Well, if you could call throwing the human around, kicking and punching and grappling her without letting her get a chance to retaliate training.

“FOCUS, girl! You aren’t focused!” the Kindred shouted at the human.

“Well, I’m fucking sorry, bitch! I thought you were training me, not pounding me into becoming part of the fucking floor!”

The vampire was clearly about to punch the girl in the face when Kane shouted at them.

“COOL IT, LADIES! Workplace fatalities in this country are too high as it is, don’t add more!”

They both stopped and looked over.

“Who’s the rat!?” the vampire asked loudly.

“HEY!” a shout came from one of the offices behind Roger and David.

“An investigator the seneschal sent to track me,” he replied as the human was making her way over, the vampires still looking agitated as Hell.

“So why isn’t he dead?” the Kindred asked.

The human looked at the vampire with vehement, but didn’t comment.

“He’s my investigator, now,” the elder beside Roger said. “He’s going to lead miss D’Richet on a wild goose hunt.”

Roger heard another voice from one of the other offices start laughing loudly. Kane then turned to Roger.

“For now, you couldn’t find anything else. You’ll report to me here. If you turn on me, I will know it, and being Nosferatu won’t be the thing that disgusts people about you. If the seneschal stops using you, I will leave you alone. Understood?”

Roger nodded.

“Good. Now get out.”

Roger was more than happy to oblige.



“That was harsh,” Emma commented as she stood next to David and watched the Nosferatu leave.

“He’s an ancilla, he will deal with it. I care not for his feelings,” David said casually. “It’s the fact that Marie sent him that angers me.”

“Why?”

“She knows about you.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.”

Emma lost herself in thought a little, then went back to her room. Catherine was walking by, headed for her office. David grabbed her by the arm as she came close.

“If you don’t want to train her, just say so.”

Catherine was quiet for a little.

“I don’t mind training her. I mind that she can’t focus, that she doesn’t take it seriously. You know better than anyone that in a fight, it’s life or death. Somehow, that concept completely escapes her.”

David let go of her, and she turned to look at him and crossed her arms. She looked into his eyes, and her face was as made of stone.

“I need her to understand that this isn’t martial arts. This is fighting to kill your opponent before your opponent kills you.”

David nodded in agreement. Catherine then closed the gap between the and wrapped her arms around David. He affectionately returned the gesture.

“All I ask of her is to take it seriously, but she fails even that. She’d rather study with John or try to decode that stupid book you gave her. What is it, anyway?”

David smiled a little into her hair.

“A cookbook.”

Catherine burst into laughter.

“You’re kidding!?”

“I’m not,” David chuckled as well. “I wrote it a few decades ago as a prank to any thaumaturge stupid enough to steal from me. Anyone worth their soul would know that most important grimoires don’t look impressive. They’re usually journals of some kind.”

Catherine leant up and placed her lips to David’s, eyes closed. David leant into the kiss, but they kept it chaste. They separated, and Catherine looked into his eyes lovingly.

“I know I could never take **her** place, but thank you for caring for me like this.”

“Of course,” David replied. “With everything you were exposed to, I’m not surprised you asked me.”

At the mention of her past, Catherine’s eyes almost went blank, seemingly returning mentally to an unpleasant memory.

“They were so awful,” she said almost catatonically. “Those bastards got what they deserved.”

David pulled her head to his chest and she let him. She felt so safe in his arms. So loved, so protected. Completely unlike **them**.

“That’s all in the past, love,” he said quietly. “They’re long gone.”

Emma watched from the first floor, holding a towel and fresh clothes. She was so shocked to see how they interacted, how they *kissed*.

I thought he loved Katherine!

She stormed into the bathroom and showered, her mind

going through what she had just witnessed.



David entered Emma's room as he knocked on the doorframe. It was time for the next episode of a certain political drama, but Emma was sitting on her bed with a sour look on her face. David's mood faltered.

"What is it?" he asked carefully.

Emma was silent for a while.

"What's going on between you and Catherine? I thought you were in love with Katherine."

It wasn't until she had spoken that she realized that the names sounded exactly the same.

"You saw," he stated.

"I did. Explain."

David and Emma locked eyes for minutes. Then he stepped out of the doorway.

"Let's go ask Catherine. That is her story to tell."

Emma was wary, but she got up and stormed out of the room. David walked behind her as she led them down to Catherine's office. Emma didn't even knock. Catherine was polishing a silver knife in her chair when they walked in.

"The hell, girl!?" she asked with anger in her voice. "Haven't you heard of knocking!?"

David stalked in after Emma.

"Catherine, Emma would like to ask you a question," he calmly said, but he did look apologetic.

“Yeah, I damn sure would!” Emma said loudly. “Why are you and David making out when I’m not looking!?”

Catherine stared at David and Emma with a face that said ‘are you fucking kidding me’ for a good few seconds.

“None of your damned business, that’s why.”

But she didn’t sound angry anymore. Now, she sounded... hurt?

“Catherine,” David began, “I would like you to tell her. If you won’t, I will.”

Catherine looked at David with hurt and anger.

“FINE! TELL HER!” she shouted. “NOW, GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY OFFICE!”

David nodded and grabbed Emma by the arm. He dragged her from the room, and Emma was confused as all hell.

“What’s going on!?”

David didn’t say anything until they were back in Emma’s room. He sat down on the chair and sighed in frustration.

“If you think my past is tragic, just listen to Catherine’s.”

Emma’s anger drained from her body.

“What?” she almost stammered.

David rubbed his eyes.

“Sit down. It’s a long one.”

Emma did as instructed. She sat on her bed. David was silent for a while, wondering where to start.

“Catherine was born in a small village in the outskirts of Germany, bordering Poland’s south-western country-side,

in 1801. Her parents abandoned her, but she was found by an old woman who took her in and raised her.” David’s expression turned grim. “When she was six, a couple of thieves broke into their home and killed the old woman, Hilde. Turns out,” David’s eyes darkened, “those thieves didn’t have a problem with pedophilia.”

Emma’s eyes widened in horror.

“They used her as... as they pleased,” she noticed even David didn’t have the nerve to actually say what he clearly implied, despite her knowledge of his indifference to extreme brutality. “For almost three years, they kept her and used her. Then, a small group of urchins, homeless children, raided the thieves’ lair. They freed her and took her with them. Taught her how to steal, fight. How to kill without remorse.”

Emma felt better, if only marginally.

At least she had gotten away.

“But some of those urchins were teenagers, and they felt the same things her captors had,” and Emma felt her heart sink further into her stomach. “When she was around fifteen years old, she had gotten several sexually transmitted illnesses, and she’d been pregnant no less than eight times. Whenever it became noticeable, the boys beat her until she miscarried. Then one night, she just killed them all.”

Emma felt her heart clench.

“Around 1820, she was found by an elder Brujah looking nothing else than a ten year–old boy. He fed from her, but when he noticed the taint in her blood, he became furious. He Embraced her as a kind of revenge. He didn’t expect her

to last until the next night. Aiden and I found her a little later that night. Staked her and brought her to a safe space. From then on, she went wherever Aiden and I went.”

Emma was horrified by Catherine’s story.

“So why..?”

“Because almost everyone who claimed to love her hurt her beyond what any sane human could take. I used magic to cleanse her of diseases so she didn’t infect anyone she fed from. And then, she asked me if I would show her what real love was like. I couldn’t turn her down,” David admitted. “I saw a broken soul, mind and body begging to be loved, truly loved. So, we kiss. Sometimes, we make love. I take her out on dates and show her what a man’s love truly means.”

Emma nodded. She felt so ashamed of herself.

All that... no wonder.

“I have no doubt that I can never love a woman the way I loved Katherine. But if my lost love can be used to show a broken woman what love really is...I think that is worth a lot. Don’t you?”

Emma nodded again.

“I feel terrible,” she muttered.

“Then go down and tell Catherine. She’ll understand. I hope,” David said the last part with some skepticism.

Emma stood up and walked out of the room. David stayed behind, but Emma was entirely certain he would hear what happened. She made her way down to Catherine’s office, where the woman was now using the knife she just polished to sharpen a stake, wooden peels lying about the floor.

“So what do you think?” she asked without looking up from her work.

“I’m sor—”

“I don’t want your pity, girl. I want you to focus, and put in effort when I teach you,” Catherine said harshly. “And don’t bring it up, ever again. If you can do that, I’ll keep training you.”

Emma was nailed in place.

She’s... insane.

She nodded slowly, and turned to leave the room.

“If you do bring it up,” Catherine added as Emma was in the doorway, “I will make it hurt a lot.”

Emma didn’t stop walking, but she didn’t miss the comment. She left the office, and rather than going back to her room, she walked out the door and into the night.



Emma was sitting in Jackson Square, silently berating herself for her previous behavior. She felt like an idiot. Why did it even upset her that much? Emma was so absorbed in her thoughts that she didn’t notice the woman sitting down on the bench beside her.

“Beautiful evening, don’t you think?” she asked.

Emma snapped her head to the woman, and saw a raven-haired beauty sitting there. Gorgeous emerald eyes looked at her kindly. The woman was exceptionally beautiful, her hair framing her face perfectly and her facial features quite exquisite. But she seemed quite young as well. She looked younger than Emma herself, if she were honest.

“Yeah, it is,” Emma replied suspiciously.

“I never get tired of this city,” the woman said with a warm smile. “The same sights, but always different, somehow.”

Emma nodded slowly.

“I’m Marie, by the way,” Marie offered, extending her hand as a show of courtesy.

“Emma Monroe,” Emma introduced herself. David had said early on to keep a fake name in her head at all times.

“It’s nice to meet you Emma. David speaks highly of you.”

So she’s the seneschal David told me about. She’s up to something.

“It’s nice to meet you too.”

David would never mention me to her. He hates her guts. She wants me to spill secrets.

“So what are you doing away from David? I can’t believe he would let his ghoul roam freely.”

Emma smirked, both because Marie clearly didn’t know David, but also because she knew something Marie didn’t. She wasn’t David’s ghoul. Anymore.

“David’s very lenient. He’s teaching and training me for the moment, but he says I’ll be sufficient to suit his needs soon.”

“Ah,” Marie nodded in mock understanding. “Is he always this lenient?”

“I don’t know. I only met him recently.”

“Right,” Marie muttered. “So, what clan is he?”

“Lasombra.”

“Sure. And what generation?”

Emma looked at her with confusion.

“Generation?”

The fake display of ignorance had the exact effect Emma had hoped for. Just a little glimpse of disappointment, which was quickly covered up with indifference.

“Yes, how far removed from the First Vampire he is in terms of sires.”

“Oh, I don’t know anything about that. Who was the first vampire?”

Marie smiled. Clearly not sincerely.

Ooooooh, she’s pissed.

“Well, according to myth, it was Caine.”

“What, you mean Abel and Cain, Cain?” Emma inquired, curious about this new information. None of the members of NightBlade had told her about this. At least, she didn’t think so. Lectures were still lectures, after all.

“Yes, the homicidal farmer who bludgeoned his little brother, if the legends are to be believed.”

“And are they?”

“No,” Marie chuckled, a light chirping sound. “They’re fairy tales to give biblical importance to our existence. To inflate the egos of elders and ancients, nothing more.”

Emma was quiet for a little, studying the woman beside her. Emma really didn’t like sitting so close to a stranger, and a Kindred, no less. Emma was silently berating herself for leaving the warehouse without her gun.

"It won't put a vampire down," David said with a small smile when he handed her the rather large pistol, '1911 .45 ACP' engraved along the slide, "but a few good shots in the head or neck will slow them down, give you a chance to come back here."

"Does it really have to be so big and clunky? I'd prefer a smaller one."

"I don't doubt that," David said with his usual chuckle, "but those are peashooters against even someone young, like Johnny."

"HEY!" they heard a small shout of annoyance.

*"Shut up, kid! He's right, you **are** young and weak," they then heard Catherine's voice berate her apprentice. "It's my job to correct that!" Emma didn't doubt for a second that Catherine smiled sadistically whilst she said the last part.*

"Is there something wrong?" Marie asked with a toxically sweet smile. "Am I scaring you?"

Emma leant back, and leant her head back, looking up at the Cabildo almost right behind them. What she saw made her smile, and she instantly felt completely safe.

"No, not particularly."

Looking over, Emma saw the small glint of anger in Marie's eyes, even as she kept up the disturbing smile.

"Well, that means that you're either unintelligent, or ignorant," she said with a threatening undertone.

Emma snorted.

"Or, it means I'm never without protection."

Marie's eyes narrowed very slightly.

"Whatever does that mean?"

“It means,” Emma heard David’s voice from behind them, “that she is never without protection.”

Marie’s head whipped around, but she saw nothing. Then she heard a whistle, and looked up. David was sitting on the roof of the Cabildo, his feet dangling casually over the edge, with eyes gleaming bright red in the darkness and a grin on his lips.

“I thought it sounded obvious, didn’t you? Maybe you’re the unintelligent or ignorant one, seneschal.”

She jumped up from the bench and stared at him angrily.

“Don’t you dare talk to me with such a tone, Kane!”

All of a sudden, David wasn’t sitting there anymore. Emma was gripped momentarily by fear.

Did he leave!?

Then, he appeared right behind Marie and grabbed her arm. With barely any time to react, the seneschal of New Orleans was whipped around and flung into a pillar supporting the front of the old, Spanish governmental structure turned museum. When she hit with her back, she let out a cry of pain, and then fell to the ground, head-first. Emma couldn’t keep the gasp of surprise from escaping, never having expected such a violent reaction from a conversation.

“You’ve been nothing but a pest since I broke the spell that made you sleep,” David said with malice well-hidden beneath indifference. “And I think, that I just may present Marcel with an ultimatum.”

He walked over to Marie, who was clutching herself in pain.

Slowly. Calculated. Cold. He grabbed the seneschal by her hair, and started dragging her over towards the alley between the Cabildo and the Saint Louis Cathedral.

“Either he will banish you from New Orleans,” he began, his voice colder than ice, his fingers never releasing the pleading woman’s hair, “or I will kill you myself.”

With a rough motion, he pulled Marie to her feet, still by her hair, and she smashed her head into the stone structure renovated in 1895. The woman’s begging stopped, and she slumped to the ground, lifeless.

“Why’d you do that!?” Emma started shouting at David, having followed them into the alley. “You could just send her running!”

“Because she’s made up her mind. She can’t hurt me, so she’ll hurt you instead.”

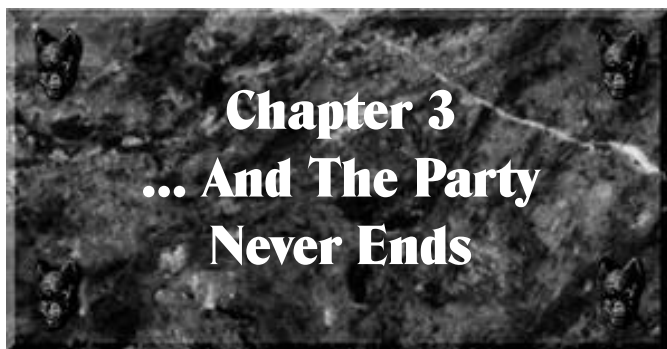
Emma was shocked.

“And you know that, how!?” she asked.

David looked at her with a face that clearly said ‘really?’, and began walking in the direction of the warehouse. Emma then realized that she already knew the answer.

“Mindreading,” she muttered to herself. “Of course.”

She then started running to catch up with her protector walking at a decently fast pace.



Rubis d'le Nuit, a few miles west of New Orleans

May 27th, 2015

“Would you mind telling me why some of my ghouls found you unconscious in the French Quarter, an hour before dawn!?”

Marcel was furious, he was livid. Marie had gone off on her own, which was fine. But a Kindred being knocked unconscious took tremendous amounts of concussive trauma, and going anywhere near someone with that kind of strength was dangerous, to say the least.

Marie was sitting in a chair opposite his desk, and was looking very ashamed of herself.

“It was David Kane who did it,” she said quietly.

“I don’t doubt that, but you must have done **something** to anger him!” Marcel spoke loudly. He rarely raised his voice, and preferred to treat those who messed up like they were children, to really hammer home how insignificant they were, but Marie was a different matter. “David rarely resorts to violence, Marie, so you must really have done something bad!”

“She did,” a voice said from the shadows of the office, startling both the other vampires, but Marcel calmed down mere moments after, compared to Marie.

“Would you kindly tell me your side of the story, David?” Marcel asked politely, but demanded nonetheless.

“With pleasure, Marcel,” David replied just as courteously. He walked over and sat down in a chair closer to Marcel than Marie. “I’ve been training a ghouel for some months now, and I really value her. Then last night, I discover you precious seneschal threatening her and trying to intimidate her.”

“Is that true, Marie?” Marcel inquired his lover sitting opposed to himself. Marie looked Marcel in the eyes for a little while, most likely deciding whether or not to lie. Then she slowly nodded her head and threw her eyes down in shame.

“Couple that with the way she’s been harassing me and putting a spy to gather information about me,” Marie’s head whipped up at David when he said that, “I now present you with a choice, Marcel; banish Marie from New Orleans, **forever**, or I will call in my boons to kill her myself.”

Marcel glared at David, but knew he couldn’t oppose David’s boons.

“There is absolutely no way I can make you reconsider?” Marcel asked David quietly. “Any way at all?”

David was deathly quiet for minutes.

“There are two ways— **only** two other ways.”

“What are they?” Marcel asked, and didn’t let the relief

washing over him come out.

“One, Marie allows herself to be subjected to the blood bond, by me.”

Marie looked terrified at that moment.

“Two, she signs a blood contract.”

Marcel and Marie both seemed relieved, despite Marcel’s efforts to hide it.

“I’ll sign the contract,” Marie said with a shaky voice.

“Good. I will draft it and have it ready in three days. I will meet you here so you can sign it.”

Marcel nodded in approval of David’s offer.

“What happens if she breaks the terms, just so I understand?”

David grinned.

“I don’t know. It differs every time.”

Then, without another word, he disappeared back into the shadows, and left Marcel and Marie to wonder what on Earth he meant.



“We’re going **what!**?”

“Clubbing,” David said casually, buttoning up the black shirt until only the top two remained unbuttoned.

“Why would you suggest that!?” Emma complained loudly.

“I’m not some party-crazed bimbo!”

“Oh, I know,” David said, highly amused by Emma’s antics and slid on the suit jacket which was paired perfectly with

his pants. "But knowing the way around clubs can be a valuable tool."

"How?" Emma asked doubtfully.

"Because a lot, and I really mean **a lot**, of younger vampires like hunting in nightclubs. And you, my dear protégé, are going to try and locate vampires in there."

...

"What?"

"Daisy, Catherine and William are going to be hunting in there. You are going to try and spot them. When you think you've found them, you let me know, and I'll tell you if you're wrong or right."

Emma was shocked at that proposition.

"This is an exercise?"

"Yes, it is. I will be using my powers to change their appearance until you successfully find them."

"Then how am I going to succeed!?" she yelled.

"They're still vampires, Emma," David informed her mirthfully. "They will still be drinking blood. You just have to locate them."

Emma looked at her mentor with the facial equivalent of the phrase 'you have got to be fucking kidding me'. Then she sighed in defeat and turned to her closet. She noticed that there were some new additions she didn't pick herself.

"The hell?"

"I suppose Daisy has been shopping on your behalf."

There were some beautiful dresses, all of them revealing to

some extent.

"I'll leave you to change, then," David smiled and left Emma's room.

Emma nodded, never taking her eyes off the dresses. Picking one, she went to get a shower and apply make-up.



"Got it, boss," William said, and then went outside. David turned around to go and see how far along Emma was, but he saw her standing at the foot of the stairs leading up to the first floor.

"Wow," David said with a look of astonishment. "You look..." but he couldn't find the right words to describe the vision that stood before him.

The black wrap dress reached just under the mid of her thighs, and the neckline dipped deep, revealing her cleavage. Her arms and shoulders were left bare, and she wore black open toe, ankle strapped shoes. It fit her perfectly, and the make-up was on point. Just enough to accentuate her facial features and make her blue eyes seem so much more blue, and her lips so much more inviting.

"If you look at me more intensely, I just might go up in flames," Emma joked with a smirk on her face.

David redirected his eyes to hers, and grinned.

"You don't know just how true that statement is," he commented.

"What, you could!?"

"Where do you think John learned to conjure fire?" he said with a grin, then held out his arm for her to take.

Emma smiled and took it. They walked out of the warehouse, and got into the sleek, black and shiny Tesla that stood outside.

“You care about the environment?” Emma joked.

“To an extent, but it’s much quieter and harder to hear at distances.”

“Right. Utility first.”

“Not always.”



When Emma stepped into the club, it was packed with people, yet not uncomfortably so. It was still early, though, so more might come in. Emma had been surprised when David pulled them past the line and the bouncer had let them in when he recognized David.

“What was up with the bouncer?” she asked David over the loud music, playing some Alan Walker remix.

“Daisy and I co-own this club,” he replied.

“Really!?”

“Yeah. Daisy owns a large clothes’ brand, and I have major holdings in a lot of Fortune 500 companies.”

“Shit! You’re much more loaded than I thought!”

“Have you seen the clothes in your closet? Combined, it could easily buy the Tesla.”

“WHAT!?” Emma’s eyes widened. “You didn’t h—”

“No, but I wanted to. Besides, what else would I spend money on? We have guns, we have knives, ammunition isn’t terribly expensive and our vehicles can easily be sold. Marcel

sold me the warehouse we work in, and I make more in a week than most lawyers make in a year. To top it off, vampires don't need food, and since we don't sweat, we don't have to shower nearly as often as humans."

"Do you even need to shower?"

"Only when I get to roll in mud, or I get covered in blood."

David looked around to find a spot for them to sit in.

"Mr. Kane, sir, I would be happy to show you to the VIP lounge!" a hostess came up to them and shouted over the loud music with a big smile on her face.

"No thank you, Lisa!" David replied just as loud. "My friend and I would like to mingle tonight! Thank you very much, though!"

Lisa nodded and walked away, probably to get a better overview over the large room. It was filled with tables with nice leather sofas encircling them, allowing for private conversation. The bar was luxurious, with black marble top and high-end barstools. A couple of bartenders in black shirts were swiftly working drinks while conversing with the patrons, and people were dancing around on the dancefloor. David took Emma by the hand, which made her blush lightly. He then gently pulled her towards the bar.

"Mr. Kane! What can I get you!?" a female bartender asked cheerfully whilst pouring a drink to another patron.

"A Bloody Mary, and something sweet for the lady!"

The bartender nodded and went to work.

"Let me guess," Emma leant up to David's ear and started saying as quietly as she could, while still talking loudly

enough that David could hear her. She had completely forgotten the fact that David could have heard her even if she whispered normally, “Bloody Mary’s are actually bloody?”

David smiled at her and leant down to whisper in her ear as well.

“Not the ones they make for humans. Every member of staff is a ghoul of Daisy’s. That’s why she often leaves for a few hours. She manages most of the business of the club, whilst I provide the money to pay for everything. Those for Kindred, though, yes. Now, start looking for the others.”

Emma nodded, indicating she understood what he’d said, and started looking around. She saw couples practically sucking each other’s faces off, men sitting at tables where almost naked women danced sensually, practically throwing money at them. A few people sat for themselves, likely spying someone they knew. But Emma couldn’t find any sign of a vampire.

“Her you go, Mr. Kane!” the young bartender practically yelled as she put both drinks on the disk. “On the house!”

“Thank you, Sarah!” he yelled back, and placed a fifty-dollar bill on the table. “Keep it! The house is on me, anyway!”

David sent the girl a smile that would make practically anyone swoon, and the girl responded with a heavy blush and shy smile. David then handed Emma her drink and put his arm on her lower back as he gently guided her to a vacant table. They sat down and Emma started scanning the crowd for any of the three NightBlade members she was supposed to find.

“I told them not to get Bloody Mary’s so you would have a little easier time finding them,” David said as he leant in. “Only a small handful of clubs in the world serve drinks Cainites can consume, so until you can find them quickly, they won’t be having drinks to mask their presence.”

Emma nodded and kept looking, now relieved that a powerful variable in the search for ‘x’ had been put out of play.

Not her, she’s too shy. He’s too flamboyant. She’s too slutty, neither Catherine nor Daisy would ever wear that. He’s too proper to be William.

It was proving far more challenging than she’d thought, even when they wouldn’t be touching drinks.

It’s too dark in h—

“David, do any of them have the same glowing eyes you do? That power that lets them see perfectly in the dark?”

David smiled a small smile of pride.

“They all do,” he said and let his own eyes glow bright red.

Emma was slightly captivated by them, but she tore her gaze away to look for the others. She saw a lot of glowing eyes, now that she thought about it.

Glowing contacts. Shit.

“Is it limited to red?”

“Yes.”

She looked again, and saw maybe a handful glowing, red eyes. More than three, but fewer than ten.

If I focus on those, I may spot them.

One of them was a rather handsome young man sitting with another man. They were gently caressing each other, relishing the light touches and building tension. There were two glasses on the table in front of them, but one of them was empty, and the other was untouched. Emma stared at the man with the glowing eyes.

Pale, skinny, doesn't drink, glowing eyes. That's William.

Emma reached her hand over and put it on David's thigh, right above his knee. She squeezed lightly twice. David looked at her expectantly, and followed her gaze when she looked back at the young man. David smiled, and just as he did, the young-looking man gazed directly into Emma's eyes for a second, before leaning over and opening his mouth. Two prominent fangs were revealed for merely a second, and then they slowly and gently pierced the skin of the semi-drunk boy's throat. William put his hand on the other side of the boy's neck and pulled him close.

The scene was making Emma feel strange, though. The way William handled his target, his *food*, was like one would treat a lover. Gentle, intoxicating and sexual. The human boy was growing hard, and started reaching under William's blood-red shirt...

Never thought of that...

The couple scooted closer to each other, and when William released the throat he was suckling on, he licked it slowly. The human shivered and started rubbing William's crotch, clearly liking it. William then pulled the guy's mouth to his own, and they started kissing.

Emma was starting to see William, and frankly vampires in general, in a new light. Seeing a vampire feed...it was...it

felt like watching porn to her. Illegal, taboo porn, but porn nonetheless.

“You see now why we Cainites can never be truly good people?” David asked whilst staring at William and his vessel as well.

“No,” Emma said confused. “It looks like it’s...nice.”

David turned his eyes to look into hers.

“It is. But not for the reasons you might think.”

“Then why?”

“Feeding is the only necessity for our existence. And sure, it doesn’t hinder our performances all that much, but in the end, drinking a human’s blood is an ecstasy unlike any drug. It’s a high that lasts for a while, and we always want more. Younger vampires often go on feeding frenzies, simply because they lack the strength of will or self-control to restrain themselves. Have you ever tried drugs, Emma? Of any kind?”

“I’ve been drunk,” she offered.

“Alright, then. Imagine getting a decent buzz every time you eat or drink. Imagine rarely having the clarity of mind a sober person does.”

“You make it sound like vampires are alcoholics,” she laughed a little and sipped at her drink.

“In some ways, we are. And there’s absolutely nothing we can do about it, other than die.”

For some reason, David stared sounding... emotional? Emma was surprised when he turned his body to face her and leant a little closer.

“Imagine never knowing if what you feel is because of your own emotions, or the pleasure of the feed you had a few minutes ago. Imagine that you’re never really sober, even hours after you had your last drink.”

Emma became uncomfortable as he seemed to become sad, an emotion she never seen mar his face.

“Imagine caring for someone, and never knowing if you care about them because their blood smells so delicious to you, or because of your own volition. Imagine feeding off a beloved, and then realizing that you’ve drunk all their blood, and you now hold on to their lifeless corpse.”

Emma tried backing away, but David grabbed her wrists.

“Have you ever heard the expression ‘sex can easily become rape’?” he asked her.

She nodded, her eyes wide and her racing heart beating like a machine gun.

“Feeding can so **very** easily become murder, or obsession. Not to mention that feeding can be considered the worst kind of rape there is.”

Emma was scared now, but David didn’t seem to notice, or just didn’t care.

“Emma, understand that we Cainites can **never** be good people! Every time we feed, which we **have** to do to survive, we put another’s life, feelings and mind at risk! The Kiss is a drug, and it isn’t a natural addiction! We ruin lives all too easily just by existing, and there is no way around it!”

“David, you’re hurting me!” she said, her wrists feeling like they were about to break.

David looked at their hands, and released them with a guilty look on his face.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. He stood up and sent her a last glance. Emma swore she saw blood on his face, but he turned away and left. Emma was left, scared of David's behavior. But what he had said was resounding in her head. Emma rubbed her wrists and looked back to where William had sat, but she saw only the boy he'd been with.

And he wasn't moving.

Emma stood up and started pushing her way past people between herself and the boy's table. People were yelling at her, but soon forgot and stopped caring. She quickly reached the table and reached out for the boy. A strong hand grabbed her already sore wrist, and she looked at the owner of said hand. It was William, now looking like his usual self. Behind him were two large men, likely bouncers.

"What are you doing?" he asked coldly.

"Did you kill him!?" she shouted at the old vampire.

"Yes," he casually said. "Now, what are you doing?"

She tried pulling her hand to herself, and William let go. She almost punched herself as a result.

"You can't just kill him!" she shouted again.

William wasn't amused.

"Sure I can. I did," he gestured to the corpse, and the two men grabbed the boy's lifeless body and left.

"Let him go! Call the police!"

"If I did that, I would be breaking the Masquerade, *idiot*."

“Who cares! You committed murder!”

Emma was teetering on the edge of despair and rage. A boy had been killed in cold blood, didn't anyone care!?

“On a mortal. Which means, no one cares as long as I get rid of the evidence.”

“I CARE!”

“Too bad I don't care that you do,” William said and walked after the big fellows carrying the boy.

Emma felt nauseous. She'd witnessed a murder, and seen the killer talk about it like it was as obvious as the sun rising every day! And that poor boy! What about his life!? His dreams!? Everything he wanted to achieve, everything he wanted to experience! GONE! His parents!? THEY'D NEVER KNOW!

Emma slumped to the floor on her knees. She saw a few small pools of liquid under the table. She put her fingers to it and pulled it to her to see what it was. When she realized what it was, she almost threw up right then and there.

Blood.

A dead teen's blood.

She stood up and rushed through the crowd to get to the bathroom. She reached it and into a stall just in time to pull her hair out of the way and emptied her stomach into the toilet bowl. Her breathing was ragged, her heart racing and her body trembling. Letting out another wave of stomach content, she felt sweat breaking out of her skin, cold sweat. Tears started pooling in her eyes and soon trailed down her face. She started sobbing, her mind going back to the lovely

teen boy's face, how happy he looked before William fed from him. Before William KILLED him!

Emma, having no more to vomit, fell to her side and started crying heavily. For the boy's friends. For the boy's schoolmates. His family. And his future, and himself. Emma couldn't stop the cries or the tears, she couldn't keep herself from shaking. She felt cold, empty. Using toilet paper, she wiped her mouth and chin before throwing it into the bowl. She closed the lid and flushed it, the sound not completely negating her ragged breathing, and ending far too soon.

I CAN'T STOP SHAKING! she screamed internally, sending curses and evil thoughts William's way. And then she realized exactly what it was David had been trying to tell her, despite her ignorance, and maybe even subconscious unwillingness to face the truth: he had done the same, many times. John had done the same, many times. Aiden, and Catherine, and Daisy and Symond had all done the same, many times. Every vampire had done the same, so many, many times.

"This wasn't an exercise in locating vampires, was it?" she quietly asked the air in the room, now smelling faintly of processed food and stomach acid. "It was seeing if I could handle murder."

"Exactly," she heard David say, and turned slowly to look at him, standing by the sink across from the stall she was using. His arms were crossed, and his face as if set in stone. Gone was the desp—

"This was all..." she tried to speak, to express her revelation, but she couldn't finish.

“A simple ruse, designed to make you witness murder up-close, and gauge your response to it. People speak somewhat lightly of death and murder. Some still do after they’ve seen it. Some break, and can never fully heal. I hope you are one of the former.”

David held no emotion on his face. Emma was starting to wonder if this was his mask, or if his usual, casual, friendly and somewhat outgoing demeanor was.

“Why would you do this?” she asked with a hoarse voice, her gaze leaving David and resting on the wall of the toilet stall.

“You said you wanted to be part of this,” he said. He didn’t sound harsh, or berating. His voice was as cold and calculated as his face. Not too quiet, not too loud. Void of any emotion, but not sadistic or psychotic. Just the perfect neutrality of nothingness. “Murder happens every day. More often than not, it’s from natural causes. But every vampire has, at one point or another, killed a human. It might have been an accident. It might have been caused by carelessness. Maybe a Ventrue Embraced a bank-managing husband who wanted to go home to his family, only to frenzy when his five-year-old daughter cut herself on the paper of her coloring book by accident, causing him to rip her and his wife to shreds to drink their blood.” David walked over and knelt down beside Emma. Emma scooted a little further away from him. “Now you know just a fraction of what he must have felt when the Beast calmed down. He definitely felt even worse. Maybe he couldn’t take the grief, and walked out into the sun. Maybe a Brujah liked a rebellious teen girl, and turned her. Maybe she called him a sicko, a freak or a son of a bitch. Maybe he took offence

to that. Maybe he bound her with his blood, just to keep her around. Maybe she went so insane from being forced into loving a man she hated for years, that she frenzied when they visited her parents. She tore the kind and loving people who raised her, and her two younger brothers and sisters, just because the circumstances her sire had forced her into made her lash out with a temper that wasn't even hers to begin with."

Emma had started crying again, but David's face remained unmoved. As if nothing could actually tug the strings of his heart. As if the strings had been cut long ago.

"You're insane," Emma managed to croak out between her sobs. "You're fucking nuts."

"I'm not insane, Emma," David said. "I'm a monster."

Emma started pulling her hair, clench her jaws and try to stifle the cries and the tears, but they just – wouldn't – stop!

"Only monsters can survive in this world, Emma. This is a dark world, far darker than you've ever known. And to become a monster, you have to be broken. I told you that once you started down this rabbit hole, there was no way out. Even if you decide you want nothing to do with this world, you now know what's out there. You know of the monsters waiting for nightfall so they can come out and play. Your life will never be as it was. Whether you like it or not, the old Emma is dead and gone, just like that boy out there." David made a gesture to the door leading to the larger room that was the actual club. He studied the young woman he had sworn his existence to protect. A single twitch of his right eye was the only sign that he was saddened by the girl's breakdown, and Emma didn't see it.

“I gave you an out. But you chose this. Now, you will have to show your resolve, and stick by your choice.”

Emma cried for minutes upon minutes, until after half an hour, she had no more tears to shed. She looked up at David with red, puffy eyes and her make-up smeared all over her face. She looked long and hard into his eyes.

“So you can kill anyone, without feeling any kind of remorse?” she said, her vocal chords practically torn from all the crying and screaming.

For the first time since their talk about locating a vampire, David cracked a small smile.

“I can’t kill children,” he admitted. “My heart isn’t hard and cold enough for that.”

He stared into her eyes for moments that seemed like hours to both of them. Then he reached out and used his finger to wipe away some of the tears on her face.

“And I could never kill you. Even if you began hating me and spent the rest of your life trying to kill me. Even if you made someone turn you into a vampire specifically so you could spend eternity trying to kill me, I wouldn’t raise my hands to defend myself. I care too much about you for that.”

Those words, to Emma, sounded more genuine than any she had ever heard before in her life.

“So why would you do that to me?” she asked sadly, her voice quivering and broken, and one final tear managing its way out of her tear canal. “How could you put me through this?”

“I want you to be strong, and more than capable of defending yourself for when I’m no longer around. Because vampires with extraordinary perceptual powers can receive glimpses of the future,” he explained to her, suddenly somber, and his voice and eyes communicated to her that he was feeling some sad feeling. Maybe it was regret. Or resignation, more like? “And I have seen my own death coming in the near future.”

Emma was worn out, emotionally and mentally. But hearing David, the **invincible** Red Alastor who hunts the world’s most dangerous vampires because he ‘gets bored’, admit that his death was coming was the last push. With an expression of sadness and fear etched on her face, she passed out against the side of the stall, her mind no longer capable of remaining active with all the trauma she had experienced that night.

David noticed it, but didn’t do anything for a while. He just sat there beside her, watching her intently as his mind raced with all the thoughts. On one hand, once he died he would be free from this world of darkness that had taken its toll on him for millennia. On the other, he would be leaving Emma behind, a thought that brought him no more joy than going to Hell, though he’d resigned himself to that possibility. He had become more fond of her than he’d expected. No, it wasn’t the same way he had been fond of Katherine, but David knew the potential for it was there.

Sadly.

David was less than excited about the idea of a woman taking the place Katherine had filled, even if that other woman was a descendant of hers. But the heart wants what

the heart desires. He just hoped it wouldn't come to that. Returning to the present, David reached over and picked Emma up like she was a pillow. He carried her out of the bathroom, out of the club and back to his car.



Emma woke up, and she felt hungry. She lazily sat up, tired as all hell, and bother her eyes and throat were sore. She looked over to the alarm clock, and saw that it was noon.

Great, none of the others are up. Guess I'll just read, or something.

She got out of bed, and then saw a black dress thrown in the laundry basket. She also saw shoes beside her door. Then, everything that happened the night before came back to her, and she started feeling nauseous again. She knew she didn't have any more to throw up, but she still felt so bad. She walked over to the door, and then realized that she was wearing a tank top and somewhat oversized pajamas pants. She didn't even own pajamas.

Oh, God.

She went over to her mirror and saw that all traces of makeup and vomit were gone. She didn't feel a bra, and when she pulled the pants a little out to look, she wasn't wearing underwear, either.

Oh God.

She lifted her arm and sniffled lightly at the pit. No trace of all the cold sweat from the night prior. Which meant someone had bathed her while she was unconscious. Emma stood in her room, holding her hand over her face and cursing David for what he put her through last night, but at the same time, she was a little grateful that he considered

her comfort. Waking up sweaty and with vomit in her mouth would have thoroughly sucked.

Emma left her room and walked downstairs. The entire place was dark, but over the four months of her stay, she had gotten used to darkness and had learned to see much better in it, though she didn't see as well as a vampire, far from it. The small, dim lights David had made Symond place everywhere didn't make it worse, either. And she was very surprised to see David standing in the middle of the large, empty hall which was used for shooting range, workout area and general lounging space.

"I assume you bathed me," she spoke, her coarse throat making her sound raspy. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

David smirked.

"You're welcome. I thought you might be uncomfortable sleeping the same way you were when I carried you inside."

Emma nodded. She walked over to him slowly, unsure of what she was about to do. David noticed the uncertainty, but didn't comment on it. Soon, she was right in front of David. She never really considered his height, but standing in front of him, she realized that he was only a few inches taller than her. He always seemed taller. Probably due to her seeing him as a powerful creature protecting and teaching her. Now, she knew he was well and truly a monster, and that put him lower than her opinion of him had been before. But he was no less important. She wrapped her arms around his midsection and put her face to the crook of his neck.

"I don't hate you," she whispered. "And I don't want you to die."

David smiled warmly and returned the hug.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

They just stood there and relished the sensation.



French Quarter, New Orleans

May 28th, 2015

David guided Emma over to a couch and sat them both down. Emma positioned herself so she was using David as a pillow, and David started gently caressing her hair.

“How can you be up so late? I thought vampires had to sleep during the day?”

“Well, the daysleep is a powerful force all Cainites contend with. I have spent centuries mastering techniques that allow me to resist many of our weaknesses and shortcomings. Fire poses little real threat to me, unless it’s something like molten metal. That is just too hot. And the sun doesn’t really put me to sleep, but I do get tired, so I usually just give in. You’ve seen how I react to sunlight, though. Nasty thing, that is.” Emma nodded absently. “Other than that, I very rarely frenzy. I can’t recall having succumbed to the Beast since Katherine was killed. And I can usually resist the urge to feed until I’m at the brink of falling into torpor, but sometimes,” he paused, and sent a hungry look at Emma’s pulsating carotid artery, “the hunger becomes too much.”

“Are you hungry now?” Emma asked quietly.

David nodded against the top of her head.

“I haven’t fed in a week.”

“Can I come with you? See how you feed?” she asked even quieter after a few moments of silence.

David nodded again.

“Don’t worry. I don’t usually kill my prey. None of us in NightBlade do.”

“Last night was just to make sure I could handle this.”

Nod.

“And life is insignificant to you.”

“No. It just isn’t a major concern. I value life. I just didn’t necessarily value that boy’s life.”

“What about his parents?”

“Orphan.”

Emma raised her head and looked at him with shock.

“Siblings?”

“Only child,” he replied.

Emma grew more and more confused.

“Any living relatives?”

“None.”

“How about school?”

“Dropped out of college two years ago.”

Emma’s eyes widened, and her breath got caught in her

throat.

“Job?”

“Garbage disposal. Hated it.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Gay and single.”

“Friends?”

“Loner, none.”

“Drug habits?”

“Four, can’t for the life of me remember what X called them.”

“Alcoholic?”

“Slave to the bottle.”

Emma fell back against David, not believing what she was hearing.

“Suicide attempts?”

“Seven, three by excessive self-medication of illegal substances.”

“You deliberately picked someone who didn’t have anything to live for. Someone who had actively tried to take his own life.”

“And he was a serial rapist and murderer.”

Emma slapped her hands to her face and started breathing rapidly.

“So you picked a fucking scum, and let me believe he was just an innocent boy!?”

“I thought you might react like that. I wanted you to understand, that perception defines your reality. Had you known all that, would you have broken down like you did last night?”

“Of course fucking not!”

“Exactly my point. When you thought he was a child with an entire life to live, you were so sad and felt such guilt and regret. But once you found out who he was, you turned and felt glad that such scum was put down.”

David placed his hand under her chin and made her look into his eyes.

“When I was a boy, I was on the receiving end of harsh treatment and painful lessons. So, when I became strong enough to deal out death and pain, I relished in it. I became a sadist, a tyrant. It wasn’t until my mother taught me how precious life **can** be, that I started weighing my opinion on whether or not I **should** kill. I think some meditation on what you witnessed, how that made you feel, and what you feel now that you know the facts, would help you immensely.”

Emma felt the anger rising up in her die. He was right. When she thought he’d been a random, innocent kid, she’d been devastated. But when she learned the truth, it was all thrown out of the window because he was massive dick. Emma started feeling ashamed of herself.

“Alright,” she said quietly and leant close to him again.

“Good,” he smiled. “For all intents and purposes, I suppose you could say that I’m teaching you how to become a monster. But I rather see it as teaching you a way to cope

with death efficiently.”

“I understand.”

David kissed the top of her head.

“I’m glad you do.”



Emma and David were sitting on a rooftop overlooking Bourbon Street.

“Do you have any preferences?” Emma asked him as she roughly scanned the crowd.

“Young people. Gender doesn’t matter, but I prefer women.”

“Feminists would take offence to that,” Emma snorted with suppressed laughter.

David cast her a confused glance.

“You don’t follow the news?” she inquired.

“Not particularly, no.”

“America’s going crazy with redefining feminism.”

“I was under the assumption it was a movement to grant women the same rights as men. They achieved that years ago.”

“Yeah, well,” she chuckled, “some women don’t see it like that. They spout ‘facts,’” she made air-quotations at the word, “that aren’t an issue anymore. What they really want is female superiority. A society dominated by women.”

David couldn’t help the amused snort.

“If that happened, nothing would ever get done.”

Emma looked at him with a ‘fuck you’ glare.

“It would have been a good thing centuries ago, when women saw through the bullshit men created to keep their power, rather than further development, don’t get me wrong. But women are starting to think they are better leaders than men, and that is plainly wrong eighty percent of the time.”

“Why?”

“Because every good, female leader I’ve ever witnessed always had the strength and ruthlessness of a man, and the cunning and intelligence of a woman. The best of both genders. Most women I’ve seen in the past forty years or so have been sheep compared to those women.”

To Emma, it sounded like David actually admired women who were like that. More than any man who was strong and vicious, but lacked the wisdom to become something.

“Katherine was like that,” Emma said without warning.

David turned to look at her again with a smile.

“She was. First time I saw her after the massacre was in a tavern. A few men were chasing her skirt. She left them near death with her bare hands,” David said with a wide smile.

“She was absolutely brilliant. The strength of a lion, the speed of a cheetah. The wits and smarts of a world-class conman, and the charm and beauty of an angel. To me, she represented humanity’s best traits.”

“Right,” Emma muttered. “There.”

Emma pointed at a young woman, twenty-five at most. Blond, nice curves, probably doing sports almost every day

if the six-pack visible because of her crop-top was anything to go by.

“Nicely spotted, young grasshopper,” David said with an approving grin.

Emma saw him focus on the woman, and suddenly, the girl stopped, and started walking into the alley right beside them. David got up and slowly made his way along the roof to follow her. Once she was so far into the dark alley that no one would see, David sent Emma a small smirk, mouthed ‘watch’, and stepped out from the roof. Emma rushed over to where he dropped from, and saw him falling. Instead of crashing against the ground, which Emma admittedly would have thought would be morbidly hilarious to watch, he landed with skill and precision right behind the woman. He spun and kicked her legs away from under her. She toppled over, but right before she hit the ground, David caught her and put a hand to her mouth. He then swiftly bit into her throat and started drinking.

Emma was fascinated by the show of skill. He seemed so fluid, Emma doubted any terrain would slow him down at all. Soon, he released her throat, and Emma caught the small lick he put to her throat where he’d bitten her. He then carefully laid her down and stood back up. He looked up at Emma with a grin, and there wasn’t a drop of blood staining his lips or chin, but just a little on his fangs. He then quickly and efficiently climbed up the seemingly flat wall by grabbing onto things feet apart and jumping.

“And that,” he said as he climbed over the edge of the roof, “is how it’s done. Fast, quiet, non-lethal. She’ll wake up in an hour or two feeling a little ‘wheezy’, but she’ll be alright.”

Emma was astonished. She had never seen anything like it. Even top gymnasts she'd seen weren't that fluid and quick.

"That was amazing!" she exclaimed. "How long did it take you to move like that!?"

"A few centuries, give or take some decades," David said cheerfully. He leant back and stretched with a happy look on his face. "I feel so much better now! She was a one-in-a-million! The richness, the flavour, the fullness! So good!"

Emma was a little weirded out by him talking about the woman's blood as if it were a fine wine, but she would get used to it.

"Could you teach me to move like that?" she asked.

"Only if you become a Cainite," he said with a small look of sadness. "Sorry, Emma."

She still nodded, even if she was a little let down.

"But I can teach you things no gymnastics teacher can. It will be tough, though. Really tough, and it will take time and effort."

"I'd like that," Emma responded with a smile. "You feeling full?"

"Yes, I am!"

"Great. Can we go fill me up now, then?"

"Oh, right. Sorry," David apologized with a sheepish smile.



Once again, Emma and David were sitting in Jackson Square. This time, Emma was enjoying a slice of pizza. David had expressed his concern with the health issues that

might arise from it, but Emma had shot him down with a stare that said ‘don’t you dare take my pizza’.

“Besides, smoking’s bad too,” Emma had countered.

“I’m dead. How can it possibly hurt me?”

They sat in silence after that. Emma ate her slice, and David puffed away at a cigarette. Emma had come to terms with David’s admittedly harsh way of teaching her how to deal with death, so the silence wasn’t awkward or tense. It was actually rather pleasant. Once she finished eating, she threw the cardboard plate in the trash can, and David handed her a napkin, which she used to wipe her hands and mouth. After that, he offered her a cigarette, and she happily took it.

“Tomorrow, Marie D’Richet will be signing a blood contract. You’ll likely only see her very rarely, ever again,” David said. “And you will have nothing to fear from her.”

“How?”

“Blood contracts are magically created, signed and enforced contracts the Tremere invented to make sure everyone would actually stand by their words. If one of the terms is broken, anything could happen. One, I saw, went up in flames without warning. Another just started decaying into dust.” David suddenly smiled widely. “I even saw something that looked incredibly similar to Christian views of an angel materialize and smite him! It was really weird, and I was completely blown away by it, but it was honestly quite amusing.”

“You’ve seen an angel?”

“I very strongly doubt it was an actual angel.”

“Do actual angels exist?”

“They might. I’ve met creatures claiming to be fallen angels, but I’ve never seen an actual angel. That I know of, at least.”

“I see.”

They had another cigarette, and just made small-talk and casual conversation. Well, as casual as discussing magical phenomena and occult theorem with the purpose of actually practicing magic could be considered.



Three days ago, Marcel had been relieved that David would spare Marie if she signed a contract, but that was dashed when David had said ‘blood contract’. Marcel had to know what that was. Which was what had led him to standing in front of an apartment building the Garden District. A building Sebastian Walcott, the city’s most well-known Tremere, had designated as the Tremere chantry in New Orleans.

Please don’t tell me it’s worse than a blood bond.

With that final thought, he walked up to the front door and knocked.

Nothing.

He knocked again, a little harder this time.

Still nothing.

Finally, he slammed on the door, and he heard a loud crash of porcelain from the first floor window, which Marcel noted to have been removed and then boarded up, and was probably covered with a blanket from the inside.

“GOD DAMNIT, FUCKING SHIT, MOTHERF—” Marcel heard various curses and profanities that eluded even his understanding of the English, or even French and Spanish, and heard loud stomping coming down a set of stairs. Soon, the door opened to reveal a very attractive, young-looking man with reddish-blond hair, green eyes, and a clean-shaven chin. He wore comfortable everyday garb that might have been fashionable in the early 19th century. Marcel recognized him as Sebastian.

“Good evening, Sebastian,” Marcel greeted politely with a kindly smile.

“Evenin’, Marcel. Can I help you?” he asked, skipping the niceties and getting straight to the point. Though Marcel always got a bad taste in his mouth from the lack of respect, he admired Sebastian’s straightforwardness, usual honesty and willingness to help him with odd things. If marginally so.

“I have come to receive your consultation on a small matter. May I come in?”

Sebastian looked at Marcel for a little, then opened the door and walked inside. Marcel stepped in and closed the door behind himself, and then followed the strange Kindred.

“David Kane has been harassed the past couple of months, and he desires the offender to sign something called a ‘blood contract’. Can you tell me what that is?”

Sebastian stopped walking, and turned around with a surprised look on his face.

“A blood contr— wait! David Kane!” he asked with astonishment.

“Yes. Will you please inform me?”

Sebastian put his hands to his head for a little, his eyes widening with amazement. Then he stormed into an adjacent room, followed by Marcel.

“What is it?” Marcel asked, now getting a little concerned.

Sebastian perused the bookshelves filled with books and tomes, and stopped at one that seemed particularly old. He hesitated a little before he pulled it out, and then carried it over to the table where he plopped it down. In Marcel’s opinion, the sound of the book hitting the table was far louder than the sound any book should make when thrown on a table. Sebastian opened it to the preface and stared at the writing, then stood back and gestured for Marcel to read it. Suspicious of the Tremere, Marcel cautiously walked over and leant over the table to read the text. Had his face been regularly colored, it would most certainly have gone pale.

Rites Of The Blood

*A Treatise on the Nature and Practice of the
advanced Magickal Properties of the Cainite
Vitae throughout the Ages, and Instructions on
how best to apply them.*

*Completed by David Kane in Jerusalem
December 14th, The Year of Our Lord 1103*

Marcel kept staring on the page.

“1103?” he muttered to himself.

"I thought the name rang a bell!" Sebastian started pacing rapidly. "I knew I'd read it somewhere! Only one copy of this manuscript was ever written! I dug it out of a tomb in the old Mason's tunnel network in Boston, walled off from the rest of the system! I **had** to get it bound in leather! This tome has been so helpful in my studies!"

Marcel couldn't care less about the book. David had written this? He flipped through the first few pages, which described some of his travels, the things he had learnt and seen, and the different varieties of Kindred magic he'd come to know of.

"I **have** to meet Master Kane, I **have** to learn more about him!" Sebastian kept rambling.

"So, where does it describe blood contracts?" Marcel asked over his shoulder, never taking his eyes off the book.

"Oh, here," Sebastian said as he walked to Marcel's side and flipped through the book, eventually landing on a few pages describing the trial and error of the blood contract.

"Thanks," Marcel mumbled, starting to read through the description of the spell's creation, and how to perform it once it had been completed. It would seem that David created the spell for the Tremere in return for a major boon, but it never went into detail on what that boon entailed.

"Can I borrow this for two days?" Marcel asked Sebastian over his shoulder.

"If you'll introduce me to David Kane, then yes, you may," Sebastian replied, star struck with the possibility of meeting such a master of Cainite blood sorcery.

"Great, thank you," Marcel replied and headed for the

door.

This... this is big! Now I can finally learn some things about David!



David entered Marcel's mansion and looked around, trying to locate the owner of the plantation. In his hand was a piece of parchment with red writing on it.

"Marcel! I'm here!" he called out. "Let's get this over with!"

"Let's," he heard Marcel's voice from the balcony above.

David looked up and saw Marcel wearing a very serious expression. David instantly knew that something was wrong. He walked up the stairs to the first floor and entered Marcel's study. He looked around at the people in the study.

Karen Chartry, a Ventrue born and Embraced in the mid-1700's in Italy. A cunning politician and skilled manipulator, Karen had arrived in New Orleans in the 40's to gain power and influence. She used the vast sums of money she had acquired through various means to make generous donations to the various schools and universities of New Orleans. It was no secret among the general Kindred populace that she craved princedom of New Orleans.

Sebastian Walcott, the miserable and psychotic Tremere who was desperate in gaining his clan's approval, especially because neither his own, nor his sire's Embraces were sanctioned. Sebastian had been a hopeful, but spectacularly unsuccessful, occultist in life, and one of the elixirs he had tried creating in life had rendered him hallucinogenic and maniacal. He was actually rather known among mortals as a rich, young man willing to donate sizeable sums to any

political party.

The Nosferatu Avery, childe of Lawrence Meeks, was a gifted spy, and a valuable asset to Meeks' network. Though she was a loner, David had seen her twirl people around her finger when she went out in a supernatural disguise. Curiously, though, it seemed that rather than focusing on Kindred intelligence, she focused on mortal affairs.

The idealistic Brujah, Dutch, came to New Orleans around 1950. He had hopes of turning New Orleans into a second coming of Carthage, the sacred haven for Cainites once upon a mythological time. He'd killed the previous leader of the city's Brujah, and enforced a new clan structure. Those who didn't comply were exiled or destroyed, whichever Dutch fancied most at the time. He'd once vied for the princedom right after Prince Doran's assassination, but quickly found out that Marcel had already secured the position. Now, he was more interested in securing Marcel's vision for the city, according to David's sources, but if there came a time when the seat of the Prince would become vacant...

These four individuals, making up the Prince's Council of advisors, rather than a Primogen council, were seated on either side of Marcel, behind his desk. Marie was standing behind Marcel, and in either corner of the room behind David stood Anthony and Christopher.

Christopher was Marcel's first childe, and generally a great disappointment. He disobeyed his sire, rebelled against the established order with a vengeance, and thought everything was owed to him. Marcel had practically given up on the boy until Christopher had modified his behavior. It was

slight at first, but Christopher had become much more obedient.

Anthony had been Marcel's deterrent to make Christopher change. In frustration over his first child's failed indoctrination, Marcel had sired Anthony to be able to take Christopher's place if the Brujah—esque Ventrue fledgling decided to stray just a little too far. Anthony obeyed every order and was almost a carbon-copy of Marcel in terms of personality. Typically, when the Prince was away or unavailable, the Seneschal would rule in his stead. That was the established norm of the Camarilla. But David knew that in New Orleans, when Marcel was unavailable, it was Anthony rather than Marie who ran all of Marcel's businesses. And Marie rarely wanted to listen to Anthony's short lectures, preferring to wait until Marcel came back.

"So, the Council has assembled, has it?" David asked humorlessly. "What's the occasion?"

Marcel stood up from his chair and made his way around his desk and leant up against it with folded arms and a serious look on his face, though David noted that, interestingly, his eyes looked a little glazed and unfocused.

Hoooh? This is certainly unexpected...

"This is about you, David," Marcel said calmly, and David noticed the very rudimentary attempt at conveying emotions truthfully.

Oh, Marcel. I thought you would be cleverer than that.

"What about me?" David asked and handed Marcel the parchment, which Marcel took without question.

"There are some questions I need answered, and I would

rather spare having to relay the information several times,” the Prince said and gestured to his assembled Council.

David’s observations with regards to mental influence by Kindred were wrong so rarely, even accusing him of having made a mistake was seen as obscene among his Alastors. And it was blatantly obvious to David that a Cainite had been manipulating Marcel through domination. But who would do it? Usurping princedom wasn’t something that any sane Kindred would want to do in New Orleans. Marcel had made too many deals to protect his subjects, and if he were suddenly dethroned, sorcerers and the New Orleans Special Task Force would jump at the vampires. Furthermore, the cells of Setites positioned throughout the city would quickly gather up their mortal followers and start a small inquisition to take out all other Kindred in the city. All of those things would be extremely major breaches of The Masquerade, something David as a Red Alastor could not allow. He would have to weed out this action of insurrection quickly, before news of real vampires in New Orleans spread across North America, and fairly quickly to the rest of the world.

“Very well,” David indulged the puppet Prince for the time being. “What questions?”

“First, there is the matter of the Lupines in the bayou,” Marcel began. “What did you do to them?”

David was quiet for a little while.

“They had no intention of calming down, and they attacked me. So I killed them.”

“You killed them?”

"I killed them."

"Preposterous," came the haughty and sultry voice of Karen. "No Kindred could go toe-to-toe with a whole tribe of Lupines on their own and emerge victorious."

"Not a whole tribe, no," David agreed. "But that wasn't a tribe. It was a sept."

"A what?" Sebastian asked, confused.

"Lupine tribes are similar to Kindred clans, with different customs, traditions and specific traits," David calmly explained. "A sept is like a Kindred-held city. There's a certain number of inhabitants depending on the environment and available space. Going against a whole tribe is impossible, yes, but that is like saying one Kindred against all Ventrue in the world."

"So how many were there in this 'sept'?" Marcel inquired.

"Twenty-four, but only a minority of them were Lupines. The rest were kinfolk, most like."

Marcel looked at David expectantly.

"Kin of Lupines who didn't turn themselves. Almost like ghouls without powers. They are mostly used as breeding stock for Lupines."

"So how many of them were Lupines?" Dutch asked lazily.

"Seven."

"And you killed them all? By yourself?"

"I've faced Anathema centuries old," David shrugged. "I few Lupines aren't that difficult to kill."

The Council all knew there was a Red Alastor in the city,

but it wasn't until now they knew that it was the scourge, David Kane.

"You're the Red Alastor who's resided in New Orleans since the 1900's?" Dutch asked with a gruff voice.

"He is," Marcel confirmed without looking away from David.

David had been silently and subtly making his way into Marcel's mind using his extraordinary skills in telepathic communication. The hypnotism covered Marcel's thoughts like a curtain of steel, but David found a few tight passages. Images of an Egyptian woman David recognized faintly shimmered into his own mind's eye.

"Now, something else has been brought to my attention," Marcel said and reached behind himself and picked up a book bound in leather. "You never told me how old you are, only that you were an elder."

David didn't like where the interrogation was going.

"True."

"What I would like to know is..." he trailed off and held the book out for David to take. "How old were you when you wrote this?"

David's eyes narrowed slightly, and he grabbed the book. He flipped it open to the preface, and saw his own name written there...in his own hand. He turned his eyes back to Marcel, and they were glowing dangerously red, despite that Marcel had decreed powers illegal in his haven.

"How did you get this?"

His voice was dangerously dark, and an unnatural chill

spread throughout the room. Marcel shivered involuntarily. "That is not important. What is important, howe—" but he was interrupted.

"It may not be important to you, Marcel," David growled and took a step closer to Marcel, almost close enough to touch the man's nose with his own, "but it is most certainly important to me."

Marcel sneered.

"You would do best to take a step back, David. And whatever you're doing, stop it."

David sneered back harder, and looked Marcel directly in the eyes, as the temperature of the room dropped even further.

"The tomb of a human very dear to me must have been violated for you to have acquired this tome," he said with barely-contained fury, before Marcel could look away. "You will **tell me the name of the perpetrator** and allow me to execute them, or I will ruin you and everything you hold dear, insolent childe."

Marcel staggered slightly as his face fell to neutrality.

"Sebastian."

Said Tremere looked like he'd been slapped in the face by an elder Brujah with a white-hot frying pan. David looked at the Warlock menacingly, his eyes fiery with rage and unholy vengeance.

"So it was the **filthy, thieving** Usurper, was it?" he growled out, his voice deep, rumbling and feral.

The entire Council rose from their seats and took fighting

stances.

“Stand down, David Kane!” Dutch yelled out.

“Stay out of this!” the elder countered furiously. “I will slaughter every person in here if someone gets in my way!”

The Councilors glanced nervously at each other, as did Anthony and Christopher in the corners. The temperature in the room had dropped to freezing degrees, and even the cold, life-less bodies of the Kindred were warm enough for their breaths to allow for speech to steam in the air. As Anthony tried to move forward to intervene, he toppled over, and landed on the floor face-first.

“Whaaaa—” he tried to speak, but his mouth moved too sluggishly to form his words correctly.

Every other vampire in the room slowly went to their knees, unable to move properly, until everyone was on the floor, immobile and defenseless. Only Sebastian remained upright, courtesy of David’s hand wrapped around the Tremere’s throat. His gleaming red eyes stared into the very soul of the ancilla Kindred, and Sebastian felt the malice, the hatred, the intent to kill rolling off the elder vampire in nauseating waves.

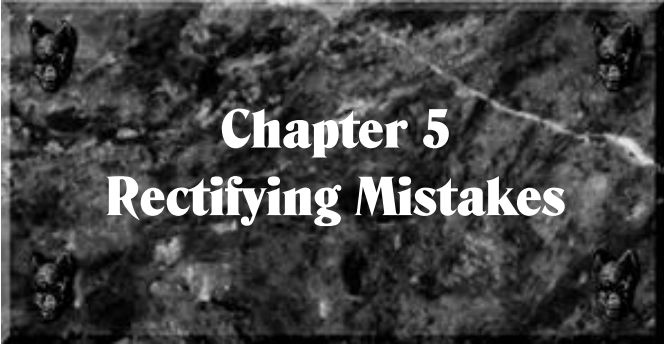
“You pathetic, worthless rat,” David growled darkly, his voice no longer even remotely within the spectrum of humans. It sounded wholly like a monster, a demon, utilizing human words. **“If it weren’t for the fact that I love this city, I would love to tear you apart, piece by piece. But my own interest demands your continued existence.”**

Sebastian was doused in fear. A fear so fully consuming and wholly all-encompassing that he knew it had to be

unnatural in nature, but that knowledge provided him no comfort. The visage of this hell-spawn, this unholyest of monsters from the depths of the most wicked vampire's worst nightmare...Sebastian, despite his already broken and fractured mind, knew full-well, without a shred of doubt, that this creature, more than any other roaming Earth, would provide him an unimaginably horrific end.

David pulled Sebastian's helpless body closer to his own face. He looked deep into the young Cainite's eyes, and sent his mind into Sebastian's.

"You were brought to Marcel's plantation to gather with the council and discuss the current state-of-affairs in regards to your sector of the mortal sphere, and Kindred society in the city," he said darkly.



Chapter 5

Rectifying Mistakes

Garden District, New Orleans

July 8th, 2015

David sat on top of the warehouse where he kept NightBlade's headquarters. He was looking out over New Orleans, the city he had come to call his home. David felt a warm presence coming out onto the roof.

"Good evening, Emma."

"Evening."

Emma sat down next to him. She looked content, to some extent. She leant her head against David's shoulder.

"I managed to levitate a book while you were out last night," Emma said, and even if she hid it, David could sense the glee and joy pent up in her.

"You did?" David asked and looked at her. She nodded with a smile. David started chuckling. "That's great! Soon, you'll be lighting houses on fire with your mind!"

"WHAT!?" Emma shrieked and looked up at him.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding!" David quickly apologized.

“Stop kidding so seriously, dick!”

David started laughing, and Emma soon joined in. They sat on the roof for almost an hour when they saw the horizon start brightening.

“Hey, David?”

“Yes?”

“You pretty much got your head burnt off the last time you saw the sun, in your office.”

“Yes?”

“How did you walk out in the sun those times you came to teach my class?” Emma asked, staring him intently in the eyes.

“Necromancy,” he replied. “It takes a lot of blood, but I essentially resume mortality, though the sun **could** still kill me if I were to stand out in it too long. Hours maybe.”

“Can every Kindred learn it?”

“Given a tutor and years of study, sure. But most necromancers aren’t keen on spilling their secrets, especially when the Giovanni has something of an owner complex when it comes to it.”

“It’s the Giovanni’s Clan Discipline?”

David looked at her with a proud grin.

“Using fancy Kindred terms, are we?”

“John told me about it,” she shrugged. “Every bloodline has a certain affinity with a set of three Disciplines, which are the divisions of Kindred powers.”

“That’s right. From what I can gather, the Giovanni has

practically the same Clan Disciplines as the Lasombra, with the exception being that Obtenebration is switched for Necromancy.”

Emma dug into her jacket’s pocket and pulled out a notebook. She flipped it open on a marked page.

“Obtenebration was Tri– Trim–, a Malkavian’s term for the ability to manipulate shadows, right?”

“Trimeggian,” David chuckled at her inability to pronounce the name of the Malkavian scholar. “And yes, that’s right.”

Emma scribbled down a small note with a pen from her other pocket, then closed the note and put it back.

“I enjoy your enthusiasm for learning, Emma,” David admitted, “but to learn this world, you have to be able to deal with the darkest parts of it, as well. I will have you witness more deaths, Emma. I will have you witness horrific things no human should have to go through.”

Emma looked out over the city, and she saw the sun coloring the horizon brighter and brighter. She felt David’s warm hand on hers, and looked at him. She was stunned when she saw his kind smile, complimented by a perfectly human-looking face, his skin rosy and warm to the touch as ever. The sun soon broke past the horizon, but nothing happened to David’s face, except that he flinched when the rays first touched him. She could see and hear his breathing, and she leant close and put her ear to his chest. Inside, she heard a long-dead heart beat strongly, pumping blood throughout his body.

“It’s quite a refreshing experience whenever I do it,” David admitted. “I’m really hungry, though, and I can’t manifest

my fangs like this.”

His smile turned devilish.

“Want to try and steal blood from a blood-bank?”

Emma studied his face for a little, before she smiled slightly wickedly herself and nodded.

“Let’s go,” he said as he jumped from the roof and landed on the road, unharmed. Then he turned around to face her. “You coming?” he shouted up at her.

With a grin, she started deftly making her way down the side of the building, her physical training and calisthenics practice paying off nicely.

“Well done,” he said when she was back on the ground. His smile was almost as bright as the sun that would ordinarily have killed him. And Emma smiled back.



David was standing next to a crouching Emma who was busy trying to pick the lock into the cold storage where the transfusion bags were kept. Thanks to David’s powers, no one noticed them, and they were lucky that no one needed a blood transfusion that day. David looked patiently at Emma’s work.

“Try twisting the tension wrench just a little, and shake the pick,” he whispered, making sure no one nearby could hear it.

Emma nodded and did as instructed, and the lock ‘clicked’ open. She looked up at him with a proud smile, and he returned it. They entered and closed the door behind them.

“So, is there any type you prefer?” she asked with a little

humor. “O—positive? AB?”

“Not really, right now I just need some to substitute what I used to revive myself.”

Emma grabbed a cooler and started packing down bags, and David did the same.

“I’m actually surprised how much blood there is on storage in here,” Emma commented.

“This is the clinic closest to the French Quarter, and believe it or not, Kindred aren’t the biggest cause of deaths or injury in there. The mortals just don’t take care when they party.”

“Good to know,” she replied.

Soon, they were on their way out, but not until David had taught her how to use the picks to lock a door as well.



“This feels kinda weird,” Emma commented as they sat in an alley and David was gulping down blood—bag after blood—bag. “Never expected I’d be robbing blood—banks with a vampire sidekick.”

“Expect the unexpected,” David bemusedly chimed between bags.

“And you’re really strange as well,” Emma continued. “There is so much to you, I never quite know what you’ll do next.”

“I’m flattered,” he said between bags again, “but that’s also why I’m one of the oldest Alastors there is. I’ve survived these duties since the founding of the Camarilla, particularly because of my unpredictability.”

“You know that you’re unpredictable?”

“Of course. I usually do something I wouldn’t expect even of myself, just to make sure no one can expect much of me besides general terms.”

“And what are those ‘general terms’?”

“That I’m intelligent beyond any human. That I’m cunning and manipulative, strong and fast, and twirl everyone around my fingers like marionettes.”

“Is all of that true?”

“To an extent. I am pretty strong and fast, even among vampires. I’m pretty smart too, but I’ve had centuries to learn and practice. The second greatest power a person can have, though, is a terrifying reputation. If the mere mention of you sends Kindred into fear-frenzies, I would say you have done a brilliant job. Then again, I try to make sure no one spreads rumors about me. The absolute greatest power is obscurity.”

“You mean obfuscation?”

“No,” David chuckled, “I mean no one knowing of your existence. Why would anyone expect what doesn’t exist?”

“I see. Have you ever heard any rumors about yourself?” Emma asked curiously.

“I have. There was a rumor going around that I’m the Lasombra Antediluvian a few centuries ago, but that was rather quickly dashed when the Antediluvian was found beneath Syracuse in Sicily, back in the early fourteen-hundreds.”

“Antediluvians are the first vampires of the clans, right?”

“Technically no, but that’s what everyone calls them. The term actually applies to any Kindred who was embraced before the Deluge. You know, the Flood that carried Noah’s ark?”

“That happened?” Emma asked with mild astonishment. It was crazy that few things actually surprised her anymore.

“Not sure about the rest of the world, but definitely in Mesopotamia. My memory’s really bad around my first nights, but I recall the land around me looking rather bare, as if everything had been swept away.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Not a clue,” David admitted. “According to Wikipedia, it was around some four to six thousand years ago.”

“So by that logic, you’re around the same age?”

“It would seem so. I just really don’t feel like it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, some elders claim that when you reach the age of a methuselah, your mind just changes,” David explained, and his face turned somber. Like he was feeling sad or left out. “Like a switch being flipped. You can’t be bothered with most things. You put yourself before anything else, and you seek to control and manipulate everything and everyone around you. You just stop caring. About everything. I never felt that. I just kept going. I never stopped caring. Every loss and every tragedy hit me just as hard these nights as they did when I was, well, *young*.”

Emma nodded, deep in thought, trying to imagine what millennia of sadness and suffering were like. She came to

the conclusion that she would have killed herself.

But David keeps going. Whatever it was thousands of years ago still keeps him going. I can't imagine the horrible things he must have witnessed. I saw a quiet, peaceful murder, and I freaked out. He must have seen wars. Bloody skirmishes and cruel torture.

"What kept you going?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know. I don't feel afraid of dying, but I can't really trust myself any more than I can trust someone who wants to kill me."

"Why not?"

"I've heard that some elders start craving death. They start taking unnecessary risks. They start inviting people to kill them if they can, but they usually end up crushing the opposition because they don't want to appear weak."

"And you think that's what's happening to you? Subconsciously?"

"Maybe. Whatever it is, I know that I long to see Katherine again."

Something sparked an idea in her mind.

"You're a necromancer, right?" she asked, somewhat hopeful.

David instantly realized what she was getting at.

"It appears she didn't have any regrets when she died. I've been looking for her soul in the Underworld ever since she passed. I never found it."

"Oh," Emma suddenly felt stupid. Of course he would have looked for her.

“I can only hope she found peace,” David lamented and looked up at the bright, morning sky.

Emma just sat and studied David for a little.

He just looks so human. And acts like it, too. But if he's thousands of years old... I don't think I wanna know everything he's been through.

“Wanna go get ice-cream?” she heard David ask.

She looked at him with look saying ‘the fuck?’.

“I thought you couldn't eat.”

“Like this, I can. Want ice-cream?”

To her, David *sounded* exited, even if he *looked* indifferent. Ice-cream, though?

“Sure, I guess,” she replied. “It is getting pretty hot, even in the shade.”

David jumped up faster than she could follow, and stuck out his hand. She took it with a smile, and felt herself hanging in the air for maybe a second as he heaved her up, literally off the ground. She almost stumbled when she landed, and it was only his firm grip on her that kept her from falling over. She also started getting dizzy, and her shoulder felt sore.

“Oh,” David realized what he had done with an apologetic expression. “Sorry. I sometimes have trouble controlling my own strength.”

Emma nodded as she swayed, trying her hardest to get rid of the dizziness.

“It's...fine,” she managed to utter, despite her eyes almost

rolling around. “Just need...a little...”

David kept a good hold of her, and she grasped him for a few minutes as her body got readjusted from the sudden acceleration.



Emma was slowly and quietly enjoying her ice-cream, but David had gotten four and was gulping them down, one-by-one.

“You know, if you do that—” she was about to say, but after he finished his last, he dropped the napkin he’d used to hold the waffle cone and gripped his head tight with a groan of pain. “You get brain-freeze.”

David looked at her with betrayal in his eyes.

“Why wouldn’t you warn me of that sooner?”

Emma couldn’t help the hearty laugh.

“You seemed so excited to get ice-cream, I thought you knew,” she said whilst laughing.

“I’ve never had ice-cream in my life,” he admitted with eyes going teary from the icy pain in his head and his nose going red. “I just really wanted to try it.”

Emma’s laugh grew in volume.

“What, you have a sweet tooth!?”

“My teeth are perfectly fine, thank you.”

“It means you like sweet foods.”

“Oh. Well, then all my teeth are sweet.”

Emma would have found it even more comical if it wasn’t

for the fact that she was aware of David's problems with understanding modern expressions and figures of speech.

When he isn't out killing or fighting... David's really sweet.

Emma spent the hour or so they sat there contemplating her thoughts about David. Despite all the horrible things he'd most likely done, and would most certainly do, Emma couldn't help but liking him a lot. He was kind, compassionate, considerate. Strong and confident, but not arrogant. He truly was one of the best men she knew. He'd been to Hell and back, and though he emerged changed, it wasn't only for the worse. Despite all his flaws and his callousness when he needed it, he really was a good man, whether he wanted to see it or not. She knew of few men in reality who would selflessly dedicate their entire, immortal existences to a single woman, no matter how much they loved them. But David was just that kind of man. Loyal to a fault and the best friend you could ever have. Maybe even...

Just maybe.



As the sun was setting, David and Emma were once again sitting on the roof of NightBlade's warehouse. They were eating sushi take-out, something else Emma had discovered that David had a fondness for. It had surprised her during the day how much the man could eat, and just how many different foods he liked. While he wasn't looking, she had poured a few drops of tabasco into a soup he'd eaten at a restaurant, and right before he was about to take a spoonful and eat it, his nose twitched, and he held the spoon out towards Emma.

“Want to try?” he’d asked with a smirk, and Emma knew he’d smelled the tabasco in his soup. Emma didn’t have a problem with hot foods, so she just accepted. David’s face had fallen when he saw how casually she’d swallowed the tabasco—*infested* soup, as he’d put it. Seemed like he really couldn’t handle spices.

But sushi, he loved. He’d bought four trays, one for Emma and three for himself. When Emma had called it quits with food halfway through, David had quickly eaten her leftover share as well. It dawned on Emma just how ridiculous ‘living–David’ seemed to be. He’d been to the bathroom four times, and always complained that **that** was one part of being alive he definitely didn’t miss.

“Do you miss being human?” Emma asked him as she looked at him. He was wiping his mouth with a napkin, and then threw it in the plastic bag he’d put the empty trays in as well.

“Not particularly,” he said with a shrug. “I love being immortal too much.”

“I see.”

“Humans aren’t bad,” he elaborated, “and I certainly have nothing against them, most of the time. But I don’t think I could handle permanently going back to being mortal. It’s fun once in a while to pretend. But in the end, being a Cainite is just much more appealing to me.”

Emma studied him silently as he looked towards the setting sun.

“I suppose my experiences from my own mortality may make me biased against it. I know things aren’t like that

everywhere anymore. I suppose, if I were born in this era, I might even have liked being human,” he commented as his smile turned downcast. “But as it is, it’s one of the worst things I could imagine. I have too many enemies, and too many allies who would turn against me if I suddenly became mortal. Not to mention that I would be practically powerless against my targets.”

“But if you weren’t a Kindred, you wouldn’t be an Alastor anymore,” Emma reasoned. “The Anathema wouldn’t even know where to look for you.”

“I’m not talking about those targets.”

“Then which?” Emma asked, confused at what he meant.

“That will have to wait for another time,” he said, and Emma saw his face tense up in...pain? “Sorry, I’ll be right back,” he stated, and ran into the warehouse.

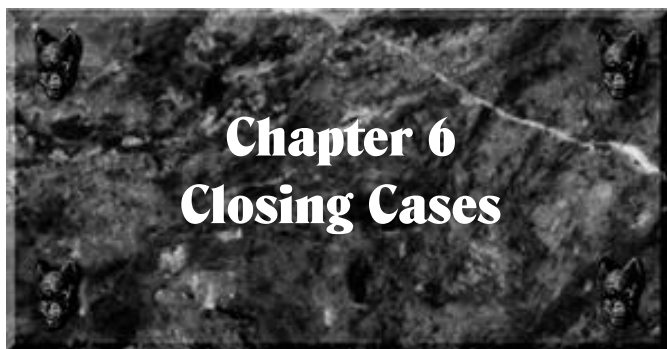
Emma slowly got up and went inside as well. When she came to one of the building’s bathrooms, she heard groaning and gasping.

“You okay in there?” she called through the door.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” came a pained voice back. “My body’s just dying again. I’ll be out in a while.”

Emma couldn’t help the snort.

‘I’m okay. Just dying again’.



French Quarter, New Orleans

August 5th, 2015

David was having a lousy evening. No member of NightBlade out on assignment had returned with good news. One good thing did happen though: the Justicars had decided to send David to Rome alone on reconnaissance. The decision was made on the basis that, for one, David had extensive knowledge of Rome's underground society, and especially it's subterranean catacombs. Second, he was among the Camarilla's best spies, infiltrators and assassins. If he killed someone, no one would be able to find out who. It had been ages since David had been to Italy last, and he was looking forward to going there again. The only problem was his duties to his team and to Emma. Of course, he hadn't mentioned Emma to the Justicars, but his role as Red Alastor was not one that could be interrupted that easily. So, he'd struck a deal with them: he would spend the next week or so tying up loose ends in New Orleans, make a schedule with his Alastors and make sure they could make do with his absence for a few weeks. The Justicars had admired his loyalty to his duties, and accepted it.

Emma was having a rather lovely evening, on the other hand. Her studies and training were going well, and she'd become stronger and faster since she'd heard Catherine's story. She had started taking her training seriously, and her hand-to-hand, shooting and melee training were all going better. Catherine had stopped insulting her during instruction, and was impressed with her progress.

Her studies with John were rapidly becoming more advanced. She could now tell the defining marks and Disciplines of all the major clans, and even knew a little of the different more obscure bloodlines. She understood how the Camarilla worked, what the different titles meant and could recite the Traditions, as well as explain what they meant and how elders chose to mostly interpret them. The Sabbat was a different thing, though. John had little actual knowledge of them, and David hadn't had much time to teach her about them in the past few days, despite every member of the coterie claiming that he almost knew their history and structure like the back of his hand. He was too busy communicating with other Red Alastors and the Justicars, and finding Alastors willing to serve under William when he became the head of the next NightBlade hideout in D.C., and he was already pitching in valuable time to help with other branches of her studies.

William had been hesitant about continuing his teaching of Emma, but Emma had apologized for her behavior the night he'd killed the boy during feeding. He'd gone right back to teaching her the finer points of insider trading, and how to predict and manipulate the stock market, and David had provided a larger sum of money to teach her with.

Daisy had taken her to six clubs and taught her how to

seduce men of any kind and preference. She'd taught Emma small ways of altering her appearance to suit whatever the situation called for, and how to use her charms to get what she wanted. Emma had attracted plenty of men, alright, but she'd never been able to manipulate them. She always tensed up and started feeling nervous and just wanted to get out of there. Whenever the men had gotten too close and started feeling her up, Daisy had quickly broken a wrist or two, and dragged Emma out of the club. Daisy decided to call it quits with the seduction, and started focusing on business: if she could direct the flow of a meeting, she could get far.

William mixed his own education into it, and the rest of NightBlade would often gather around a table and pretend to be businessmen of any kind: bankers, economists, designers, investors in a corporation, even oil sheiks. A few times, they had pretended to be Primogen of the city, and Emma was supposed to be the Prince, bringing up issues and deciding on a solution using the Primogen's suggestions. They all felt a little awkward the first time, but they quickly grew to find it rather entertaining. Especially since they were allowed to derail Emma and lead the discussions to another topic. The first many times, Emma became flustered when things didn't go according to her plan, but with William and Daisy instructing her, she quickly gained the confidence to thwart even these distractions. She became quite the savvy politician, and David didn't doubt that she had the potential to become a Prince sometime, if she decided to become a vampire, though she still had decades to go before David would consider her ready to take up a position in Kindred politics.

Her training with Catherine was going well, too. After hearing her story, Emma had taken the practice far more seriously, and Catherine had stopped berating her. *As much.* Soon, Emma was sparring with several of the Alastors in their free time to get a feeling for their different styles. David had explained that, much like himself, he wanted her to be able to shift styles and methods to undermine that of their opponent, even if that meant never becoming truly good at any certain style. Aiden fought like you'd expect a soldier; he kept his hands up, ready to deflect and redirect any strike, and usually used throws and takedowns. Daisy almost danced around, never standing still and being particularly difficult to hit, launching kicks after kicks. Catherine was more like a kick-boxer, with powerful punches and kicks, and the occasional throw. William was more like a traditional boxer, using only his hands and making sure to never keep his feet on the ground too long. Neither Symond or John fought, though. She'd noticed a popular trend with the Alastors, as well; they all preferred unarmed combat, especially David.

Know your enemy, and know yourself, and you need not fear the results of a hundred battles, David had said. The best way to know yourself is by only using your body. When you master it, you can start using weapons.

Which was what led to Emma facing off against David in a sparring match. They were both standing on the mats, bare feet and dressed in workout clothes. David wore slightly baggy sweatpants and a tight-fitted muscle shirt. Emma herself wore yoga pants and a sports bra. Aiden, Catherine and Daisy were all sitting in nearby chairs, waiting to see how long she would last. Catherine had bet five seconds.

The longest bet, by Daisy, was ten. Emma was stretching a little, while David watched. After all, none of the vampires would pull muscles. Emma stood up and took her stance. She held her left arm up to guard her face, and her right was lowered so her right elbow covered her liver. Her knees bent slightly and her feet shoulder-width apart. Unlike the weak stances David had seen from female actors in action films in recent months, Emma's stance was tight. Controlled. Like a real fighter. He could see the tension in her wrists, preparing to punch hard.

Good.

At Aiden's 'go', Emma lunged forward and delivered a right leg to his abdomen. David sent his left hand down to block it, but was pleasantly surprised when she redirected it to his head. He lowered his head, saw her foot hit the mat, and then it immediately pushed off and sent her heel hurtling straight for his face. He stood back up, and the heel just barely missed his face.

"Nice one!" he commented.

Then, without hesitation, she swung her leg back down, but instead of landing it on the floor, it soared up her front. Her left foot left the mat, and he just barely got out of the way of a kick from a backwards flip. David couldn't help the laugh that escaped him. He'd had plenty of openings to end the fight already, but he'd been forced to use human limits only. Emma landed and sent her left foot in a straight back-kick towards his abdomen. It actually hit, and with a considerable amount of force. Well, compared to an average human. She was no Bruce Lee, but she was definitely not far off a championship title.

She's grown so much in just half a year, David thought to himself as he ducked below the roundhouse sent to his head. She'll be just fine.

David lowered to the floor, leg outstretched to catch her ankle, but it didn't land. She jumped and planted her knee in his face. David rolled out of the way and got up. Had he been allowed to use his powers, she would have been down before Aiden could finish saying 'go', but he wasn't allowed to. He also didn't want to strike back; he was barely able to keep from breaking all kinds of things around his office when picking them up. If he were to accidentally strike with too much force...she would die before he could regret it. David kept dodging and weaving, and took the occasional hit; a kick here, a punch there, and a throw to finish him off. As he hit the ground, Emma held onto his wrist, turned him over, and pressed down on it at a strange angle. She couldn't break it, even if she had dropped an anvil on it, but he did feel the tension in his wrist. David tapped the mat in defeat.

"You're good," David said with pride as she helped him up. "You've come a long way."

Emma smiled brightly.

"Why didn't you hit me back?" she asked, though. "I know you had plenty of openings, but you never tried to hit me."

"I already told you," David said with a smile. "I'd never lay a harmful hand on you. I probably wasn't the best choice in sparring partners."

David noticed that Aiden was collecting all the bets placed on the fight, with a wide smile on his face. Both Catherine and Daisy looked sour.

“You are so cheesy sometimes,” Emma chuckled.

“How can you resemble cheese?”

...

“Never mind.”

David shook his head, confused, and walked away. Most likely to go back to his office and continue his preparation for his trip to Italy. Emma had to admit, she felt down, and jealous. She'd wanted to visit Rome for a few years now, and here David was, being shipped off, as if it were nothing. She'd asked to come with him, but he'd said no.

“I'm not going for leisure, you know,” David said casually. “I'm going in the capacity of a spy. It would be too dangerous for you.”

“What, because I'm a human?” Emma rebutted.

“Exactly. The Kindred here are mice compared to the Roman hunters, the ‘Society of Leopold’. They're the modern Inquisition, and they're deep into religious fervor. I'm walking blasphemy. I practice magic from before the catholic church existed. They see me as a heathen of the highest order. They would be more than happy to kill you, just to agitate me.”

So Emma had accepted that she wouldn't press the issue further, so long as he brought pictures and souvenirs back with him. David had relented to that, and, she'd been delighted to see, had scuttled off to Symond to ask how he used the camera function on his phone.

• • •

Aiden and Emma were walking through the streets of the French Quarter, looking for a certain man. As it turned out, Aiden and David sometimes took police cases when they

had the time. The cases were always the ones the police couldn't solve themselves. Apparently, it was a small part of an agreement between someone in the police and Marcel, to keep the resident Kindred of New Orleans safe from police investigations, or something. The man they were currently looking for had evaded capture for two months now, all the while committing murder and robbery throughout New Orleans. Something the police had overlooked, but David had established almost immediately after Aiden disclosed the case to him, was that the sites of his crimes led a direct line towards the French Quarter. So now, it was up to Aiden and Emma, as his 'apprentice', to find him and inform the police of his whereabouts.

"So, why do you and David do this, again?" Emma pondered aloud.

"He thinks it's great mental exercise, and pretty fun. Besides, the more we do to keep things smooth between the Kindred and the police department, the better."

"Why's that?"

"Because there's a man, Robert Carter, who works in the police force. He was a ghoul of the previous Prince, Doran. Now, he hunts vampires, and has broadened to hunt werewolves and magicians as well. There's an agreement between him and Marcel; he stays away from New Orleans Kindred, Marcel stays out of the police's affairs."

"Right."

They walked throughout the western part of the French Quarter, keeping an eye out for Michael Finnigan, the guy the police couldn't catch.

“But if the police can’t find him, how should we be able to?”

“There isn’t a single vampire in the police department,” Aiden explained. “Would be pretty hard to keep a day-job there. Which means, no one with unnatural senses and decades of experience in tracking a target with the most powerful tool of a hunter.”

“And what is that?”

Aiden looked at her with a small grin.

“Animal instinct.”

Aiden led Emma through many streets and alleys, continually sniffing the air and changing directions.

“You know what he smells like?” Emma asked blatantly.

“The police confiscated a balaclava he’s worn during a robbery. A few whiffs did the trick.”

Aiden then suddenly stopped, holding his hand up for Emma to do the same. He took another couple of whiffs, and then ran down the street. Emma followed without a word, though he was tough to keep up with. Aiden rounded a corner almost thirty feet ahead of her. When she reached it, she saw a woman sitting against the wall in the alley. She couldn’t make out any other distinctive features in the dark. Aiden was sniffing the air at the end of the alley.

“He was here,” he said seriously. “And recently. Not half an hour.”

Emma ran over to the woman.

“Are you alright, m—” but the words got caught in her throat.

“Emma,” Aiden said with concern. “Step away from her.”

“Oh my God,” Emma exclaimed, her eyes wide and hand in front of her face.

“Emma!”

The woman, now that she had come close enough to see, didn’t have a neck. Rather, someone had severed her head at the chin, cut off the remaining neck, and put the head back on. The face was mauled, beaten and battered, with her skull caved in. Her shirt had been cut open to reveal that her left breast was missing, as well.

“What—” she uttered before Aiden rushed her and dragged her out of the alley.

Once out, Emma doubled over near a building and threw up her dinner. She heaved, before another nauseous wave hit her, and forced her over again. Aiden was holding her hair out of the way, patting her back with some affection.

“Just let it out,” he said calmly. “I know what it’s like. Just let it all out.”

Emma’s throat was burning, and her eyes were watering up.

“Dear God,” she muttered.

Aiden’s hand rubbing her back was comforting, but what she had just seen...the brutality, the cruelty of it...the teen boy had died quietly and painlessly. Emma couldn’t imagine how much the woman’s death had hurt. Aiden handed her a napkin from his pocket, and she used it to wipe her mouth and chin. She then threw it in the puddle of partially-digested food and stomach acid on the ground.

“Who could do such a thing?” she asked weakly, her hands

shaking. "What kind of monster could do that?"

"The worst kind of monster that exists," Aiden said calmly. "A human."

Emma looked at Aiden with a surprised stare.

"When we do it, it's fine; we're monsters, that's what's expected of us. But when a human does something like that...It's the worst kind of crime."

Emma pushed herself off the ground, and didn't fall back solely by Aiden's hands steadying her.

"Go find him," Emma said quietly. "Give him what he deserves."

Aiden seemed conflicted at leaving her to herself, but did so, nonetheless. Emma stood quietly for a little while, before she turned back to the alley. She stared at the mangled corpse of the woman, and did her best to remain standing, without crying. But she couldn't. The tears kept coming, and she had to turn away before long.

"How long did it take them to get used to something like that?" she quietly wondered to herself. "Aiden didn't even flinch."

She then turned back in the direction of the warehouse. On the rooftop of the building above her sat a balding man with blood on his face and a knife in hand.

"Time to send a message," he chuckled darkly to himself. "Best get these investigators off my back."

"I know a way of doing that," came a voice in a British accent from behind him.

Just as he turned to see who it was, he felt a kick to his back,

and before he could even think of screaming, he was falling towards the pavement. The last thing he saw, as his body turned mid-air to see his attacker, was a pair of gleaming, red orbs glowing from the darkness. Until the darkness enveloped him, and he saw, or felt, no more.

Emma heard a loud thud, and turned around. A balding man was lying on the pavement next to where she had thrown up. She rushed over towards him, but had to turn away again. Blood was slowly pouring out from under his head, and next to him lay a bloody knife. His face matched that of Michael, though Finnigan had hair when the photo she and Aiden went by was taken. She looked up at the top of the building, but saw nothing. She could swear she heard a voice muttering ‘problem solved’, but was sure her mind was playing tricks on her, by that point. She turned away and ran into another alley, where she sat down, breathing rapidly and heavily. She pulled out her phone and went into her contacts.

‘Aiden’

She dialed the number and held the phone to her ear.

“Aiden?” she said, panting heavily. “He’s at the crime scene...dead.”

“What!/? I’ll be there in a few minutes!”

He hung up. Emma lowered her phone and stared into the shadows of the alley.

Oh God, why did this happen!/? Damn it!

She put her free hand to her chest, right on top of her heart, and tried to slow down her breathing. It took several minutes, and her breathing was only stable once Aiden

walked into the alley where she sat.

"You okay?" he asked and sat down next to her. "Did you see what happened?"

"No. I was walking away when I heard..."

"Right. The police will be here any minute. I think it would be best if you leave."

"What? No, the police is coming, I have to give a statement!"

"And tell them what, exactly? That you were here because a bunch of vampires wanted to teach you deduction skills?"

Emma went quiet at that. Of course, she couldn't tell the police the truth.

"Until you become better at lying," Aiden said calmly, "it would be best if you weren't around police at all. They'll see right through you."

Emma nodded.

"I called David. He's on his way to pick you up."

Aiden's ears visibly perked, and a moment later, so did the rest of him.

"Speak of the devil."

Only seconds later, the black Tesla came rolling up next to the alley. Aiden got Emma on her feet and took her over to the car, where he put her in the front seat. He then closed the door, and the Tesla sped off again.

"You alright?" David asked worriedly as he studied her. Apparently, he could keep his eyes on her and the road at the same time, seeing as he didn't crash them.

“No,” Emma whispered as she put her hands to her face.
“No, I’m not. But I will be.”

David placed his right hand on her forearm.

“Of course you will. Would you like to go somewhere? Get something to eat? Drink?”

“A bar would be nice,” she said timidly.

David turned right, just as he’d begun turning left.

“Just don’t drink yourself to death,” he said quietly, and she couldn’t help the snort that escaped her.

It didn’t take ten minutes to find a good bar in the Garden District. Parking his car, David got out, ran to the other side of it and held the door open for Emma. With a whispered ‘thanks’, he guided her to the bar’s door and opened it for her. They walked over to a table where David sat her down. He then went to the bar and got a bottle of vodka and a shot glass. He returned to the table in less than thirty seconds.

“Good thing you’re the designated driver,” Emma chuckled weakly as she took the first shot.

“Certainly.”

“I don’t get it,” Emma said after her third shot in less than a minute. “How did we not see him if he was sitting on the roof when we got there?”

“Don’t think about it too hard. People just miss things, sometimes. Even vampires with powerful senses.”

That statement sparked a thought in her head. She pulled her small notebook out of her jacket. She flipped through its pages while David looked on, curiously.

“He must have been a ghoul!” Emma exclaimed.

“Shhhh!” David hushed her.

“Right,” she apologized and lowered her voice. “People, got it. But it makes sense! If a ghoul’s domitor is of low enough generation, they could potentially learn higher Discipline powers!”

David looked at her with a small frown.

“But to learn Obfuscation at a level higher than Aiden’s senses would take a ghoul centuries. Finnigan was born in the seventies.”

Emma’s somewhat victorious expression fell into defeat.

“Unless...” David turned thoughtful. “Could you smell his blood?”

Emma was confused at the question, but looking back, she realized something.

“Blood usually smells coppery or bitter...but his smelled sweet. Almost like honey.”

David sighed out with exasperation.

“Meaning his body contained a large amount of vitae, or the vitae of an elder,” David stated. “Which means...” and he gestured to Emma, who realized what he was alluding to.

“The blood of an elder could grant him temporary Disciplines at higher levels, like enhancing Obfuscate he already had!”

“Exactly,” David concluded and rubbed his eyes. “Did you read some of Trimeggian’s work? You sound incredibly scientific when you talk about the powers of the blood.”

“John gave me a printed copy of some, yeah,” she looked sheepishly. “I understand it much better.”

David paused a little.

“What was your focus of study at university?”

“Biochemistry. And math. Why?”

“Well, makes sense, then,” David said. “I could get you a copy of the *Encyclopaedia Haemovoria*, if you like.”

“The what?”

“The *Encyclopedia of Blood Drinkers*. It’s a lexicon written by Trimeggian. It’s brilliant for its description of the different Cainite powers.”

“I’d like that, yeah,” Emma smiled a little. “But if Finnigan drank elder vitae, that would mean...”

“That there’s a powerful, unknown player in New Orleans, or close by. Obfuscation is one of the Setites’ specialties, of which there actually is a fair number in this city. Shame we can’t follow him back to them.”

“Do you think he’d have gone back?”

“Without the shadow of a doubt. Vitae, especially that of an elder or methuselah, is incredibly addictive. Some vampires stop drinking human blood altogether, and just drink Cainite vitae, instead. Ghouls can go mad if they don’t get vitae very often, as well.”

“Is that why you kept me unconscious for two whole weeks after you fed me your blood?” Emma asked hesitantly, not knowing how precarious the subject would be.

“Yes. I fed you a few times to thoroughly heal your burns,

and if you'd tasted it, I'm almost certain I'd have had to lock you away to 'sweat it out', I think they call it."

"That's what they call it," Emma affirmed. "And lock me up? I'm not sure that woul—"

"Don't underestimate the allure of vitae, Emma. Even the strongest are enslaved by it. It isn't just a chemical change in your brain, which causes the addiction," David explained darkly. "It's unnatural. Irresistible. I've seen great men with the will of heroes be brought to their knees by it. Take Robert Carter as an example; he says that he hunts vampires for the good of the citizens."

"Right, he's a policeman."

"He's lying through his teeth, Emma. He's making excuses to cover his addiction. He's been a ghoul for almost a hundred years. He can't stop now. If he did, he'd die, and he's desperate for vampire blood. **That's** why he hunts vampires. He just dresses it up nicely."

Emma couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"But he's a policeman, to be one you hav—"

"Half the officers in the city are susceptible to bribes, and more than a few will go so far as to mishandle evidence, if paid well enough."

Emma was appalled at that.

"But—"

"No 'but's about it, Emma. It's the reality of things. It's always been that way, and it always will be. I'm not saying there aren't honest officers, there definitely are. But they are heavily outweighed by the corrupt ones."

“I thought dirty cops was just a trope for TV and movies.”

“They aren’t. They are very real. Which is why I’m going to teach you how to bribe the police, as well.”

Emma was confused. Learn?

“Don’t you just hand them money?”

David chuckled in amusement.

“If you did that, you would just lose it. It’s about how you approach it. You need to be confident and you need to seem like you have plenty of cash. Like a little bribe is nothing. You need the right look in your eyes, the right posture. It’s very similar to seduction when it comes to **what** you do. The only real difference is **how** you do it.”

“That makes no sense at all,” Emma commented with a perplexed look.

“It will when you start doing it.”

Emma hummed, as if to say ‘whatever’. She took her seventh shot of vodka and downed it without hesitation.

“I think that’s enough,” David commented and was about to take the bottle and glass, before his hands were swatted away.

“I’ll let you know when I’ve had enough,” Emma growled, though her light voice made it seem adorable, rather than intimidating.

David took his hands back and folded his arms. He kept watching her as she took her eighth, ninth, twelfth and fourteenth shots. As she was about to take her fifteenth, a guy came over and stood close to Emma. He was somewhat muscular, and the t-shirt was definitely too small around

his chest and arms. His hair was short and his face clean-shaven and seemed flat, as if he'd been punched enough to remodel his face's skeletal structure.

He reeks of steroids, David thought to himself.

"Sup, girl," he said with a deep voice and looked her over. "Wanna come over to our table? Have some fun?"

Emma smirked at David and got up to go with the man.

What the...

"I don't think it would be such a good idea," David said.

"Shut up, kid," the bodybuilder-esque man said mockingly. "You'll end up getting hurt."

Emma let out a drunken giggle.

"He's a lot older and stronger than you," she said to the over-sized man.

"Him?" he asked with a bark of laughter.

"Emma, don't do this," David almost...pleaded with her? "You know I can't violate the Traditions."

"If you want me, David, then claim me."

Does she realize what she's saying?

"Wanna take this outside, punk?" the 'roided' man asked intimidating as he grabbed Emma's posterior, at which Emma giggled.

David stared at Emma with a dark look for a few moments. Until he got up.

"I promised I wouldn't let anything strange happen to you, Emma," David said calmly. "If you end up in an alley

somewhere, don't you dare come running back and blame me."

David then turned around.

"If you don't want me, David, that's all good!" she called after him. "I guess I'll just have a bull tonight, then!"

"Don't come back to the house until you've thought long and hard about what you're going to do tonight, Emma. I won't let you in."

With that, he left the bar, leaving Emma behind. Emma, was staring at the door he left from. She saw the front lights of the Tesla light up outside, and drive away. And then, she realized what she'd done. As if the comically large man fondling her wasn't enough proof.

Well, he wants me, doesn't he? Emma thought to herself, her head starting to spin from the alcohol. *Well, his lost. Lose. Lost. Loss, there we go.*

She turned back towards the large man and was about to start making out with him, until she saw a man come up behind him and slam his fist into the man's right side. For a moment, she thought it was David, but she soon realized it was just a man who looked very similar. Eerily so, as a matter of fact. He looked Emma in the eyes and walked over to her. He grabbed her wrist and dragged her along.

"YOU FU—" the grotesquely large man was about to shout, but the David look-alike spun around and slammed his heel into the side of the man's head with enough force to knock him out instantly.

Emma had only seen that kind of speed a few times before; in vampires. But this man looked wholly human. He

returned to pulling her towards the door, and Emma was feeling incredibly scared. She was shit-faced drunk, and David wasn't going to save her. She could do nothing to defend herself against this ghoul. She could only hope David had been bluffing.

Through her drunken haze, she barely registered her surroundings. The man put her in the front seat of his car, and her head started pounding when the gas engine roared to life. Her eyes burned at the bright lights of the streetlamps, and her head spun with the speed at which the man was driving, and taking his swings. She tried to plead with him to leave her alone, but her hearing was somehow muffled, and she couldn't hear what he replied, even as she could barely make out his lips moving. She soon passed out.



The next thing she saw was darkness. Nothing but utter, silent darkness. Well, except for the very faint breathing coming from somewhere in the room. Slow and steady, rhythmically inhaling and exhaling. Emma, though still feeling the worst effects of the alcohol having worn off, despite the fact that the alarm clock next to her head showed that it was only three hours after she and David had entered the bar. She tried to sit up, gritted her teeth through sore muscles and a dull headache, before rough-skinned, if somewhat gentle hands pushed her down.

"You need to rest. I could remove the worst effects of your drink, but you still need to sleep."

The voice was dark, and deep, but his tone wasn't threatening, even as it wasn't soothing, either. Rather, the

man sounded like a soldier addressing a wounded subordinate. She tried to get up again, and she heard him sigh.

“For fuck’s sake,” and then his hand touched her forehead. Before she could protest, she felt as if she was slammed in the face with a baseball bat, and was knocked out cold.



It wasn’t until noon that she woke up once again. She felt completely refreshed, until she realized just how dry her throat was. She looked around the rather clean and empty apartment, which, come to think of it, looked a lot like David’s. On the nightstand beside the bed she lay in was a cup with a red liquid in it, like tea. She took a slow sip at first, but when she realized it was cold, she chugged it down. She ran her tongue over her lips to moisten them, the dryness feeling like the skin covering them was shrinking.

“You’re awake,” she heard the voice from before, and whipped her head to the door leading to the living room.

There stood the man from last night, looking almost identical to David. He even wore the same style of clothes.

“If you’re ready to go, get out of here,” he said bluntly.

His eyes were cold and uncaring, completely unlike David’s though. His face held no concern, no compassion and no emotion she could interpret, other than sheer irritation.

“Who are you?”

“David’s downstairs—neighbor. Get out.”

Emma was offended by his blunt command to make her leave.

“Don’t be so rude! I didn’t ask you to help me!”

“No, but David would’ve thrown a tantrum if I didn’t.”

That brought Emma to silence.

“What do you mean?”

“Ask him. Do I have to tell you to get out again?”

Emma frowned, and stood up from the bed. She pushed past him, making sure to shove his shoulder with her own, and stormed out of the apartment, slamming the door shut behind herself. She then ran up the stairs and knocked on the door with the sign ‘David Kane’ on it. When there was no answer, she knocked harder, and waited. Still no answer. She looked to her left, and saw the sky outside. It was noon.

He’s asleep. Fucking perfect!

She stormed down to knock on the rude man’s door, when she saw what name was on the sign out front.

‘Jason Kane’

She froze.

Jason Kane? As in, David Kane?

She stood still, hand raised to knock on ‘Jason’s’ door.

The hell is this?

Emma hesitated. She didn’t know what to do. David had said he wouldn’t let her back into the warehouse. Did that mean he was there? Emma really regretted what she’d said last night which, oddly, was as clear in her mind as anything else from the previous night. Why had she done that? She liked David, why would she start...

Emma thought about it. The way they cuddled when they

were alone, the way they interacted, cared. All the signs were there. She didn't know about David, but she was almost certain that **she** had fallen for him. There was just something about him. She realized that last night, she had **wanted** him. Really **desired** him. Emma couldn't sort out her mind.

Why the fuck am I thinking like this!? Shit!

She decided that going to the warehouse in his sleeping hours would be best, and then asking for forgiveness. She walked down the stairs, a pit opening in her stomach. What would she say? What would she do? A vice clenched her heart and lungs in her chest. Was this really happening? It **shouldn't**, but everything she could think of pointed to it.

Fucking damn it! Argh!

She walked out into the streets of New Orleans, the sunlight bringing not the slightest bit of ease to her mind. She made her way through the French Quarter, all the while thinking, planning. Scheming. If only she had become better at seduction...no, David wasn't that kind of man. Rather, if she played on her own uniqueness in his eyes, she might make it easier. He cared for her, wanted to protect her. She could take advantage of that. With that thought, she stopped dead in her tracks and looked down at her hands.

What am I thinking? I sound like—

She felt her heartbeat pick up the pace, and sweat started escaping her skin, but not because of the heat. It was cold sweat. Her stomach was churning, as if squeezed and turned with a wrench. She felt sick.

I sound like a monster.

But it wasn't that odd, was it? She had been training and studying how to be one under the vampires in NightBlade. Elder monsters, who felt no guilt, remorse or shame. And they had started, it would seem, to rub their mindsets off on her, as well. The intent had never been for her to become a vampire. Just to learn to survive in a world where they existed. And her actual goal was to learn magic, like her ancestor Katherine had. An offer David had made long ago sprang into her mind, uninvited but offering release from the machinations of the monsters that surrounded her. And, hopefully, escape the emotions David was unknowingly planting in her heart.

"Do you know any mortals that can teach me mortal magic?" Emma asked whilst they sat like that.

"I do," David replied, "but they live in a temple in Tibet."

"You're kidding!?"

"I'm afraid not."

Emma was silent for a while.

"I can get you there, if you'd like," David offered. "The temple is protected by wards and ancient magics. They can teach you a lot, considering they're practically shaolin monks with magical capabilities."

"I can introduce you. They'll be happy to help you grow. To train you and teach you."

"How long would I have to be there?" Emma almost whispered. David leant his head down to let his cheek rest on her head.

"A few years, at least. And it would be difficult. But you would be strong when you left. I've seen them do things no human could, and

that few vampires can boast to be able to do."

Emma sat down on a bench close to her. The sun was glaring down at her with harsh rays, but that wasn't bothering her. What was bothering her, however, was herself. She could see her hands shake, but she couldn't feel them. Even as she closed them into tight fists, she felt nothing from them.

What's happening to me?

She felt a tear roll down her face, but only one. Her days of crying were over. At least, for now. She looked up, and glanced over the crowd of people just doing their own business. They were happy and smiling, and Emma hated it. She no longer saw kind people willing to help anyone. She saw pathetic creatures who fooled themselves into believing the world was a bright, happy place. But she knew. She had seen the world, and it was dark. She couldn't help the dark snort that escaped her.

A world of darkness indeed, David.

Emma reached up and grabbed the silver cross hanging from her neck. Once, it had been a comforting gesture. But she had seen things that shouldn't happen. That shouldn't exist. She caressed the cross a final time, before roughly snapping the clasp around her neck and throwing the pendant in the trash can beside her.

God doesn't care. He created evil, he could easily remove it. But he doesn't. People die violent deaths every day, and God just allows that. What a fraud. All-powerful and all-good, my ass!

She stood up from the bench and continued on her way towards the warehouse. The gnawing hunger in her belly

didn't even register, as her mind went to dark places. Just like she herself was walking to a dark place.



Chapter 7

Parting Ways

French Quarter, New Orleans

August 8th, 2015

Emma was sitting in David's office chair two hours before dusk, smoking his cigarettes. She knew David wouldn't mind, but that did nothing to appease her. The sun was setting, and David would be here soon. He needed to get his last preparations done so that he could go to Italy by the end of the week. Emma had looked in the drawers of his desk, just looking to pass time, and to learn a little more about him. She had found some police-dossier on herself. But, in contrast to how she knew she would have reacted a little over six months earlier, she wasn't the least bit disturbed by it. She had found a small painting of Katherine, no bigger than the size of a small electronic tablet. Emma had stared at it for a solid ten minutes before throwing it back into the drawer.

I'm not Katherine.

She didn't know where the thought came from, but the way David spoke of her and Katherine, it was as if he only compared them. Emma had thought it was nice at first. But

now...now she couldn't stand it. Why did David have to be so charming, anyway? Why did she have to develop feelings for him, when he clearly only loved Katherine?

As she smoked, she noticed an old chest in the corner of the office. Curious, she got up and made her way over to it. It wasn't locked, so when she opened it, she was surprised by what she saw in it. Weapons of many kinds, most old and rusty. One stood out to her, though. It was a machete. It was stained with dried blood, but the blood wasn't *that* old. Not like some of the stains on older blades, one even resembling a spearhead made of...bronze? She picked up the machete, and held it in her hands. John had taught her that holding something left an imprint on it, and that people could learn to interpret those imprints. She'd even learnt how to do it, even if it was a shaky power at best. She closed her eyes, focused and took deep breaths, her cigarette lying in an ashtray on the desk.



David was sitting in a black Sedan, blank from recent wash and waxing. The Louisiana license plate said 'HJD 834'. He was wearing dark clothes and black leather gloves. He sat in silence for a few minutes. David's eyes were flittering about the street outside, looking for a sign of anyone, anyone at all that could reveal what was going to happen. There were none. His slow, rhythmic breathing stopped, as he ceased the unnecessary action. He closed his eyes, and his face smoothed out. It then started to somehow shimmer, and change. Soon, he looked wholly different. Young-looking, brown eyes and brown hair, glossy with product. He looked around one final time, his eyes flaring up in a bright, dangerous red color, before he stepped out of the car, machete in hand. He made his way across the street in stride, and opened the side door to an

orphanage of some kind. As he entered, he saw the forms of several children sleeping soundly in their beds. His face revealed no emotion as he walked over to the first bed. Looming over it, the child stirred, and as the ten-year-old boy's eyes fluttered open, a gleam of steel silver shone in the light from the outside, and blood splattered all over the grown man. The head came clean off, and rolled off the bed, onto the floor. The noise awoke a few other children, who stirred slightly as well. The vampire made his way over to another, who stared at him with eyes of pure, unbridled terror. With another gleam, this time stained with red, the seven-year-old girl's head was cleft in half, diagonally from right scalp to left jaw. Screaming of young voices resounded in the room, and they all scrambled out of their beds to run for the door, away from the murderer.

It was locked.

The despair and horror was thick in the air, rolling off the small humans in waves of delightful fright. The vampire came closer, and one boy, almost fourteen, decided to try and out-manuever him. The boy was eviscerated, his stomach open horizontally across, and his guts spilling out onto the floor. He lay in a puddle of his own blood, gasping and groaning as the life ebbed from his body. The stranger was now almost entirely covered in blood. Crying and screaming for someone to help them, the children were cut down, one by one.

Twelve.

Thirteen.

Fourteen.

One ran straight at the unholy beast, and jumped at his neck to try and tackled him. As his chest and neck connected with the monster's, he felt a searing pain in his throat, and not an instant later, he fell to the ground, his larynx, Adam's apple and windpipe

clenched tightly in the monster's mouth.

Fifteen.

The foul beast started chewing on the pieces in its mouth, until it swallowed, and continued towards the other children. It hacked and slashed and cut and stabbed, never letting up, never flinching and never making a sound.

Sixteen.

Seventeen.

Eighteen.

The creature turned away from the mangled pieces of once-humans, and went to the exit. A small, horrified noise came from under one of the beds. The demon stopped mid-step, and turned its head towards the noise. With its glowing, red eyes, it saw a small girl, no older than five, hiding under a bed. The monster grinned wickedly and held up a finger to its lips, as if to shush her. It then left through the door it came from. It walked to its car and got in before driving off into the night. As the car sped down the streets of New Orleans, its face shimmered and distorted, revealing David's face once again.



Emma dropped the machete, horrified at what she had seen. She put her hand to her mouth to stifle her gasp. She stumbled backwards, and tears welled up in her eyes.

"You're a monster," she managed to rasp out to no one.

Yet, someone answered.

"If it took you this long to figure that out, I must have overestimated your intelligence," came the coldest she had ever heard David's voice from behind her. "You weren't

supposed to see that.”

She turned and saw David, his eyes dark and blank as she had never seen them before.

“Didn’t I tell you not to come back if you refused to come with me?”

Emma’s voice got caught in her throat. That look. It was the same he’d worn right before he slaughtered those terrified, crying children. But here she put on her game-face, and stood up.

“Get me to the temple in Tibet,” she demanded, coldly as well. “And once I’m there, don’t ever contact me again.”

Only the barest glint of remorse was visible in his face before the very human emotion was mercilessly crushed by what she could only assume to be millennia of emotional desensitization.

“Fine. Get your things and go to my apartment. Jason will take you there when he has arranged the trip.”

He pulled out a small bundle of keys, pulled a single one out from among them, and threw it at her feet.

“Now get out.”

Emma unwittingly had a flashback to Jason earlier that morning. She bent down, picked up the key, and walked past him. But she stopped when she reached the door.

“Why did you do it?” she asked without turning to face him.

He was silent, and she went to leave.

“You would only hate me more if I told you.”

Emma didn’t stop, and went upstairs. She walked to her

room, gathered a bag, and started packing. She packed only practical wear and sports clothes, seeing as she was going to a place remote from all civilization.

Let him burn the rest.

While she was packing her clothes, she didn't notice the fact that the sun had sunk beyond the horizon while she had been reading the machete's past. Hurried footsteps approached her room, and Daisy burst inside.

"YOU'RE LEAVING!?" she screamed.

"Yes, Daisy. I'm leaving."

Daisy was taken aback. She had never seen Emma like this. Her happy little human had only moped once. Granted, it lasted for a whole month, but still.

"Why?"

"Because David is here," Emma replied, never looking at her best friend.

"Whatever it was, I'm sure David's sor—"

"This can't be solved by 'being sorry'," Emma interrupted the old vampire. "I saw what David truly is, what he's doing to me. And I don't want any part of it anymore."

Daisy was confused. She didn't understand.

"What's happening to you?" She was almost afraid to ask that question.

Emma stopped her packing.

"I'm becoming a monster. That's what."

With that, and zipping her bag closed, Emma took her things and left the room. She didn't say goodbye, she didn't

touch Daisy. She just passed her and walked down the corridor to the stairs leading down.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Catherine asked the human, blocking her way with her arms crossed. “Your training isn’t over.”

“Tibet, where I’ll finish it,” Emma said.

Her dead eyes and cold voice, created by observing her caretakers and instructors during their darker moments, told Catherine that it wasn’t up for debate, and she wasn’t cracking a joke. Emma moved around Catherine, and headed for the entrance. As she passed, she glanced into David’s office. David was still standing exactly where she left him. She tore her eyes away and walked out the door. She didn’t look back. Daisy stormed into David’s office.

“What the Hell did you do!?” she accused him.

David didn’t answer for several minutes.

“I taught my several–times–great–grand stepdaughter how to survive.”

“Yeah, I get that! Why is she leaving!?”

Another silent pause.

“Because she wants to.”

Daisy was furious.

“And you’re just going to let her go!? Just like that!?”

“Just like that.”

“I thought you were better than this! Sure, you’re a killer and a fucking sociopath, but you’re a good man!”

David snorted humorlessly.

“That sentence is completely self-contradictory.”

“I don’t give a shit! Man the fuck up, David!”

David turned to face her, and she was shocked speechless when she saw the bloody tears rolling gently down his face, even as his lips carried a smile, however pained it was.

“I’m giving her the choice I didn’t get. My father molded me into a monster since I was a boy. My sons rejected me and attempted to kill me, when I had lost my life and gained a new one. My fiancé was murdered, simply for association with me.”

Daisy was perplexed. She had never seen David cry in the hundred-years-plus she had known him.

“I have been on this planet for millennia, Daisy,” David began. “Do you think I haven’t been in this situation before? I have raised generations of warriors, each better than the last. And even as their primary goal in life has been to take the lives of others, only the best of the very best turned their backs on me and left me when they realized just what kind of monster I am. And Emma...she’s by far the greatest I’ve trained, so far. I have no doubt that, in time...she will surpass every other human I’ve ever taught.”

David was like a mountain. Unmovable. Unshakeable. Invincible. But Emma... Emma had obliterated the mountain from its foundation. Or maybe the true culprit was Katherine, all along? Or something far more distant, entirely?

“Sadness isn’t the worst thing in the world,” David continued. “I’ve caused so much of it. How much do I really deserve it? I’m certain there’s a special section of Hell,

reserved just for me. I just have to complete my journey there. Hopefully, it isn't too far off. I don't know how many more centuries I can weather this world. It has taken a great toll on me."

David slowly walked past her and headed upstairs, likely to the roof. Daisy was rooted in place, unable to move even an inch. She was like a statue, what with how her body didn't even twitch.



David looked out over the City of the Damned, the Big Easy. New Orleans was such a beautiful place. From his position on the roof of the warehouse which housed NightBlade, he could see a great deal of the French Quarter, his home. He could see Emma, walking down the street, past the Cathedral St John. His red-stained face held a somber smile.

It was bound to happen, anyway. At least now she can defend herself, and she's going to learn magic from real masters of the art.

David couldn't help but feel a certain pride in his chest. When he'd first seen her, Emma walked with such shyness and insecurity. Now, as she marched through the streets of the French Quarter, she looked so strong and confident, like she owned the place. David was fully aware of her feelings for him, and could sense them even as there was such a great distance between them. Her emotions and thoughts saddened him, but he knew they would only make her stronger. She might one day find a husband, have children and die of old age. And then, David would begin the cycle anew again, as he had for two centuries, every cycle another heartbreak of one kind or another. But for

Katherine, his beloved, the pain from every cycle was a small price to pay to uphold his promise.

“Are you happy, Katherine?” David muttered. “I certainly hope so.”

David lit a cigarette and stood in silence, watching as Emma disappeared into the clutter of blocks, headed for his apartment. He thought a ‘good luck’ for her, knowing she would never hear it.

“I saw the machete in your office. You could have explained yourself to her,” Aiden said from the door leading down into the warehouse. “You could have told her that it was for her protection.”

“She wouldn’t have believed it, and my words would have been wasted.”

“Charlie West was closing in on her. If he had another week, he would have discovered her, and that would’ve meant she would be killed, just because you were watching out for her. The Traditions forbid you from outright killing him. You didn’t have any other choice than framing him.”

“It doesn’t matter, Aiden. She wouldn’t understand. Not yet, if ever at all. She’s too kind for that.”

“Why not at least try, father?”

“I’m not your father, Aiden.”

“You’re better. My father would rather lash me with his belt than admit I had a point.”

“I know. And your mother would force your hand into a pot of boiling water if you stepped out of line.”

“Exactly. Family isn’t defined by blood, but by those you

care for, and those who care for you. And she is part of our family.”

“But we’re not part of hers. Not anymore, at any rate.”

Aiden gave up, and went back downstairs. His old man was stubborn as ever.



Emma was sitting in the plane, waiting to take flight. She had expected economy, but apparently, they were flying in a private jet. Across from her sat Jason, as stoic as ever, with his eyes closed and almost certainly resting.

Or meditating.

She just wanted to get away from it all already. Away from New Orleans, away from vampires. Away from David. The worst part was, as she searched her feelings, she still felt David as strongly in her heart as ever. Despite the atrocity she’d witnessed, she still loved him. And she was certain that he, at least to some extent, felt the same way.

The sun was high in the sky, and she had been informed that the flight would only take about ten hours. Jason had also passed a message from David, saying that the monks in the temple in Tibet were awaiting her with open arms. Jason would escort her into the temple, and when everything had been settled, he would leave, and never come back for her. And David wouldn’t visit, either. Her heart tightened at the prospect of never seeing David again, but she ignored it to the best of her ability. It would make her look weak to come running back.

And there we go. The pride.

Emma really had changed a lot, now that she thought back on everything that had happened. Like her late grandmother had said, she had seen adventures, and now she was heading out on another. But was that really all there would be to her life? Just spending it all learning and going on adventures? Before her untimely demise, her mother had read her *The Hobbit*. Growing up, she had always wanted to go on an adventure of her own. And now that she was here, she just wanted to go back to the time before she met David.



David was lying in the box in the back of the private jet, set to take him to Rome. Emma would probably be half-way to Tibet by now. As he lay in the metal casket, his mind kept wandering to Emma. How would she fare? What would she do? What would she become? He felt like the darkness of the box would be his chosen afterlife, if he were even given one. Suspended in nothingness for eternity. Alone. And he deserved it. He truly was a monster, because he regretted nothing of what he'd done. The sadness and pain and suffering he had brought upon innocent people. The lives he had cut short, for no reason whatsoever. Being a beast and being a monster were two widely different things in David's mind. A beast can't help it. They were forced by something else to do what they did, with no chance of denying and retreating. A monster chose to do what he did. But at what point did the two meet? When a beast chose to give in, rather than resist as long and hard as possible. It was in David's nature as a vampire to drink blood. It was an inherent instinct to kill. But he didn't choose the moral high-ground of taking only what little blood was necessary to survive, he didn't resist the urge to kill. Forced into

vampirism, he gave in to the Beast, and ultimately became a monster. Would Emma do the same? Only time would tell.

David felt the daysleep approach, and readied himself for another day of bloody dreams, filled with screams and pain and agony. And he would endure it, like he had for centuries. That was what he had learnt, above all else, in Iga. He was a shinobi. ‘One who endures’. And he was thoroughly good at it.



The hike up the mountain path was long and hard. Were it not for the training with NightBlade, Emma wouldn’t have made it to the top, and would likely even have died on the few occasions a rock came loose and thundered towards her, or a foothold on the rocky walls crumbled beneath her fingers. It took Emma and Jason almost two days to reach the temple, but reach it, they did. A large gathering of men and women of varying ages awaited them at the gates.

“Thank you for bringing our apprentice to us, Jason Kane,” the middle-aged man waiting in the front addressed them in almost perfect English. “You may rest within our sanctuary for the night. We insist that you dine with us before you take the perilous journey down again.”

Jason walked up, placed his outstretched palms together and bowed.

“You do me honor, shīfu. I should be delighted to take you up on the offer.”

The monk placed his hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“Rise, descendant of David. You are a guest of honor in our

temple.”

Jason did as he was asked. The older monk then walked past him to inspect Emma closely.

“Hmmm. I see David’s training in you, my apprentice. Good. You will need it.”

Emma emulated what Jason had done just before, and bowed.

“Thank you, shīfu. I look forward to studying under your guidance.”

“And quite a tongue, as well. I can only guess at the things David has taught you of using words.”

Emma didn’t like hearing David’s name anymore, but she would deal with it.

“By request of your former master, I shall take you on as my own apprentice. You will rest today, and eat well. It will be the last day of comfort until you become accustomed to our routines.”

Emma bowed again to show that she had understood it and was prepared.

“Well,” the monk said and turned back towards a smaller building, “let us go to eat, and I will show you around the temple.”

Emma and Jason followed the monk.



David entered the room to the apartment. He was in the heart of a long-dead empire, and he was back for the first time in centuries. The apartment was fitted with little over

the bare minimum for human habitation like his own apartment, seeing as David had far less requirements. Rather, there were boxes with weapons, ammunition and equipment, courtesy of the Justicars. David threw his backpack on a chair and walked over to the desk and sat down. He opened the laptop plugged in on the desk and started going through the documents on it.

Dossiers, schematics for larger estates and landmarks, rough outlines on some of the supernatural players in Rome, as well as a document detailing his mission and what objectives were the bare minimum required before he left Italy again.

Basic stuff. Shouldn't take more than a few months.

He closed the laptop and got up to leave the apartment, but something stopped him as he reached the door. He could smell something. It was very faint, but it was there. He looked around, sniffing the air. It was familiar, somehow, but he just couldn't place his finger on what it was. He followed the very faint traces of the scent around the apartment, until he realized that it was permeating the whole apartment from the walls, floor and ceiling. Rodent infestation? Asbestos? The Italians needed to take better care of their apartment.

Until he thought harder.

No, wait... that scent... don't tell me...

With his mind now on high alert, David knelt down and punched a hole straight through the floorboards. Right below him were packet upon packet upon packet of a sandy brown material. Written on the wrapping paper was 'C4'. David rushed over to the wall and punched through it, only

to find further stacks of the plastic explosives. There were long wires going from packet to packet, making sure they would all go off in an instantaneous chain-reaction. David realized that the room was completely covered in blocks of the stuff, and combined with the fact that he just realized another thing he could smell was gas, permeating the apartment from the kitchen, there was likely less than an instant to get out before the detonator was pressed and the explosives would light up the gas, which would result in—



A popular Italian TV station was on the air. Gialina Morusetti, a well-liked and attractive news host was currently reading the news aloud to the nation on the TV and in the radio.

“We are broadcasting emergency news! Earlier this evening, there was an explosion in central Rome, near the Tiber, which brought down an entire apartment building and part of the building next door! According to the fire department, the explosion was likely caused by a gas leak! An estimated nine civilians are believed to have died instantly, and four others have lost their lives in the past two hours, dying *en route* to the emergency room! Eye witnesses from the other side of the street claim that the explosion originated in one of the apartments at mid-level, and that they saw the new tenant, a man now identified as David Kane by the rent contract submitted to social services office earlier this month, was in that very apartment at the time of explosion! Our condolences go to the families of the fallen, and especially, to the friends and family of David Kane! That was all for now, but remember to follow up on this story in the coming hours! Thank you all for watching!”

Emma woke up feeling well rested. She had a good meal, though it consisted mostly of rice, and Jason had been more tolerable in the presence of the ‘akashics’, as they called themselves. She got up and dressed in workout clothes, before she headed out to meet her shīfu. The sun was barely rising in the distance, and the mountainous air was cold on her skin, but it quickly cleared her mind. She saw Jason talking on a satellite phone, with shīfu Azai, as she had learned her master’s name was. She approached the men, eager to get started and try to forget about David.

“I see,” Jason said. He seemed... sad? Emma had quickly come to the conclusion that he didn’t get sad, but here he was, with a regretful frown. “Thank you. I’m making my way home. Should be back the day after tomorrow. Bye.”

He hung up the phone, and looked at shīfu Azai and Emma.

“Last night, there was a gas leak in an apartment building in Rome. It resulted in an explosion which killed eleven people. There is only one survivor, but he is in the emergency room in a critical condition. A burnt corpse was found inside. The tenant has been declared to have died instantly.”

“So?” Emma asked, not concerned with mere gossip. “What does that have to do with me?”

Jason’s eyes darkened considerably. “You wanted to get away from David for good. Looks like someone made sure that wish will be kept.”

Emma’s eyes widened, and her stomach dropped. What?

What did he mean? David couldn't...

"The tenant was David Kane, from New Orleans, Louisiana. The Italians are holding a memorial service for him as we speak."

Emma, despite wanting away from him, wouldn't want David to die! Her eyes started burning, and she felt sick. Suddenly, the air seemed much colder and thinner, as her breathing picked up. Her knees started shaking, and before long, they couldn't support her any longer and she dropped.

"No— David can't die. He's too powerful, nothing can kill him," she mumbled to herself.

Soon, she reached her hands as well, and she felt dizzy. Shīfu Azai knelt down beside her and put a comforting hand on her back.

"Take slow, deep breaths, apprentice," but she couldn't. She couldn't! David wa— He was dead! Emma felt the tears on her face starting to freeze in the cold climate of the mountain range. "Apprentice. Calm down."

But the thin supply of oxygen in the air, combined with her now ragged panting and her spinning head, she fell limply to the ground below her.

Becoming A Monster

Things are getting heated in ‘The Big Easy’, New Orleans. Prince Marcel’s “second-in-command”, the seneschal Marie D’Richet, is growing more and more resentful to David Kane over the past four months, and is concocting a scheme to put him down a notch.

With NightBlade, things are calming down, but the Alastors are still rattled. After the incident at the stadium, the mysterious Lasombra is still missing, and over the world, Alastors are reporting greater difficulties in tracking the Anathema. That is also true for NightBlade. Having seen few signs, and no actual Anathema, the Kindred are growing restless.

Emma is taking learning about her new world seriously. The Kindred she lives in a warehouse with all teach her a little something that can be incredibly useful in a variety of situations. Emma takes to learning with great enthusiasm, and is a natural talent with some of the skills they teach her. She notices a few changes in her behavior, and is increasingly worried about her mind. But David has a plan to see if Emma is of the right cut to make it in this *world of darkness*. And if she is, if she turns out to be a potential force to be reckoned with... he just might have to take measures down the line to prevent her from eventually...

Becoming A Monster